

When Does Tolerance Go Too Far?
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Not long after I returned from Jordan, where I attended a Conference on the subject of Islam, where we looked at Islam and democracy, Islam and modernity, Islam and other religions, Islam and women, I spoke at a Sunday service here asking, "Why Can't We Understand?" I talked about many of the ways that we don't understand Islam and its history, and the many ways in which we don't understand the Arab culture in which it was created.

Then in 2012, I attended a similar conference in Morocco, shortly after the Arab Spring, where we heard Muslims from all over the Middle East, but especially Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Morocco, share their dreams for the future of their countries after their "Spring," dreams which have, for the most part, been dashed.

After that, I became a founding member of the Delaware Lahore Delhi Partnership for Peace, and the Delaware Board includes not only Hindus from India, but also, Muslims from Pakistan, India, and the U.S. Invited by our Lahore Partner, I became part of a Delaware Delegation that spent ten days in Pakistan in January 2014. We stayed in the homes of our Muslim hosts, where we lived with their families; we had a non-stop agenda that included meetings with a wide range of elected officials, business people, academics, artists and musicians; we were hosted for lunches by former Prime Ministers, with business groups, and at universities, and dinners by Governor Mohammad Sarwar and--behind multiple 12-foot guarded walls--Chief Minister Shehbaz Sharif, the Chief Executive of the Punjab and brother of Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Because so few Americans beyond diplomats and military have been willing to visit Pakistan since 9/11, we were packaged for the media, with newspaper articles and television appearances. But we were free to ask questions, lots of questions, and we were free to talk to a wide range of Pakistanis, though almost all from the educated elite.

In addition to the formal agenda, each member of our Delegation selected an area of interest, and our hosts arranged meetings with Pakistanis to address those areas. Julie Rumschlag, Dean of the Cab Calloway School of the Arts, met with educators and toured schools; Tunde Durosomo, Senior Economic Development Advisor to the Mayor, met with government officials; Rebecca Faber, President & CEO of World Trade Center Delaware, met with business people. My stated area of interest was girls' and women's rights--in education, the law, employment, and family--and I had additional meetings with women educators, legislators, and activists.

Perusing Facebook recently, I realized that, unless you lump all Christian denominations together, I now have more Muslim FB friends than from any other single religious group except Unitarian Universalists. And I find myself frequently defending Muslims against those who lump all Muslims together, those who decry things they don't like in Islam but are uncritical of in Christianity, those who denounce the Qur'an but read the Bible uncritically, those who have become fearful of, and angry at, what they see of radical Islam in our world today, but don't hear the moderate and progressive Muslims.

Because of what has been happening in our world, I, like you, have learned much more about Islam in the last few years. Because of the turmoil in the Middle East, some of the information about Islam in the media comes with drama. For example, headlines declare that Islam is now the fourth-largest faith in the United States! Well, yes. But, according to the Pew Research Center, Muslims are only .9% of the U.S. population. The big story in religion in the U.S. is the growth in “nones” (that’s not Roman Catholic nuns, rather n-o-n-e-s) or the unaffiliated, which make up nearly 16% in the U.S. today. Equally dramatic is the growth in Atheists & Agnostics, which at 3.1% and 4% are 3 and 4 times as numerous as Muslims. Yes, Christians have decreased in numbers, but they still make up 70.6% of the U.S. population, which is the highest of any country in the world.

So, we’re not being taken over by Muslims! But there **is** an important issue that we, as UUs and progressives, need to face.

First, what have we learned about Islam? We know that Islam, now the primary religion of the Middle East, is part of the Abrahamic family of religions. According to the Qur’an, Islam followed the partial, or incomplete, revelation of the Torah and of the Gospels, both corrupted in their transmission, with the final and infallible revelation of God’s will in the Qur’an. Emerging six centuries after the death of Jesus of Nazareth, Islam honors Abraham and Moses, the prophets of Judaism, and Jesus, the prophet of Christianity, but reserves the highest honor for Muhammad (570-632), as God’s final messenger, through whom God delivered the Qur’an.

We know that the Qur’an recognizes Judaism and Christianity, calling Jews and Christians “People of the Book.” In addition, Islam shares basic theological concepts with both Judaism and Christianity, including an ultimate God, creation, the role of humanity, and accountability (or judgment).

But we’ve also, become aware that there are two attitudes in the Qur’an—the more peaceful Islam of Mohammad’s days in his birthplace, Mecca (570-622 A.D.) and the more violent Islam of Mohammad’s days in (Yathrib) Medina (622-630). In Mecca, Mohammad “received” peaceful messages about the oneness of God, rejecting the polytheism of the time; generosity towards the poor and needy; kind treatment and emancipation of slaves; and the equality between men and women before God. In Medina, Mohammad provided justification, first, for the Muslim’s attack on wealthy Meccan caravans, and, then, for war with Meccans and other tribes, as well as justification for violence against those who opposed Islam.

