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SERMON ON “*DARING TO COMPREHEND THE ATTRACTION OF ISLAM*”
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Rumi, the Sufi mystic, wrote,

*Something opens our wings. Something
Makes boredom and hurt disappear.
Someone fills the cup in front of us.
We taste only sacredness.*

The goal of the religion of Islam is “to taste only sacredness.” The goal is to submit to the Oneness which is Allah, is God, is the interconnected web of all existence of which we are a part, that we exclaim with Rumi,

*I am so small I can barely be seen.
How can this great love be inside me?*

It is this great love that will achieve the social justice toward which the five pillars of Islam, the rituals described in the Qur’an, lead the Muslim. This is the great attraction of Islam.

I put the word “daring” into the title of this sermon “*Daring to Comprehend the Attraction of Islam*” because it is audacious and presumptuous to try to articulate a faith I do not practice or profess. But I hear so many articulations of Islam by others, and have witnessed the prejudice, the pre-judging of Muslims, including under the so-called protection of the Patriot Act, that I want to make the attempt. Unitarian Universalism strives to learn from all the world’s religions. In our class on *Four Spiritualities* we learned that Islam is attractive to those on the *Path of Devotion*. That is the spiritual path our religion is probably least like. But, perhaps a look at the attractiveness of Islam can help us to balance our thinking and acting ways with a bit of ritual, reverence and respect for another’s ways.

The post 9-11 book *Why Do People Hate America?* Describes a cultural stereotyping of Muslims called *Orientalism* buttressed within Western culture in literature and scholarship. Authors Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Win Davies write, “The basic representation of Muslims as militant, barbaric fanatics, corrupt, effete sensualists, people who lived contrary to natural law, developed early in Western scholarship and has been resistant to change. And its central premise has always been that the failings of Muslims, as people and societies, stem from their beliefs ... Conformity and orthodoxy are seen as central to the nature of a monolithic Islamic civilization. It is conventional not to examine the range of opinion that exists in Muslim society, not to see its people and history as shaped by a civilizational discourse, but to see the extreme as the norm... most of all it provides an edge of fear and discomfort in the relations between ordinary people, the non-Muslim and Muslim populations of Europe and America. Racism and discrimination across North American exist not only in the attitudes and actions of an obnoxious extreme fringe – they can be implicit in the commonplace attitudes and information of well-meaning, well-intentioned, nice, sensible people.”¹ It seems that America needs an enemy. Now that “communism” has been squelched, we have adopted a new enemy, a new wholly other to demonize.

Sardar and Davies compare the “*cultural knowledge*” of the stereotypes once accorded those of African heritage with now those of Middle Easterners. Science, the Bible and scholarship were used to reinforce the stereotypes. The children of Ishmael, in contrast to the children of Isaac, are tribes of color and somehow less endowed, less chosen by God. Today’s phrase “axis of evil” takes in three whole nations of people in a lump, while the phrase and priority of the “war against terror” (against Islamist extremists) allows other serious problems of the world, like AIDS, global warming, genocide in the Sudan, and gang warfare in Oakland and San Francisco, California to be underfunded or ignored with a more pressing excuse.

The truth is that those who practice Islam are as diverse as those who practice Christianity. What is unique about Islam, compared to much of Christianity and much of the cultural religion of Americanism, is that it teaches and affirms racial, national, political and religious pluralism. That is Islam while being an Arabic derivative, from its beginnings welcomed all races. It has taken different forms in different countries like Senegal, India, Indonesia, Spain and Black America. It is

currently expressed in monarchies, dictatorships, democracy and theocracies within different cultures. And, most importantly, Mohammad its first visionary and prophet, saw Islam as an extension, an incorporator and even a protector of Judaism and Christianity, and as a pacifier of a tribal and perpetually-quarreling Arabia with the monotheism of Islam which was working to unite people in other lands.

