

The Basics of Islam

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Reading

from An Introduction to Islam by Frederick Mathewson Denny

Orthodoxy is not the best term to use when characterizing Islam's sense of right religion. A better term is *orthopraxy*, which means "right practice" and comes much closer to the reality of Muslim devotion and obedience to God. Here Islam is closer in spirit and practice to Judaism than to Christianity. Christianity stresses doctrinal clarity and understanding by means of creeds, dogmas, and theologies. Islam and Judaism, on the other hand, view religion as a way of life and a ritual patterning of that life under God's Lordship. There is a sense of security in both traditions in maintaining proper worship and following divine guidance by "commanding the good and forbidding the evil," as the Quran puts it. It is because of this affinity along the lines of orthopraxy that Muhammad regarded the Jews of Medina as natural allies in the development of godly community, or *uma*. The fact that a Jewish-Islamic religious blending did not succeed does not mean that fundamental similarities and structural as well as functional affinities were lacking; it was because of the Jews' and the Muslims' differing views on the provenance of Muhammad's prophecies.

Sermon

As we know quite a bit about Muhammad's life, I wondered this morning if we might start there.

Carol told us of some of the circumstances of Muhammad's life and the events around the birth of Islam. We know Muhammad was an uneducated man, orphaned at a young age, and so raised by his uncle, who was a powerful man within their community. Muhammad married a wealthy older woman, who afforded him the time to be prayerful, which he took full advantage of, going for days in hermetic retreat into the desert. His wife was, in fact, his first convert to the religion that was revealed to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel. That revelation that was given to Muhammad was organized into chapters and verses and numbered into *suras* after his death. Other writings also remain in Islam, some of the most important being the sayings of Muhammad – for although he never confused the revelation that was given to him with his own opinions, his charisma was great, his character was revered, and so his own sayings are also held in reverence.

There are lots of stories about Muhammad's life, but a few stuck with me, and so I thought I would share those. As many of us in America are aware, Islam is one of the fastest-growing religions in our country, if not *the* fastest. And one population that has

been attracted to Islam in disproportionate numbers is African-Americans. Well, there is one story that made me think of this fact and consider why it might be.

The first Muslims in Mecca faced persecution for their beliefs. Muhammad and his family were spared intense persecution because the uncle who raised Muhammad, Abu Talib, was head of the Hashim clan and protected Muhammad. Those of lower classes or without such protectors suffered imprisonment, beatings, torture – all the good stuff of religious persecution. One story tells of a black slave, Bilal, who had become a Muslim. As punishment for this, Bilal's non-Muslim master laid him on his back in the sun during the hottest part of the day, with a heavy rock resting on his chest. His master announced that Bilal would stay there until the slave died or denied Muhammad. Instead of doing the latter, Bilal repeated over and over again in the noonday sun while undergoing such agony, "One, one!," referring to God's unity, one of Islam's central tenets.

Muhammad's father-in-law, Abu Bakr, finally reprimanded Bilal's owner for such inhumane treatment and traded one of his own "heathen" slaves for Bilal. Eventually, Bilal was freed by Abu Bakr and became the prophet's chief *mu'ahdhin*, the one who calls the Muslims to prayer.

So here is a tradition that has as one of its first heroes a black slave who denies the attempts to make him betray his faith, who is freed by his devotion and faith and courage, and goes on to greatness in the faith. I wondered as I read this if this is part of what makes Islam a faith that is attractive to so many African-Americans.

Throughout his life, Muhammad received new pieces of revelation. There are two interesting examples of this. One relates to the "satanic verses" – a phrase well known to us thanks to Salman Rushdie. Well, it turns out that early in his life as a prophet, it was revealed to Muhammad that El-Lat, El'Uzza and Manat, three female figures, were the daughters of Allah and were intermediaries whose intercession is to be hoped for. The two verses that speak of these goddesses as intermediaries were later revealed to Muhammad to be false. The original revelation, he came to see, had come from Satan (hence these verses were dubbed the "satanic verses"), and they were struck from the Quran and replaced with a line that said, in essence, that these female figures had no special powers or authority.