More attention has been paid to verses from this latter part of the Qur’an in recent times, as we’ve seen violent images of murder and learned of horrific cruelty in the name of Islam. And we are, instinctively, led to wonder.

Who has not recoiled in horror at the beheading last year of journalist James Foley and aid worker Alan Henning in July, aid worker David Cawthorne Haines in August, journalist Steven Sotloff in September, or aid worker Peter Kassig in October. And we cannot even imagine the horror of the family of Kayla Jean Mueller, the American aid worker whose death was confirmed in January, but whose parents only later learned that she had been repeatedly raped by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the proclaimed Caliph of the so-called “Islamic State,” or Daesh.

And our horror is multiplied when we see the murderers quote the Qur’an as they slash the necks of

their hostages. Our horror soars when we read of Daesh codifying sex slavery, using the practice as a recruiting tool, and justifying rape with verses in the Qur'an. As Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have documented and Rukmini Callimachi recounts in her *New York Times* article, "ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape," Daesh has developed an entire infrastructure of enslavement of girls and women to service Daesh fighters, complete with Qur'anic justification for slavery and rape.

I refer to these extremists, as does Secretary of State John Kerry, the French & the Australians, as Daesh—or ISIL. The so-called Islamic State (a.k.a ISIS) hates the name Daesh, which is the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State of Iraq & the Levant, or ISIL in English, because Daesh sounds like the Arabic "Daes" meaning "one who crushes something underfoot" as well as "Dahes" which means "one who sows discord."

We know how to react to Daesh. We, especially we Unitarian Universalists, instinctively, as did President Obama, separate these brutal acts and their barbaric perpetrators from Islam, from the "real" Islam and "real" Muslims.

But should we?

We Unitarian Universalists are a tolerant group. Tolerance is part of our history. It's in our DNA. The seven principles through which we express our values and hold as moral guides, were a part of our service this morning, as we read those principles together. The first of our seven principles, the most oft repeated, is, "The inherent worth and dignity of every person." Our third principle begins with, "Acceptance of one another."

Unlike many other denominations, sects, or religions, we don't have an infallible source for required beliefs, or creeds. When UUs adopted our 7 principles in 1984 (ratified in 1985) and put them in our UUA bylaws, we also adopted a statement about the sources for these 7 principles, these values, and moral guides. We have a **Living Tradition**. We don't have an infallible writing from the past, from a long-ago culture, that must be followed and revered. Our Living Tradition draws from six sources "as diverse as science, poetry, scripture, and personal experience" (uua.org).

So, our principles, and the sources for these principles, are inclusive. They ooze tolerance. We, first and foremost, declare "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." And our sources include "experience" from "all cultures" and "wisdom from the world's religions."

What's not to like?

Well, a growing number of moderate Muslims are calling for a reformation of Islam and say that progressives, like some UUs, are too tolerant of an Islam that needs to change. Now, as I said, I spend a lot of time defending the Islam of my Muslim friends from those who would tar all Muslims with the extremism of Daesh.

My Muslim friends from Pakistan, Jordan, Morocco, and the United States are all educated moderates to progressives, and are as far away from Daesh as we UUs are from the Westboro Baptist Church. Their Islam is moderate. They, and many moderate Muslims, find ways to ignore the violent parts of the Qur'an just as Christians who still hold fast to the Bible as the direct Word of God find

ways to ignore the violent parts of the Bible.

But more and more moderate and progressive Muslims, notably Muslim academics, writers, and thinkers are giving expression to a need for Islam to reform, for Islam to have a reformation. And, increasingly, many are saying that we progressives are not helping their cause, especially when we excuse Islamic extremists by saying, as President Obama and many liberal church leaders have said, that Daesh does not represent Islam. Because, as they point out, when a member of Daesh beheads a journalist or a humanitarian worker and quotes the Qur'an, he is, in fact, accurately quoting the Qur'an.

The Muslim reformers recognize that, just as the Bible has loads of uncomfortable verses, so does the Qur'an. However, most of us in the Judaic Christian tradition recognize that the Old and New Testaments represent a different time and culture and we've moved beyond believing that they are the direct, infallible, Word of God. We UUs, especially, who have a religion based in historical research, scientific understanding, and rational thinking, know, for example, that the earliest books in the New Testament were written over 50 years after the death of Jesus of Nazareth, and all the books of the New Testament canon were written by men who never met Jesus of Nazareth. We know that "The Church," the dominant Christian organization that became the Roman Catholic Church, decided what books to include in the Canon, and what to exclude, and went to great lengths to destroy books that offered a different perspective of Jesus of Nazareth, books labeled as heresies. Gradually, more and more of these "heretical" writings have been discovered. Thanks to the discovery by Muhammad Ali in a field he was farming near Nag Hammadi in Egypt, we have 52 texts that someone, most likely monks from the nearby monastery of St. Pachomius, refused to destroy, instead, burying them in urns that remained hidden for 1,600 years. Among other thing, these texts, the Gnostic Gospels, challenge common Christian beliefs, such as the virgin birth or the bodily resurrection.