The Qur'an says,

Do not argue with the followers of the earlier revelation otherwise than in a most kindly manner - unless it be such of them as are bent on evil-doing - and say: "We believe in that which has been bestowed upon you; for our god and your god is one and the same, and it is He until Him that we all surrender ourselves. (Qur'an 29:46)

Another stereotype of Islam is that it denigrates women. That, too, is a cultural stereotype or preference of the West. The Qur'an was written to protect and provide for women. Even the unequal distribution of inheritance was intended because the surviving male relatives were expected to provide for the widow, even to marry her. The covering of women from top to toe is intended to protect her.² Women's hair was considered erotic as was the shape of her body. Men, too, were to wear loose clothing not tight pants or shorts or even short-sleeved shirts. Women pray behind men so that they will not be a distraction to the men who are apparently considered weaker in their flights of fancy or lust than women. In Iran, an established Islamic culture, women are educated, can enter the same professions as men including becoming religious leaders. Today, under cover of their long flowing garments, most every kind of clothes may be hidden from when what they now call their "work uniform" can be removed. I have some sympathy for this cover up. I have always found that wearing a robe in the pulpit prevents discussion in the congregation of a woman minister's choice of dress. One of my colleagues was run out of her church because she wore mumu's and Birkenstocks in the pulpit.

I am not trying to overlook the distortions that conservative Muslims have imposed to keep Taliban women in the home under lock and key, or Saudi Arabian women under male domination under threat of physical harm, but, it is important not to jump in with our preferences and not try to understand theirs. One reason given for Middle Eastern fear and anger of the West is the ever-increasing loose ethics, sexuality,

rampant materialism and the freedom of the press and advertising that blares our customers to the world.

On Friday, I heard Diane Rheem interview Juliet Schorr on WLRN. I have been in seminars with Juliet in Massachusetts. She teaches at Boston College and is on staff at the Center for Popular Economics which teaches progressive economics. Juliet writes books on domestic economics. One was on the overworked American recording the steady increase in work hours for men and then adding women to be able to maintain the same family wage. She noted the rapid decline in leisure time compared to European workers. Her latest book is called "*Born to Buy*." It gives frightening statistics on the number of commercials a typical child sees in a day on TV, including in the classroom. She shows how children are as inculcated into the consumer culture as the water in which we now swim. Even eighteen-month old children recognize brands. It is children who drive their mothers to buy what they have seen on TV with nagging and pleading.

Hearing this in the context of thinking of Islam, I wonder if, as Unitarian Universalists, we could use our religion as a reason to restrict our children's time with television, our teeny boppers peer pressuring for scanty clothing, and our families succumbing to fast foods.

Karen Armstrong writes,

Social justice was... the crucial virtue of Islam. Muslims were commanded as their first duty to build a community characterized by practical compassion, in which there was a fair distribution of wealth. This was far more important than any doctrinal teaching about God. In fact, the Qu'ran has a negative view of theological speculation, which it calls *zannah*, self-indulgent whimsy about ineffable matters that nobody can ascertain one way or the other. It seemed pointless to argue about such abstruse dogmas; far more crucial was the effort (*jihad*) to live in the way that God had intended for human beings. The political and social welfare of the *ummah* (community) would have sacramental value for Muslims. If the *ummah* prospered it was a sign that Muslims were living according to God's will....Consequently, they would be affected as profoundly by any misfortune or humiliation suffered by the *ummah* as Christians by the

spectacle of somebody blasphemously trampling on the Bible or ripping the Eucharistic host apart.

I find this sacred principle of Islamic faith a sacred principle of our own. Action speaks louder than words. We believe in acting for justice against inequity and are known in many communities as the ones to call upon when there is social action, social witness to be done.

What Islam offers, in addition, is a system of rituals to encourage their social action. They believe that it is in bowing to the ultimate, merciful, compassionate Allah that Allah's compassionate nature would pour into them. This and the acceptance of Muhammed as the first prophet are the first pillar of Islam. So, all the prayers begin with obeisance to God. The prayers, which are the second pillar, are frequent, a minimum of five times daily in the direction of Mecca, so that awareness of the compassionate God would fill their day and affect the way they lead their lives. Sometimes I do the morning prayers with my husband when he is here. I know only a few words of the Arabic so in a sense my prayer is wordless. But I have learned the ritual bowing and kneeling and getting up again. I recommend trying it sometime. There is something very special about bowing before the universe which is so much grander than I am. There is a place in the prayer while kneeling, when you reach to the right and then the left saying "*As salaam aleichem*" to each side of that very wide world - *Peace be with you. Peace be with you.*

The third pillar is almsgiving. It is required that those who have give to those who have not. It is not poor taste or to be hidden to be a beggar in an Islamic country. The outstretched hand or cup or bowl allow the Muslim to give coins or drink or rice in fulfillment of their faith. Related to this is the Muslim understanding of illness. "In Islam, illness is understood to be a great blessing because It is an opportunity, if borne with patience free of complaint to purify oneself of past sins - to burn away wrong thoughts and deeds. If you ask a Muslim about their health, even someone who is ill, they will customarily reply "*Al hamdulillah*" which means "*All praise belongs to God*"³ Imagine praising God for coming down with a cold. It turns the world upside down.

