

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
 “What’s Right with Islam”
 Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore September 28, 2008

Call to Celebration

In honor of the theme of this service exploring what is right with Islam, we will begin with a recording of the adhan, the traditional call to prayer that sounds five times a day from minarets of mosques around the world. The Arabic transliteration is in your order of service.

Allahu Akbar (4x)
Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah (2x)
Ashadu anna Muhammadan Rasool Allah (2x)
Hayya 'ala-s-Salah (2x)
Hayya 'ala-l-Falah (2x)
Allahu Akbar (2x)
La ilaha illa Allah

The translation is as follows:

God is Great
 I bear witness that there is no deity except the One God.
 I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God.
 Hurry to the prayer
 Hurry to success
 God is Great
 There is no deity except the One God.

Let us listen and feel the call to know, feel and live the truth
 as we join together in the celebration of life.

Spoken Meditation

Let us breathe deeply in and out, in and out, in and out.
 Calming the panic pressing in from Washington and Wall Street
 As the profit making party comes to a crashing halt.
 We sit by our 401K's watching the gyrations of the market indexes
 Worrying about the security of our employment and income and
 Fretting about our hopes for our children and dreams for retirement.
 It feels so unfair to live a productive and honest life
 And to be made vulnerable by the greedy excess of others
 Gambling with our hard earned savings.

Breath in and out, in and out, in and out.
 The fever of this moment will pass.

Whether troubles get worse, as they very well may,
 Or better, as is also possible,
 Let us be a sheltering community for each other
 Let us assist each other to weather the financial storm.

The sun will come out tomorrow. We will endure.
 The spirit of life and love
 will remain in our hearts
 no matter what.

Readings from the Quran

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). (The Private Apartments 13)

The parable of those who spend their substance in the way of God is that of a grain of corn: it groweth seven ears, and each ear Hath a hundred grains. God giveth manifold increase to whom He pleaseth: And God careth for all and He knoweth all things. (The Cow 261)

Truly man was created very impatient;
 Fretful when evil touches him;
 And [stingy] when good reaches him;
 Not so those devoted to Prayer;
 Those who remain steadfast to their prayer;
 And those in whose wealth is a recognized right
 For the (needy) who asks ... (The Ascending Stairway 19-25)

And O my people! Give just measure and weight, nor withhold from the people the things that are their due: commit not evil in the land with intent to do mischief. (HUD 85)

"And O my people! Ask forgiveness of your Lord, and turn to Him (in repentance): He will send you the skies pouring abundant rain, and add strength to your strength: so turn ye not back in sin!" (HUD 52)

Ramadhan is the (month) in which was sent down the Qur'an, as a guide to mankind, also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgment (Between right and wrong). So every one of you who is present (at his home) during that month should spend it in fasting, but if any one is ill, or on a journey, the prescribed period (Should be made up) by days later. God intends every facility for you; He does not want to put to difficulties. (He wants you) to complete the prescribed period, and to glorify Him in that He has guided you; and perchance ye shall be grateful. (The Cow 185)

High above all is God, the King, the Truth! Be not in haste with the Qur'an before its revelation to thee is completed, but say, "O my Lord! advance me in knowledge."
(Ta-Ha 114)

Sermon

As I've been studying Islam for this sermon, I've realized how fixed I am in my view of reality. I don't believe in special revelation. I don't believe God selects particular humans to receive truth not available through other means. I don't believe in angels appearing on earth in human form. I don't believe in the judgment day and a coming paradise or hell fire. These are central beliefs in the Islamic faith that I do not accept, and reasons I am not a Muslim.

If I were to treat the Islamic faith like a mathematical proof or a scientific theory, I would be inclined to discard it as false as I do not accept the premises as valid. Yet, I cannot do this because I do not know for sure that my beliefs are correct. I do not know for sure whether or not God does select certain individuals to receive direct communication. Just because I have never seen an angel, and I'm not aware of what I would consider credible evidence of someone who has seen an angel, doesn't mean that angels don't appear to people and talk to them and give them revelation from God. I cannot see into the future and know whether the world will end with some kind of apocalypse as foretold in the Bible. These are outside the realm of what science can validate in repeatable experiment.

Since Unitarian Universalism does not have any creedal tests of faith, all are welcome to be a member here who *do* believe in revelation, angels, and the judgment day. And all are also welcome to reject them completely and be a member.

