

What Islam Has to Teach Us

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

January 22, 2012

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I don't normally do focus groups to decide my sermon topics, but this past summer I asked one of our small groups which one of the world religions they most wanted to hear about from the pulpit. Overwhelmingly they said—Islam. I have to admit I was mildly surprised by this response. It seems like in the last ten years since 9/11 all we have been hearing about is Islam. But upon further reflection, I decided to accept their suggestion. While Islam has been in the news a great deal in the past decade I am not sure all of that coverage has been accurate, and certainly rarely favorable. Not only that, but even when one does get a pretty good sense of what Islam is and what it is all about, it can be hard to see how it connects to us. The Principles and Purposes of Unitarian Universalism, speak to the many sources of our tradition, one of which is insight from the world's religions. Thus we need to have some understanding of Islam in order to see how this vast religious tradition can impact our own tradition and perhaps transform our spiritual understanding in some way.

At first blush, however, this seems well-nigh impossible. There are so many differences between Unitarian Universalism and Islam that it appears that the gulf would be impassable. For one, Islam has at its center a single source for religious truth, the Koran. The Koran was revealed to the prophet Mohammed over the course of many decades in bits and pieces. It is considered by Muslims to be the direct words of God; in Arabic of course. A close second behind the Koran is the Hadith, a series of texts which describe the Prophet Mohammed's actions, sayings, and daily practices which one is supposed to follow. It is very similar to the *Imitatio Christi* tradition in Christian spiritual practice. Taken together these two books describe a wide array of theological doctrines, stories, and rules on how one is to live. This way of life is referred to as the "Straight Path" in Islam. And like a path, one either follows it or one does not—the choice is yours.

Having one source for religious truth leads to other differences between Islam and Unitarian Universalism. One of which you might have already guessed. UUs don't do too well with rules generally speaking. Tell a Unitarian Universalist how to live and they will usually do the very opposite just to show you they can! The closest we get is either being a vegetarian and voting Democrat. You can be a Unitarian Universalist and still choose to go against either of those two things, we won't kick you out, but people look at you funny. The word "Islam" carries with it many connotations, including sharing a root with the word

peace. But basically it means “submission.” Submission to the will of God and to the rules and practices that make up the “Straight Path.” Dare I say, submission is not the strong suit for many Unitarian Universalists.

Another difference between us is theological. The Universalists among us would find the God of the Koran to be a pretty angry fellow. In many ways the God of the Koran is probably closer in temperament to the God of the Old Testament in this regard. If one follows the rules and leads a just and moral life, then you go to heaven. Ignore the rules or act immorally, then you will go to hell. It is basically as simple as that. The Universalists of course based their belief on an infinitely merciful and compassionate God on the example of Jesus in the New Testament. Since Islam rejects the New Testament as at best a partial revelation of God, they therefore reject Christ’s divinity and his claim to be the messiah. It is Mohammed, rather than Jesus, who becomes worthy of emulation.

In many ways I think the differences between Unitarian Universalism and Islam stem from a difference in the values we claim to hold as the highest priority. Unitarian Universalism tends to be very post-modern. We like nuance and the grey areas. We are comfortable with paradox and mystery and holding seemingly contradictory ideas in tension. We sing songs about how “to question truly is the answer.” I can’t tell you how many people I have known who have lifted up that

line from that hymn as being one of their favorites. Islam values clarity above all things. There is God's team and the other team and you best know which team you are on. To be fair, only the most extreme fundamentalists believe that if you are not a Muslim that you should die or be killed. We must bear in mind that such extremism is as much politically motivated as it is anything else. We in America are no strangers to people who hold extreme political ideas finding justification for them in religion. The overwhelming majority of Muslim people are like everyone else. Privately I am sure they question their faith, as all of us do from time to time, but at the end of the day most of us are one religion or another because we feel it is the right one at some level. Thus Islam's claim to be the one true "Straight Path" is no more remarkable than Judaism's claim to be the Chosen People or Christian claims that because they are born again they will be saved.

Yet at the foundation of Unitarian Universalism is a commitment to what has been traditionally called "tolerance." Tolerance is a somewhat problematic notion these days because it does not go far enough. It is all well and good to tolerate another person who is different from us. However Unitarian Universalism asks us to go a step further to listen and learn from the differences we have with people from another religion. We are called to not deny those differences or minimize them as if they did not matter. Rather we should recognize our differences with religions such as Islam, and see if there is

something for us to learn. That is why I started with the differences between Islam and Unitarian Universalism. For it is there that we will find that we may have something to gain, an appreciation for Islam precisely where we depart from it. So the challenge before is this: what is among those differences between Unitarian Universalism and Islam that we might find admirable, useful, and dare I say even transformative? We never learn or grow by talking to each other or talking only to the people who agree with everything we say. We grow through honest and authentic reflection around our differences. That is what I want to spend the rest of my time this morning doing.

