

Exploring the Koran  
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This past Wednesday while eating lunch across the street in the cafeteria I was not surprised when I saw the headline on a news story that read ‘Anti-Islam Protesters Plan Massive Rally’ ...maybe some of you saw it too. “Organizers say as many as 60,000 people could attend an anti-Islamization rally in the eastern German city of ‘Liepzig’, in what could be one of the biggest protests there since pro-democracy marches a quarter-century ago.”<sup>1</sup> Given the atrocities from the terrorists known as the Islamic state or ISIL and other groups like them – with the killings in Paris - it is almost as if unconsciously I had been waiting to hear about these rallies and demonstrations. We can feel so powerless at times to stop the violence that it becomes too easy for us to lash out against a whole people or a whole faith tradition and it seems as if that is what is happening in this story. I think it can also happen in our thoughts and questions about what is going on and we question – is this what Islam is all about? What does the Qur’an teach anyway? And if the Qur’an’s message supposedly doesn’t support what ISIL and extremists are doing in the name of their faith, / if this isn’t what the faith is about – then why are not moderate Muslims speaking out?

It can be easy to judge...we go there because we don’t know enough, because we are afraid or feel threatened...because sometimes we don’t know how to think about it all anymore. I don’t think I’m alone in this...and it takes real discipline to not give in to fear...it takes effort to study and cultivate a sense of curiosity without judgment and to be open to having our ideas challenged and perhaps dismantled. And still questions remain - what does the Qur’an say anyway? And why are there different ways to even write the name – which is correct – Koran

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<sup>1</sup> NPR Story on January 21, 2015 by Krishnadev Calamur

with a 'K' or a 'Q'? "For nearly 25 years the Associated Press Stylebook wrote it with a K with various editors saying the K easily tells Americans how to say the word correctly. But other's including Kay Siblani – executive editor of the Arab American News says using Q-u-r-'-a-n reflects the original pronunciation – including putting the emphasis on the second syllable as it should be."<sup>2</sup>

The Qur'an is believed by Muslims to be the last revelation from God to his prophet Muhammad. At the age of 40 Muhammad began receiving messages or revelations from God. As scholars say "Muhammad became a link in a long series of biblical prophets, messengers...who served as a conscience to the community ... Like Moses, who had received the Torah on Mount Sinai from the god of the Hebrews, Muhammad received the first of God's revelations on Mount Hira, 'It is He who sent down to you the Book with the truth, confirming what went before it: and He sent down the Torah and the Injil (Evangel or Gospel), before as a guidance to the people. And like Amos and Jeremiah before him, Muhammad served as a 'warner' from God who admonished his hearers to repent and obey for the final judgment was near."<sup>3</sup> You see, in the early years Muhammad's preaching critiqued the status quo...with Mecca's most affluent and political people rejecting his message. They rejected his message for he preached against polytheism – and all the trinkets and business polytheism required that made merchants and artists money on them; he preached for social justice, "condemning the socio-economic inequities of his time. He also denounced false contracts, usury and the exploitation of the poor, orphans and widows. He called all true believers into a community of God, a universal community that transcended tribal bonds and authority, a community led by him – as God's

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<sup>2</sup> from AJR, Dec.2006-Jan.2007, <http://ajrarchive.org/Article.asp?id=4239>

<sup>3</sup> World Religions Today, Esposito, Faching, Lewis, page 191.

messenger.”<sup>4</sup> The very words “Muslim’ and ‘Islam’ come from the same Arabic root that means to submit...submit to the will of God and life will be well. Submission is an act/is a state of being that is at the very heart of what it means to be a Muslim. The Qur’an is different from the other sacred texts in the Abrahamic traditions – while the Torah – the first 5 books in the Hebrew scriptures were received by Moses from God, the rest of the Hebrew scriptures – the Tanak were written by humans; and the whole of the Hebrew scriptures tells of the relationship between the ancient Israelites and their God; the Christian scriptures are in fact a collection of stories about Jesus, the early church and letters written by apostles with very few words coming directly from God – but the Qur’an is believed to have literally come from the mouth of God in Arabic and received directly by Muhammed. It is said that Muhammed experienced a sense of pressure surrounding him, and one of his wives is quoted saying that her husband began to sweat, even on cold nights, when receiving the Qur’an – it was a very physical experience.

The Christian Bible has been translated into some 1300 languages, while the Qur’an has rarely been translated into other languages – because it is believed that the Qur’an existed in heaven as a book as a final revelation, a final guidance for how to live a life. When it was recited to him, it was in Arabic and even those roughly 18% of Muslims speak Arabic – all Muslims world wide learn to recite the scripture in its original language and in fact, scholars say the Qur’an defies translation for it is not meant to be read but it is to be a recitation – spoken from the heart. Memorization of the Qur’an is understood and believed to be an act of devotion – all 114 chapters/suras, divided into 6,200 verses. After the Prophet’s death, all the various collections of the recitations, once written on a variety of materials – rocks, animal skins, leaves...etc, all were collected and put into one book. After the opening chapter – the chapters

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

were organized from longest to the shortest – this book came together only 20 years after Muhammed’s death. A very short time given that it took a few hundred years after Jesus’ death for the Christian scriptures to be finalized into one book.

