

Glimpses of Islam: Themes of the Qur'an
Rev. Martha Hodges May 22, 2011

Today we continue to try to understand Islam a bit better. Over this past church year, I have spoken to you about the five pillars of that faith, about the attitudes and opinions of Muslims around the world, about the need to distinguish between the cultural practices of the Middle East and the teachings of Islam, about the role of women in Islam, and about the mystical beliefs and poetry of the Sufis.

Why am I asking you to spend so much time thinking about Islam, this religion that seems so alien, so different from our own? Well first of all, and most obviously, the followers of Islam, especially in the Arab world, demand that we pay attention. The West's ignorance and indifference to Islam is the source of much mutual fear and even hatred among the nations of the world, including our own and much of the Middle East. Yet only one tenth of the world's Muslims are Arab. Islam is second only to Christianity in the number of its followers: between 1.2 and 1.6 billion Muslims around the world, one fifth of the world's population, the only major religion that is actually growing in numbers. Yet mutual misconceptions and stereotypes continue to influence our interactions.

Besides this most practical of reasons, our Unitarian Universalist faith draws on, among its sources, the wisdom of the world's religious traditions, seeking to find there a deeper understanding of the human condition and the human quest for transcendence, our shared response to the mysteries of living and dying. Islam is one of the three great monotheistic religions that have their roots in the deserts of the Middle East. Jews, Christians and Muslims are the so-called People of the Book, the Abrahamic religions, tracing their religious origins back to the figure of Abraham and the Hebrew scriptures. As descendants from that same tradition, we are cousins.

This morning, I'm going to again rush in where angels fear to tread and, in all humility and with apologies to Muslims and religious scholars of the tradition, attempt to open the pages of the Qur'an to closer examination. I offer this disclaimer because any religious text offers complexities of interpretation, layers of cultural tradition, subtleties that do not survive translation, depths of meaning that an outsider can't hope to grasp without years of dedicated study. This is true of our own Hebrew and Christian scriptures. It is even truer of the Qur'an for a couple of good reasons.

As you know, educated followers of the Bible, even the most devout, now agree that, while it may be divinely inspired in some way, it is the product of human authors. It reflects the social and political needs and realities of the days in which it was created. The Bible we know is the result of centuries of committee work: which books to include, what authorities to cite, which of the possible meanings of individual phrases to emphasize. The Qur'an is different, as any Muslim can tell you.

Muslims believe that it is this very tinkering with the original truths of Judaism and Christianity that has corrupted their meaning and authenticity, that has covered the original revelations of the prophets – Adam, Abraham, Moses and Jesus – with error. The Qur'an, they believe, restores the original truths of the tradition they share with Jews and Christians, and is the final and complete revelation. It can do this because, they believe, God, through the archangel Gabriel, dictated the words of the Qur'an to the prophet Mohammed. The word "Qur'an" means "recitation" in Arabic. The words of the Qur'an, then, are the literal words of

God, of Allah, spoken to Mohammed in his language of Arabic. This revelation took place over the course of twenty-two years.

Mohammed, like most of his contemporaries in seventh-century Arabia, was illiterate. His ignorance of some of the historical and scientific references made in the Qur'an is cited as proof that the words come from Allah, not himself. Mohammed is believed to have relayed the verses to his followers for memorization as they were revealed to him; only later were they written down. Unlike the stories and histories contained in the Bible, the Qur'an is short on narrative. It is believed to be a series of monologues of God, written in the first person, although Allah refers to himself alternately as "we" and "he" throughout. The verses are arranged, not in chronological or thematic order, but in order of length, longest to shortest.

It contains explanations of the nature of God and man and the duty man owes to God. It tells us what we must do to attain Paradise and provides detailed instructions on all aspects of life that we must observe in order to live according to God's will.

The words themselves, as received from God, are holy, not just the meanings they convey. One may debate their meaning, but their authenticity is beyond question for the believer. Even to translate the Qur'an into other languages is to change its nature. An English-language Qur'an is not the actual Qur'an, therefore, but a facsimile, a representation of the Qur'an. This is the reason that Muslims around the world, no matter their native language, pray and recite from the Qur'an in Arabic.

So, what were the errors in Judaism and Christianity that God, Allah, needed to clear up in this final revelation? (Allah, by the way, is not some Islamic name for God, not a personal name, like Yahweh, or Jehovah. It simply means "the God" – al-lah. It is similar to the Hebrew Adonai, or the "the Lord." This is emphatically the same God, the God of the Jews and the Christians.)

Well, first and most importantly, the message to Mohammed was that God is unique, all-powerful, all-knowing and all-encompassing. Judaism and Christianity also, of course, consider themselves to be monotheistic religions. But some verses of the Hebrew scripture hint at the existence of other deities, over which the God of the Hebrews triumphs; Christianity, of course, teaches that God exists in three forms: the father, the son and the Holy Spirit. The Qur'an clearly rejects this possibility. God has no son. Jesus was, until Mohammed, most important among the prophets, but, like Mohammed and all the other prophets, he was emphatically human. You might say that Islam is a Unitarian religion. Jesus, according to the Qur'an, did not perform miracles; nor was he resurrected from the dead, but will return some day to lead the battle against Satan.

"*Shirk*" is the one unforgivable sin. This is the sin of associating other beings with God. Other sins, if sincerely repented and left behind, will be forgiven by Allah, who is in nearly every verse addressed as "Most Compassionate and Merciful." But *shirk*, committed by one who has been exposed to the true faith, is another matter. It may take the form of confusing other beings with God, or confusing His creation with himself. It may take the form of overreliance on the self, the belief that good things have come to one through one's own efforts. This is a form of idolatry, putting one's own accomplishments before God, worshiping wealth or power, or choosing earthly belongings over righteousness. All these deny the all-encompassing true nature of God.

The second most important teaching of the Qur'an is that the purpose of human life is to serve Allah on earth in order to achieve salvation, to be reunited with God in the afterlife. To do this, one must submit oneself utterly to God's will. Islam means "submission." Each individual is accountable to God for his or her actions in this life. In fact, this life is simply a test of faith, devotion and character, and our performance will be evaluated on the Day of Judgment. There is no vicarious atonement. In other words, no one, not even Jesus, can die for our sins, our failures or refusals to submit to God's will. The Qur'an is explicit about how the believer is to submit, and about what the will of God is.

Humans must remember Allah in their thoughts and prayers; they must share Allah's material gifts with others through the giving of alms; they must obey the commands to be honest, modest and obedient to God; they must repent of their failings and be forgiven; they must be fair and just in their dealings with others, adhering to the teachings of the prophets and doing good works.

The afterlife, the inevitability of the Day of Judgment, is the third dominant theme of the Qur'an. More than either of its fellow Abrahamic religions, Islam stresses the afterlife. Unlike them, it does not present death as the wages of sin; death is the goal of life, the longed-for return to God. To achieve this reunion is the motivation for living according to His will. The Qur'an is detailed and explicit about what we may expect in both Paradise and Hell. These are not metaphors for states of mind or our spiritual condition; they are real places in which we will dwell for eternity. The promise of heaven and the threat of hell are constantly recurring themes.

It's important to understand another difference that sets Islam apart. It has no doctrine of original sin. Adam and Eve were led astray by Satan in Eden and disobeyed God, but this sin was forgiven. Adam, by the way, was the one who succumbed to temptation, according to the Qur'an, not Eve. So much for woman as weak-willed temptress.

There was no Fall that darkened the future of humanity. Sins, in Islam, are not passed from one generation to the next. Everyone is accountable only for his or her own sins. Perhaps one of the appeals of Islam is the explicitness with which these sins are explained, and the clearness of the instructions on how to avoid them. The emphasis on eternal torment for he who turns away from God may be dark and daunting to Western eyes, but the "straight path," the way to avoid this hell, is equally explicit. We begin with a clean slate and free will and a God who is loving and merciful, all of which adds up to a comparatively cheerful view of our ultimate destiny. The idea that Islam is a harsh and unforgiving religion is inaccurate.

Is Islam inherently violent? In our desire to be tolerant and see the best in all religions, are we avoiding or glossing over the question of *jihad*? Where do all those terrorists get their ideas, if not from the Qur'an?

Well, like any religion, Islam can be put to dark purposes. It can be used to justify violence and inhumanity. And like any scripture, the Qur'an includes passages that horrify the modern liberal sensibilities.

What does it say about *jihad*? *Jihad* does not, as many Westerners believe, translate as Holy War. It means "struggle" or "striving." The so-called Great Jihad is the struggle of the individual to overcome temptation in one's personal and spiritual life. It is the struggle to submit one's desires, ambitions and selfish tendencies to the will of God. The so-called Lesser Jihad is the struggle of the community to live in accordance with God's law – a struggle that may

include armed conflict. And what is the will of God as far as unbelievers? Are Muslims encouraged to conquer or convert the unbeliever?

The Qur'an is quite clear on this. Islam is considered a universal religion. It is not restricted to a chosen people or a small group of the elect. It is intended to include the world. Converts are encouraged, and all that is required to become a Muslim is to profess that there is no God but God and Mohammed is his messenger. But despite its welcome of converts, Islam prohibits conversion by force. It instructs its followers to reply to others who try to convert them to another faith, "You have your religion and I have mine." Jews and Christians, as fellow People of the Book, are to be tolerated and treated well. On the other hand, Muslims are warned against becoming intimate with unbelievers, as this may tempt them to stray. And the Qur'an spells out under what conditions war with unbelievers is justified.

War in self-defense or in defense of Islam is justified. It is condoned in response to forcible displacement from the home. We can see here the origins of Bin-Laden's justification for attacking the West. In his eyes, by occupying Saudi Arabia, the US was assaulting Islam. Similarly, we can trace the Islamic justification for war with Israel, in the conviction that Muslims were forcibly displaced by the establishment of that state. Let it be said, however, that the killing of women and children or the aged, or of any civilian, is forbidden in the Qur'an, as is suicide, even in the service of Allah. Destroying crops and targeting clergy are also forbidden.

War is to be avoided except under these conditions. Fellow monotheists are not to be targeted. Jews and Christians may even attain Paradise. In chapter 5, verse 65, the Qur'an says, "If only the people of the scripture believe and lead a righteous life, we (that is God) will then remit their sins and admit them into gardens of bliss. If only they would uphold the Torah and the Gospel... they would be showered with blessings... Some of them are righteous, but many of them are evildoers... The believers, Jews, converts, and the Christians who believe in God and the Day of Judgment and who do what is right will have nothing to fear, nor will they be grieved."

A few verses later, it reminds us that those who believe not what Jesus said, but that he is part of a trinity, will incur a painful retribution. You can see why there is confusion. The Qur'an defines a true Christian as one who follows the teachings of Jesus, not the teachings about him, including that he is God. Islam would have little sympathy with UU atheists or agnostics, but UU Christians who seek to follow the example of Jesus and who profess faith in one God would have little trouble being accepted.

The bottom line is that the Qur'an can provide justification for loving and just and hateful, intolerant and even violent behavior. So can the Bible. The Torah, the Christian Gospels and the Qur'an are products of their time and their place. They were created in response to the conditions – political, social and economic – of those times and places. Exhortations to war against local and long-dead enemies can be used to justify current hostilities. The Qur'an, like the Bible, contains contradictions and unclear meanings. Like the Bible, it can be, and is, culled for verses to justify bad behavior and, taken out of their total context, these verses do that job admirably.

Like any religion, Islam can be a force for good or evil. And, as with any religion, a deeper knowledge of its teachings can be used in the cause of tolerance or hatred, peace or war. Islam, like any religion, provides insight into humanity, our fears and longings. Its scripture offers us beauty and challenges our understanding. What we do with it is up to us.

With fearless faith in both reason and compassion, in the conviction that the world is vast and wondrous enough to contain all manner of beliefs, and in the certainty that what unites us is greater than what divides us, let us seek peace together.