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American Muslims & Islam in America

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

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At the beginning of each summer, when I plan my sermon topics for the next year, I try to be particularly aware of relevant issues and topics I may be neglecting. For instance, at the end of my second year as your minister, I realized I had never preached about Islam. **And if we are serious as Unitarian Universalists about drawing wisdom from the world's religions, balanced with the insights of modern science, then it is probably a mistake to ignore the world's second-largest religion.** Since 2014, I have preached about Islam at least once annually. And I look forward to sharing with you in the future about topics such as Progressive Islam, Twenty-first Century Interpretations of the Qur'an, the Life and Teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, and the bestselling Muslim Mystic Poet Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (92).

There are approximately 1.5 billion Muslims in the world today, making it the world's second largest religion. (Christianity is the first largest, with 2.1 billion adherents. And the Hindu Tradition is third, with 900 million.) I should add that **projections estimate that Islam will become the world's largest religion by 2070**. So there are many reasons to increase our familiarity with the Islamic tradition—from correcting misinformation that exacerbates Islamophobia, to equipping ourselves to be better able to advocate for a more open, liberal, and progressive Islam of the future.

And our motivation should be not only be to dismantle prejudice, but also to end the irrational wasting of our limited taxpayer resources. For instance, **“By the end of 2016, Muslim terrorists were responsible for 123 of the 240,000 murders in the United State since 9/11.”**

Yet counter-terrorism remained the number one priority of the FBI, which spends several billion dollars annually to prevent and prosecute Muslim terrorists.” While a certain level of funding is needed to help prevent future attacks, we seem to be well into the territory of diminishing marginal returns. Moreover, when representatives of our government routinely harass innocent Muslim citizens, we sow seeds of resentment and alienation, and fertilize the soil in which future terrorism can grow.

A few data points may also be illuminating. For instance, new survey results released a few weeks ago about “America’s Changing Religious Identity” included the headline that, “**White Christians, once the dominant religious group in the U.S., now account for fewer than half of all adults living in the country.** Today, fewer than half of all states are majority white Christian. As recently as 2007, 39 states had majority white Christian populations.”

There are also some fascinating data points about Unitarian Universalism that I will share another time. But since our focus is on Islam, there are two trends about Muslims in America that may be worth highlighting:

- (1) **Non-Christian religious groups are growing, but they still represent less than one in ten Americans combined.** Jewish Americans constitute 2% of the public, while Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus each constitute only 1% of the public. All other non-Christian religions constitute an additional 1%.
- (2) **America’s youngest religious groups are all non-Christian.** Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists are all far younger than white Christian groups. At least one-third of Muslims (42%), Hindus (36%), and Buddhists (35%) are under the age of 30. Roughly one-third (34%) of religiously unaffiliated Americans are also under 30. In contrast, white Christian groups are aging. Slightly more than one in ten white Catholics (11%), white evangelical Protestants (11%), and white mainline Protestants (14%) are under 30. Approximately six in ten white evangelical Protestants (62%), white Catholics (62%), and white mainline Protestants (59%) are at least 50 years old.... The median ages of Hindus (32 years), Muslims (32 years), Buddhists

(36 years), religiously-unaffiliated Americans (37 years), and Hispanic Protestants (37 years) are below 40.

That's a lot of numbers to keep track of, so I'll repeat the highlights about Islam: **Muslims are approximately 1% of the U.S. population. And of that 1%, one-third of Muslims are under the age of 30.**

And although I do not want to overwhelm you with data, there are a few more helpful points worth considering about Islam in America in recent decades:

- **In 1967, there were probably fewer than 250,000 self-identifying Muslims in the United States; today, there are about 3.35 million.**
- The growth of the Muslim community is largely due to immigration. In 1965, the Immigration and Naturalization Act signed by President Lyndon Johnson in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty reformed the racist system of immigration that largely prohibited immigrants from countries perceived as non-white. Millions of non-white people have immigrated to the United States since then, and perhaps two million of them have been Muslim.
- **In 1967, there were perhaps fewer than 200 mosques in the country. Today, there are more than 2,000.**
- Today, the sectarian profile of Muslim America roughly mirrors that of the rest of the Muslim world. The majority of Muslim Americans are Sunni, while 16% identify as Shi'a, 14% say they are "just Muslim," and 4% are members of smaller communities such as the Ahmadiyya movement and the Nation of Islam.

