

Surrender to Peace: An Appreciation of Islam by Rev. M. Lara Hoke

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Do you remember the first time you ever encountered Islam? Think for a moment. What was the first time in your life you recall learning that there was a religion called Islam or religious people called Muslims? Perhaps some of you knew Muslims growing up, in your neighborhood or among friends and family. If so, chances are that your first encounter with Islam and Muslims was pleasant, peaceful, perhaps positive. But I'm guessing that for many of you, your first encounter with the knowledge that Islam and Muslims existed was through the media and in a negative context. My own first awareness of Muslims was the Ayatollah Khomeini and the hostage crisis starting in 1979, certainly not a positive association.

Unfortunately, our exposure to Islam through the media plays the biggest roll in forming our impressions of the religion. And the media portrayal of Muslims is almost entirely in the context of struggles, often in the Middle East. But this is misleading. It is true that most Middle Easterners are Muslims, but it is also true that most Muslims are not in the Middle East. We have 1.5 billion Muslim sisters and brothers in the world, and only about 18% of them (less than 1/5) are from the Middle East. Actually, most Muslims are from southeast Asia. Indonesia has more Muslims than any other country in the world – yet we do not picture Indonesia when we think of Muslims, I dare say! We have been presented with a very negative image of the Middle East by our media, and we have unfortunately dumped much of that baggage onto our view of Muslims in general.

Now, I could spend all my time today trying to talk us down from our negative impressions of Islam. And it makes me sad that there's any need to do this. But I do feel a need, given the intense "Islamophobia" in our country since at least 9/11, and as was evident this summer during the controversy around the so-called "Ground Zero Mosque". So I will briefly address the three main negatives, or the three main fears, about Islam that I tend to hear. First, there is a fear that Islam is inherently violent. Second, there is often a negative reaction to certain sections of the Quran, the holy scripture of Islam. The third major area of fear seems to be about the role of women in Islam, often a part of present-day anti-Muslim rhetoric.

Let's start with the fear the Islam is inherently violent. Part of the controversy is over the concept of "*jihad*", commonly translated as Islamic holy war. *Jihad* is an Arabic verb that means "to strive or struggle in the path of God." Some have translated this to mean an external struggle, or war, on behalf of God – and according to the Quran, it should be only in self-defense, never a war of aggression.¹ But many Muslims (perhaps most, worldwide) would interpret *jihad* to mean an internal struggle to be on the path of God; an internal struggle to live an upright life. So *jihad* is not a call for Muslims to go to war against non-Muslims, as some fear. The Quran says, "There is no compulsion in religion"; you are not to convert through force.

The second major fear of Islam is centered around parts of the holy book of Islam, the Quran. The Quran was revealed to the prophet Muhammad by God over a period of 23 years during the 7th century CE; this revelation is the central miracle of Islam. There are certain *suras*, or verses,

¹ The Quran states: "Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but commit no aggression; for God loves not transgressors." (2:190)

in the Quran that sound violent or otherwise objectionable to our modern ears. Consider this verse: “Blessed is the one who grabs your little children and smashes them against a rock.” Just one thing. That troubling, violent verse is not from the Quran; it is from Psalm 137 in the Hebrew Scriptures. Yes, the Quran has troubling verses. But in this, the Quran is no different than the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament; they all have troubling passages to those with modern and moderate sensibilities. Each of these ancient scriptures requires thoughtfulness and contemplation to see past the troubling passages, through to the beauty of the overall message.

It is true that there are extremist Muslims who have interpreted their scriptures and faith in a way that justifies terrorism. But it always comes down to interpretation... for any religion. Every religion has fundamentalist interpretations, and regressive and even hateful interpretations. There have been those that interpret the Christian Bible in such a way as to justify racism and white supremacy – even slavery, for instance. But these extreme interpretations are the exception. Most Muslims interpret Islam in a way that is peaceful, and potentially beautiful.

As for the third major fear, the role of women in Islam, it is a complex issue. When Muhammad received the Quran in a revelation in the 7th century CE, it was actually very liberating for the women of that time and place. It gave them many rights that they had not had under local, tribal rules, including the right to own property and gain inheritance; the right to vote; and a say in marriage and divorce. In modern times, how Muslim women are treated, and how they are expected to dress, has much to do with the particular culture they are in and their customs and interpretations. Some less-modern interpretations put women in an oppressive situation. Once again, the media tends to focus on Muslim women facing the most oppression; Muslim women who are not oppressed become somewhat invisible.

Obviously that was a cursory discussion of these three major fears. It was just a start. Recently on *20/20*, Diane Sawyer and crew did a very nice piece on Islam, a Q&A addressing these fears and others. If you did not see it, I recommend watching it online at abc.com² as a good place to start.

