

Talking About Islam
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
March 1, 2015

Readings

selections from the Quran

We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know each other. (49:13)

My Mercy and Compassion embrace all things. (7:156)

Those who believe and do good works, the Infinitely Good will appoint for them love. (19:96)

O believers, by ye steadfast before God, witness for justice. (5:8)

God loves the just. (5:42)

from "The Spiritual Significance of Jihad" by Seyyed Hossein Nasr
(from the 1982 fall issue of the journal *Parabola*)

The Arabic term *jihad*, usually translated into European languages as "holy war"... is derived from the root *jhd* whose primary meaning is "to strive or to exert oneself." Its translation as "holy war," combined with the erroneous notion of Islam prevalent in the West as the "religion of the sword," has helped to eclipse its inner and spiritual significance and to distort its connotation. Nor has the appearance upon the stage of history during the past century, and especially during the past few years, of an array of movements within the Islamic world, often contending or even opposing each other and using the word *jihad*... helped to make known the full import of its traditional meaning

Muslims, as both individuals and members of Islamic society, must carry out *jihad*; that is, they must exert themselves at all moments of life to fight a battle both inward and outward against those forces that if not combatted will destroy that equilibrium which is the necessary condition for the spiritual life of the person and the functioning of human society.

Through inner *jihad* the spiritual man dies in this life in order to cease all dreaming, in order to awaken to that Reality which is the origin of all realities, in order to behold that Beauty of which all earthly beauty is but a pale reflection, in order to attain that Peace which all men seek but which can in fact be found only through the inner *jihad*.

Sermon

How are we to talk about Islam, during this period of history in particular, when the most common association in the media with Islam is more often than not with war and terror?

A little while ago we heard several verses from the Quran, verses highlighting justice, mercy, and understanding. That's certainly a start, to lift up those teachings within Islam that have nothing to do with war and terror, that instead are about the development of personal character and the seeking of a just society.

Of course here's the rub: Someone else could be equally selective in quoting from the Quran and read verses encouraging death to infidels. Which is done all the time by terrorists... as well as by critics of Islam.

And herein lies some of the challenge when talking about Islam.

But note this. Selective reading is not only something we do in regard to Islam. Just about every religion has what we might call its shadow side as well as its illuminating light. So, for example, every Sunday I am selective in my choice of verses from whatever religious tradition, whether from the Bible or from Buddhist texts or from Taoist texts and on it goes. I choose the passages that have meaning for me and that I hope may be meaningful and even inspirational for you. Mostly I ignore the rest, or sometimes do my best to explain the rest.

But it is all too easy to get into a shouting match that takes the form of firing selective out of context quotes back and forth. As you know, for a long time conservative and liberal Christians have thrown Bible verses back and forth about this or that hot-button social issue, whether gay rights or abortion; or, a couple hundred years ago, slavery.

How then are we to talk about *any* religion, whether Islam or Christianity or whatever tradition, when there is such variety of perspectives within each religion?

Well, it seems to me that the first thing is to acknowledge – and talk about – exactly that, the variety of perspectives, the diversity *within* each religion. In this regard, Islam is no more one monolithic entity than is Christianity with its variety of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox forms; or Buddhism with its varied streams; or Hinduism; or Judaism...

Within Islam the primary division of which most of us are aware is between Sunni and Shia; yet, to further complicate matters, there are varied perspectives and practices within each of these streams; and then there is the wild card of Sufism, sometimes described as the mystical tradition within Islam. And these days there is another sort of spectrum, from progressive Muslims to conservative or fundamentalist – not unlike the spectrum in other faiths.

Finally, as if all of this weren't complex enough, there is a vast array of cultural and political diversity of expression within the Islamic world, a world which extends

outward from its source in the Arab region to south Asia, southeast Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas – in other words just about everywhere.

This means that we see varied understandings of such things as the injunction in the Quran to dress modestly; we see varied understandings of the role of Islamic law, sharia; we see varied understandings of (and debates about) the role of Islam within the nation state and the relation between Islam and democracy. And on and on. In short, as Muslim scholar Reza Aslan has written, “God may be One, but Islam most definitely is not.”

How then are we to talk about Islam?

First, then, is to quite simply recognize and name this huge diversity of theology and practice within the world of some billion or more Muslims around the world. If someone tries to tell you that Islam is only this or only that? At least we ought to be prepared to say... not so fast.

We can also come at “talking about Islam” from what may seem to be the opposite direction, which is to name what it is that all Muslims hold in common.

We can do this by returning to what are customarily called the Five Pillars of Islam. And though there is (of course!) some diversity in how these pillars of the faith are carried out, there is no dispute that these “pillars” are at the center of the faith of Islam. And it seems to me that reflecting on these central beliefs and practices offers a terribly important counterpoint to the daily news of yet another terrorist bombing or atrocity at the hands of self-identified Muslims.

First pillar: The declaration of faith, often translated as “There is no god but God, and Mohammed is his prophet.”

Beyond the literal meaning of the words, this is an affirmation that the whole and central purpose of our lives is to shape our lives in service to God – or as we might put it in more universal language, to the highest that we know or can know, indeed to the power or source of life which is beyond our complete knowing, certainly beyond any human-like attributes of gender or character.

