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Demystifying Shariah & Reimagining Islam
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On the Islamic calendar, we are in the month of Ramadan, which began a week ago on April 12 and will end a little more than three weeks from now on May 11. One of the five pillars of Islam is fasting during Ramadan—refraining from food, drink, smoking, sex, and anger from sunrise to sunset. In addition, I should add that the spiritual practice of Ramadan is about much more than what you don't do; it is about refocusing one's freed-up time and energy—from not doing all those other things—to spend more time in prayer, reflection, and in community.

So, for UU Muslims who are members of this congregation and all who are observant, *Ramadan Mubarak*, may you have a "blessed Ramadan." And for anyone who has friends, family members, or colleagues who are observing Ramadan, may we be supportive and compassionate toward anyone fasting this month.

Ramadan also feels like an auspicious time for our annual sermon on Islam. So, by way of introduction, let me share a few statistics from the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Future Project. There are approximately 1.9 billion Muslims in the world today (who account for ~25% of the almost 8 billion total people in the world), making Islam the world's second largest religion. Christianity is the single largest religion with 2.4 billion adherents, and the Hindu Tradition is the third largest with 1.2 billion.

If we fast-forward thirty years to 2050, you'll see that Islam is expected to grow from 1.9 billion to 2.8 billion adherents, which would shift it from 25% of the world's population to ~30%. Many of the other religions, including Christianity, are also growing, but Islam is growing more rapidly—primarily because it is dominant in

countries with an overall younger population. If we extrapolate two decades ahead, Islam is projected to become the world's largest religion by 2070. Now, without going into the whole 1400 years of historical Islam, let me give you just one more point of reference that makes this current growth all the more remarkable.

If we turn the clock backward to 1914 and World War I (when the Ottoman Empire was ultimately broken up), there were only ~240 million Muslims in world, and Christians outnumbered Muslims 2.5:1. So there has been an almost eightfold increase to reach the 1.9 billion Muslims today. In comparison, a little more than a century ago, the number of Muslims alive in 1914 worldwide was not much larger than the modern Muslim population of just the nation of Indonesia.

To give you a few related data points from our own country, the 3.8 million Muslim Americans today are only about 1% of the ~330 million total population here in the U.S. And if we extrapolate out to 2050, Muslim Americans are projected to roughly double to 8 million, but will still comprise only about 2% of the U.S. population.

Again, without trying to explore the whole history of Muslims in the U.S. (which we have explored in more detail previously), there has been a significant shift in the number of Muslim Americans since the 1965 Immigration & Naturalization Act, which removed some of the White Supremacist bias in our country's immigration policy.

- 1967: < 250,000 Muslim Americans; Today: ~3.9 million
- 1967: < 200 mosques in country; Today: > 2,000

I know that's a lot of data, but most important to me than specific numbers is giving you a sense of the overall trends. And if I could ask you to remember just one thing, it would be that the soon-to-be 3+ billion Muslims in the world are *tremendously diverse*.

Although many people's strongest associations with Islam—from popular culture and the Western media—is an Arabic-speaking person from the Middle East, **only 18% of Muslims are Arab**. [So when I say that the one thing I hope you remember is that the *soon-to-be 3+ billion Muslims in the world are significantly diverse*, a big part of what I'm talking about is that more than 80% of the world's 1.9 billion Muslims are neither Arab, nor Middle Eastern—not that there's anything wrong with either of those things. Rather, it's just that the reality of global Islam today is so much bigger than just the Middle East; Islam is widespread and decentralized. More than half of the Muslims

in the world today live in Asia. And the country with the largest Muslim population is Indonesia, followed by Pakistan and India, which have the second and third largest Muslim populations today (Ali-Karamali 15).

In the words of a religion professor from American University in D.C., consider that:

> Saudi Arabia…has only the sixteenth largest Muslim population, behind countries such as Uzbekistan, Ethiopia, Turkey, and Iran. For what it's worth, Saudi Arabia's Muslim population is roughly equivalent to *China's* [Muslim population]. All of this should make us reconsider how we perceive not only Islam, but also the locus of its power and influence. While the Saudi government routinely casts itself as the protector and defender of the faith, they represent only a small fraction of the world's Muslims.

Along these lines, let me share a little more about some of the ways that outdated preconceptions about Islam are being perpetuated and how they might be changing. I've been teaching a 15-week undergraduate World Religions class this spring at Frederick Community College, so I've been thinking a fair amount recently about how the various world religions are taught.

My first formal introduction to Islam was in the late 1990s when I took an "Introduction to Islam" class as an undergraduate Religion major. I feel fortunate that prior to September 11, 2001, the college I attended had already made a commitment to hiring a full-time professor of Islamic Studies, and I am grateful for that opportunity to begin studying Islam in depth from an expert. But for many years he was the only professor teaching Islam at that college, and his focus was mostly on the Middle East and ancient Arabic texts, which are really important historically, but represent only 20% of Muslims today. And that's the case in many institutions of higher learning: either they have no experts on Islam or only one expert who focuses on the Middle East and/or ancient Arabic texts. More recently, I was glad to learn that my undergrad *alma mater* has hired a Religion professor with a specialty in Hindu and Muslim communities in contemporary India and Bangladesh, an expertise which helps account for the lived

experience of more than 80% of the world's 1.9 billion Muslims who are neither Arabic nor Middle Eastern.

