

Understanding the Muslim Mind and Religion

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I'm twenty-five years old. I'm all alone, on a bicycle. I've just crossed the border from Turkey into Syria. By staying on the road, even to eat my lunch, I'm avoiding the many landmines that litter the ground around this disputed border. I'm a little scared. I don't know much about Syria, except what I've read in the newspaper.

The image stuck in my mind is of a nation of terrorists who look like Arafat: men with dotted turbans on their heads who haven't shaved in days. In order to get in, I lie to the border guard. I say, "I'm Christian and I promise I'm not traveling to Israel." He stamps my passport.

I begin biking through the sandy desert on a road with little traffic. Every twenty minutes or so, I pass men standing in front of mud and dung-walled homes. They're wearing turbans and haven't shaved in days. They're waving me over. I look at them and point straight ahead saying, "Sorry, I gotta go!"

I feel vulnerable and alone; this country feels dangerous and I'm getting tired. I've been bicycling for two hours without a break and have sixty pounds of gear on my bike. I decide to take one of the beckoning men up on his offer to come over. He's six foot two inches and weighs about two hundred and seventy pounds. He's wearing a turban and hasn't shaved in days. I tentatively enter his small home, feeling somewhat apprehensive.

As the tea water boils, he asks me in broken English, "Where are you from?"

I say, "America – Chicago."

He looks at me with wide eyes, "Chicago!" He dramatizes as if there is a machine gun in his hand and says, "Bam, bam, bam... Dangerous!" Followed by, "Al Capone."

It made me realize how many misconceptions we had about each other's countries.

Syria turned out to be one of the safest countries I visited. And the warmth and hospitality was among the best I'd received during a three-year around-the-world bicycle trip.

In the towns and villages, people argued over who would take me in for the night and feed me dinner. Each family sent me off after a large breakfast with a packed lunch in my bag. You see, hospitality is very important in Islam. It's a religion that began with Abraham – who is said to have left his tent open on all four sides so that no matter what direction someone came to his home, they would feel they were entering through the front door.

When we look at why there's so much misunderstanding and mistrust between Muslims and people in the West, we have to mention the anti-Islamic media in the US. It is ironic how all

of a sudden it seems as if the press are all experts on Islam. But to get to the heart of the misunderstanding, we have to go back to Abraham.

As we heard in our first reading from the Hebrew Scriptures (also known as the Old Testament), Abraham's first son was Ishmael. Ishmael was born to Abraham by Hagar, who was Sarah's slave. Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham as a wife once she realized that she could not bear children herself. The Bible tells that for thirteen years, until Jacob was born to Sarah, Ishmael was Abraham's only son. Ishmael was his first born son, and in Genesis 17:20-21, God promised: "As for Ishmael...I will bless him and make him exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make of him a great nation." It is believed by both Arabs and Jews that the Arab people are the offspring of Ishmael. So, the Arabs and the Jews are half brothers, both sons of Abraham.

Now, let's re-read the passage regarding the sacrifice of Abraham's son from the Bible. In Gen: 22 it reads:

...God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"
And Abraham said, "Here I am."
God said, "take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love,
and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering..."

Doesn't that seem strange, that God would say, "take your only son—Isaac..."?

As the Muslims have contended for centuries, the only time when Abraham had only one son was during the thirteen years before Isaac was born—and that son was Ishmael. Therefore, Muslims claim, and have a good case, that it was not Isaac that God asked Abraham to sacrifice, but rather it was Ishmael, his first and oldest son. This is just one of the confusing and contradictory passages in the Hebrew Bible that Muslims point to in order to demonstrate that it cannot be the unblemished word of God. Muslims believe, however, that the Hebrew and Christian scriptures are indeed God's revelation to humanity, but that each one has been corrupted by human mistakes and mistranslations.

In the case of the sacrifice of Abraham's son, Muslims believe that Isaac's name was deliberately inserted in order to deny the Arabs God's promise to Abraham's descendants. In Genesis 17:8 God says to Abraham: "I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now alien, all the land of Canaan, as your perpetual possession; and I will be their God." Of course, this promise of the land contributes to the complexity of the Palestinian issue. If God promised the land to Abraham's descendants, one would think that would include Ishmael as well as Isaac's offspring.

Now, some might argue that Ishmael was the son of a slave who Abraham took later as his wife. Therefore, the blessings and other promises would not go through her son; they would only go through the offspring that came from Abraham's first wife Sarah. One could make this case, but it's not very strong, because if we look at the twelve tribes of Israel, they come from Jacob's twelve children. And, we know, four of those children were born to maidservants. Bilhah and Zilpah, the maidservants of Leah and Rachel, were given to Jacob as wives by his wives, just as Hagar was given to Abraham by Sarah. Bilhah and Zilpah bore Jacob four sons: Dan, Asher, Naphtali, and Gad. None of these sons were denied the blessings and covenant and land because their mothers were maidservants.

