

“The Straight Path: A UU Considers Islam”
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Call to Worship

This morning marks the eleventh day in Islam’s holy month of Ramadan. During these thirty days, Muslims around the world seek purification, forgiveness, guidance and a renewed devotion to Allah. Able-bodied adults avoid all food and drink between sunrise and sunset during this month. The time to break the fast is signaled by the siren you will hear mentioned in the reading a bit later. Alms, and especially food, are given to the poor during this month, and prayer and self-examination help the Muslim draw closer to God.

The beginning of Ramadan coincides with the sighting of the crescent moon in the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. Islam teaches that it was during this month that God, through the archangel Gabriel, first revealed himself to Mohammed and commanded him to recite and pass on the words of the Qur’an as dictated to him.

As with any religion, there are many understandings of what it means to be a Muslim. You would expect nothing else of a faith with more than 1.6 billion followers. But the observance of Ramadan, along with the other four Pillars of Islam such as daily prayer and pilgrimage to Mecca, are practices that define and unite Muslims when so much else divides them.

This morning we seek the beginning of clarity, a glimmer of understanding, of this phenomenon called Islam. It is our duty as free-thinking people to try to sort fact from fiction, to study, question and learn about this religion that has become, for better and for worse, an ever-growing force to be reckoned with in our own world.

These words calling us to this sacred time come from the Sufi mystic Rumi, the 13th

century Persian poet:

Sometimes you hear a voice through
The door calling you, as a fish out of
Water hears the surf's *come back*.
This turning toward what you deeply
Love saves you...
Read the book of your life that has
Been given you. A voice comes to
Your soul saying, *Lift your foot*.
Cross over, move into the emptiness
Of question and answer and question.

As we enter a time of silent reflection, let us move with trust in that elusive truth, into the emptiness of question and answer and question.

Reading “Ramadan in a Muslim Country” by Altaf Bhimji

A new night of the sacred month
the thin slice of the moon; the crescent
visible only a few minutes to the naked eye

A sight beautiful,
signaling new,
fresh

Greetings one to the other: Ramadan Mubarakh

And a few hours later, sounds of drums
Wake up! Wake up!
have a meal, a simple glass of water!
Before the first light, before you begin the fast,
make the intention
Wake up! Wake up!

And the day progresses, a slowing down;
restaurants closed, coffee houses empty.

And workers begin their trek home early

Late afternoon, the specialty stores open selling the special once a year snacks,
crowds flocking and moving hurriedly collecting their Iftar (breakfast)

And mothers prepare the traditional meals
taking extra time for the fasting family

Only an hour before the sun sets
city streets empty, as in a curfew,

And now only a few minutes,
family and friends gather around the table making small talk
awaiting the moment...silence...

And the siren, signaling the sun dipping below the horizon

...

And together, some with dates, some with a pinch of salt
"We take this food in the name of Allah, most gracious, ever merciful"

Prayers given
and later friends and family mill around, some content
others tired, but all happy
on this day of Ramadan...
Peace

Reading "Ramadan in the West" by Altaf Bhimji

A new night, beginning of the sacred month
the thin slice of the crescent
visible only a few minutes to the naked eye

Awaiting the news, here, far away in a land pretentiously secular
with In God We Trust visited only on Sunday

Awaiting, watching the Internet for the crescent news
And some calls made
Relatives far flung: Chicago, New York, London, Frankfurt and Los Angeles

Yes! The crescent has been sighted! Ramadan Mubarakh!
Over miles and miles and miles of telephone lines

The masjid schedule consulted, and alarm clock set for the meal before first light

Work the next day, same tempo, same schedule.
The boss and co-workers say; "Oh, you're fasting?" "Why?"

Unable to comprehend the beauty of a simple ritual:
"Come, we're going to see a movie after work; we won't make you eat"(!)

Going home, 1/2 hour before sunset
from the 9-5 routine, never ending, never changing

Arriving home, break fast with some friends
meal cooked the night before.

Remembrance of Ramadan in Karachi, Casablanca, Lahore, Cairo
and Dhaka

Tears, and anger expressed today: Murder and slaughter on this day!
Killed in prostration! Where Abraham (peace be upon him) lies!
Martyrdom in a Holy month! On Holy land!

And hope expressed: Our faith desecrated, but,
fastest growing in America!
A simple prayer; perhaps one day we will fast in San Francisco,
as we fasted in Dhaka, Cairo, Lahore, Casablanca and Karachi

And the fast is broken
and later friends and family mill around, some content
others tired, angry, grieved, and all somber
on this day of Ramadan...
Peace

Sermon: "The Straight Path"

What is it about religion that leads people to violence? All the world's major religions teach peace, don't they? They all preach some version of the Golden Rule, compassion, and generosity... So why, we have to ask, has religion inspired war, cruelty, even barbarity, for as long as there have been believers?