One way to view the events around these verses is to see how keen a sense there was for Muhammad of revelation as powerful, but not easy to discern, and a respect for the ongoing revelation that he was experiencing. A cynical view of the events is that they were brought about by political concerns: That is to say, the merchants of Mecca thought it a deficiency of God that He had only daughters (as it would have been for an Arab man), and so Muhammad was directed to change the teaching to attract these important converts. (In 1 Timothy 13, Christians did a similar thing, but that is a tale for another time.)

The ongoing revelation of God sometimes played in Muhammad's favor. For example, after Muhammad's beloved wife Khadija died, he took 10 more wives and two

concubines. Some of these marriages were political; others were acts of mercy for the widows of Muslims killed in persecution or combat. Muhammad's favorite wife was A'isha, and a great deal of what is known about Muhammad comes from stories she told after his death that were recorded. One day, however, Muhammad went to visit his adopted son Zayd and ran into Zayd's beautiful wife, Zaynab. Although it is permitted for a father to be in the company of his daughter-in-law alone, Muhammad made a quick and awkward departure, making it clear to her and to others that he found himself attracted to Zaynab. Zayd, hearing of this, and not getting along well with Zaynab himself, offered to divorce her so that Muhammad might marry her.

This suggestion caused a commotion among Muhammad's followers, for whom the marriage was perceived as incest – even though neither Zayd nor Zaynab was technically a blood relative. But God revealed to his prophet that he would permit Muhammad to marry Zaynab in what is still a controversial verse, 33:37: "And when Zayd divorced his wife, We gave her to you in marriage, so that it should become legitimate for true believers to wed the wives of their adopted sons if they divorced them. God's will must needs be done."

When A'isha heard of this, she is said to have replied: "Truly thy Lord makes haste to do thy pleasure."

The last story reminds me of the blessing and the challenge of having a religion founded in times closer to our own, so that more can be known about the founder. It allows a fuller sense of the man/woman, and that offers virtues and challenges. To be fair to Muhammad and to Islam, the *passion* that he had for Zaynab did not scandalize his followers. For Muslims, passion exercised within legal relationships is a great gift from God. What troubled them was the break in custom around whom one could marry. Yet, even so, the fact that Muhammad was *allowed by God* to violate the tradition on marriage to adopted daughters is seen as a powerful proof of Muhammad's great character and charisma.

Teachings

I think most of us know the basic teachings of Islam, and at best in the time we have together, I can only offer a refresher for those who know it and a teaser for those who do not. Most of what I am saying today is drawn from one source, *An Introduction to Islam* by Frederick Matthewson Denny. It was recommended to me by Chris Taylor, a professor from Drew University, and by Carol Haag's son also. It is a wonderful, rich source of understanding about all aspects of Islam.

Up against the polytheistic culture of Mecca at the time, Muhammad was a Unitarian. In fact, that is the translation (one translation) used for another name for Muslims, *muwahhidun*. Another translation for that word is "upholders of the divine unity." So the first doctrine of Islam is faith in this one, true God.

The second doctrine of Islam is a belief in angels as God's messengers and helpers – like Gabriel, who dictated the Quran to Muhammad. So too is there a concept of fallen angels, like those who dictated the satanic verses to Muhammad.

The third doctrine is a belief that all scriptures are dictated to prophets, as they have been through time, by means of suggestion or "word-inspiration." Jews and Christians also received God's truth this way, but they were considered guilty of corrupting what was given to them to serve their own needs, and so Muhammad was given revelation again, so that it might be pure and purely understood.

One claim that is made is that the Quran is free from human tampering, such as went on in the numerous "redactions" of the Bible, for example. However, in the last few years, in the attic of a mosque in Yemen, old copies of the Quran were found that are different versions from that which is currently used and that might provide evidence of a scripture not as free from human agency as is claimed. According to a PBS show about this discovery, however, those copies are being allowed to rot in the attic rather than cause a crisis of faith.