I need to add this framing introduction to what I will be saying today because I'm not interested in hearing after this sermon a list of, "yes, but..." arguments against Islam ... and, I could make my own list of everything I don't like or accept about Unitarian Universalism. I do choose to be a Unitarian Universalist and work within our tradition because I believe our approach best reflects how I understand reality and offers an excellent way to do religion for our times. I have great faith in what we will become in the next 100 years and I'm excited to be part of that process.

Central to our Unitarian Universalist religious approach is appreciation of faith traditions different from our own. As we claim no exclusive access to God or special revelation, our approach draws from the wisdom from the world's religious traditions to inform and guide us. God may select someone in our movement as a Prophet and give her or him direct Unitarian Universalist revelation but it hasn't happened yet to my knowledge. (I'm ready and waiting Lord ...) Today we are guided in our religious journey by the diversity of religious sources ... including Islam.

And this is the first thing I'd like to mention that is right with Islam. It doesn't set itself up, as Christianity does, with a universe-changing event as Mary gives birth to God's progeny. Muhammad (peace be upon him) was a flesh and blood man not an incarnation of God. Muslims recognize Jesus, Moses, Abraham, and many other religious leaders as prophets, human beings who have contact with God face to face. Muslims believe there have been many, many prophets, estimated in the range of 124,000. Some of those prophets receive revelation and then become Messengers who bring back the word of God as revelation. Thus Muslims embrace Jews and Christians and their revelation as well as that of others.

Which leads to the second thing I'd like to mention that is right with Islam, it's wide religious toleration and acceptance. Islamic civilization spread through Persia, Asia and Africa thus having contact with Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and indigenous African religions. Most of the time, they have not imposed their religion on others nor tried to eliminate other religions from being practiced. The decision to follow the Prophet (peace be upon him) requires an unforced voluntary commitment. The capacity to tolerate other religious traditions is built in through recognizing the reality of prophets and messengers before Muhammad (peace be upon him).

This leads us to the third appreciation I'll mention that links closely with the heritage of Unitarianism, the oneness of God. Rejecting the belief in God-men and God-women, does not limit our appreciation for special people who may have paranormal powers. I like how the Prophet (peace be upon him) is described in a popular Sufi poem:

Muhammad is a man, but not like other men,
Rather, he is a ruby and other men are like stones.

La illah ha, illa Allah, there is no deity but God, is the diamond, the cornerstone, the central pillar of Islamic faith and quite compatible with the monotheism of our heritage. Everything we can conceive of as God is not God. Our minds cannot think a thought big enough to contain the totality of the divine. All of scientific understanding is but a grain of sand on the beach, a drop of water in the ocean of the magnificence that is the one God. Our only response to this grandeur of being is humility and gratitude to exist and to know. This God is not distant from us but extremely close, as close as our heartbeat and the breath that fills our lungs. This God is eager for our embrace. It is said that for every one step we take toward Allah, Allah takes ten steps toward us.

A quick aside on the word "Allah." It isn't a different concept of God than Yahweh, Adonai or Elohim as found in the Torah or Theos found in the Greek Gospels. It is just the Arabic way of saying the same word. Muslims are clear they are not revealing a new concept of God different from the Christian or Jewish one.

This unified conception of God that embraces Judaism and Christianity has led Islam to transcend culture, tribe and race. One of the most magnificent aspects of Islam is its transcendence of the racial and cultural divides we struggle with here in the United States. Islam has no poisonous Calvinistic view of the Elect or the

divisive Jewish idea of being specially chosen by God. All are welcome to be Muslim because all are equal before God. No one is special. In every corner of the globe, all bow before God the same way, looking the same direction, saying the same Arabic words. Before God all are worthy no matter what station in life, what economic background, what national origin. Islamic egalitarianism sets up no priestly class with special communication with the divine. The imam is but a skilled interpreter of the Quran, not a source of anything new or innovative from God. Islam has no secret teachings or special holy class of communers with God. All that is needed to live according to God's wish and commandment is freely available to all in the Quran and the Hadith, the stories of Muhammad's life (peace be upon him).

This leads to another affinity between Unitarian Universalism and Islam, the development of character. Muslims do not view themselves as helpless sinners saved only by the Grace of God. They see their task in life as perfecting their faith, through the exercise of their free will.

Being a good Muslim requires a lifelong commitment to spiritual practice and inner development, all designed to lead to union with God in this life or after death. This requires learning what leads away from and towards God, what we might call moral and ethical development that we too strive for. Muslims look to Muhammad as the perfected example and teacher to follow.

The base of this inner growth and development begins with restraining the "lower" self that urges us to do bad things. To help curb our inner urges to harm others, and ourselves, Muslims encourage the development of the conscientious or higher self. This is the sense of self that recognizes what is right and wrong, criticizes the lower self for its urges and seeks correction. The appropriate suppression of the lower self and the cultivation of the higher self are basic to moral development and socialization.

And there is more.

Islam recognizes another state of consciousness they call the inspired self (what we might name, a sense of calling). This self is the co-creative process that manifests through receiving inspiration from God that invites the Muslim to draw nearer. In this state of consciousness, one starts becoming a channel of divine action in the world.

When one grows into and integrates the inspired self into one's being, one can discover another state of consciousness they call a contented self, (what we might call inner peace). This is finding a deep mutual satisfaction with God, to be both pleased with God and pleasing to God.

Islam posits one more stage of development that I don't think we have a name for that they call the "perfected self." In this final stage of development, one becomes completely transparent to the will of God, completely one with it, the ego-self completely submitted to it. The Prophet (peace be upon him) described this state

as: God becomes the seeing that sees, the hearing that hears, the hand that acts, the foot that walks and the heart that comprehends.

How does one attain the perfected self? Follow the path of the Prophets.

Notice the perfected self is not about collecting material stuff. Here is nothing here about achieving a certain level of technology or possessions as prerequisites to perfecting the self. In fact the perfecting of the self requires the surrender of the separate self to the will of God. This leads to another aspect I believe is so right about Islam. Muhammad (peace be upon him) didn't retreat from the world, live in a cave or a monastery. He wasn't born with a silver spoon in his mouth, just the opposite. His father died before he was born and his mother shortly afterward. He endured much hardship in his life. He showed us how to live a good and holy life while remaining in the marketplace of existence. His whole life is a model for us of how to struggle with the daily tasks of eking out a living, marrying and raising a family, as many of us do, and at the same time striving for inner peace and perfection.

Thus the values for worldly existence that come from Islam are also to be appreciated as part of what is right with Islam - values not much different from our Unitarian Universalist values. We both have the concept of the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We both deeply value life, both plant, animal and human, treating it with care and respect. We both value freedom of the individual especially in the realm of religion. Though we have an expanded conception of family, we both value family as the foundation for human society. We both value the uncompelled transcendence of selfish interest toward selfless interest to serve the common good. We both value hard work, charity, compassion and forgiveness. Not only do we share these values, they are common values of many of the world's religious traditions.

My greatest appreciation for Islam is its dedication to spiritual practice. Tomorrow is the last day of the month of Ramadan. Muslims have been fasting from both food and water each day from sun up till sun down. This is an arduous undertaking, not for self-punishment but for solidarity and self-illumination. Muslims remind themselves of their unity with God by praying five times a day. The hajj or the once in a lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca reminds them of both their insignificance as a separate self and their oneness in the sea of pilgrim's devotion to God. The spirit of this passion for God is very inspiring to me as a way to create a base of meaning for one's life that transcends circumstance.

Yes, I also have my reservations. I have reservations about Judaism and Christianity as they are practiced as well. I have my reservations about Buddhism even though I'm deeply devoted to insight meditation that has Buddhism as its source.

The guiding religious principle of Unitarian Universalism I see emerging now is appreciation. This principle allows us to draw inspiration, strength and sustenance from all the great religious traditions without mis-appropriating from them. ➤

We Unitarian Universalists are in the process of synthesizing our own religious tradition that will draw from these sources and go beyond them in a creative response to them that will become our foundation – just like every other new religious tradition has grown from its roots.

I believe that the same Spirit of Life and Love that animated all the prophets still is actively at work in all of us and in Unitarian Universalism. Our challenge is to be receptive channels of this energy and intuition to create a non-exclusive religious approach for the twenty-second and twenty-third centuries. We may not see it today, but by the grace that is inherent in our being, may we craft a beautiful religious path that effectively addresses the spiritual needs of religious liberals, as effectively as the Prophet (peace be upon him) did in his time.

Let that be our joy and our challenge today.

Benediction

The truth is here, right now, living through us.
 In Islam and other religious traditions,
 that same truth can breathe through us
 When we discover what we cherish in common.

The heart of Islam is love
 The heart of Unitarian Universalism is love
 Let us find the harmony between us in love.

Go in Peace. Make Peace. Be at Peace.

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Good books for further research I used in preparing this sermon:

The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 2002.

What's Right with Islam: A New Vision for Muslims and the West, Imam Feisal Abdul Fauf, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 2004.