

2005-10-23            Islam  
Mark Belletini

**Opening Words**

We are here,  
*on an autumn morning of liquid light,*  
to worship, to submerge into the ancient rhythm  
*of song and silence, word and wonder*  
which offers its light to our days,  
*and through our nights.*

And so we begin our time of celebration:

**Mindful of the responsibility our freedom presses  
into us, blest by the beauty of the world,  
and drawn by a vision of a community known for its  
honesty, generosity, depth, love, and justice-work,  
we focus our time together by the kindling of light.**

**Sequence:** (Musical: The Muslim Call to Prayer, recorded with  
permission in Cairo in 1969 at the Muhammed Ali mosque,  
interspersed with a Kyrie composed by David Fanshawe Silva  
Classics Silkd 6003)

*Silence*

Light of Light, light of stars and light of suns,  
light bouncing off minarets, and light on the  
foreheads of people facing the ruins of their  
earthquake-torn cities; light in our memories,  
our hearts and our yearning; light in the names of people in our  
lives whom we love or with whom we struggle. Light in the  
remembering of names, in the speaking of them....

## *Naming*

Light in the music, light in the text, light in  
the singing, light in the community of singers,  
light in those who watch, light in those who  
respond...

## **Readings**

*The First Reading comes from the man who is often called the  
Father of modern Iraqi poetry, Jamil Sidqi as-Zahawi. He lived  
from 1863 to 1936, and this poem is called "The Sky of Iraq"*

O limpid mirror,  
you sky over Iraq,  
best of all skies.

Look at me.

For a long time my heart has loved you,  
my soul adoring you.

Gaze upon me at dawn,  
when the nightingale is still singing  
on the top branches of the tree;  
gaze back at me when the sun disappears,  
when the shadows stare and witness.

Gaze upon me when all creation silences  
noisy nature, and when, in night's darkness,  
only the murmuring of the river is heard.

Gaze upon me when the autumn tree begins to  
mourn its leaving leaves,  
and the gardens lose their flowers,  
what flowers remain lose their light.

Gaze upon me secretly, through the rift in the clouds, and gaze  
upon me when I weep,  
and gaze back at you with eyes full of tears.

*The Second Reading is a very early Muslim Era poem from the great Rab'ia of the 8th century, who calls her poem "The Two Loves"*

I love you with two loves:  
A love which aims at my *own* happiness,  
and a love worthy of you.  
In the love for my own happiness,  
I think of you and no one else.  
But in the love worthy of you,  
the veils covering you fall away,  
and I see you.  
There is no glory for me in either one  
love or the other, but glory to you  
in both of them.

## **Sermon**

To my surprise, there was something new in my e-mail account this week. Besides being filled with invitations to buy nifty, numbing medications, meet Mormon singles, and negotiate vast cash exchanges around the world, I was offered "an opportunity" to join an organization called the United American Committee which claims as its agenda the protection of the United States of America from the Muslim extremists.

Suspicious at once by the self-righteous tone of the e-mail, and because I was preparing this very sermon on Islam, I decided to check out the website of this organization. It revealed its origins surprisingly quickly. For example, the site refers to Muslim "churches" instead of mosques. The organization also wrapped itself in the American flag, which is blazoned on all the t-shirts and caps it sells. Its bookstore sells volumes featuring Fox News's "experts."

So I wrote a note back to the man who has sent me the e-mail, Mr. Petrilla. I told him I was in no way interested in his organization, which struck me as *authentically* extremist in both information and tone. He wrote me back telling me I was hopelessly uninformed, but that he would stop sending me messages.

But I suppose he was right about one thing. As a citizen of the United States raised outside of that tradition, I am pretty uninformed about the whole length, width and breadth of Islam. It encompasses some of the richest and most complex religious traditions in the world. And there is no way I can convey any of the little I *do* know in a few minutes of pulpit time on a Sunday Morning.

And, I know a few things, certainly. I've heard of the prophet Muhammed, and read the Qur'an. So have many of you, perhaps in school, perhaps on your own, even if you were raised outside the Muslim faith, as most of you were. And like many of you, I have Muslim friends who fast, more or less, during this month of Ramadam, or to whom I bestow presents on the feast of Eid, which is coming up soon. And I keep a few devotional objects from the Muslim tradition in my office. My friend Babar, for example, brought me this set of Muslim prayer beads from his last trip to Saudi Arabia. These are a beautiful example of the artistry that attends devotional practice in that religious tradition.