But enough focus on the negative, enough time trying to be an apologist for Islam, as if I have any right! On the other hand, as a Unitarian Universalist minister, and as one who was raised as a UU, I *do* feel qualified to be an apologist for Unitarian Universalism. You might recall that the third source of our Unitarian Universalist tradition is “wisdom from the world’s religions which inspire us in our ethical and spiritual life.” But I dare say that most of us have had trouble drawing on the wisdom of Islam; we’ve had trouble letting it inspire us in our ethical and spiritual life. I think we UUs have sadly under-appreciated Islam, the second-largest religion on earth.

Now, a sermon isn’t nearly enough time to appreciate and celebrate a great world religion – chronologically, the third great world religion of the western world, following Judaism and Christianity (and having much in common with these other western religions). But let me paint a picture for you of what I admire about this great world religion, and how I am learning to let it inspire my spiritual and ethical life. And I’m talking today about “mainline Islam”, so to speak.

² <http://abc.go.com/watch/2020/SH559026/VD5589601/islam-questions-and-answers>

We UUs often lean on Sufism for our Islamic inspiration. Sufism is the mystical tradition within Islam, and when we use the words of Rumi (as shared for our Opening Words), we are being inspired by one small branch of the Islamic tradition. If you look in our own hymnal under sources from the Islamic tradition, they are all from the Sufi tradition! Today, I want to focus on the vast majority of the Islamic tradition that is not Sufi.

For the sake of time, I'd like to focus on what I have gotten, spiritually and ethically, from the Five Pillars of Islam. The Five Pillars are the heart of Islam, the five most important practices for a Muslim to follow. Briefly: the first pillar is in fact a declaration of faith – the declaration there is one God, and that Muhammad is the prophet of God. The second pillar is that Muslims must pray five times a day in a particular way. The third pillar is about charity – specifically, Muslims must give 2.5 percent of their wealth to charity. The fourth pillar is that Muslims must fast during the month of Ramadan. The fifth and final pillar is that a Muslim must make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once if at all possible.

Let me address these out of order, starting with the third pillar, charity (or almsgiving) directly to those in need. This should inspire anyone, Unitarian Universalist or not, who takes a moment to think about it. What a wonderful ethical guideline, mandating giving – 2.5 % of one's total assets, mind you! – to those in need. Imagine giving at that level to those in need. What would it be like if each of us did that? What would it be like if our congregation, and every Unitarian Universalist congregation, gave at that level from our assets? It would be powerful *for us*, even independent of whatever benefit it would bring to those in need.

Then there's the fourth pillar, or fasting during the month of Ramadan. Ramadan is the month during which the holy Quran was first revealed to Muhammad. From sun-up 'til sundown, physically healthy Muslims over 12 years old are not supposed to eat or drink; for that matter, they should avoid sensual pleasures such as sexual activity. In this sense, it's a bit like the Jewish tradition for Yom Kippur, only over the course of an entire month. One part of the reason for Ramadan is purification through discipline and self-sacrifice. But Ramadan is also a month of charity. By fasting from eating and other sensual pleasures for a month, Muslims experience hunger and deprivation in a literal, visceral way. And in doing this, they can experience a new level of compassion for those who are hungry, for those who must go without. By fasting at Ramadan, the Muslims are siding with the poor and those who go without in a very real way; it reminds me a little of the Christian tradition of liberation theology. What would it be like if each of us incorporated a spiritual practice of fasting into our lives? What would it be like if our congregation, or all UUs even, chose one day a month for a fast in solidarity with the poor and oppressed? Again, I'm sure it would be powerful for us, and I'm sure it would in fact make our compassion more real. Perhaps it would make it easier to decide to give 2.5% of our assets to charity.

What about the first pillar of Islam, that there is one God, and that Muhammad is the prophet of God? The first thing that always comes to mind for me when I think about the first pillar is how similar it is to unitarianism – I mean unitarian with a lowercase “u”. That is, Muslims do not accept the doctrine of the trinity which makes Jesus literally the same as God. For Muslims, though Jesus is revered and regarded as a prophet, he is not seen as an aspect of God – and for that matter, neither are any of the prophets from the Hebrew Scriptures, and neither is

Muhammad himself. Instead, for Muslims, Jesus is seen as a wonderful example of humanity, but not a deity to worship. Worship is for “the God”, or Allah, alone. So in a sense, Muslims have the same struggle with Trinitarian Christianity that our Unitarian Christian forbears did – and that many modern UUs still have. Usually, a modern UU concept of Ultimate Reality is not at all synonymous with Jesus, or Muhammad, or any other individual human being, past or present. In that sense, we have something very important in common with Muslims.