Second pillar: Prayer. As we know, faithful Muslims are meant to pray five times a day at prescribed times. There are set prayers and prostrations; all meant to encourage precisely the sort of alignment with God, with Reality as it most truly is, that is suggested in the declaration of faith.

Third pillar: Zakah, sometimes translated as charity. To begin with, giving a certain prescribed percentage of one’s capital each year. But the deeper understanding within this financial giving is that nothing belongs to us, everything belongs to God and is therefore meant to be shared. Further, this giving or sharing is not only of our financial resources, but can take the form of any expression of generosity or kindness. So I think we can understand Zakah as the manifestation in the world of our daily lives of this alignment with God that is sought through the declaration of faith and the practice of prayer.

Fourth pillar: Fasting during the month of Ramadan, from dawn to dusk taking neither food nor drink. Not to show off one’s strength and dedication; rather, as yet

another way to turn one's attention away from the worldly personal and sometimes selfish concerns that too often take up too much of our time and attention, and instead towards the way of life as we more truly and deeply want to live: lives of generosity and kindness, lives seeking justice and peace, lives aligned with the divine.

Fifth pillar: The Hajj, or Pilgrimage to Mecca – for all who are able physically and financially to make the journey. Gathering with those of all nations and backgrounds, all dressed in white with no distinction of class or wealth. What a powerful reminder of our essential human unity, and so the call to serve God... by serving one another.

So – when we talk about Islam in this era of terror and war in the name of Islam, we ought at least to have in the back of our minds both the diversity within Islam, and the essential unity at the heart of Islam.

The heart of Islam? Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the Iranian born scholar who was the source of our second reading, put it this way, simply, in his 2002 book by that title – *The Heart of Islam*: “The heart of Islam is also the Islam of the heart”

He goes on to affirm that this “religion of the heart” is to be found within every religion, a wisdom which in challenging times such as ours “can provide for us... the light of harmony based on... the warmth of compassion and love of the other.”

So... the heart of Islam at one with the heart of all the world's religions? *There's* a way to talk about Islam – not as somehow radically different from other religions, whether Christianity or Buddhism, but as at heart radically united.

Well, this is a beautiful enough sentiment – and I believe also true. But even after all I've said thus far, there will be some who claim that Islam is at heart *not* a religion of love, compassion, and peace, but a religion of the sword, of vengeance, of intolerance.

What then?

Too much more to say today in any detail.

But a few additional reminders:

First: Islam is not without its shadow side. And in this it is, sadly, as I suggested earlier, also at one with most other religions, most with potential seeds of intolerance and violence. It would, for example, be a tight contest historically between adherents of Islam and adherents of Christianity when it comes to intolerance and war and violence.

Further, we must name that much of the unrest today in the Middle East, Pakistan, Nigeria, and other parts of the Islamic world has roots primarily not in the nature of Islam, but in the legacy of colonialism. Too complicated for any detail this morning, and not at all to justify the violence and terror, but it is to begin to help us understand from whence it comes.

And to those who claim that more moderate voices within the Islamic world are not speaking loudly enough against the violence and terror perpetrated by some in the name of Islam? Well, this is simply not true. There are plenty of such voices, from Imams right here in the Boston area, to, most recently, the Imams and Muslim scholars

everywhere around the world who have been speaking out against the brutality of ISIS, affirming that their brutality has nothing to do with the spiritual truths and teachings of Islam, except in a warped and twisted way.

Finally, it helps when we talk about Islam to realize that, again like every other religious tradition, it is not historically static, but has evolved and changed over time, and that now in fact it might be undergoing quite dramatic reformation from within – including conflict and, sadly, too often violence. Reza Aslan writes in *No God but God*:

...the story of Islam has been in a constant state of evolution as it responds to the social, cultural, political, and temporal circumstances of those who are telling it. Now it must evolve once more.

...the tide of reform cannot be stopped. The Islamic Reformation is already here. We are all living in it.

And a journey through the internet, with the multiple varieties of Islam and diverse perspectives of Muslims on full display... assuredly reinforces his contention.

Let me conclude this morning with a word about *jihad*.

You heard in the second reading that the essential meaning of *jihad* has to do with spiritual striving, striving to become a better person, striving to create a better society. Now, Islam is not a pacifist religion, no more than Christianity is a pacifist religion – though there are pacifist sects. And we know that at the very beginnings of Islam, Mohammed led battles to defend the new faith. But when his warriors were returning from battle, he famously is quoted as saying that they had returned from the *lesser jihad* and could now resume the *greater jihad*. The lesser *jihad* was the outward defense of the faith, even by taking up arms; the greater *jihad* is that inward spiritual struggle to become a better person, to become ever more closely aligned with the divine, or, as other traditions might put it, aligned with the Tao or with the kingdom of heaven or with our Buddha-nature.

In other words, this word *jihad*, so dangerously tossed around these days, so often abused by extremists, is a word that in a better world (which perhaps someday will be our world) could unite us all. For whatever religious language we use, don't we all – or most of us anyway – strive to be better human beings, to align ourselves with life and love, with the world as it is and as we would help it to become?

How are we to talk about Islam, during this period of history in particular, when the most common association in the media with Islam is more often than not with war and terror?

Seeking to understand Islam in its entirety, in all its diversity, light and shadow, and as it evolves; seeking at the same time for the heart of Islam which is the heart of all religions, which is the heart of every human being who strives to be not just human, but humane.

So may it be.