The Qur’an is so central to Islam it is one of two foundations...the Qur’an and the Five Pillars of Islam. It is the Opening sura or chapter of the Qur’an that is included in the prayers Muslim says five times a day – it was the first of our readings earlier this morning. The second sura, titled The Cow is the longest and is referred to as the mini-Qura’n as it covers such a broad range of subjects and offers guidance for living in many different areas of life. The Qur’an is so central to Islam it has been said the Qur’an is to Islam as Christ is to Christians.<sup>5</sup>

So here is a text – that is held in such esteem by its followers that all Muslims, regardless of their national language, memorize, recite and pray the Qur’an in Arabic whether they fully understand it or not. Ah, some of you may say, that’s not okay or ah, therein lies the problem. They are speaking without understanding. But before we cast judgment, let’s remember that that it is not unlike some of us who are learning Spanish – and have learned to recite our church aspiration and sing our church hymn in Spanish and maybe we don’t totally understand all of the words. And here is a rub – yes...that a sacred text in a language not widely known or understood – thus a dependency on teachers to offer commentary on the text – and thus enters interpretation and a biased explanation and thus trouble ensues because not all teachers agree on the commentary. And so sides break out to defend an interpretation, a teacher’s reputation and the fighting begins as well as the desire to get back to the basics...go back to the beginning – to the fundamentals...and there are few other scholars who understand religious fundamentalism and

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<sup>5</sup> from a lecture by Professor Grant Hardy from Great Courses, Sacred Texts of the World, lectures 30 and 31.

religious extremism better than Karen Armstrong. Her book, *The Battle for God* plots this out over the centuries and how it evolved to where we are today.

And again, it can be very easy for some of us to think extreme fundamentalists only occur in those other religions – like Islam...and our media coverage doesn't help...but let us not forget – extremists are grown in every faith, including Christianity...as the Rev. Madison Shockley from Pilgrim United Church of Christ reminded us just Thursday night at the Roe v. Wade dinner – it was Christian extremists who, on a Sunday morning killed Dr. Tiller in his own church for his work with women and abortion. And I think we have extremists in some states on school boards who question scientific theory and demand not scientific theories be taught side by side. We need to keep alert, pay attention and work for reason, cultivate a spirit of curiosity and refuse to give in to fear or lump all who are different from us as Other – as if we have no connection or will not be impacted by their behavior. We have to counter fear and violence with knowledge, questioning and listening. We must show up to say there is another way than giving into fear.

And that is what happened in Leipzig Germany the day of the Anti-Islamic Protests. Thousands did show up...but not necessarily 60,000...and 4,000 police officers also showed as did many groups of counter demonstrators, including government and faith leaders who chose to speak out and oppose these rallies that called for limiting immigration. And this is just one example of many around the world of the clashes and rallies and demonstrations that happened when fear, ignorance and feelings of powerlessness rule the day. And this is why in this world with its immediate news feed – this is why we are in such need of cultivating a spirit of learning about other faiths and finding the similarities; it is why we must do our homework to learn and try to understand more so that we do not create more harm, arouse more fear, or nurture the

seeds of xenophobia (fear of the Other). This is some of the ‘why’ behind this sermon series of the intersection of the world’s religions and Unitarian Universalism.

This work is so important for if we only learn about Islam and Muslims from what we see or read in the media then we too can be guilty of outlandish attitudes, thoughts and eventually behaviors. This became so apparent to me when traveling through the country of Croatia in the fall – it was a country made up at one time of a people with three religions...and over the course of the tour it became easier to see how these religions were used against each other and helped each group to see the other two groups as enemies. The war played out in this country among the Catholics – who are Christian, the Orthodox, who are Christian and the Muslims. Our young guide Roc grew up during the war and his wife to this day still suffers its effects – it isn’t just soldiers who suffer from PTSD. As we traveled throughout Croatia time after time we saw that the Catholic and Orthodox churches were repaired, the shops and towns were restored but not so often in the places where Muslims lived – those areas, those buildings remained pock-marked from the shells and gunfire, dirty and often abandoned. This was never clearer than in the small town of Mostar – not far over the boarder into Boznia-Herzagovena. Our bus parked that day in the near-empty parking lot of a large, new-looking Catholic church taking up almost a city block with its impressively high walls, and an even higher bell tower. This was our meeting place after the local tour...from the church we walked the short distance to the intersection – crossed the busy street and within a block found ourselves walking across a bridge and immediately the street grew more narrow; the buildings were smaller, dingy and looked unkempt. It was there we began seeing sides of buildings with rounded pock-marks that told the story of the war...it was here that we met our young guide and proceeded to go into the part of the town known as Old Town. On this tour all across the country we had ample opportunity to go into several churches,

Catholic and Orthodox alike, but the small town of Mostar was the only place where we could enter a Mosque.

We entered the mosque and gazed around – it was a small room, the floor was covered with a variety of rugs – some looked worn and tattered; the room felt well used – not ornate or lush in any way; and on the pale colored walls, beautifully painted and mounted onto them were verses of scripture from the Qur’an, especially over the door ways... And there are some beautiful passages in the Qur’an that speak of how we are to live with charity to all. Did you hear those words in the earlier reading? “...but they are righteous...who donate goods and money for love of God to relatives and orphans,...to the needy and for freeing slaves; who give alms for welfare and fulfill their promises; who are patient in suffering, adversity and hard times.” Many understand Islam as a religion of peace and my heart leaped when I heard some Muslims speaking out against ISIL and others refusing to even refer to the terrorists as the Islamic state nation for they do not act out of Islamic values.

There is work for us to do to remember that extremists can come in all faith traditions and that we need to do our homework, to take the time to listen, to learn, to question and speak with people we know before judging a faith or a whole people. We need to be a source of encouragement for moderates in all faiths to speak up and speak out – like the young man did who, on September 17<sup>th</sup> stood in Bard Hall and participated in a discussion of what our faiths had in common, how our various sacred scriptures instruct us to treat the stranger and welcome diversity in our midst. He stood and recited verse, after verse after verse from the Qur’an – speaking so passionately, eloquently sharing the truth of his faith and how he understood it that I found myself nodding in agreement. This is our work to do – to be about this business so that

attitudes do not become barriers to a shared vision of peace, justice and compassion for all of us, with our faith intact. May it be so.

Benediction: