

What Do A Billion Muslims Have to Teach Us About Unitarian Universalism?

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*For the complete audio recording of this service delivered on July 16, 2017,
at the First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco, [click here](#).*

*For a recording of the sermon (not including the reading) delivered on July 22, 2018,
at the Berkeley Fellowship of Unitarian Universalists, [click here](#).*

Reading

Imagine you are approaching a mosque...in a desert village...a thousand years ago. You hear the call to prayer from the rooftops:

God is most great
God is most great
Allahu Akbar
Allahu Akbar
I testify that there is no god but God
I testify that there is no god but God
la ilaha illa llah

Islam is a radically monotheistic religion. One might even consider it one of our earliest unitarian forebears. The call continues:

I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God.
I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God.

Thus ends the profession of faith. As you prepare yourself for worship, you hear the following words:

Come alive to the prayer
Come alive to the prayer
Come alive to the flourishing
Come alive to the flourishing
Allahu Akbar
Allahu Akbar
la ilaha illa llah

You are now in the mosque, far away from the concerns of the world, ready to orient your mind towards the infinite.

While Christians believe that the creator expressed itself in the form of a man, Muslims believe the creator expressed itself in the form of sound, beginning with these words:

Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Caring

Thus opens every chapter of the Qur'an. Perhaps today we will hear Surah *Ash-Shams*, "The Sun":

By the sun and her brightening
By the moon when it follows her
By the day when it displays her
By the night when it veils her
By the sky and what constructed her
By the earth and what shaped her
By the soul and what formed her

These are rider oaths. You can almost hear the sound of the horses galloping across the Arabian desert.

By the sun and her brightening
By the moon when it follows her
By the day when it displays her
By the night when it veils her
By the sky and what constructed her
By the earth and what shaped her
By the soul and what formed her

Or maybe we have awoken early to worship at the break of day, and appropriately enough, we get to hear a recitation of *Surah Al-Fajr*, the Dawn:

By the dawn
By the nights ten
By the odd and the even
By the night as it eases away
Is there not in that an oath for the thoughtful mind

Or perhaps it's evening, after a hard day of work, and we are here to give thanks. The stars are beginning to appear and we hear *Surah Al-Layl*, the Night:

By the night when it falls
By the day when it breaks
By what has made the male and the female
You strive toward different ends.

We ask ourselves, what are these different ends? We hear in the next verses:

So, for one who served and was conscious of Divine presence,
And confirmed the Truth,
For such a one, We shall soon facilitate the path of ease,
But for one who hoarded,
And considered himself self sufficient,
And denied the Truth,

For such a one, We shall soon facilitate the path of difficulty.
Wealth will not save him from ruin

And this brings us to the present day.

Sermon

I sometimes say that I was a seminarian in search of a denomination for ten years before I became a UU Ministerial Aspirant. After moving to the Bay Area, I attended services at Grace Cathedral, the San Francisco Zen Center, the Buddhist Church of San Francisco, Or Shalom, and the Vedanta Society of Northern California all before walking through the doors of the First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco when Rosemary Bray McNatt—the new president of Starr King School for the Ministry—gave her sermon entitled “A New Anointing.” To me, it felt like a call, and a year later I was enrolled in that school. I am saying all this to tell you a little bit about this person who presumes to preach about the Qur'an. I do not consider myself a Muslim. I am not an expert in Islam. I've taken a couple classes on the Qur'an at Starr King, which—as anyone who's an expert in anything knows—is just about enough to be dangerous.

So why do I want to speak with you about the Qur'an? Why should you listen to this self-professed amateur talk about something he admittedly knows only a little about. Well, I don't think one needs to be an expert to speak about religion. I see religion as a kind of folk art. You don't need a Master of Fine Arts to appreciate Beethoven, let alone the Beatles, and you don't need a Master of Divinity to appreciate religion. But you do need to know something. After all, what would the Beatles have sounded like to someone who only knew music from 19th Century Europe?

But why know anything about religion? And why Islam of all religions? Of the World's five most popular religions, it's probably the one I have the least experience with. But it's also arguably the most important one for us to learn about right now. Today there are about as many Muslims as there are Jews in the United States, but that number is growing quickly; particularly with mass migration due to war, climate change, and wars caused by climate change. So we can anticipate having more interactions with Muslims going forward. And of course, this is particularly the case for those of us in our denomination who would consider ourselves allies with those refugees which are being turned away from our borders.

But beyond cultural competency, there is the question of what we ourselves have to learn from this religion. In fact, as Unitarians, I think we have a special connection with Islam. Both Unitarianism and Islam are outgrowths of the Judeo-Christian tradition; both tend to revere Jesus, but do not worship him; both believe that the kingdom of God belongs to all people, not just a chosen few. Furthermore, the poetry of Muslim mystics like Hafez and Rumi have found their way into our hymnals and even onto some of our church walls (if you go up the hill to Kensington for example).

But Islam is not Unitarianism, at least not as we know it. Professor of Religion, Stephen Prothero posits that every religion is a response to a question or a problem. In the case of Islam, he observes that the problem is pride, and the solution is submission (which is what “Muslim”

technically means). Submission, that is, to that which is greater than all. This brings us back to our reading:

For one who served and was conscious of Divine presence,
And confirmed the Truth,
For such a one, We shall soon facilitate the path of ease,
But for one who hoarded,
And considered himself self-sufficient,
And denied the Truth,
For such a one, We shall soon facilitate the path of difficulty.
Wealth will not save him from ruin

(The Night; 92:5-11)

Are you the "one who served and was conscious of Divine presence"? Or are you the "one who hoarded and considered [yourself] self-sufficient"? This is the distinction the Qur'an makes again and again and it aligns with the tradition that comes out of the Judeo-Christian heritage that we share.

This question is as alive today as it was 1, 2, 3,000 years ago. The Protestant theologian, Walter Brueggemann, when reflecting on the Hebrew prophets, wrote:

the problem of our time is not atheism but idolatry. The issue is not that we are nonbelievers but that our belief is assigned to unworthy and unworkable objects.

(Brueggemann, p.56)

When we hear the *muezzin* calling out “there is no god but God, *la ilaha illa illah*,” it is not a metaphysical statement so much as an ethical one. The word “worship” derives from an Old English word meaning “to shape worth”. But what we acknowledge or “shape” as worthy also shapes us. So what is it that holds worth for us today? What is it that shapes us? Is it the size of our bank account? The material things we’ve accumulated? Or is it something greater than that, greater than us?

Islam differs from Christianity in that it does not believe in original sin. Humans are not innately “sinful” in Islam, but we are forgetful. How easy is it for us to forget that which is worthy of worship? But the Qur'an instructs us: the whole world is full of reminders. The creator, (who is personified as “We” in the Qur'an) asks us the following:

Have you ever considered the seed which you cast upon the soil?
Is it you who cause it to grow – or are We the cause of its growth?

Have you ever considered the water which you drink?
Is it you who cause it to come down from the clouds – or are We the cause of its coming down?

Have you ever considered the fire which you kindle?
Is it you who have brought into being the tree that serves as its fuel – or are We
the cause of its coming into being?

It is We who have made it a means to remind [you of Us], and a comfort for all
who are lost and hungry in the wilderness [of their lives].
Extol, then, the limitless glory of thy Sustainer's mighty name!

(The Event; 56:63-64, 68-69, 71-74)

We hear this echoed in the prayer of Hafiz we heard earlier as he addresses his beloved Sustainer:

Cloak yourself in a thousand ways;
still shall I know you . . .
I shall salute you . . .
I shall surely see you in tumbling clouds,
in brightly embroidered meadows.
. . . in ivy that climbs,
in clusters of grapes,
in morning flaming the mountains,
in the clear arch of sky.
You gladden the whole earth and make every heart great.
You are the breathing of the world.

(Hafiz, Beloved Presence)

But as we move into cities and we lose consciousness of the natural world that sustains us, it becomes increasingly easy for us to believe ourselves “self-sufficient”. How hard could it be, some wonder, to put a city on Mars? It turns out: incredibly difficult. How easy it is to forget that the “clusters of grapes” we buy at the grocery store are truly a miracle of nature, existing solely on this planet, due to a fortuitous combination of elements that has occurred nowhere else. There may indeed be life on other planets, but there are no grapes. There is no ivy. And whatever life does exist is similarly miraculous in its own way.

I find a certain resemblance between this line of thinking and that of Carl Sagan. On the matter of God, Sagan agreed with Einstein who said, “I believe in Spinoza’s God, who reveals himself in the harmony of all being.” Sagan liked to remind us that our elements were forged in the bellies of stars and that we are made of star stuff. In 1990, as the Voyager 1 space probe was leaving our Solar System, he convinced NASA to have Voyager turn its camera back at Earth and take a picture. Reflecting on what was in that photograph, he pointed out:

. . . you see a dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. . . .
Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the universe, are challenged by this point of pale light.
. . . To my mind, there is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our

responsibility to deal more kindly and compassionately with one another and to preserve and cherish that pale blue dot . . .

(Sagan, Pale Blue Dot)

Whether you believe in the God of Abraham and Muhammad, who has the power to intervene in the history of the universe, or you believe in the God of Spinoza and Sagan, who is better understood in terms of the rational order of the universe itself, there is wisdom in following these signs, these *ayat* in Arabic, back to their source, to remember that we are *not* self-sufficient beings but fully interdependent with that “web of all existence” which creates and sustains us.