From Moses ordering the mass murder and enslavement of the Midianites, through the Crusades and the Inquisition, through the genocide of World War Two, to the partitioning of India and Pakistan, acts of terror in Northern Ireland, and wars of the Middle East, to the murder of Muslim students in North Carolina and the painting of swastikas on synagogues -- the list seems

endless – acts of violence on small and massive scales, all inspired, or at least supposedly rationalized by their perpetrators as the will of God. Is religion to blame? And what of the unspeakable atrocities carried out in the name of Islam, most recently, attacks by the Islamic State or its followers in Kuwait, Tunisia and France in the past few days, ostensibly in honor of Ramadan? Is Islam to blame?

Who is the enemy here? What is the source of the threat that none of us can completely ignore, try as we may to be calm and reasonable people committed to the principles of religious freedom and tolerance? When friends and acquaintances, coworkers or family, media or politicians condemn Islam as a dangerous and hateful religion, how are we to respond?

The answer matters. It matters to us as religious people who want to speak for justice, to speak truth. It matters to us as Americans and as citizens of the world in an environment threatened by intolerance from all sides. And it matters to us as human beings who seek to understand ourselves and our reasons for acting as we do.

Wars and other acts of terror are seldom about religion. They are about territory, wealth, class, about dominance and power. Religion is the key that is used to unlock the human resistance to participating in inhuman violence. Religion is used to inspire and motivate us to support acts of aggression. Religious appeals speak to us on an emotional level. They tell us that we are in the right, that we are serving something larger and nobler than our little self-interests. They inspire us to courage and self-sacrifice, and also to acts of brutality. Religions reinforce the idea that we must protect the tribe, whatever that tribe may be, because God loves our tribe the best. It's no coincidence that God also wants our tribe to prosper over all others.

The Qur'an is full of verses that justify violence toward those perceived to offend God. And the Bible is equally full of such verses. The Qur'an is also full of verses that preach

compassion, mercy and peace. As is the Bible. Scripture, be it Jewish, Christian, Hindu or Muslim, can be used to justify pretty much any course of action. If you're looking for a scriptural reason for doing whatever it is you want to do, keep looking long enough and you'll probably find it.

All that being said, is there something about Islam that makes its followers especially vulnerable to persuasion to perpetrate or support acts of terror? Is Islam inherently violent? In our desire to be tolerant and to see the best in all religions, are we avoiding or glossing over the question of jihad? Where do all those terrorists get their ideas if not from the Qur'an? Knowing full well that terror comes in all forms, if we are honest with ourselves, must we not ask this question, this uncomfortable question?

What does the Qur'an say about jihad? Jihad does not, as many Westerners believe, translate as Holy War. It means "struggle" or "striving." The so-called Great Jihad is the struggle of the individual to overcome temptation in one's personal and spiritual life. It is the struggle to submit one's desires, ambitions and selfish tendencies to the will of God. The so-called Lesser Jihad is the struggle of the community to live in accordance with God's law – a struggle that may include armed conflict.

And what is the will of God as far as unbelievers? Are Muslims encouraged to conquer and convert the unbeliever?

The Qur'an's statements on the subject are complex. Islam is considered a universal religion, as is Christianity. It is not restricted to a chosen people or a small group of the elect. It is intended to include the world. It embraces converts. Nevertheless, Islam prohibits conversion by force. Jews and Christians, as fellow People of the Book, are to be tolerated and treated well. On the other hand, Muslims are warned against becoming intimate with unbelievers, lest they be

tempted to stray from the straight path. And the Qur'an spells out that war with unbelievers is justified in self-defense or in defense of Islam.

When western forces occupy Muslim lands, in the eyes to the jihadist, we are assaulting Islam. Even so, the killing of woman and children or any civilian is forbidden, as is suicide, even in the service of Allah.

The bottom line is that the Qur'an can provide justification for loving and just and also hateful, intolerant, and even violent behavior. So can the Bible. Scriptural exhortations to war against local and long-dead enemies can be used to justify current hostilities. The Qur'an, like the Bible, is rife with internal contradictions and unclear meanings.

Is Islam dangerous? My answer to this question is that fundamentalist thinking is dangerous, whether it is Islamic fundamentalism, Christian fundamentalism, Jewish fundamentalism or even atheist or nationalistic fundamentalism. This is my perspective as a Unitarian Universalist. My own commitment to trying to see multiple points of view and my conviction that truths are changeable admittedly color my opinion.