And this beautifully embroidered cap, often worn while saying prayers, was given me by the Reeds this morning. Their son, Aaron, who died in the war over there in Iraq, had planned to bring back as a gift, and they very graciously gave it to me, a gift I will treasure always.

Some of you who grew up in the Muslim traditions will know more than I do, but even you will not be able to fathom the full

range of the literature, the practices, the differences and the similarities. It's just too vast.

But there are important things that all of us can know, whether we were raised in that tradition or not. There are, for example, the five important things that all Muslims are called to do...to proclaim the Oneness of God, to pray or worship five times each day, alone or in the congregation, to give a portion of your earnings to charitable organizations, to fast from dawn to nightfall for a full month each year, and to make a pilgrimage once in one's life to the city of Mecca.

This is the Sunni list, at least. The Sunni Muslims are the clear majority, in the world. The Shia, who revere the family of Muhammed more than the elected caliphs of old, don't often talk of the "five pillars of Islam," but agree that the proclamation of the Oneness or Uniqueness of the Holy is basic and central. Most Western books give the Sunni view of things.

Do all Muslims live out their lives in devotion to these principles? No, of course not. Many Muslims do not pray five times each day, maybe just once, with a nod the other four times.

Some skip the fast, especially when the ever-moving holiday month of Ramadam falls during July, and the distance between morning and evening is at its longest. Others never make it to Mecca. And there are Muslim skeptics everywhere who are not so sure that even the basic affirmation of the Singular Uniqueness of the Holy really makes any sense in the modern world. Yes, there *are* Muslim questioners and skeptics, plenty of them. I will mention some of these folks in a few minutes. But my point is this...there are a great many ways to be authentically Muslim, progressive and conservative, devotional and cultural, mystical and legalistic, and all of them are rooted in the same tradition. Just as it's silly to deny the validity of Quaker silence because it's so much quieter than a Pentacostal revival, or so much simpler than a

Russian Orthodox Mass, it's equally silly to deny the validity of hundreds of diverse and contradictory Muslim practices.

As to Muslim theology, most people I know will be able to tell you that Muslims take refuge in Al'Lah, which in Arabic, simply means The God.

And who is that?

First, I need to say that I find none of the easy answers to this question to be very helpful. To say, for example, that Christians, Jews and Muslims all relate to Divinity in basically the same way (usually put as "they all worship the same God") is infuriating to me, as if the differences in culture and heritage in these traditions was just so much window dressing. Sorry, culture is not easily divorced from theology, and refusing to face differences is refusing to face reality. Reality has never been, and never will be, neat and monochromatic and abstracted from real people living real lives in a cultural setting.

But by saying that, please do not lump me with the rude and repulsive rhetoric of people like Pat Robertson, who uses his daily television show, broadcast on a station he fully owns, to defame and twist every notion of Al'Lah that's possible, insisting that Al'Lah is more devil than God, and with great self-congratulation, proclaiming that Islam is an evil perversion of good religion, of which his own is the only example he can think of. There is no doubt in my mind that Mr. Petrilla, with his United American Committee, must stand in Robertson's long and murky shadow.

But to say that many Muslim understandings of the Holy differ from many understandings of the Christians, Jews and even us Unitarian Universalists does not take one whit of beauty away from the Muslim affirmations.

The poem by Rabi'a which you heard earlier sounds like something which Juliet might have written to Romeo, doesn't it? It is a love poem with clear passion.

"I love you with two loves: A love which aims at my *own* happiness, and a love worthy of you."

This is an adoring, consuming love.

This attitude toward Al'Lah permeates a great deal of Muslim poetry, in both Arabic and Persian dialects. Especially Muslim Sufi poetry, rising out of Persia. And especially like Rumi, the single most popular poet today in the United States, whose words we sang earlier. Oh, there are many other ways of relating to Al'Lah too, but please don't associate Al'Lah with any image of an old man with a beard, as so many in the West seem to (and boy, is that idea hard for me to understand!)...there are no such images of Al'Lah in Islam, nor any other kind of image. None. Zip. This anti-image attitude permeates many of the civilizations radiating out from the Arabian peninsula... even the Eastern Orthodox Church in that area fell into the influence of this culture and banned all icons in their churches for over 100 years. And for those of you who find this anti-image attitude "exotic," please remember that this same approach was found throughout Northern Europe with equal strength, but with different origins. It was the very similar anti-image philosophy of Celtic Northern Europe which undeniably grounded the later Protestant removal of all images there, especially the statues and storybook stained glass.