Earlier I mentioned that probably the foundational difference between Unitarian Universalism and Islam is that Islam has a single source of religious inspiration or truth. Unitarian Universalists, at least for the past century, have either no particular book that contains religious truth or multiple ones. Imagine with me what it would be like to have one book, and only one book, as your source of religious truth. Perhaps you at one point belonged to a religion like that—Islam is not the only one which does this of course. I would imagine that you would get to know that one book pretty well! Indeed, the Koran is the most frequently memorized book in the world. In some Middle Eastern countries they have contests to see who can not only recite the entire Koran from memory, but who can do it in the most poetic and lyrical fashion. When you know one book so well, your whole life starts to

swim in its narrative. You can see where a problem you might have or a challenge you are facing in your work or home may find some resonance or connection with that narrative which you have studied to the exclusion of others. As the years go by, passages within the Koran take on greater meaning for you. You “get it” in ways you may not have when you were younger. It challenges you to be a better person than you are, and since there is no other book to run to, you have to meet that challenge.

I think it is this latter point which I find telling. Unitarian Universalism is great at going broad, but too often we hesitate to go deep. If we were reading a book like the Koran or the Bible or the Sutras and we discovered that part of those teachings were too hard or too different it would be easy to set aside that book in favor of another one that was compatible with our already made up minds. Again, we don't learn or grow when all we do is read the books we already agree with or listen to news channels that already agree with our point of view. I think too often our tendency is to skim the surface of various spiritual practices or religious ideas and never really commit to going deep with any one of them. I am not saying Islam should be everyone's path; obviously it isn't. But there is a good deal to be said with sticking to a single religious narrative even and especially when it is hard to do so rather than jumping ship to something easier that will let us off the hook.

Another difference that I find intriguing about Islam was described in our Ancient Reading this morning. Muslims pray in the direction of Mecca, specifically toward the Kab'ba, five times a day. This is one of the famous "Five Pillars" of Islam, the five religious practices that define one as a Muslim. I have been in a room when this was done; dozens of people moving in synchronous motion. I have never done it myself, but it is a powerful thing to witness even when you don't know what they are saying. Then you think about all of the people around the world stopping what they are doing at that moment to all turn to the same point on earth and pray. It is a mind-boggling thought.

For the Muslim, the world has a center. There is a clear reference point to existence in the holy city of Mecca. This axis in space gives the Muslim a clear sense of the sacred, and by contrast, the profane. While some of us may jokingly refer to Boston as "Mecca," few of us pray in the direction of 25 Beacon Street! For most of us the world is kind of flat and textureless. In secular modern America there are few places that one could truly call "holy" and have everyone agree. In fact most of the places I can think of that are like that tend to be associated with death and disaster; places like Pearl Harbor, Ground Zero, and Gettysburg.

Unitarian Universalists often struggle with the question, "Where is our center?" For whatever else we may say about Islam, there is no question to the Muslim as to where their center is. It is in a book. It is turned to five times a day. A pilgrimage is made to it at least once in a

lifetime. The spiritual resonance of a specific place has power. What is that center for us? Better yet, what might that center be for you?

There is an old saying that theology is the result of reading the Bible and the newspaper at the same time. Theology is the religious truth revealed by one's tradition, in either the Bible or the Koran for example, fully engaged with and in dialogue around issues impacting the world today in this time and place in history. Unitarian Universalists struggle with the question of a center—what is the center of our faith, asked the Commission on Appraisal a number of years ago in their book “Engaging our Theological Diversity.” Muslims know their center, but struggle with their circumference; if I may strain the metaphor a bit. In other words, they are still working on a way to fully engage the world as it is today. The problem is that Islam presents little in the way of middle ground. Even apostates of Islam treat it like a zero sum game. You are either on that straight path or you are not. You are either a traditional Muslim or a secularist. You can change the secular laws to conform to the laws of the Koran and Hadith, collectively known as Sharia. People who take that position are known as Islamists. That is a position that rejects modernity in favor of a “pure” Koranic worldview. Islamists can critique modernity; its decadence, its technology, its immorality, but cannot also critique their tradition.

This is the value of liberal religion in all traditions of the world. Liberal religion stands in a position to critique modern life as well as the

religious tradition out of which it arises. Thus Channing, for example is a critic of his culture and his society, most notably slavery. And he is a critic of Christianity while still considering himself a Christian. In his “Moral Argument against Calvinism” he is scathing in his criticism of orthodox Protestantism. So liberal theology is a double edged sword—it is critical of both the Bible and the newspaper at various times and not simple one way. While liberal theology is not unheard of in Islam it is small and struggling.

So we can learn from our Muslim brothers and sisters. Ideally they would learn from us as well. I am a firm believer in mutual transformation through dialogue. Whatever the differences and commonalities may be between Unitarian Universalism and Islam, or any religion for that matter, I believe it is our religious duty to listen. I believe it is our calling in fact. I predict that one of the unique roles that Unitarian Universalism will play in the next century, or even the next decade, is to be a religious translator for our culture. If someone else is using religious language that is different than my own, then as a Unitarian Universalist it is my job to translate what they say into religious language that I can understand or be comfortable with. So if someone is using the term “born again” I can take the spirit of that term—a radical spiritual transformation of the heart—and have it make sense in my own context. It is NOT, and I will repeat that, NOT their job to conform to my religious language. That is on me to deal with

them and meet them where they are, not to demand that they conform to my way of thinking. To coerce conformity in religious language goes against everything Unitarian Universalism stands for. Meeting people where they are and helping them to get to where they need to be is our mission.

And let us be about it if we are to be the church of the next century. Islam is a growing force in our world and it is a noble and impressive tradition. May we have the courage to engage it honestly and authentically. May we not hide behind the fear of political correctness lest we shrink from true growth and transformation. And may we be blessed with the peace that passes understanding. Amen Blessed Be.