

“Islam and the Arabic World”

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As Unitarian Universalists we are called to accept one another, to encourage one another on paths of spiritual and ethical development (whether as Muslims, Christians, atheists or others). We include as one of our sources, wisdom from the world religions, which of course, includes Islam. And yet, we struggle. As Unitarian Universalists, we are on the forefront of liberal religious thoughts. We have a hard time accepting and encouraging orthodoxy of any kind, and although there are many liberal Muslims, overall Islam has been swept by a wave of popular orthodoxy and fundamentalism (as has Christianity in the West).

In addition, Islam is a monotheistic religion, believing in one God, Allah. Although Unitarian Universalism comes out of the theistic Protestant tradition (yes, we were once “People of the Book”), overall our theology is humanist, and those of us who are theist have modern ideas of God. Finally, as Unitarian Universalists we champion freedom and individual thought and action. Islam means “submission,” submission to Allah and the teachings of the Prophet. Submission in a very loving and positive sense, but submission nonetheless. As Unitarian Universalists we struggle to accommodate members of the same committee, let alone submit to anyone or anything. Our faith is not easy. It encourages us to challenge ourselves. Freedom is a privilege and a responsibility that requires thought, compromise, and understanding.

In a recent sermon I opined that United States foreign policy makers should be able to pass significant tests on Islam and the Arabic world before we engage in more short term and shortsighted American foreign policy in the region (including the proper spelling and pronunciation of country names, basic geography, as well as linguistic, cultural, and religious difference). There really is a religious and historical difference, for example, between Iran and Iraq, and “yes,” it really does matter in a world of growing technology, communication, and economic, political, and religious unrest. This morning we are engaging in a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” to help us understand Islam, the Arabic world, and our interactions with our neighbors who live there.

The oldest surviving reference to the word “Arab” is in an Assyrian inscription from 853 B. C. E., almost three thousand years ago. Since that time Arab people and empires have existed around modern day Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Yemen, spreading into other areas such as the Middle East, Mediterranean, India, Europe, and North Africa. Many ethnic Arabs believe that they are descendants of Noah’s son, Shem, or descendants of Abraham’s son with Hagar, Ishmael. Prior to the introduction of Islam in 610 C. E., many of these Arabs would have been polytheistic (believing in many gods), which was very common in the Semitic world. A few were monotheistic (believing in

one God), most likely either Christians or Jews. As is the case today, prior to the introduction of Islam, there were also minorities of Christian and Jewish Arabs.

In 610 C. E. a man named Muhammad (believed to be descended from Abraham through Ishmael) went to Mount Hira in his native town of Mecca (in present day Saudi Arabia) to engage in prayer and retreat, a practice then common among local residents. At the time Muhammad was forty years old, married, and the father of four daughters. His wife, Khadija, was an interesting woman in her own right. Muhammad was her second husband and she was at least ten years older than he. Her first husband, a wealthy merchant, had died early. As a widow she continued to run her husband's business, which is where she met Muhammad. Khadija hired Muhammad to be a caravan leader, and soon after the two were married. According to multiple sources, their marriage was notably happy and close. (Note Arabic women's right to inherit, own property, and run a business existed centuries earlier than similar right in the Western world)

According to the *Qur'an*, while engaged in retreat on Mount Hira, Muhammad received a revelation from the angel Gabriel. Gabriel took Muhammad on a fantastic journey to the Temple of Jerusalem and the seventh heaven where he met Allah face to face (the only Muslim to do so) and received the revelation of Islam. Much like *New Testament* stories about the birth of Jesus, the *Qur'an* contains different references to Muhammad's night flight.

The introduction to the *Qur'an* captures Muhammad's experience in the cave

And now, behold, a dazzling vision of beauty and light overpowered his senses, and he heard the word "Iqra'!" "Iqra'!" which being interpreted may mean "Read!" or "Proclaim!" or "Recite!" The unlettered Prophet was puzzled; He could not read. The Angel seemed to press him to his breast in a close embrace, And the cry rang clear "Iqra'!"

After Muhammad came to his senses he was seized with terror and immediately went to speak to his best friend and most trusted confidant, his wife, Khadija. She in turn became his first convert to Islam, recognizing the power of her husband's experience.

Muhammad remained illiterate, so what exists in the *Qur'an* is a recitation transcribed by other people. The word "*Qur'an*" means, "to recite," and much of it was recited by the Prophet to scribes and followers, and those who came later. The *Qur'an* is not chronological, like the book of *Genesis*. Some of the *Surahs*, or chapters from the *Qur'an* are long, and others are short. Devout Muslims, like devout Christians are encouraged to read them all.

The language of the *Qur'an* went on to change world history. The *Qur'an* is written in Arabic, as one verse of the *Qur'an* explains "By the *clear* Book: We have made it an Arabic recitation in order that you may understand."

