

Islam

Genesis 16: 7-12; Hebrews 5: 7-10

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I. Introduction

A number of years ago when I was working at Emmaus Services for the Aging, we got a call from George Washington University Hospital that one of our seniors had slipped into a coma and was going to die shortly. He had had the foresight to have an advanced directive, and so the doctors called us before they were going to disconnect him from life support. And because he had no family, they called me to see if there were preparations that needed to be made for his death.

Mr. Bey was Muslim and I had no idea what preparations might be appropriate for a devout Muslim who is dying. So, I called a friend of mine, a young guy who was a student at GWU who had done an internship with us and I said, "Zaheer, I don't know, I'm at a loss here about what to do for Mr. Bey as he dies. Do I read a psalm? Are there passages from the Qur'an that I could read?" And Zaheer said, "You know, it's part of our sacred obligation as Muslims to care for brothers and sisters as they transition into death, so can I meet you over there?" And I said, "Sure."

So, the next day, I slapped my clerical collar on and met Zaheer at GWU Hospital. Zaheer was in these beautiful white robes that made a wonderful contrast to this deep, dark beard that he had, and we went together into Mr. Bey's room and stood on either side of him, praying as the doctors disconnected him from life support, and then for the next two hours we stood together, praying, as Zaheer chanted these beautiful passages from the Qur'an and Mr. Bey slipped into death.

And then, the piece I didn't expect at all happened which is that the student Muslim community at GWU got permission to receive Mr. Bey's body and, because he had limited resources and no family, they engaged in the traditional ritual cleansing of his body and burying him in the appropriate way and at the appropriate place.

It was a very powerful experience to be part of that process with my Muslim brothers and sisters. But it occurred to me that probably not dissimilar from me, many of us when posed with a question about what is appropriate in a particular situation for a person of Muslim faith would not know how to respond. And so, I'm grateful for the opportunity to spend a little bit of time talking about the basics of Muslim faith as we explore another one of our cousins in the family tree of religion.

II. The Basics

It feels like a vitally important conversation to have, both because Muslim men and women represent a quarter of our Earth's population and arguably the fastest growing religion on the Earth, and because it is such a fraught conversation for those

of us particularly in America. It is fraught of course because we are still wrestling with the scars of 9/11, 14 years ago and with the fact that we've had 14 years of constant war, two wars, in predominantly Muslim countries.

Interestingly, I don't think our struggle with Islam has as much to do with the events of 9/11 as with all of the media exposure since then. There's an interesting Pew Research study that came out recently that noted that in March of 2002, six months after 9/11 had happened, 25 percent of Americans said that they thought that Islam was more likely to encourage violence than other religions. Twenty five percent, six months after 9/11. Ten years later, that number had risen to 42 percent of the population. So, I don't think it has to do with 9/11. I think it has to do with what we are exposed to in our country.

There was an interesting recent media analysis that noted that 57 percent of the images of Islam and Muslims in the news media are images of radical militant Islamists. Fifty seven percent. While that community of radical Islamist represents a fraction of one percent of all of the Muslims in the world. What that means is that we have this very, very skewed exposure to what Islam is about and it is not dissimilar from -- and if you can put yourself in this frame of mind, if you were talking to someone who's primary exposure to what Christianity was about was the Klu Klux Klan and how you would try to explain what our faith is about to a people who saw primarily images of violence and hate. So, I want us to bear that in mind as we reflect together a little bit on this wonderful religion.

Islam was born in the Arabian Peninsula in the 6th Century but it's worth noting that only 15 percent of Muslims worldwide are ethnically Arab. The majority of Muslims worldwide are Asian. Muhammad, however, was born in the city of Mecca in the year 570. He was orphaned at a very young age and was raised in the house of his uncle. So, he grew up with a great sensitivity to being an orphan and being in a place of vulnerability so that much of what has shaped Islam is a deep concern for those in any community who are marginalized.

He also grew up in Mecca which was a very thriving commercial crossroads, similar in many respects to Ancient Corinth. And as you know, when Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he talked a great deal about the dangers of disparities in wealth. And likewise, Muhammad growing up in Mecca grew up with a great sensitivity to disparities between the haves and the have-nots and his commitment to addressing that is a voice that is a very powerful and needful one in our country today.