Oh, mind you, there is a rich tradition of art, throughout the Muslim world. Writing itself, in the form of sublime calligraphy, evolved into a remarkably beautiful artform, almost unknown in the West. You'll also find Muslim art in deliciously intricate design patterns for mosaics, arches and domes. To be sure, you *can*

also find Persian miniatures, and various almost Western style paintings of animals and garden scenes. But you will never, never find any depiction of Al'Lah. Ever. Or of Muhammad's face.

But poetry remains the most pre-eminent art of the Muslim world. You will find thousands of poetry and theology texts about Al'Lah, richly textured and beautiful. The words used for theological discourse in Islam are quite lovely, in my opinion, very alive. There are, for example, almost a hundred names given to Al'Lah in Muslim literature, none of which lend themselves to imagery of any kind. Al Quddush, "the Holy," is one. Al Bari, "the Evolver," is another. Al Adl, "Justice," a third. Then there is Al Ali, "the Most High," Al Wasi, "the All-Embracing," Al Karim, "Generosity," Al Batin, "the Hidden," and An Noor, "the Light."

And after talking about Al'Lah, any one lifting up Islam must speak the name of Muhammed, Muhammed Ahmed Mahmud Mustafa to be exact. He is often lumped together with Jesus and Buddha and Ramakrishna and Confucius by the Western explorers of World Religion, but I really think such comparisons, though well-intentioned, are simply deceptive.

After all, how does the story of a middle-class merchant who is forging a new state as well as a new religion, Muhammed's story, compare with the story of a Galilean peasant builder in an utterly colonized nation at the edge of a vast empire? Or how does that same youngish statesman compare to an aged Chinese itinerant scholar and retainer like Master Kung, whom we know as Confucius? Such ill-fitted comparisons run far beyond the proverbial apples and oranges, it seems to me.

As with Jesus' life, and Siddattha the Buddha's life, Muhammed's life comes under historical scrutiny these days. But only for those who do not find such things threatening. Just as there

are plenty of evangelical conservatives who think that Mark Belletini (along with the whole rest of the membership of the Jesus Seminar) is going to hell for looking at the gospel texts with critical scrutiny, so there are certainly many conservative Muslims who are deeply pained when they hear that there is little archeological evidence in support of many of the early historic battles of Islam, and that there is compelling evidence that the historical Muhammed's story has been given some rather polemical twists by later generations. Or worse, that there are many early versions of the Qur'an which are different from the modern version in significant ways, and that the compilation of the various *suras* or chapters took a much longer time than the more legalistic tradition suggests.

For some progressive Muslims, such critical work aids a deeper and more satisfying faith, which can interface with the modern world excellently. For the conservative, like a devout Wahabist, or conservative Muslim, in Saudi Arabia, this is not likely the case. But both are Muslims. Just as both the wild firebrand fundamentalist Billy Sunday and the liberal Martin Luther King Jr. were equally Christians. And I can think of plenty of Jews who are conservative, and many who are as liberal as it's possible to get. Yet all of them rise from the noble ground of Jewish heritage.

Are there fanatics among Muslims who espouse violence as the best answer, and spew anti-Jewish slogans and veer far from the more compassionate teachings embedded in the Qur'an and other Muslim books? Of course, just like there are Christians who espouse violence and anti-Jewish slogans that veer far from the more compassionate teachings found in the New Testament. But my point is that blithering religious fanatics, like the late and violent-hearted Rabbi Meir Kahane or the Rev. Bob Jones of Bob Jones University, are not typical, but at the frayed and fragile edge of their respective religious traditions. And I insist that focusing on fringe people as normative is one of the main reasons why both

anti-Islam and anti-Semitism exists. In fact, this is why religious liberals, often not any more educated religiously than many of the conservatives, often simply descend to lambasting, with considerable acid and ridicule, the more popular forms of modern post-television Christianity. The edge, I say, is not the center. But the edge has the power to change the center over time. And so, being watchful is not foolish.