As Islam spread, so did the Arabic language, which, unlike Latin, has existed as a viable language in religion, poetry, law, and the vernacular for over three thousand years. Today Arabic is considered an example of diglossia, a language with various dialects used in different places, so that for example, a vernacular form of Arabic may be used at home, and a classical form of Arabic is used for religious purposes, but there is also a modern version of Arabic used in the media. Use of Arabic is a point of pride not to be underestimated. Most residents of the Arabic world are bi-lingual if not tri-lingual (wide

view of culture and language even if illiterate), but since the end of colonial oppression in the last century, most Arabs, whether ethnic or cultural, prefer to speak Arabic or another indigenous language.

In the 8th and 9th century the Umayyads and Abbasids (both Arabs) created an empire that spread from southern France to China and Asia Minor. As their empire spread, so did Islam and the Arabic language and culture. In the thirteenth century the Mongols rode east conquering and destroying parts of the Persian and Arabic world. In an interesting irony, the Mongols were ultimately converted to Islam. In the sixteenth century the Moghul ruler, Akbar spread Islam throughout India. Simultaneously the Turkish Ottoman Empire spread Islam throughout North Africa and Europe.

Today there are both ethnic Arabs (people from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Oman) and cultural Arabs (such as Moroccans or Egyptians, who lived under Arab empires and adopted the Arabic language and Islamic religion and laws). In 1946 the Arab League defined an Arab as “A person whose language is Arabic, who lives in an Arabic speaking country, who is in sympathy with the aspirations of the Arabic speaking peoples.” An ancient definition of Arab is still used by some today that consider an Arab to only be someone who lives a nomadic, Bedouin life. This definition is more about culture and history than language.

Today eighteen states and two territories are considered to be part of the Arabic world, among them are Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine (is it a state?), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, Western Sahara, and Yemen. This is largely a map of the Middle East (minus Israel), Arabian Peninsula, and the North African Coast. On the other hand, there are several Muslim countries that are not Arabic. A partial list includes; Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Iran, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Pakistan, and Turkey. These countries do not share the same history as Arabic countries. Nor do they share the same language, and some share very different versions of the same religion (for example, Turkey is Muslim but very secular. Iran is Persian not Arabic, and Indonesia is in the Pacific).

When inflammatory cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad are printed in Europe and the United States or when the Pope quotes obscure, negative texts on Islam, Muslims around the world get upset. When Hezbollah challenges Israel, Muslims around the world cheer. However, when Turkish women took off their head cover the people of Saudi Arabia were unconvinced. When Egypt signed the Camp David Accords in 1978, they were expelled from the Arab League that had been headquartered in Cairo. If lesson 1 is that Arabic is a powerful language, lesson 2 is that there is nothing monolithic about the Arabic and Muslim world. If we paid more attention to Islamic history we would already know this.

Since the death of the Prophet in 632 C. E. there has been disagreement about the succession of Islam. Shi'ite (or Shi) Muslims believe that Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali, was the successor. Sunni Muslims believe that Muhammad's second father-in-law was his successor. From 632 C. E. until the present there have been bloody battles and accusations made about which is the correct branch of Islam. This enmity, although papered over by the recent rise of Islamic fundamentalism, has been bitter. Today 85% - 90% of the Muslim world is Sunni and 10% - 15% is Shi. The Shi regularly feel persecuted. Iran is the only Shi majority country in the Middle East, so most Shi live as

minorities in their own homelands. For example, when the House of Saud took power in Saudi Arabia in 1926, they instituted laws discriminating against Shi, although (maybe because) there is a significant minority of Shi in the country.

Today most Shi live in Afghanistan, India, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. What I notice about this short list is that it contains the two countries where the United States is unsuccessfully fighting wars, Afghanistan and Iraq. I also notice that it contains one country that is not Arabic, but searching for more power in the Middle East as well as nuclear weapons, Iran. I also notice that this short list contains the largest, wealthiest, and most religiously conservative Arabic country, Saudi Arabia.

If I were a United States foreign policy maker in the Middle East I would spend a lot more time learning about the lives, hopes, and fears of Shi'ite Muslims. What is their history? What is their story of discrimination, power, oppression, and persecution in the Islamic world? Why is there so much instability in countries with a significant Shi'ite minority? How do the Sunni majorities interact with them? What is their difference in religious interpretation and how does that influence people? Is there anywhere that Shi'ite and Sunnis share power, and if so where and how does it work?

I think of our reading from this morning with the words of King Abdullah II of Jordan, a man I admire, as I did his father. This goes against the grain of Western and American thinking, but sometimes monarchies are better than other alternatives. King Abdullah II notes that there is nothing worse than “inter-religious conflict.”

