

Islam: The Power of Unity by Guy Newland 3/29/26 UUFCM

As most of you know, we count six sources of our living tradition: direct experience of mystery, prophetic words/deeds, world religions, Jewish and Christian teachings, humanist teachings, and earth-centered traditions. Among “world religions,” as one of the sources, at UUFCM we do hear a bit about Buddhism, Daoism and some indigenous traditions. But much larger than Buddhism or Daoism is Islam; Islam is the world’s second largest religious tradition. **About ¼ of the world’s population is Muslim.** Yet: Last month someone here pointed out to me that, when emphasizing the inclusiveness and creed-free UU approach, she happened never to have heard mention that we welcome Muslims. Just as there are many sorts of Christians, there are many kinds of Muslims; and some, I think, could find a home here. In any case, I thought we should see what we can learn by looking at Islam, not with a critical eye, but rather **considering its kinship with UU.**

Today Unitarian Universalism welcomes people whether they believe in one God or Goddess, no God, or many Gods, or just don’t know what to believe. But our roots in the Unitarian and Universalist traditions involve

rejection of the orthodox Christian trinity in favor of a more precise monotheism; and—even more crucially—the utter rejection of original sin. This gives a clue as to why many of our ancestors in this tradition felt much closer to the Jews than they did to other Christians. And for the same reasons, they were also closer to the Muslims. Suleiman the Magnificent ruled the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century and extended his relatively tolerant Muslim rule into what is now Romania, where the Unitarian tradition was developing. Not only Unitarians, but other divergent Christians and many Jews fled Protestant and Catholic Christian countries to take refuge under the Muslim Ottomans.

Islam explains itself via five “pillars”: (1) profession of faith, (2) prayer, (3) charity, (4) fasting, and (5) pilgrimage. Profession of faith means declaring that there is no God but God (Allah) and that Muhammad is the Prophet of God. Prayer mainly means ritual prayer five times every day while facing Mecca. Charity means giving a portion of one’s wealth, every year, to help those in need. Fasting means abstaining from food, drink, tobacco, sex, gossip or quarreling from dawn to sunset throughout the lunar month of Ramadan (which just ended last week). The fifth pillar, pilgrimage, means that once in

one's life, if possible, one should travel to Mecca to worship with other pilgrims gathered there.

The declaration “there is no God but God” reflects the strict monotheism of Islam. Before the rise of Islam in the 7th century, the diverse tribes of the Arabia worshipped different gods and were often in conflict with one another. By unifying the region--and then many regions beyond Arabia--under the idea of the absolute ONENESS of God, Islam brought people together in *kinship*, a single spiritual community--transcending tribe, class, and race--called the *ummah*. The inspired idea of ONE people under ONE God created enormous power, helping Islam spread across the globe. Many individual strands are weak, but when bound together they form a very strong rope. Likewise, the idea of “Indivisible;” lots of people oppose Trump for very different reasons, but we gain power when we can all pull together.

The oneness of God was also the keystone of Unitarianism, rejecting the Christian trinity, rejecting the idea that Jesus was uniquely divine. Many, including Rev. Drew, understand God as the power of Love (which he takes to be a natural but mysterious power). Likewise, in Islam, the most important

names for the One God are “The most merciful” and “the most compassionate”.

In line with that, Islam expects moral behavior. Muhammad is believed to have said, “The servant does not reach the reality of faith until he loves for people what he loves for himself of goodness.” It has been argued that this amounts to a Muslim version of the golden rule and can be read to imply the idea of human rights. Humans are all *equally* bound by God’s laws. So everyone deserves to be protected by law in the same way that we wish ourselves to be protected.

Unlike Christians who believe in original sin, Islam (like most UUs) teaches that every individual is born in a state of purity and is responsible for their own actions. While familiar term *jihad* does mean the struggle to protect the Muslim community, the “*greater jihad*,” the most important struggle, is the struggle within ourselves to maintain our basic God-given purity, resisting selfish desires.

That Muhammad is the Prophet of God does not mean that there are no other prophets. Just as UU finds inspiration in many sources, Muslims traditionally believe that there have been 124,000 prophets, of which we know

the names of only the 25 mentioned in Quran. These 25 include Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. As this implies, Islam recognizes a special kinship with the Jewish and Christian traditions because—while Islam alone has the final prophecy delivered by Muhammad—other traditions have sacred books that record (albeit imperfectly) the teachings of those earlier true prophets.

Many people today think there is a uniquely intense hostility between Jews and Muslims. But this perception largely derives from the period after WWII when Christian colonialists carved out a Jewish state in Palestine. Prior to that, for about 18 centuries, the most vicious antagonists of the Jews were almost *always* Christians. For example, in 1492 when Ferdinand and Isabella drove all the Muslims out of Spain, they immediately expelled all the Jews; these Jews who had long been living peacefully under Muslim rule.

The other four pillars of Islam—prayer, charity, fasting, and pilgrimage—reinforce, embody, enact the oneness of the community under one God. Idolatry (*shirk*) means putting anything else in the place that only the one God should be. In UU terms, this means that LOVE is more important than our personal comfort, our time, our desires, our money. We err in looking for

deep meaning in what is most convenient, what the social algorithm dictates.

This is the moral of a story about a Muslim “holy fool” or trickster named

Nasrudin:

*One evening, Nasrudin was out near a sidewalk,
looking through the grass and bushes under the light of a lamp post.*

*A friend of his walked by and asked what Nasrudin was up to.
“I’m searching for my house keys,” said Nasrudin.*

*The friend offered to help, and the two spent a considerable amount of
time
continuing to search under the light of the lamp post.*

*Finally, the friend asked, “Where did you last have your keys?!”
“Oh, back at the house,” replied Nasrudin.*

*Exasperated, the friend shouted, “Then why are we looking here?!”
Nasrudin plainly stated, “**Because the light’s better here.**”*

In Muslim life, all human needs have a time and place, but none should take priority over God even when that means “searching the dark.” The shared inconvenience of communal prayers, the shared hardship of fasting during Ramadan, the shared hardship and danger of the pilgrimage: these all reinforce the idea of one people joined together in putting God above other concerns.

As for “charity,” Muslims are expected--and in many countries required--to give what they can to those in need. Exactly how this works varies greatly, but in general one is expected to give about 2.5% of one’s wealth each year. Kabir, the great Indian Muslim mystic, sang:

I don't think there is such a thing as a wise billionaire. For who with a fine mind can look out upon this world and hoard what can nourish thousands of souls.

Studies show that in the USA, Muslims are those most motivated to donate based on a believed religious obligation and a sense that those with more should help those with less.

This enacting and embodiment of the Muslim vision of unity reaches its culmination in the pilgrimage to Mecca. While in prison, a guy from Michigan, Malcolm X, was misled to believe that Islam is natural religion exclusively for Black people and that whites are the devilish creations of a mad scientist. As Malcolm came to doubt these teachings, he took up the pilgrimage to Mecca. He writes:

There were pilgrims from all over the world, of all colors, from blue-eyed blonds to black skin Africans. But we were all participating in the

same rituals, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and non-white. America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. I was treated with perfect hospitality, as a brother, by light-skinned Muslims. Belief in one God had removed the 'white' from their minds, the 'white' from their behavior, and the 'white' from their attitude. I could see from this, that perhaps if white Americans could accept the Oneness of God, then perhaps, too, they could accept the reality of the Oneness of Humanity.

May it be so.