

## World Religions: Islam

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It may seem peculiar that, here in between the past two Sundays' services focused on the Christmas season, and the two services coming up tomorrow night to celebrate Christmas Eve, we're suddenly interrupting that flow to talk about Islam. Well, as Virginia pointed out in her Welcome this morning, our Living Tradition of Unitarian Universalism draws not only on Jewish and Christian teachings, but on the wisdom of other World Religions as well.

And while Tuesday is one of the holy days of Christianity, this past Thursday was, in fact, one of the holy days of Islam; namely Eid al-Adha, about which I'll say more a little bit later. And so, as a part of our ongoing exploration of the various major world religions, today we consider Islam.

Islam is a monotheistic religion that originated with the teachings of Muhammad, a seventh century Arab religious and political figure. The word "Islam" means "submission" and refers to the total surrender of oneself to God. Adherents of Islam are known as "Muslims", a term meaning "those who submit." There are somewhere between one and two billion Muslims in the world, making Islam the second largest religion, next to Christianity.

The primary sacred text of Islam is the Qur'an, which is believed to contain the literal words of God in their original Arabic language, as dictated to Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel over a period of some twenty-three years. Muslims also acknowledge the divine origins of the earlier Hebrew and Christian scriptures. In fact Muhammad is seen as the last of a long line of true prophets that included Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus.

In addition to the revealed scriptures, there are collections of sayings attributed to Muhammed, called the Hadith. Those writings are not regarded as having the same status as the Holy Qur'an, but they are considered an important resource for understanding and interpreting Islam.

I'd like to describe some of the basic beliefs and practices of Islam, but I ask you to keep in mind that, as in any religion, there are variations among subgroups. And so any basic description I give will, of necessity, be an oversimplification. That being said, there are six fundamental beliefs considered as the foundation of Islamic faith: 1) a single, indivisible God, the Creator, who is just, omnipotent, and merciful; 2) angels, who are described in the Qur'an as "messengers with wings; 3) the divinity of the scriptures, which as I mentioned before, includes the Hebrew and Christian Bible as well as the Qur'an; 4) the Messengers of God – namely those prophets I mentioned before. Muhammad is considered the last of the prophets, his message being the final, universal message for all of humanity; 5) The Day of Judgment, when people will be judged on the basis of their deeds while on earth, and given either the reward of Heaven or the punishment of Hell; and 6) the Supremacy of God's will, to which all are expected to submit.

The basic practices of the religion are often summed up by the set of obligations known as the Five Pillars of Islam. These describe a Muslim's duties as:

- 1) to recite at least once during their lifetime the *shahada*, which is the creed appearing on the front of your order of service in Arabic. The English translation is: "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his Prophet." In fact, most practicing Muslims repeat this at least daily.

- 2) to perform the *salat*, or prayer, five times a day, if possible. This is typically done in early morning, early afternoon, late afternoon, shortly after sunset, and finally at night, just before sleeping.
- 3) to donate regularly to charity.
- 4) to fast during daylight hours of the lunar month of *Ramadan*, which is believed to be the month that Muhammad received the first revelation of the Qur'an.
- 5) if economically and physically able, to make at least one *hajj*, or pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca.

As you might expect, there are a number of special times on the Muslim calendar, which is a lunar calendar, so that the various holy days happen about eleven days earlier each year. Some of the main holy days are:

- *Muharram*, or Muslim New Year, which for 2008 falls on January 10
- *Ramadan*, which I already mentioned as one of the Five Pillars. This is the holiest period in the Islamic year, lasting for the entire ninth lunar month. This year, *Ramadan* began on September 13 of our calendar.
- *Eid al-Fitr*, the first day of the tenth lunar month, marks the end of *Ramadan*. It is a time of rejoicing and gift-giving. This year it fell on October 12.
- *Eid al-Adha*, also known as the Festival of Sacrifice, falls during the twelfth lunar month, right after the time of the annual *Hajj* to Mecca; that is, three days ago. It commemorates the day when Abraham intended to follow the instructions of God, and sacrifice his son Ishmael – the ultimate act of submission to God's will. You may recall that in the Hebrew Bible, it's Abraham's other son, Isaac, who was nearly sacrificed. The celebration often includes sacrifice of an animal such as a sheep or goat, with most of the meat given away to others.

As in many religions, Islam consists of a variety of divisions or denominations, which are essentially similar in belief, but which have significant theological and legal differences. The primary division is between the Sunni and the Shi'a. Most sources estimate that about 85% of the world's Muslims are Sunni, and about 15% are Shi'a. The two groups arose essentially out of disagreement over the rightful succession of leadership following Muhammad. Although they share many core practices, they do disagree over the importance and validity of particular collections of *hadith*, or writings.

Another subdivision of Islam is Sufism, which isn't strictly a separate denomination, but is a more mystical, ascetic form of the tradition. Sufis strive to obtain direct experience of God by making use of intuitive and emotional faculties that one must be trained to use. There are several different Sufi orders, distinguished largely by their favored forms of spiritual practice. Perhaps the most well-known are the so-called "whirling dervishes", who have been around since the thirteenth century Ottoman Empire. Others focus on various forms of dance, meditation, music, or poetry. One of the primary means of transmission of Sufi wisdom is through teaching stories, which are typically structured so as to be understood at any of several different levels of meaning.