(I want to acknowledge a tension I feel in this sermon. I find a desire to be respectful, but also honest. I know it is easy to dismiss another's faith, with its contradictions or its less noble moments. That is not my intent. My intent is to look with open and searching eyes, the way we do at our own faith and its heroes and heroines. It is a delicate balancing act – honesty and respect – and I wanted to name that tension.)

The fourth fundamental belief in Islam is in a final judgment. Many of the teachings around this judgment day parallel that which is taught in Judaism and Christianity, with God handing out rulings on the virtue or vice of our lives, with bodily resurrection and triumph for some, and punishment for others. In Hell there are fires, in Heaven a garden with shelter and cool waters, families reunited, and the beautiful young women of voluptuous description that we heard so much about in reference to the suicide hijackers and their potential motivations.

The fifth and final fundamental creed is a belief in predestination that, like Christianity of some stripes, is balanced paradoxically with a belief in human freedom and agency.

I offer these beliefs as a basic background, but as Denny pointed out in the reading this morning, Islam is better seen as a commitment to certain actions or religious practices, not beliefs.

Indeed, of the five pillars of Islam, only one is a pillar of belief. This is the testifying – *shahada* – that there is "no god but God and Muhammad is his prophet," the very saying of which is considered an act of conversion. The remaining four pillars are chiefly concerned with *right practice*. They are prayer, almsgiving, fasting during Ramadan, and the Hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca.

Each of these pillars deserves a whole sermon, because each is rich with custom and meaning. And, like all spiritual disciplines, each takes the person who surrenders to the practice to a place that is spiritually instructive if not transformative. But let's just look quickly at some of the basics of each that are at the core of the practice.

The Muslim ritual prayer service is known as *salat*. It is a highly regulated form of prayer that happens five times daily. In Muslim countries, the faithful are called to prayer by the *muezzin*, whose call to worship is broadcast from atop the mosque's minarets. Although it is preferable that the *salat* be observed in a mosque in communal observance, it also can be observed in homes or at work. Muhammad himself observed the prayer in the courtyard outside his home in Mecca. Indeed, the word "mosque" comes from the Arabic word *masjid*, which means only "place of prostration" and doesn't even imply a building.

During the time of prayer, all the faithful the world over face towards Mecca. Muslims who travel even purchase books and a compass that help them to identify the direction in which to face. There is an incredible sense of unity that accompanies this practice – knowing as you do that all over the world, the faithful are facing in the same direction, directing their identical prayers to the same place.

The *salat* involves ritualized statements and ritualized body postures. There are recitations from the Quran, words of praise, bowing, standing and ritual prostration. Interestingly, the final act is for the worshipper to utter once in either direction, to his left and his right, a blessing of peace: "Peace be upon you all and the mercy and blessings of God." The "peace," or *taslim*, is considered to be directed to one's fellow Muslims *and* beyond them to all who are in need of God's guidance and blessing. This generous act of praying for peace and for others concludes the *salat*.

Many know that Muslims are required to offer charity to all who ask for it. Above this, however, they are required to give *zakat*, or alms, a kind of tax on personal wealth that goes to help those in need – and is distinguished from charity. In traditional countries, it is given to the government for distribution. In other places, the individual believer must distribute it. It is supposed to go to the poor, those converts who lost their possessions because of their faith, to free slaves and debtors, to the traveler, and for works that serve God's purpose – missionary projects, religious educational institutions. The rate of the *zakat* is about 2.5 percent above the minimum amount of wealth which is exempt, called the *nisab*. One theory offered for why it has been hard to follow the money of men like Osama bin Laden is that some of it may be raised through such gifts.

The third pillar of Islam is fasting during Ramadan. This year, that month of fasting will begin on Nov. 17, and for the next month, from sunrise to sunset each day, Muslims will abstain from food and drink. Ramadan is a holy time, during which many auspicious events were believed to have taken place. It is also a demanding time, during which great spiritual discipline is required; a time of spiritual reflection, during which many people go on retreat. What is perhaps most surprising to those who travel to Muslim countries during Ramadan, as my husband and I did years ago, is how joyful and celebratory a time it is. During the day, things are subdued: Many businesses are only open for a half-day to

allow their owners to go to the mosque, and, I would imagine, because it is hard to concentrate when you are weak from hunger and thirst. Indeed, the experience of fasting is supposed to deepen one's sense of dependence on God and empathy for the poor and hungry, but so too is it associated with time together with family and friends. Because each night, after sunset, huge gatherings of family and friends come together to break the fast. My father-in-law went to pay his respects to one business associate, who had a room that was covered in carpets in which to receive guests, and the buffet of food was taller than my father-in-law, who is 6 feet.