He also grew up in a very pluralistic polytheistic society with a lot of Bedouin tribes who worshipped a variety of gods, often nature-related gods, and that was the milieu in which he was raised. But in Mecca, there were small Jewish and Christian communities and Muhammad found himself drawn to the people of the book and developing a great appreciation for how they understood their god to be and how they worshipped and studied.

Over time Muhammad started spending more time going up into a mountain outside of Mecca to spend time in a cave in prayer, and when he turned 40 years old, he had a very powerful experience of the divine in that prayer time as he worshiped and he was visited by the Angel Gabriel, a familiar figure to all of us as one of God's primary messengers, who started to teach him about who God was and was very clear in talking about God as God alone, that there aren't a lot of gods, we don't believe in polytheism, we have a fierce belief in the fact that there is but one God. And Gabriel was also very clear that this was the same God that the Jews and the Christians had been worshiping, this wasn't a new idea of a deity. But Gabriel taught Muhammad that the Jews and the Christians had got pieces of the story a little mixed up and that he was there to clarify who God was and what God's call was about.

Muhammad experienced these visions and teaching for the rest of his life, about 22, 23 years, and began likewise to start teaching the people around him in Mecca about who God was and what God was about and developed a core of followers who started to believe and worship with him and who started to memorize these teachings that he was giving them, and eventually started writing those down for fear that they would get corrupted over time. And those writings of course we now know as the Qur'an which simply it's a word that means recitation. The Qur'an is in Muslim tradition the perfect word of the almighty. And while we are tempted, I suspect, to see that as in a similar way to the way we understand the Bible, I want to suggest that actually it would be better to understand the Qur'an in a way that we understand Jesus. Jesus as the supreme and clearest word of God through which lens we see everything else -- and we've talked about this a little bit, that even as we interpret scripture, we interpret scripture through the lens of who Jesus is and for the Muslim community, the Qur'an has that kind of weight. They're not Muhammad's words or some other author's words. They are God's words given directly to Muhammad and through Muhammad, to the people.

The Qur'an is made up of chapters called surahs, there are 114 of them, and if you read them, you would find a lot of very powerful commonalities with many of the things that you read in our scripture. You'd find many of the same characters: Adam and Abraham and Moses and Jesus and Mary among many others and some of the same stories with a little bit of a different twist, but a lot of the theological ideas you would find points of great connection with. They echo very profoundly, much of what our Jewish and Christian tradition shares with us. Their writings about Jesus are very respectful and appreciative of Jesus' ministry and understand Jesus to be one of many prophetic voices that God has called over the centuries.

So, while there's a great appreciation for Jesus, they understand Jesus to be a prophet, not the Messiah, and that's a distinction and an important one obviously between our faith and Islam. And they understand that Muhammad is the last of the prophets, the one through whom the Almighty speaks most clearly.

III. The Five Pillars

So, there are some very important places of both connection and disconnection between our Christian faith and the faith of Islam. One of the places where there's disconnection is very honestly who Jesus is, and our understanding that Jesus is God incarnate, that Jesus is a part of the trinity that is the one God, and this is a concept that obviously both Jews and Muslims don't agree with us on and in fact don't understand the trinity often at all, understand the trinity to be veering carelessly close to being polytheistic. And so, there's a very sharp distinction there and carefulness around how we talk about God.

But there are a host of I think very important and helpful connecting points with Islam as well. The word "Islam" itself means to submit, and the fundamental call of being a Muslim is to submit to the will of the almighty. And that should not be a foreign concept to us. As Rob just read a few minutes ago from the book of Hebrews, Jesus is held up as the model because Jesus submitted fully to the will of God and invites us to submit all of our lives to God's holy will. This is a concept that we stand in complete harmony with our Muslim brothers and sisters on.

Muslims also have a deep appreciation for the fact that if God is the parent of us all, we are all siblings regardless of what skin color we have or where we grew up, and Muslims have frankly done a better job than we have often in promoting multiculturalism, the multiculturalism that we so desire and seems very deeply embedded in Islamic tradition.

I want to share just a minute the Five Pillars of Islam that represent the sort of core set of beliefs and practices that are involved in being a Muslim, because I think there are some very compelling places of connection between that tradition and our own, some places that frankly we could learn a lot.