Since WWII, when the United States became a “superpower” we looked at all the countries in the Middle East and saw issues of oil production, Communism, nationalism, fundamentalism, and democracy. The Arabic world was swept by nationalism in the mid 20th century as well as ideas of pan Arabism. The United States worried about the former Soviet Union and continued the cold war in the Middle East, arming everyone along the way (including soldiers in Afghanistan that we now fight). We were looking through Western lenses and missed the larger, deeper pictures, cultures, identities, affinities, basic economic needs, and histories of the region.

We ignored human rights, poverty and corruption, the medical and nutritional suffering of average Arabs. When your family is starving, you don't care who rules the country as long as there is food to eat. In our quests to impede Communism and spread democracy we regularly overlooked the inherent worth and dignity of every person and their right to a healthy life. King Abdullah II notes, “Unless we solve the core problems, terrorism in its strength will always be with us.” He refers to Palestine, and I agree with him. I would also add that the economic underdevelopment of many Islamic countries as well as the discrimination of Muslims in the West creates core issues that fester.

According to the Pew Research Center, which recently completed a survey of 91,000 world residents from 50 different countries, “America's image is at a low ebb; where once it was considered the champion of democracy, America is now seen as a self-absorbed, militant hyperpower.” A quantitative analysis of the results has been published in a new book entitled *America Against the World*.¹

The report summarizes fascinating mixed findings. For example, residents of Muslim countries struggling with recent terrorism, like Jordan, Pakistan, and Indonesia are now less likely to consider suicide bombings against civilians as acceptable. Muslim countries are also losing confidence in Osama bin Laden. Muslims and Westerners

¹ www.pewglobal.org/reports.

consider economic underdevelopment in the Middle East a significant issue. Anti-Semitism remains overwhelming in predominantly Muslim countries, and many Middle Eastern Muslims do not believe that Arabs carried out the September 11, 2001 attacks. There is a lot of mixed information, positive and negative in these findings.

There is a lot that we do not know about one another and a lot we need to learn. I want to close with a story by writer and teacher, Leila Ahmed. It is a story about her confrontation as a Westernized, educated, Arab with the orthodox Islamic world. As in most confrontations, not all is as it seems.

Shortly after I first arrived on the peninsula, I called on the Women's Center in Dubai to meet Moza, one of the wives of a local notable. She was about fifty, illiterate . . . but she was the nominal president of the local women's society . . . and I was calling on her formally in her capacity as president to interview her, as my job at the time required, to get her views on Islamic education. She was wearing one of those black, tent-like garments that covered her from head to foot and gave her exactly the shape of a tent; her face, except for her eyes and part of her mouth, was concealed by a still gold-dusted mask, and she was bedecked with an outrageous profusion of jewels . . . In appearance she was the archetypal oppressed, passive, Muslim woman, whose body was confined and whose mind was surely encased in bigotries. I, at the time still carrying my Mediterranean prejudices, (reinforced by my Western training), naturally expected nothing of her. But in the course of discussing Islamic education, and its relation to the Islamic ideals of womanhood, and what girls should be allowed to study, Moza, a woman illiterate in all languages, opined that the most proper professions for women were engineering, law, architecture, and medicine. She also told me, apropos Islamic ideals and the notion that women's true vocation was motherhood, that Mohammad's main object in establishing Islam had been to give men power over women, and that this was all part of an ageless battle between men and women. The reason men had developed and hysterically insisted on, the idea of motherhood as the only true vocation and had established all those laws confining women, tying them to home and children, preventing them from entering the professions, was quite simply because they knew that unless women were confined, trussed up, and thoroughly handicapped they would quickly outstrip men – and take over. And she delivered herself of these views not as if she thought she was saying anything new or revolutionary, but as if she were speaking of matters of fact, well known in their world of sisters and mothers.²

We have much to learn from Islam and the Arabic world, from people like King Abdullah II and Moza. We need to move beyond stereotypes. Yes, we should struggle with the fact that Moza cannot speak to another woman without completely disguising herself and that Ahmed gave her an alias instead of using her real name, which would not have been safe.

² Leila Ahmed, Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Autumn, 1982), 521-534.

Learning more does not mean that we will agree or be comfortable. But we live in a busy, fast, industrial world where ignorance is no longer bliss and we need to listen to King Abdullah II when he cautions us that the Islamic moderate base has eroded. We must heed his wisdom and life's experience when he says

We've been surrounded by bullets for many decades and Jordan is still here. We are averaging 9-12 months between crises and they are getting worse and worse. All of us in the area including the Israelis are feeling more and more insecure. Nobody knows where this is taking us. The peace camp needs to turn the boat around in the other direction. If not, we sink, all of us.³

³ www.time.com (September 18, 2006).