But for me, there’s more spiritual inspiration in the first pillar of Islam than lowercase “u” unitarianism. This is the *Allahu akbar* – God is greater than anything we can conceive of – vision of the Divine. The reading by Seyyed Hossein Nasr³ that you heard earlier tries to get at this Islamic vision of God, to the extent that words can even begin to describe it. Words fail all of us, from every religion, when we try to describe Ultimate Reality, the Awesome Mystery at the heart of the universe, the Original Source. I draw spiritual inspiration from Islam’s acknowledgement that God is beyond anything we could ever describe; *Allahu akbar*. That’s a transcendent vision of the Divine. But Islam also puts forward a beautiful depiction of God-with-us, an immanent vision of the Divine. In the Quran, God is closer to us than our own jugular vein. This way of thinking of the Divine as contained in everything in the universe, including ourselves, and also simultaneously being something beyond everything that is knowable to us, is a kind of pantheism. In this, I consider it to be a very progressive concept of the Divine. And also, it’s inherently mystical, describing that which is beyond scientific understandings, and incredibly intimate and passionate. Really, it’s not just the Sufis who are mystics. In a very real way, devout Muslims of more “mainline” sects such as the Sunnis and Shiites, are also passionately in love with the Divine. Couldn’t you just feel the passion for the Divine when we listened to the *adhan*, the call to prayer? I find this very spiritually inspirational.

And that brings me to the second pillar of Islam, or praying five times a day in a particular way. Devout Muslims pray five times a day – at very specific times – facing Mecca, a sacred city for Muslims. A Muslim is to cleanse first, and a prayer mat keeps one clean from the ground when praying in a prostrate position. This past week, I attempted to pray in this style. I ended up modifying it. I prayed five times a day at approximately the right time, facing toward Mecca (essentially east by south east). I didn’t use a prayer mat, nor did I pray in a prostrate position – it was overly challenging for me to make that happen in my daily life. I learned so much from this experience. First, I learned just how much discipline it takes to do this. The most important thing I learned was how powerful it is to pray five times a day! What an amazing spiritual discipline! Ordinarily I pray once a day, and I gain a lot from it. But five times? And at regular intervals – at dawn, at mid-day, in the afternoon, at sunset, and in the evening before sleep? It’s an amazing experience. Five times a day, you are taking yourself out of your mundane, workaday world and communing with the Divine as you conceive of it. Honestly, it’s sort of intoxicating. I have never done this before, and I can’t recommend it enough. No wonder Islam has produced some of the most profound mystics! As for facing toward Mecca, as a non-Muslim, I don’t have the same sort of attachment to this holy city. However, it was a powerful thought that there were millions? – who knows how many! – of other people, facing the same way at those same times, also praying. Prayer always feels more powerful to me when done communally, as we do during our time of silence. What would it be like if everyone in this congregation – or even several of us – agreed to pray at the same time or times each day, perhaps

³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (HarperCollins, 2002).

facing in the same direction even? I think it could enhance our spiritual life greatly, at least for anyone so inclined to try it.

This, finally, brings me to the fifth pillar of Islam: making a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in one's life, if physically and financially able to do so. This made me think: Is there any place on earth so sacred to Unitarian Universalists that we would all agree that each of us would ideally like to travel there at least once in our life? And, if we all decided to face a certain direction to pray, toward what exactly would we face? And no, I don't think UUA headquarters at 25 Beacon Street in Boston would cut it! Islam has a powerful sense of place in this way. So I kept thinking about it, and you know what I realized? I realized that there is no human-made structure or human-built city to which I would choose to face. I would choose to face something... astronomical, cosmic. Something like, the sun. Or facing the north or south pole. Or toward the planet Venus, or a particular star. And it made me realize... Oh my goodness, I'm a pagan! Many UUs identify as pagans, and this congregation has a very strong CUUPS, or Covenant of UU Pagans, Chapter. But I had never thought of myself as a pagan. This past week I realized that I am, in a very real sense, some type of neo-pagan. It is those things created *not* by human hands that I would choose to face, and it was my profound experience with praying in something of the Islamic style that helped me have this epiphany and this deep connection with my vision of the Divine, the Interdependent Web of All Existence which is greater than anything I could ever conceive.

So those are the ways in which focusing on the five pillars of Islam enhanced my spiritual and ethical understandings this past week. There's much more to Islam than the five pillars, of course. Before we close, I do want to say something about the name "Islam" itself. It comes from the Arabic word "salaam", which means "peace". Islam literally means "Surrender to the peace of God". And as for the word "Muslim", the syllable "mu" means "doer of" in Arabic. So a Mu-slim is a doer of Islam, or one who surrenders to the peace of God. Wouldn't it be liberating – perhaps even comforting – to be able to surrender yourself to the peace of Ultimate Reality, to the peace of the Divine Mystery? What would it look like to surrender to the peace of the Divine Mystery in the Unitarian Universalist tradition? I hope that we Unitarian Universalists will spend more time with Islam, part of the third source of our tradition, continuing to learn from its wisdom and passion and beauty. May it be so. Blessed be, and amen.