But it's also true that there are others on the edge working to change the center too. These are the liberals, the progressives, the radicals. The Progressive Muslims of this country, with their snazzy website and magazine, are a recent movement, to be sure, but they are standing on a long and proud tradition of Muslim liberalism that *has always been there*. Many of them are following in the footsteps of the famous Egyptian feminists of the 1920's and 30's, like Huda Shaarawi. Others are recovering the Muslim practice of *ijtihad*, or creative interpretations of the law, which inevitably support the more liberal interpretation. Leading modern Muslim progressives are people like the outspoken modern Egyptian physician and feminist, Nawal El Saadawi, the controversial outspoken Canadian lesbian Muslim, Irshad Manji, as well as Fawzia Afzal Khan, Amina Wadud, Omid Safi, Salam Al-Maraynati and many more. These are people, for example, who have pointed out that the Qur'an says nothing about women being veiled, but that male Muslim scholars have interpreted passages in the Qur'an in the exact same way that Western men interpreted the Bible...to keep all the privileges to themselves. The *culture* of male privilege, in short, is not Muslim religion, but it distorts that religion every time. That's why I made such a point earlier in the sermon to insist that culture cannot be divorced from any talk about religion. These issues of culture affect Christianity and Judaism no less than Islam, and all three religious traditions would do well to look at how unquestioned cultural practices set every justice-seeking religious passage in the scriptures into a fun-house mirror, rudely distorting it. And even we Unitarian Universalists

have much to ask ourselves about how unquestioned cultural notions, such as the notion of white privilege, distort some of our own stated values. No one is exempt from self-questioning, I think.

But why are all the names of Progressive Muslims I just read to you entirely unknown to most of us in this room, including me, until I read their writings this week? Because I assure you, it's to someone's advantage. Especially those who wage wars in Muslim countries. The West, you see, is still steeping in millennium old Crusader ignorance, a self-delusion based on colonialist dreams of pillaging and stealing wealth. A thousand years ago, those bought-and-paid for mercenary goons, supported by a few fanatic bishops, ransacked their way across Europe, killing all the Jews on the way, to save the tomb of Jesus from these strange people whom they accused of all sorts of blood curdling practices, including the worship of an idol named Baphomet. (This is clearly a corruption of the name Mohammed.) Now admittedly, even Pat Robertson and Mr. Parilla don't believe that stupid story any more. But what they teach their people is different only in degree.

And I'm clear that ignorance can no longer be an excuse in this world of consistent and constant misinformation. But as I said, I suspect the main reason for spreading this misinformation is that it is in the political interest of the powers that be in our generation to fan the ancient prejudices so that it's easier to convince a skeptical nation that waging a war in the land of the Euphrates is somehow righteous. So I doubt we'll see any urge to educate ourselves more honestly coming from that direction.

So, my first point this morning was this: there is no such thing as an authentic Muslim who can define Islam for everyone else. Nor can any Christian (although many certainly try) define anyone else's honest Christianity. And no Orthodox Jew can diss the Jewishness of a Reform agnostic. Each religious group divides into a wild variety of types, none of which, however, is entirely typical.

And facing that complex reality is the first step toward tempering ignorance and keeping stereotype and prejudice at bay.

My second point this morning is that humanity precedes doctrine, and that I think that religious progressives simply affirm this reality better than religious reactionaries can. And this makes me think of the Muslim Iraqi poet I read earlier, who looked at the Iraqi sky with such tenderness.

*Gaze upon me, he writes, when the autumn tree begins to mourn its leaving leaves,  
and the gardens lose their flowers,  
what flowers remain lose their light.  
Gaze upon me secretly, through the rift in the clouds, and gaze upon me when I weep,  
and gaze back at you with eyes full of tears.*

Wonder at the sky and tears...these two *human* realities unite religious progressives all over the world. Whether they use the language of Al'Lah or of God, or are skeptical of all divinity, it makes little difference; they read justice and mercy in their respective sacred books and cultures instead of hatred, distortion and cruelty. They read justice and mercy in their own hearts, and they work hard to uproot any hatred or cruelty that had been planted there. They desire to move forward, not hold everyone back. Standing under the sky of Iraq, or under the sky of Columbus, such deeply religious people can weep at the misery which the reactionary arm of religion, whether Christian, Muslim, or Jewish, heaps upon the earth. And then, after weeping good and long, they can join their hands, and looking up smiling at their respective and beautiful skies, walk forward together to meet the challenge of the coming century.

## **Offering**

Remembering that Generosity is the child of Responsibility, and Responsibility is the child of Maturity and Self-Awareness, we offer the opportunity to pay our pledges in support of this our common home.

### **Light Prayer** from the Dala'ilu

'l-khairat ma'a 'l-ahzab (There is a tradition of such prayers found in several Muslim prayerbooks.)

O Light of Light, appoint for me light in my heart. And light on my last day, too, and light in front of me and light behind me. Appoint for me light on my left and light on my right, light above me and light under me. Appoint for me light in my eyes, and light in how my eyes see things. Let there be light in my face, and light in my body, and light in my blood, and light in my very bones. May I grow into light, all of me, and so I say again, light, light, light, more and more light.