We UUs recognize that all of these Biblical and extra-biblical writings, much like the Qur'an, are reflections of a period in antiquity in which each religion was born, and so, while fascinating for what they reveal, of questionable application to today's world. Both the Bible and the Qur'an, however, are deemed infallible Words of God for some believers. And progressive Christians and Muslims, both, have difficulty with their own sources when they are trying to present their religions as moderate, and trying to claim that the extremists who quote their sources are, somehow, wrong, are, somehow, misusing the text.

And that's where many of the reformist Muslims come in. While there is probably little argument that Daesh, in its murderous rampage through Syria and Iraq, its slaughter of innocents, its beheading of journalists and humanitarian workers, is to be abhorred, where do we draw the line between being accepting or tolerant of other cultures and beliefs, and recognizing that we must oppose some of those beliefs and cultures when they harm or subjugate others?

More and more reformist Muslims are drawing the line at the treatment of women. Some quote the Mecca-era Qur'an verses to show that Mohammad wanted women to be equal. But they have a hard time with the Medina-era Qur'an. Some blame men from the three centuries after Mohammad who solidified the misogyny in the Hadith—the compilations of sayings of Muhammad by people who claim to have heard Mohammad say them, most of which, scholars have deemed questionable or

fabrications. Some rely on interpretations that help their arguments. More are now saying that the Qur'an needs to be treated as an important historical document, not the Words of God. As Muslim scientist and writer Fatima Imra Nazeer writes, "Only when the notions of Qur'anic infallibility and inerrancy are challenged will it be possible for believing Muslims to openly admit that, according to literalist interpretations at least, violent and hateful passages exist in the Qur'an: passages that call for fighting those who don't believe in Allah, that support ISIS's ideology and help them recruit young Muslims."

The focus of most reformists is not merely countering the violence of Daesh, but, more often, addressing the subjugation of women. And these reformist scholars, thinkers, and writers, are calling into question the treatment of women, beginning with covering which, they argue, is more cultural and historic, than Islamic. They rail at those men who want women to cover to protect men from their own desires.

My friend Kanwal Khalid, Professor of Fine Arts at the University of the Punjab, in Lahore, Pakistan, recently posted a picture of herself on FaceBook in which she was standing on an Atlantic Ocean beach, barefoot, in rolled-up jeans and a tank top, hair blowing in the wind. Not remarkable. Except that when I was with her in Pakistan, when out in public, her arms and legs were covered.

When I took her to Longwood Gardens, we were dressed nearly alike, but when she took me to the Lahore Museum, she wore a traditional Pakistani Shalwar Kameez—the Shalwar being trousers, or leggings, Kameez a long top or kurta, and a duppata or scarf. Only, Kanwal is educated. She is a College Professor. Her kurtas are beautiful, with elaborate embroidery and often worn over Choori Pajama, a tight-fitting pant or legging.

Though not in the United States, in Pakistan, Kanwal always has a scarf draped artistically around her neck so that if there is a call to prayer while she is in public, she can drape the scarf over her head. She is a devout Muslim, but that's not the reason. The reason is, that in Pakistan, the culture requires that a woman do so. 90% of Pakistanis are illiterate and get Muslim beliefs from Imams, who are often also illiterate. Islam is conflated with patriarchal cultural limits for women. It's a dangerous place for women, especially women who are not properly clad.

But not in the West.

Islam scholar Lamyia Kaddor writes that the headscarf, let alone any other covering, has "no theological foundation whatsoever" and "is obsolete." Indeed, her paper argues it represents misogyny by Islamic scholars, representing patriarchal social structures. Kaddor, and Mona Eltahawy, and Asra Nomani, and so many other Muslim scholars and writers are arguing that progressives, like we UUs, need to challenge the subjugation of women that is invading Western culture, including the United States. They are telling us that, through our progressive tolerance, we are aiding and abetting the subjugation of women—not on some far-off country and culture, but right here, at home.

Why should this matter to us? Isn't part of tolerance letting others believe whatever they want to believe? Plus, why start with covering? Women are being discriminated against all over the world. They can't drive in Saudi Arabia. They're subjected to genital mutilation all over northern Africa. They're sold or married off as children in India. They're put to work rather than going to school all

around the world. In the scheme of things, what difference does covering make?

