

UNDERSTANDING THE MANY FACES OF ISLAM

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro (VA)

March 28, 2010

It's hard to imagine how the same faith tradition that inspired the words we just read together has also inspired some of the most repulsive acts of violence and repression in human history. Today I am going to talk about why that is so, with the goal of increasing our appreciation for the complexities of the Islamic faith. Some of the reasons for our struggle to understand Islam are embedded within its own history—including the life of the Prophet Muhammad—and some are the result of the contrast between the values advocated by the Islamic tradition and the values promoted by Unitarian Universalism. Rather than trying to speak the final word on Islam, I hope to challenge you to understand it from a broader perspective. Let me also invite you to participate in the weekly classes on world religions I will be leading, starting on April 6th (sign-up sheet on back table).

The first challenge revolves around the importance of **religious devotion**. Most of us UUs wear our religion lightly—not on our sleeve but perhaps in our hip pocket. We cherish our personal freedom from authority and regimentation. In contrast, the word *Muslim* means “one who submits”—to the will of Allah and to the strenuous practice of the faith. These practices are known as the “Five Pillars of Islam,” and they are summarized on the back of your order of service. Let me briefly explain each of them. [See **handwritten notes.**]

Profession of faith (*shahada*): There is no god but God (Allah) and Muhammad is the Prophet of God.

Ritual prayers (*salat*): 5 times daily

Charity: almsgiving (*zakat*: 2.5 % of total wealth each year)

Ramadan: month of purification (no food, drink, or sex from dawn to dusk)

Pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*)

In countries where Islam is the prevailing religion, these practices are incorporated into daily life, but in non-Muslim societies like the United States or Europe, they pose some difficult challenges. Should a Muslim pay **both** income taxes to support the general welfare as well as the *zakat* expected by the local mosque?

Another significant challenge to our understanding of the Islamic tradition is its attitude toward **violence and death**.

2 meanings of *jihad* (“struggle”) expressed in *hadith* attributed to Muhammad

Greater *jihad*: **internal** struggle with self-indulgence, insensitivity to others

Lesser *jihad*: struggle against **external** enemies

Justifications for violent (lesser) *jihad* in the Qur'an (exploited by Islamic extremists such as Osama bin Laden)

To **defend** your nation or community from aggressors (e.g., Russian & U.S. invasions of Afghanistan)

To **liberate** people living under oppressive governments (e.g., Saddam Hussein)

To **remove** a government that will not allow the free practice of Islam (e.g., Chechnya)

The glorification of violence and death in contemporary militant Islamic movements are embedded in the ambiguities of the Qur'an. Violence against innocent civilians is expressly forbidden in the Qur'an: "If you kill a life unjustly, it is as if you killed all life." (sura 5:32) Also prohibited is suicide: "Whoever kills himself with a weapon . . . will kill himself forever in the fire of Hell." The passages in the Qur'an that appear to justify the use of violence are ones that refer to specific conflicts that Muhammad was dealing with in his ongoing struggles with his adversaries. Regardless of the context in which these ideas were set forth, the core issue here is **reverence for death versus reverence for life**. In one of his most memorable statements, Osama bin Laden said, "You Americans love life, and we love death." Those of us who love life must recognize that the threat of death is not an effective deterrent to those who seek death as an expression of their religious devotion. We must do all we can to foster a love and respect for life among people in the Muslim world.

That leads me to another challenge in our understanding of Islam: **the role of women**. Women played a crucial role throughout the life of the Prophet Muhammad. His first wife Khadija encouraged him to pursue his religious visions, and she is regarded as the first convert to Islam. They had three sons (all of whom died as infants) and four daughters. The best known daughter is Fatima, who played a significant role in the power struggle over leadership of the movement following Muhammad's death. Another important woman in Muhammad's life was A'isha, the daughter of his close associate Abu Bakr, who supported him throughout the rest of his life and was the main source for many of the Prophet's words and deeds that have been preserved in the *hadith*. In view of the importance of these women in the Prophet's life, it is both ironic and tragic that Islam has earned a reputation as oppressive of women. In her book *Islam in America*, Jane I. Smith observes, "There is little doubt that women [during Muhammad's time] were considered full members of the *umma* [the Islamic community], that they participated in its public as well as its private life, and that they shared in both the developing set of religious obligations and worship activities." [p. 27]

To me there is little doubt that the oppression of women in some repressive Muslim societies such as Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia is due to ancient patriarchal customs more than the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad himself. Many of the Islamic practices about women's dress in public, restrictions about dating and courtship, and separation during worship are based on a solid foundation of mistrust of men's sexual desires. Many contemporary Muslim women express relief that their modest appearance in public liberates them from unwanted attention from men. In most Muslim countries, both males and females are encouraged to pursue education and realize their individual potential. About half of all American mosques "allow" women to serve on their governing boards, but the painful truth is that power and authority in the global Islamic community rests almost entirely in the hands of men.

So what are we to make of all these contradictory dimensions of the Islamic faith? Karen Armstrong, an insightful student of the history of religion, says, "Muhammad was one of the

great prophets, but also a poet and statesman. In recent years, of course, with the horrors that have been perpetrated in the name of the tradition that he founded, he would have been so shocked, appalled, and devastated to see what has been done.” [quoted by Krista Trippett, *Speaking of Faith*, pp. 144-45] Sadly, the faith practiced privately by devout Muslims around the world has been distorted into a political campaign for violent *jihad* against the “enemies” of Islam. As long as our military forces continue to occupy Muslim countries, we will continue to provide the Islamic militants with all the incentives they need to recruit warriors who are committed to violence and death in defense of their Islamic faith. We need to protect our homeland as best we can . . . and get out of theirs.

I believe that the greatest hope for the future is not only the establishment of democratic governments in the Middle East, but also our support for the voices of moderation within Islamic society. This includes religious and political leaders, but especially educated women. **The future of a peaceful relationship with Islam rests in the hands of those who value life more than death.** In her fascinating book *Speaking of Faith*, Krista Tippett recounts Bruce Feiler’s account of his visit to the tomb of Abraham and Sarah near Hebron, one of the most contentious battlegrounds between Muslims, Jews, and Christians. “In one of the most haunting and overlooked passages in the Hebrew Bible, in Genesis 25:9, his sons Ishmael and Isaac—rivals since they were born, estranged since childhood, leaders of opposing nations—come to stand side by side to bury their father . . . Abraham achieves in death what he could never achieve in life: this moment of reconciliation, a hopeful side-by-side flicker of possibility where they’re not rivals or warriors, Jews, Christians, or Muslims. They are brothers.” [p. 203] Let us hope that in our lifetime, the voices of mutual respect will prevail over the voices of violent conflict. **Side-by-side, not us versus them.**