Fundamentalists are afflicted with unshakable certainty. There is no room for doubt in their belief systems. And when you have no room for doubt, those who question your rightness must be put down. Those who disagree with you or merely question your convictions are dangerous, not just to themselves, but to you, and they must be dealt with. Fundamentalists make exclusive truth claims. If I am right, then you must be wrong. If you can't see that I'm right, you must be convinced, by force if necessary, and failing that, you must at least be controlled.

Fundamentalist thinking appeals to those of us who are terrified of doubt, of being wrong, of being left out of the closed circle of the righteous. When we live in a culture that offers religious justification for our fears, we are vulnerable to those who invite us to prove our

righteousness in violent ways. And many terrorists come from such cultures.

Now, the Qur'an is believed by Muslims to be the literal word of God. The literal word and the final word. Educated followers of the Bible, even the most devout, now agree that, while it may be divinely inspired in some way, it is the product of human authors. It reflects the social and political realities and needs of the days in which it was created. The Bible we know is the result of centuries of committee work: which books to include, what authorities to cite, which of the possible meanings of individual phrases to emphasize. The Qur'an is different, as any Muslim can tell you.

Muslims believe that it is this very tinkering with the original truths of Judaism and Christianity that has corrupted their meaning and authenticity, that has covered with error the original revelations of the prophets – Adam, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. The Qur'an, they believe, restores the original truths of the tradition they share with Jews and Christians, and is the final and complete revelation, the literal words of God.

This revelation took place over the course of twenty years. Mohammed is believed to have relayed the verses to his followers for memorization as they were revealed to him; only later were they written down. Therefore, the words themselves are considered holy, not just the meanings they convey. One may debate their meaning, but their authenticity is beyond question for the believer.

Its words are to be taken literally then, rather than as the product of a particular time and place, namely the Arab peninsula of the 7th century. Mohammed was a reformer who sought to unify the nomadic tribes of Arabia, to impose law and order and the Muslim religion on the fiercely independent and often ruthless warlords of his day through military force. His vision of an empire united and powerful and subservient to God's will was realized with a speed and

effectiveness that boggles the modern mind.

The modern jihadist sees this story of empire and military victory not as history, but as a call to arms. Like any religious fundamentalist, destiny calls to him from holy scripture to recapture the glories of a lost golden age. Historical context is meaningless to the fundamentalist. What was true in the times and culture that gave rise to the holy text is true for all eternity. When any scripture, or any belief, transcends history, when its truth is inviolable and beyond amendment or question, danger results. You can't apply the rules and cultural mores of one or two thousand years ago and expect to recreate that culture in the modern world.

Now it's a bit of a paradox that while Islamic conservatives seek to reestablish the mores of a medieval desert existence, Islam is very much a religion of this world. More than its sister religions of Judaism and Christianity, Islam emphasizes the afterlife, it is true. But Islam is what we might call an applied religion. In this way, it's similar to Unitarian Universalism. It is less about professed beliefs than about actions taken in the here and now. Deeds not creeds, as we say.

The difference is that the actions of the devout Muslim are clearly dictated by the religious institution. How many times to pray, when, where and how, for example, are spelled out. Your duties as a Muslim are not in doubt. No wonder it has such tremendous appeal in this day in which we are stumbling to keep up with a changing culture, technology, population and even natural environment. Traditional religion of any stripe offers a haven from the constant choosing and decision making of the modern world.

In fact, the word "Islam" is Arabic for submission. Once God's will has been determined, or explained to you by a credible authority, your actions follow naturally. Muslims pray to Allah to keep them on the "straight path." Such a tradition of obedience is another reason that Islam may appeal to those who are in doubt about their place, meaning and importance in the world.

You are not asked to question, but to follow; not search your conscience for what is right, but to search your conscience for your acceptance of and obedience to God's will and his plans for you.

And unlike our own UU understanding of religion as applied to everyday life, there is no distinction made in fundamentalist Islamic thought between the religious and the secular. It is a religion that flows into every aspect of life. From its beginnings with Mohammed, Islam has guided its followers in matters of politics and government, war, economics, law, the arts, family life, education and personal as well as community ethics. To be a Muslim is to be Muslim in every part of life. Given this porous or even nonexistent boundary between religion and government, it is little wonder when a religious totalitarian group such as the Taliban or ISIS promotes theocracy. It might not be such a stretch for the devout Muslim to follow the call to fight to establish a society in which religious belief and practice rule every aspect of life.