So, Muslims have pointed to a double standard within the Hebrew Scriptures regarding Ishmael. In other words, there's no reason why God would deny Ishmael, by calling Isaac Abraham's only son. It seems clear to the Muslims that God was referring to Ishmael. In Islam the second major holiday is the celebration of Eid, to commemorate the obedience of Abraham to God when he went to the mountain to sacrifice his first born son Ishmael. In this seemingly simple story, we find the roots of some of the animosity between Arabs and Jews.

Many Americans don't realize that Islam considers itself to be the continuation of the Jewish and Christian traditions; it actually considers itself to be the perfecting of those traditions. Islam considers Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joseph, and Jesus all to be prophets. Muslims accept the story that God helped Moses and the Jews escape Pharaoh in Egypt and that God gave Moses the commandments on a mountain in the desert. They believe that Jesus came to spread God's love and a star announced his arrival. However, Muslims contend that while the Hebrew and Christian scriptures reflect the revelation of God, they have been written down by men and contain some mistakes and errors.

Early Unitarians would agree completely with Muslims on this point. Unitarians have been saying for a long time that these scriptures have been put into the words of men and not just any men, but specific men in a specific time and culture. Therefore, they cannot be taken literally; rather they must be read by employing reason and scholarship to understand them.

It is interesting to note that by interpreting the Bible using reason, logic and scholarship, Unitarians have come to make some of the same critiques of Christianity that Muslims make. For example: Unitarians, like Muslims, have always rejected the conservative Christian notion that people are born with original sin and in need of redemption. St. Augustine developed the theology that due to Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden all people are now tainted with sin from the time of their birth. We are told that we inherit Adam's sin as newborns, and it's only through

God's blood sacrifice of his only son, Jesus, that we can be redeemed...only if we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and are baptized in his name. Unitarians and Muslims have always rejected the idea of original sin.

We've also rejected the notion that Eve's culpability in the garden caused God to punish all women with pain in childbirth and the burden of being ruled over by their husbands. Genesis 3:16 reads:

To the woman he said,
I will greatly increase your pangs in childbirth;
in pain you will bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you.

Islamic author and scholar Hassan Hathout in his book "Reading the Muslim Mind" explains that:

In the Quranic version of this event the devil tempted both Adam and Eve, they both sinned, they both repented, they both were forgiven, and that was the end of original sin. Every human being therefore is born pure, and it is only later on that our choices blemish us and make us sinners. ...The idea of vicarious sacrifice is therefore alien to Islam, and the claim that Jesus, or any one else, had to be slain in atonement for human sins, is unacceptable. (32-33).

The Quran reads:

Whoever receives guidance receives it for his (or her) own benefit,
and whoever goes astray does so to his (or her) own loss.
No bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another.

On another point, Unitarians and Muslims both challenge traditional Christianity. Nowhere can we find where Jesus claimed divinity for himself. As a matter of fact, there are many examples in the Bible of where Jesus makes it clear that he's not God. In Mark 10:18 Jesus said, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." When Jesus prays he prays to God, calling God Abba or Father, and in no instance does it appear he is praying to himself. In Mark 15:34-35 we read of Jesus dying on the cross, and it says:

At 3 o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice,
"Eloi, Eloi, Lema sabachthani?"
which means, "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?"

In the Quran there's a passage that reads:

And behold! Allah will say,
"Oh Jesus, son of Mary: Did you say unto the people,
take me and my mother for two gods beside Allah?"
He will say, "Glory to you. Never could I say what I had no right (to say).

If I had said such a thing, you would indeed have known it.
You know what is in my heart, although I do not know what is in Yours,
for You know in full all that is hidden.
Never said I to them aught accept what You did command me to say:
“Worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord” (5:116-118).

I found it interesting as I traveled through many Islamic countries that in conversations with Muslim scholars, I found that they knew more about the development of the Christian Bible and tradition than many Christians. They have been taught since the development of Islam in the seventh century C.E. that Jesus was not widely considered God until the fourth century, when Constantine called the council at Nicea in 325 and developed the Nicean Creed—a creed which Constantine spread across his empire in order to unify it and consolidate his power. Like Unitarians, Muslims are aware of this widely documented history, and therefore they too reject the notion of Jesus’ divinity as a creation of men long after Jesus died.

Another matter of agreement between Unitarians and Muslims is in the area of religious tolerance. Now this might come as a surprise to many of us, but the Quran is explicit. It reads: “Let there be no compulsion in religion” (2:256). As a matter of fact, one of the first actions that Muhammad took when he returned to Medina to establish the first Islamic state was to make a treaty among all of the tribes (including the Jews) ensuring their freedom of religion and worship.