As critics of the field of religious studies are increasingly pointing out, we should be wary of outdated equations such as this one:

Islam = Middle East + Arabic + texts (Fuerst, JAAR, 915).

This anachronistic equation conceals more than it reveals. The truth is that the "diverse texts, practices, customs, and traditions of the world's 1.9 billion Muslims" is *much greater than* **"**Middle East + Arabic + texts."

> Most Muslims do not speak Arabic as a first language, are not typically Arabs by ethnicity, do not usually live in the Middle East, and often refer to texts, practices, customs, traditions, and other frameworks beyond the Qur'an…. If we drew a circle around South and Southeast Asia today, more Muslims would live inside that circle than beyond it…. The top ten most populous Muslim countries include only two that are predominately Arabic-speaking, Algeria and Egypt; Turkey, famously uncertain if it is part of the Middle East, also cracked the top ten. The remaining are located in Asia and Africa—constituting some of the following prevalent if not major Muslim languages:
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> - **Urdu** - the national language of Pakistan, estimated to be the world's third most-spoken language,
> - **Malay** - spoken by 290 million people in countries such as Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore,
> - **Turkish** - spoken by 170 million people worldwide,
> - **Persian** - spoken in Iran and other countries
> - **Indonesian** - spoken by 156 million people, and
> - even English prevalent if not major Muslim languages.
>
> Yet the conventional formula of Islam = Arabic + Middle East + texts persists. (919, 932-933)

Again, if you remember only one thing from today's focus on Islam this Ramadan, I hope it is an invitation to expand and reimagine our association with words like Islam

and Muslim to become increasingly inclusive of the wide diversity of the world's 1.9 billion Muslims, more than 80% of whom live outside the Middle East.

To say a bit more, I was glad to learn that our own Beacon Press, which is owned the Unitarian Universalist Association, published a book last year titled *Demystifying Shariah: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It's Not Taking Over Our Country* by Sumbul Ali-Karamali, a Muslim American author and speaker with an expertise in Islamic law. She grew up in Los Angeles, California, majored in English at Stanford University, earned a standard U.S. law degree from the University of California at Davis, then earned an additional degree in Islamic law from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

About a decade ago she wrote a previous book titled *Muslim Next Door: the Qur'an, the Media, and that Veil Thing*. She's also written a book for children and young people (ages 10 and up) titled *Growing up Muslim: Understanding the Beliefs and Practices of Islam*. And in the spirit of expanding and diversifying our association of what Muslim and Islam mean, I should add that she also likes folks to know that as important as her Muslim American identity is to her, she also "loves opera, white-water rafting, reading fantasy literature (Terry Pratchett is a favorite), and watching *Star Trek* reruns."

There's also a lot more in her most recent book than we will have time to consider, but I will share a few highlights with you.

First it is important to say that in the wake of concerted efforts in recent years to demonize *shariʿah* law in this country, it can be difficult to zoom out to a broader perspective and appreciate that, "For most of its history, Islamic law [*shariʿah*] offered the most liberal and humane legal principles available anywhere in the world." And for anyone wondering if that's just propaganda, that is an exact quote from the renowned Harvard law professor Noah Feldman. (His podcast is quite good, by the way.)

From a world history perspective, Islamic law rates, along with Roman law and English common law, as "the world's three major legal systems—defined as widely influential legal systems that grew past their original birthplaces" (8).

And it's unfair to judge *shariʿah* law exclusively in terms of those who use it for cruel and abusive purposes, unless you are going to do the same regarding the ways

Roman and English law have been used in similarly horrific ways. We also need to consider the ways that—historically—*shariʿah* has been used to create a more just society, defend the powerless, establish rule of law, and empower women—especially when compared with how woman were often treated prior to *shariʿah* (9).

If you want to dive into the details, Ali-Karamali's book offers many useful examples. But in general, I appreciate her point that, when people corner an average Muslim American and demand that they explain *shariʿah* law, it's like asking the average Christian to define and defend the vast complexities and nuances of Roman Catholic canon law.

On the simplest level, the word *shariʿah (Arabic:* شَرِيعَة*)* means "way" or "path," and it has the connotation of a way or path toward a freshwater oasis, where one's thirst might be quenched—which is certainly appealing in the desert climates in which shariʿah originated (9).

More generally, *shariʿah* often refers to the entire system of Islamic jurisprudence, which can be thought of as using the equation Qur'an + Sunna + fiqh*:*

- **The Qur'an** (Arabic: القرآن; literally "recitation") is the central sacred scripture of Islam, traditionally believed to have been divinely recited by or dictated to the prophet Muhammad, starting in the month of Ramadan. And traditionally during Ramadan, many Muslims recite the entire Qur'an, which, as a point of comparison, is about 80% the length of the Christian "New Testament." (You used to see it written as "Koran," but a more accurate transliteration is Qur'an.)
- **Sunnah** (Arabic: سنة; literally "habit" or "usual practice"): these are words and deeds of Muhammad that serve as a model for Muslims to follow—as recorded in written records such as the Hadith ("talk" or "discourse").
- **fiqh**: interpretations of the Qur'an and Sunnah by *ulama* (Islamic jurists and scholars) (9).