Lest we feel a little smug about our own secularized society, let's recognize that our American separation of church and state seems pretty tenuous as times. We are not immune here to religious hysteria or to using religion or a distorted version of it to manipulate public emotion toward political ends. Just listen to the religious platitudes uttered during an election year, think about the battle of creationists to legitimize their religious beliefs in our children's textbooks, or consider this: 46% of Americans want the Bible to be employed as a source of legislation. If it were not for the safeguards written into our constitution, who can say how different our situation might be?

Putting that aside, any blanket statement about any group of people, fundamentalists included, must be qualified. And it's an important qualification. Of course, there are many religious fundamentalists, Muslim and Christian and otherwise, who do not espouse violence. Who simply want to be left alone to live their lives in obedience to what they understand their

scripture to direct. Every scripture is open to different interpretations, given the multiple mutual contradictions they contain – even one that is believed to be the literal word of God.

Not only are not all religious fundamentalists violent; Muslims around the world who would consider themselves fundamentalists are in the minority.

There is a fascinating book that I would recommend to you, called *Who Speaks for Islam* by John Esposito. The book reports on a Gallup Poll of Muslims around the world, in over thirty-five countries. The poll was conducted in 2006 and 2007 and so it's a bit dated now. It predates the Islamic State and Boko Haram, for one thing, though not Al Qaeda. It reminds us of some little-thought of facts and challenges our stereotypes. For example, the country with the largest Muslim population is Indonesia. We tend to think of Islam in association with Arab countries because of its founding in that part of the world and because Middle Eastern Muslims appear more often in the news than those from other countries with large Muslim populations, countries in Africa and Asia, for example. Yet only one tenth of the world's Muslims are Arab.

Many of the behaviors and attitudes that we tend to associate with Islam have more to do with the Arab culture and subcultures than with the teachings of the Qur'an. If we would understand Islam, we need to remember that the role of Muslim women, for example, is at least as much a product of national culture and tradition than of Qur'anic teaching. Women in Saudi Arabia live very different lives from women in Pakistan or Indonesia. The dictum to cover the head and submit to the male head of household is typical of traditional Middle Eastern cultures, not just Islamic ones. What's more, the hajib, or headscarf, is seen as liberating rather than oppressive by many Muslim women. It is the highly sexualized role of women in the West that they view as oppressive. Things are seldom as simple as they seem.

The poll reported on in *Who Speaks for Islam* was also illuminating on the subject of holy

war and terrorism. Some of its findings: About 7% of those interviewed supported the actions of September 11. If this seems high, we might consider this: Another study showed that only 46% of Americans think that “bombing and other attacks intentionally aimed at civilians” are never justified. Those Muslims who approve of the attacks of 9/11 were found to be no more or less likely to be devoutly religious than any other Muslims. And the poll revealed that if Muslims hate America, it is because we have invaded and occupied their lands, because we dominate them economically and threaten their resources; because we are suspected of colonialist designs on them; and because we denigrate Islam and their way of life.

The point to remember here is that it’s unwise and unfair and even dangerous to generalize about Muslims, just as it is about any religion or nation.

So as Unitarian Universalists, what are we called to do, how are we called to respond to the growth of Islam and the increasingly horrifying news about the acts of Muslim extremists?

Being part of the human family requires us to do a little work. The work of informing ourselves, trying to understand, speaking with others with that intention and passing on this vital message. We don’t know the whole story and we never can. Doubt is a gift for which we are grateful. Be skeptical.

The followers of Islam demand that we pay attention. The West’s ignorance and indifference to Islam is the source of much mutual fear and even hatred among the nations of the world, including our own and much of the Middle East. Islam is second only to Christianity in the number of its followers, comprising almost one quarter of the world’s population. It is the only major religion that is actually growing in numbers. Yet mutual misconceptions and stereotypes continue to influence our interactions.

Like any religion, Islam can be a force for good or evil. And, as with any religion, a deeper

knowledge of its teachings can be used in the cause of tolerance or hatred, peace or war. Islam, like any religion, provides insights into humanity, our fears and longings. Its scripture offers us beauty and challenges our understanding. What we do with it is up to us.

We are called to educate ourselves, to practice patience, to avoid assumptions and prejudice and hysteria. To resist manipulation. To respond to fears with fact and reason as well as with compassion.

In the conviction that the world is vast and wondrous enough to contain all manner of beliefs, and in the certainty that what unites us is greater than that which divides us, let us seek peace together and give ourselves to this holy work of growing understanding.