One of those places of connection, the first of the Five Pillars of Islam is the affirmation and adherence to the idea that our God is one God and is ruler of all of creation and that affirmation is the foundation upon which everything else rests, that there is no other God but God. We heard that in Jewish tradition in the Shema last week and we hear that very powerfully articulated in Islam today. And an appreciation for all of the gods that seek to pull us away from the one God who is God.

The second pillar of Islam is a commitment to very regular discipline of prayer. And for all of you who have been in Muslim countries, you will recall the very powerful experience of hearing that call to the prayer from the minarets five times a day, the sort of ongoing invitation to engage in dialogue with the divine and to keep mindful of God's presence and God's connection to us all throughout the day. This is a tradition that very much echoes what in our monastic history we call the Prayer of the Hours, the sort of regular reminder that we are God's and that everything we are grows out of our relationship with God. And I love this idea of an opportunity to get reminded of that throughout the course of the day where you can step back a little tiny bit and regroup ourselves in God's holy presence. I think that's very powerful model for us.

The third pillar of Islam is a commitment to alms giving. Again, as I mentioned a minute ago, Muhammad had a very powerful sense of both the dangers of wealth and the dangers of wealth inequality in society and how that created divisions that tore people apart. So, there's a very profound obligation in the Muslim community to share the wealth that we have been given by God. This is why the Muslim community at GWU immediately claimed Mr. Bey's body and took responsibility for the cost and the care of making sure he received an appropriate burial, that we've got this very profound call to share all of the gifts that God has given us with the people around us in a way that build a somewhat more equitable community of believers.

The fourth pillar of Islam is fasting and particularly fasting during the month of Ramadan. And you all have hung out with me long enough to know that I have referred to fasting in Christian tradition as the most neglected of our spiritual disciplines, right? There's a very powerful gift of fasting in teaching an ability to let go of some of the things that cling so tightly to us. And the Muslim community does this for a month every year. John Wesley of course would not ordain a Methodist preacher who didn't spend a day a week fasting. [Indiscernible]'s nodding his head. He knows that this is part of what was expected of us for generations. And I got to say it is a spiritual discipline that it saddens me we have got away from. So, you all know that when Lent rolls around, I often hit this fairly hard because fasting is such a great gift in terms of re-centering ourselves and reminding ourselves of our needfulness of one thing alone that is God.

It is an interesting coincidence that John Wesley's way of fasting is actually exactly the way that Muslims fast during Ramadan, which is a fast during the day and then a single evening meal at the end of the day, which is how John Wesley fasted often twice a week for most of his life. So, I want to offer that up again as a place for us to maybe call back to our better selves by our encounter with Islam.

The fifth pillar is a once in a lifetime commitment to make a pilgrimage, a Hajj, to the city of Mecca, which was the birthplace of the faith for Islam. And we don't talk much about pilgrimages in Christian tradition and I don't know that I've ever preached on pilgrimage other than maybe talking about my sabbatical a little bit which had a pilgrimage flavor to it. But pilgrimage is also a very rich part of our Christian tradition. And if you talk to Drema or Pat House about their pilgrimages on the Compostela de Santiago over the last several years, you will hear them reflect on what a powerful process it is to make a journey to a holy place and that process of letting go of the things that we carry as we move to a place of holiness. I think that too is a very valuable witness to us as Christians because this has also been part of our tradition as a people of faith.

IV. Conclusion

So, we have much to be grateful for when we look over this vast and wonderfully diverse community of Islam. We, in the West of course, owe a deep gratitude to Muslims across the centuries because it was of course the Muslim

community that first re-discovered the wisdom of the ancient classics and helped spur and give birth to the Renaissance in Western Europe. It is Muslim teachers and healers that shape so much of what we understand to be the study of medicine. We all count with the numbers that we were taught by our Muslim brothers and sisters.

All those ways have shaped us on very profound levels. And as we close, I want to offer off an image that I want you to spend a little time with. It comes out of a story from Islam's early expansion, and because Islam exploded much in the same way that the Christian church did in its early years, and as the Muslim armies drove north through Palestine and Syria, they captured the city of Damascus, the home of the apostle Paul, and when it came time to worship, the Muslims in Damascus went to the biggest church that the city had which was the church of John the Baptist, and they all gathered in that great church for Friday evening prayers and then turned it over very graciously to the Christian community who then worshipped there the following Sunday, and they continued that pattern for years. Two branches of the children of Abraham living with mutual respect and appreciation and peace.

Amen