According to Will Durant’s series “The Story of Civilization”

When Marco Polo set out across Persia (in 1271) to see the China of Kublai Khan, he found himself within the Mogul Empire almost all the way. History had never before recorded so vast a realm. On the west it touched the Dnieper in Russia; in the south it included the Crimea, Iraq, Persia, Tibet, and the Ganges; in the East it embraced Indochina, China and Korea; in the north lay its original home Mongolia. Throughout these states, the Mogul rulers maintained roads, promoted commerce, protected travelers, and permitted freedom of worship for diverse faiths. (VI 664)

And a few centuries later during another Muslim Empire – the Ottomans—we are told:

...the Christians in Islam enjoyed a religious toleration such as no Christian ruler would have dreamed of...At Smyrna, for example, the Muslims had fifteen mosques, the Christians seven churches, the Jews seven synagogues. In Turkey and the Balkans, the Greek Orthodox Church was protected by Turkish authorities from any molestation in their worship. Pepys thought that most of Hungary yielded to the Turks because it had more religious liberty under Ottoman rule than under the Catholic emperors. This was certainly true of the heterodox Christians. “The Calvinists of Hungary and Transylvania, and the Unitarians of the latter country,” reported Sir Thomas Arnold, “preferred to submit to the Turks rather than fall into the hands of the fanatical House of Hapsburg” (VII 519).

What many westerners forget (or were never taught) is that while Christian Europe was in the throes of the dark ages, when Christian leaders were burning books and denouncing science and any intellectual competition, it was the Muslim world that preserved the great libraries and the Greek heritage. They continued the advances of science and academics. They brought forth leaps in medicine, chemistry, physics, astronomy, philosophy and mathematics (algebra is actually an Arabic word and it was invented by Muslims). It's difficult for those of us raised with such a Eurocentric education to realize that from at least the eighth through the thirteenth centuries, Islamic nations were culturally, politically and militarily superior to Europe. The influence of Islamic culture and history on the west is significant. It seems biased to Muslims that western civilization is referred to as having grown out of the Judeo-Christian heritage, when in fact, it's the Judeo-Christian-Islamic heritage that's responsible for much of western civilization.

There's a great deal more to say about Islam. I realize that today's sermon will have to be the first of a series that I'll return to from time to time throughout this coming year. The life and teachings of Mohammad, the role of Jesus, Moses and other prophets in Islam are worth some exploration.

While this morning I have pointed out some similarities with Unitarianism, there are significant differences as well. The role of women needs to be examined, as it appears the Quran speaks in somewhat egalitarian terms, but other writings that have been attributed to Mohammad are demeaning. And the role of women in most Islamic cultures today is far from egalitarian. Yet, Bangladesh, Pakistan and other Islamic democracies have elected women as Presidents, while the US still seems a ways away from doing that.

The idea of jihad or holy war in Islam refers primarily to the inner spiritual war each person faces between good and evil. However, we must make no mistake that there are many passages in Islamic scripture that speak of physical holy wars and killing as well. Moderate Muslims interpret these passages as referring to fighting and killing only when a person or people are being denied the right to practice their religion and even then only after all other means are employed. However, literalists read those passages differently. And literalism becomes scary when your religion celebrates the faith of a father who is willing to kill his own son for God. Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam has its extremists who are dogmatic and unbending.

A major shift came when Europe and the West embraced the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason; at that time, much of the Islamic world resisted it and turned towards orthodoxy. As

Europe once again gained an appreciation for rationality and science, much of the Islamic world retreated to old traditions and unquestioned faith. Will Durant writes:

...though [Islam] in its youth allowed great science, it had now frightened philosophy into a scholasticism of barren pedantry. The ulema—the scholar-theologians who wrote the laws on the basis of the Koran—formed children in faithful orthodoxy, and saw to it that no Age of Reason should raise its head in Islam (VII 519).

With these shifts, the Ottoman Empire began to decline and European colonialism spread. Today there are over one billion Muslims with whom we share this planet. Among them are millions of devout, intelligent and caring people, like the Islamic community here in Tulsa. With all that's happening today, it's important however, to keep in mind where we are in the story of civilization. We must realize that this is not so much a tale of the battle of religions. Religion has so often been used as a tool or as a pretext to disguise lust for land and power. If nothing else, the story shows us that we have to use our minds in religion and that we have to let the core teachings of tolerance, respect and forgiveness prevail over literalism.

May the descendants of Ishmael and the descendents of Isaac one day realize true kinship. May the land of Israel come to know peace. And may all people heed these words from the Quran:

You Humankind:
We have created you as a single family,
And made you into nations and tribes
That you might come to know and cherish one another. (49:13)

Amen.