And interpretation, of course, can make all the difference.

Ali-Karamali rightly notes that cynical, misinformed, or Islamophobic calls for Muslims to "Give up *shariʿah*" are like telling Christians to give up the Bible and Jesus's teachings; such suggestions are probably not going to be received well. Similarly, when

journalists ask Muslims if they are "in favor of *shariʿah*" it's the equivalent of asking Christians if they are in favor of Jesus (11).

A more productive approach might be to explore motivations and contexts for various interpretations. Of course there are archaic, pre-modern aspects of *shariʿah* law. For example, death by stoning is recommended as a punishment at various points in the Jewish scripture, and "until the nineteenth century, English common law [included the possibility of punishing] hundreds of crimes, even misdemeanors, with death." For anyone who takes the time to become even passingly familiar with *shariʿah* law, it quickly becomes clear that, "only a minuscule fraction…is about offenses and punishments; by far the largest part is about personal religious observance and conduct" (151). Even more importantly, it is vital to recognize that these laws are rarely if ever enforced to the fullest extent, as is the case with all human legal systems (136).

Some further context for *shariʿah* law is that, "searching out transgressions" is prohibited, and "turning a blind eye to private misconduct" is required. Here's a significant story illustrating these points about Umar, one of Muhammad's companions and later the second caliph:

> Walking in Medina one evening, Umar heard raucous noises emanating from one of the houses. He climbed over the wall of the house and found inside a man not only drinking wine but cavorting with a woman who was not his wife. Umar accused the man of sinning, and the man reported that, whereas he himself may have indeed sinned, Umar had committed three Qur'anic sins: seeking out faults in others (49:12), climbing over the wall of the house (2:189), and entering a home without permission (24:27). Umar…admitted his fault and departed. (136) As another Middle Eastern prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, similarly said: "Let the one who is without sin, cast the first stone."

The truth is that, by and large, the various calls to "ban shari'ah" in the U.S. are usually about cynical and bigoted attempts to increase Islamophobia, not any legitimate reason—and that is because the establishment clause in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution already prohibits *shariʿah*—or any other religious law—from taking over our country (192). As many commentators have noted, anti-

shariʿah laws are a "solution in search of a problem" (194). And it's really worse than that because in many cases anti-*shariʿah* laws end up as an unconstitutional violation of the free exercise of religion for Muslim Americans, which is protected by the First Amendment (197).

As I move toward my conclusion, let me share with you one related aspect of the undergraduate "Introduction to World Religions" class I'm teaching this spring. Even as our class focus shifted significantly from week to week as we explored the many different religions of the world, there were at least three major themes woven throughout the semester that can help us today in our attempt to reimagine and diversify our associations with Islam and Muslims:

1. Definitions matter: There is arguably never one singular, uncontested universally agreed upon definition about anything in any religion; therefore, regarding any particular definition, notice *who decides*? And *who benefits*? And conversely, who loses out? As the saying goes, "If you're not at the table, you might be on the menu."
2. Original Pluralism*:* There are religious differences not only between religions, but also *within* religions. No religious tradition is monolithic, pure, or unadulterated. If someone is trying to convince you that they represent the "One True Version of the Faith" (and that all the other versions are heretical and deviant), they are either ignorant or in denial of the messiness, complexity, and diversity that is present in the history of every religious tradition from the very beginning—or they are trying to cover their uncertainties up. Another way of saying this is that there have always been Hinduism(s), Buddhism(s), Judaism(s), Christianit(ies), Islam(s), and Paganism(s).
3. Responses matter: Pay attention to how different individuals and groups respond to the same texts and traditions differently. In the schema of the Muslim American interfaith activist Eboo Patel, notice how the same religion in different hands can be a:
    - "bubble" - isolating one group as completely as possible from all others.
    - "barrier" - preventing one group from interacting with one or more other groups

- “bomb" - attempting to destroy the other
- “bridge” - making compassionate connections across differences.

Because different individuals and groups can respond to the same texts and traditions differently, the onus is arguably upon individuals and groups to be responsible for their choices. We have the freedom as human beings to choose to side with love—and we are responsible if we choose instead to side with hatred and division. If you look closely enough at the history of any religious tradition, I promise you that you will find that every single tradition engages in so-called “picking and choosing” regarding which textual selections and interpretations to emphasize. And if we’re going to pick and choose, why not choose love? If you are curious to learn more, I recommend Eboo Patel’s memoir *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, in the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*.

For now, I will conclude by inviting us to be sure we are also looking in the mirror —and reflecting on the ways that our own Unitarian Universalist tradition can sometimes be a “bubble” or a "barrier” when we, for instance, use too much insider language or become so celebratory of our self-perceived progressiveness that we fail to appreciate how much we still have to learn.

May we commit ourselves anew to doing all we can in this hurting world to respond to religious and cultural differences by building bridges of peace, connection, and compassion. I’m grateful to be on that journey with all of you.