These Muslim reformists are saying, it makes a great difference. Their scholarly papers, articles, books, and biographies are showing how covering is not merely a woman's individual choice, not merely a political statement, not merely a fashion statement, even for those who argue that they are. They're showing that covering is a product of subjugation—no matter how people try to explain it away, try to say it is expressive of Islam.

Well, wait just a minute. How can we get worked up about covering when we in the United States don't have such a great record when it comes to women's rights. It took us 131 years to give women the right to vote. The Constitution, without rights for women, was adopted in 1789, and it wasn't until 1878 that the Nineteenth Amendment was first introduced in Congress and another 41 years before Congress approved it in 1919 and sent it to the states for ratification, which took another year.

Part of the delay was because of the legal doctrine of coverture that we accepted from English law, whereby "no female person had a legal identity." A daughter was "covered" by her father's identity, that is, she was the property of her father until she became the property of her husband, signified, at marriage, by a woman being given her husband's name to show legal ownership. The legal effects of coverture lingered into the late 20th century, with remnants still found today (Catherine Allgor).

Coverture was at work forty years ago when women were still required to have their husbands co-sign for a credit card and their wages were discounted as much as 50% in calculating credit limits. This isn't just history. I got one of the first credit cards in Delaware issued to a woman without her husband's signature. And I set the precedent in Delaware courts for the right of a woman to use her own name, rather than her husband's. So the rights that we have aren't all that old.

But that's their point! Asra Nomani, Lamyia Kaddor, Mona Eltahawy, Ali Rizvi, Fatima Imra Nazeer, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and so many others, are telling us that here, of all places, where women have fought and won important rights, we should not allow patriarchal enclaves, whether cultural or religious, to control and subjugate women just because we want to be tolerant.

As Asra Nomani, in *Standing Alone: An American Woman's Struggle for the Soul of Islam*, argues, we're moving backward in the United States, as Muslim enclaves and Mosques, with the influx of culturally conservative Muslims, are becoming more conservative and are suppressing women's rights. But she points to something more ominous: an Honor Brigade. Her research has documented how the Organization of Islamic Cooperation has created an Honor Brigade to combat Islamophobia and project what they deem as the "true values of Islam." In the U.S., the Honor Brigade has targeted those who have called for Muslim women's rights. But they target, as well, anyone--especially writers, speakers, pundits, political leaders, TV personalities--who they think is slighting Islam. **And they are in Delaware.** Asra Nomani and the Delaware Lahore Delhi Partnership for Peace were targeted when we invited Asra, a devout Muslim, to speak here. If you say anything about Islam or Muslims that they don't like, even if you're Muslim, you're labeled Islamophobic.

This organized effort has given rise to what Pakistani-Canadian physician and writer Ali Rizvi calls, "The Phobia of Being Called Islamophobic." Rizvi writes, "The phobia of being called 'Islamophobic' is on the rise—and it's becoming much more rampant, powerful, and dangerous than Islamophobia

itself.” Rizvi notes that Muslim organizations like the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) have become so successful at “labeling even legitimate criticism” Islamophobic, that “Western liberals, in a supposed show of tolerance, embrace an apologist stance in favor of the intolerant.”

So, where do we draw the line? While I regularly defend my Muslim friends and their moderate Islam against those who are uninformed and unthinking, do I also have a responsibility to oppose conservative Islam’s subjugation of women?

After all, I get involved with other justice issues. When the Westboro Baptist Church came to spew its hate as Delaware’s legislation allowed the first gay and lesbian couples to marry in Delaware, Doyle and I went to downtown Wilmington to demonstrate against them. We chanted against their chanting, and applauded as Karen Petersen and her wife Vikki Bandy came out of the courthouse to greet us after their first-in-the-State wedding.

So do I have an equal responsibility to challenge Naveed Baqir when he tries to silence moderate Muslims speaking in Delaware, or do I challenge what he is doing to young girls at his Tarbiyah Islamic School of Delaware, in Newark, where kindergarten and first grade girls are covered, and all you can see of the principal, his wife, are her eyes? Should I be challenging those Muslim ultra-conservatives in the United States, and in Delaware, who are subjugating girls and women? Those who are convincing African American women in Wilmington that they must wear niqabs or burkas? Where is that line between tolerance (it’s their belief system, their business) and allowing subjugation?

So where do we draw the line? When are we tolerant of other’s beliefs and culture, and when do we pause and decide that someone’s, or some group’s, religiously-motivated actions are unacceptable.

I may draw that line differently than you. And I may do that because I value human rights and social justice more than I do tolerance of other’s beliefs and cultures.

At the very least, we need to be aware that, sometimes, we may be too tolerant.

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