I already shared one story from the Sufi tradition as our reading this morning. I'll be closing my remarks with some further examples of Sufi story and poetry. But before I go there, I

want to address briefly the difficult position Islam finds itself in here in the United States in the early twenty-first century.

As you are well-aware, because of the horrific, destructive acts of some in the name of Islam, the reputation of the entire religion has been tarnished. Many Americans, including those in positions of religious and political leadership, have made a point of distinguishing between Islamic fundamentalist extremists on the one hand, and the vast majority of peace-loving Muslims on the other. And yet there seem to be deep reservoirs of misgivings and suspicion regarding the relationship between Islam and American principles of peace, freedom, and tolerance.

One critique that I've heard often over the past several years has been to question why, if they do not support fundamentalist, extremist, violence, have moderate Muslims not spoken out more vigorously against it. I would suggest that such expressions of disavowal are there, even if they do not get the media attention routinely given to bombings and other violent acts. So I want to lift up this morning those Islamic calls for peace and freedom and tolerance and unity, and rejecting terror and violence.

One example was the "Prayer for Unity" that I shared earlier this morning. Another is featured in a story in the most recent issue of *The Christian Century* magazine, under the title: "North American Muslims issue fatwa against terrorism." Issued on November 30, and supported by some 500 Muslim leaders and organizations, the statement reads, in part:

Targeting civilians' life and property through suicide bombings or any other method of attack is prohibited in Islam. . . and those who commit these barbaric acts are criminals, not 'martyrs.'

According to the article,

The fatwa also says Muslims have a duty to alert law enforcement about any threats to human life and must not cooperate with any group or individual involved in terrorism. . .

The fatwa follows similar attempts by moderate Muslims, [but] previous calls were "widely ignored."

May we have the wisdom and the discipline to judge our Muslim sisters and brothers – indeed our sisters and brothers of whatever faith or creed – on their own words and deeds, and not on the words and deeds of those who purport to speak for them and to act in their name.

When I did the service on Judaism earlier this month, one of the gifts of that tradition that I lifted up was that of story. I think, perhaps, any religious tradition worth its salt must include its own treasury of stories. In the case of Islam, the mystical Sufi branch of the tradition, in particular, places great value on the use of stories as teaching tools. I'd like to share another Sufi tale now, one called "Do More than Laugh at Fools":

Once upon a time there was a fool who was sent to buy flour and salt. He took a dish to carry his purchases.

'Make sure,' said the man who sent him, 'not to mix the two things – I want them separate.'

When the shopkeeper had filled the dish with flour and was measuring out the salt, the fool said: 'Do not mix it with the flour; here, I will show you where to put it.'

And he inverted the dish, to provide, from its upturned bottom, a surface upon which the salt could be laid.

The flour, of course, fell on to the floor.

But the salt was safe.

When the fool got back to the man who had sent him, he said: 'Here is the salt.'

'Very well,' said the other man, 'but where is the flour?'

'It should be here,' said the fool, turning the dish over.

As soon as he did that, the salt fell to the ground, and the flour, of course, was seen to be gone.

So it is with human beings. Doing one thing which they think to be right, they may undo another which is equally right. When this happens with thoughts instead of actions, man himself is lost, no matter how, upon reflection, he regards his thinking to have been logical.

You have laughed at the joke of the fool. Now, will you do more, and think about your own thoughts as if they were the salt and flour?

In addition to their stories, many Sufi masters have been known for their poetry. One such was Hafiz, who lived in fourteenth century Persia. I'd like to share two of his poems with you this morning, both of which appear in the book, *The Gift*, and translated by Daniel Ladinsky. First is "How do I Listen?":

How

Do I

Listen to others?

As if everyone were my Master

Speaking to me

His

Cherished

Last

Words.

And the final poem I leave you with is "Becoming Human":

Once a man came to me and spoke for hours about  
"His great visions of God" he felt he was having.

He asked me for confirmation, saying,

“Are these wondrous dreams true?”

I replied, “How many goats do you have?”

He looked surprised and said,  
“I am speaking of sublime visions  
And you ask  
About goats!”

And I spoke again saying,  
“Yes, brother – how many do you have?”

“Well, Hafiz, I have sixty-two.”

“And how many wives?”  
Again he looked surprised, then said,  
“Four.”

“How many rose bushes in your garden,  
How many children,  
Are your parents still alive,  
Do you feed the birds in winter?”

And to all he answered.

Then I said,  
“You asked me if I thought your visions were true,  
I would say that they were if they make you become  
More human,

More kind to every creature and plant  
That you know.”

As we make our way through this religiously pluralistic world, may we heed the wisdom of Hafiz by cultivating that habit of deeply intentional listening that he describes, and by embracing those religious visions that will make us more human, more kind to everyone we know or encounter.

So may it be.