How this affects a decision on whether to continue bombing during Ramadan depends on your perspective. It is a holy time. It is also a time when your enemy should be weak from fasting. What I find myself wondering is – back to the Just War Theory – whether bombing during this period makes long-term peace more or less sustainable. I fear the latter. To ignore a people's holy season is not easily forgotten. It wouldn't be by me.

Finally there is the fifth pillar, the Hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca. It is required that each Muslim make this pilgrimage once in his or her adult life. There is one protection: that he/she is physically and financially able to do so – financially able meaning that he/she can provide for family while away.

Each year there is one month that is the holy pilgrimage period, during which an adult takes solemn leave of his/her family. This leave-taking involves formal goodbyes and the drawing up of a will to symbolize acceptance of death and submission to what life will follow (or come out of) the journey.

When pilgrims enter the city of Mecca, they change into the ritual garb called *ihram*, a traditional white outfit that symbolizes purity (the women's outfits are more varied than the men's). Gathered around the *Ka'ba* in the middle of the Mecca sanctuary in their ritual garb, there is an overwhelming sense of unification. Both literally and figuratively, all distinctions seem to be erased as believers circumambulate the black meteorite that is believed to be at the navel of the world, where heaven and earth meet. It was in the moment of prayer during his Hajj that Malcolm X was converted from his radical form of Islam to a more peaceful vision of the faith – one that works for the essential unity of humanity under God.

There is much, much more to the Hajj than we have time to cover. Moreover, I wanted to save time to talk briefly about what is sometimes called "the sixth pillar" of Islam, *jihad*. Almost always, in the American press, *jihad* is translated as "holy war." A better translation would be "striving" or "exertion," as in striving or exertion toward God. In Islam, it is believed that there is greater and lesser *jihad*. *Greater jihad*, interestingly enough, is against one's baser instincts or lack of faith or devotion. *Lesser jihad* involves, if necessary, armed struggle against the enemies of Islam, though like our "just war," *jihad* also should only be waged in self-defense.

The Quran commands that "there shall be no compulsion in religion." *Jihad*, as exertion, can and does involve the peaceful attempts to spread Islam through preaching and

teaching. But *jihad* as war is generally aimed at righting a wrong, not conquering in the name of religion. And, again, it cannot be fought unless it is considered to be in self-defense.

The pillars of Islam were not fully in place at the time of Muhammad's death. They are the product of emerging practice, interpreted and reinterpreted by an elaborate system of Islamic jurisprudence. Moreover, the pillars of Islam, like all grounding beliefs and duties of all religious traditions, are not supposed to be the sum total of a devoted life, but the foundations. A good life lived in accordance with the teachings integrates almsgiving, prayer, pilgrimage and purification into its regular rhythms.

I am looking forward to hearing what Chris Taylor has to say in a week's time about extremism in Islam, because from what I have read, Islam appears to have strong strains of tolerance and peacefulness in its teachings and practices. There has always been respect for the other faiths of the book – Judaism and Christianity – and there does seem to be this desire to care for the poor and feed the hungry and free the slaves that our own faith teaches, and emphasis even on "deeds not creeds" that has become the Unitarian Universalist mantra. Daily prayers end with prayers for peace for all. *Jihad* is best fought against one's own instincts for evil, and only secondarily as a war against others – and even then only in response to aggression. So where does suicide hijacking come in, and how big a piece of the family of Islam is it these days? How much a perversion of Muhammad's received revelation as we know it?

These are the questions I am left with and for which I hope to find answers in the days ahead. Bless us all in our quests for understanding. Amen.