The fourth pillar is the observance of fasting during the lunar month of Ramadan. From the first light of dawn until the sun goes down, the faithful fast. It is a time of

extra prayers to ask for forgiveness of sins. The fasting allows a person to experience what it is like not to have food like a person who goes hungry though not fault of their own. It builds, not so much endurance, as empathy...a fellow feeling with those who have not enough. I plan to practice the fast during Ramadan this year. I invite, any who wish to experience it to join me. We will share our experiences. I have done it a couple other times. I find it is indeed helpful to fill one's thoughts with this empathy which those who are hungry rather than thoughts of how much I wish I could eat lunch! Fasting also helps me to appreciate my food the more. You often break the fast with a date or a piece of fruit eaten slowly. It tastes very good. I have, in two years, given the money saved during Ramadan to help a village in Africa.

The fifth pillar is the Hajj. The Hajj is a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca. The Hajj began hundreds of years before Mohammed. It is a pilgrimage to give reverence to a sacred black stone, a meteorite, called the Kaaba which fell to earth from heavens. The Hajj is filled with particular rituals that encourage the pilgrim to cleanse him or herself from sin, to live in empathy with the poor, and to dedicate themselves to Allah.

It leads me to wonder what sort of pilgrimage might have meaning for us. There is something endearing about the idea of planning, preparing and taking a sacred journey at least once in a lifetime. For some it is a visit to an ancestral land. To others it is a visit to a foreign land. To some it may be a hike of the length of the Appalachian Trail in the east or John Muir's trail in the west. To some it may be a visit to a shrine of Guadalupe or Montserrat or Macho Pichu.

It is possible for us to appreciate the gifts of another religion and incorporate bits and pieces into our own. It is also possible to actually try out the physical and spiritual rituals of another religion not to take them for our own but to understand why and how they are important to someone else. It is caring enough to put ourselves in the way of embodying for a moment the experience of someone we care about or wish to know better. I think of the lifework of a man like Huston Smith who not only studied but moved from culture to culture to experience the religious rituals of others. One understanding of Universalism is a taking into oneself of the salvific practices of one religion after another. What an amazingly embodied universalism that would be.

I want to close with a Sufi story. It is a story which gives a whiff of what the Islamic experience might be. It is called “*Presence*.”⁴

The sheikh Junaid had a young dervish he loved very much, and his older dervishes became jealous. They could not understand what the sheikh saw in the young man. One day, Junaid told all his dervishes to buy a chicken in the marketplace and then kill the chicken. However, they had to kill the chicken where no one could see them. They were to return at sundown.

One by one the dervishes returned to the sheikh, each with a slaughtered chicken under his arm. Finally, when the sun went down the young dervish returned, with a live chicken still squawking and struggling. The older dervishes all laughed and whispered among themselves that the young man couldn't even carry out the sheikh's orders!

Junaid asked each of the dervishes to describe how they carried out his instructions. The first man back said that he had gone out and purchased the chicken, then returned home, locked the door, closed the curtains over all the windows, and then killed the chicken. The second dervish said that he returned home with his chicken, locked his door and pulled the curtains, and then he took the chicken into a dark closet and slaughtered it there. The third dervish also took his chicken into the closet, but he blindfolded himself, so he himself could not see the slaughtering. Another went into a pitch black cave.

Finally, it was the young man's turn. He hung his head embarrassed that he could not follow his sheikh's instructions. “I brought the chicken into my house, but everywhere in the house there was a Presence. I went into the most deserted parts of the forest, but the Presence was still with me. Even in the darkest caves, the Presence was still there. There was no place I could go where I was not seen.

ENDNOTES

1. Ziauddin, Sardar and Merryly Wyn Davies, *Why do People Hate America?*, Disinformation Company, NY, 2002, p. 52
2. William O. Beeman, "Iran: Imminent Threat of Cultural Challenge?," *Open Spaces*, Volume 7, Issue 1, 2004, pp. 34-5.
3. Gary Henry, "Even at Night, the Sun is There," *Parabola: Healing*, Spring 1993, pp. 64-5.
4. "Presence," "From *Essential Sufism*," edited by James Fadiman and Robert Frager in *Parabola*, Fall 1997.