No more data, I promise!

My larger point is that the stories we tell matter. And some of this data begins to point us toward a story different than the tired debates about "Islam *and* the West" or "Islam *and* America" as if they were completely oppositional, with nothing in common. In contrast, as Amir Hussain, a theology professor at Loyola Marymount University, details in her important book Muslims and the Making of America, a more accurate—and arguably **much more helpful and hopeful**—story to tell may be about "Islam *in* the West" and "Muslims *in* America." After

all, Muslims have always been in the United States of America—since before there was an America (116).

As an example of learning how to tell that story better, I will lift up one paragraph from President Obama's 2009 speech to the Muslim world, delivered at Cairo University—an address worth revisiting in full:

Islam has always been a part of America's story. The first nation to recognize my country was Morocco. In signing the Treaty of Tripoli **in 1796, our second President John Adams wrote, "The United States has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Muslims."** And since our founding, American Muslims have enriched the United States. They have fought in our wars, served in government, stood for civil rights, started businesses, taught at our universities, excelled in our sports arenas, won Nobel Prizes, built our tallest building, and lit the Olympic Torch. And **when the first Muslim-American was recently elected to Congress, he took the oath to defend our Constitution using the same Holy Koran that one of our Founding Fathers – Thomas Jefferson – kept in his personal library.**

Allow me to unpack a few of those details more fully.

Regarding the first line that “Islam has always been a part of America's story,” here’s one example. We have a biography from **1734 about Job ben Soloman, an enslaved African Muslim who in 1730 was sold in Annapolis**, Maryland—less than 90 minutes from here by car. Part of why we know about him at all (including that he was a Muslim) is that his owner found it remarkable that Job could speak and write Arabic (8). Similarly, some of you may recall from Alex Haley’s 1977 television miniseries *Roots* (about tracing his ancestry) that there is a scene in which **Kunta Kinte (played by LeVar Burton) shares with his mentor (played by Louis Gosset, Jr.) about being a Muslim.** I should perhaps also note that Kunta Kinte was also sold in Annapolis (8-9).

To widen our lens beyond these two specific examples, “Historians estimate that **between 10 and 20 percent of the enslaved people who were kidnapped and brought here from West Africa were Muslim.** . . . The first Muslim immigrants to North America other than slaves were

from the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century” (9). Enslaved Muslims helped enrich and build this country from before its official beginning. Indeed, George Washington, the first president of the United States, owned two enslaved Muslims named Fatima and Little Fatima, both named after the youngest daughter of the Prophet Muhammad and his first wife (and first follower) Khadījah. So—**enslaved Muslims also helped build Mount Vernon** (21).

Turning the clock back further, we also have records about Estevancio the Moor, an enslaved Muslim owned by a Spanish conquistador who landed in Florida in 1528. Estevancio was part of a group that explored Florida and Arizona before a member of the Zuni tribe killed him in 1539, in what is now New Mexico. **“Almost eighty years before the Pilgrims landed in America,” a Muslim had already explored uncharted territory and died here**” (16).

Turning the clock back one more time, it is important to remember that in the same year—1492—that “Columbus sailed the ocean blue,” Spain was also expelling all the Jews and Muslims who refused to convert to Christianity. Relatedly, there is a fascinating part of the 1994 book *Shards of Love* by the late María Rosa Menocal (1953-2012), the Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale University, about Luis de Torres, a *converso* (a Jewish person forced to convert to Christianity) who was part of Columbus’s expedition as a translator. De Torres could speak Arabic and Hebrew in addition to Portuguese. Now this is where the historical records get fuzzy, but it seems that when Columbus landed in Cuba, de Torres was able to speak in Arabic with some of the Taíno chiefs in Cuba. This lends some potential credence to legends from the tenth and twelfth centuries about Arabic sailors crossing the Atlantic—perhaps pre-Columbus contacts (14-15). Menocal writes provocatively about **“the speaking of Arabic in the New World when in the Old it is being outlawed”** (15).

I don’t, however, want us to get distracted on this speculative point. Regardless, we know much more definitively that 10,000 years before Columbus’s voyage, in approximately 8,500 B.C.E., semi-nomadic groups of hunter-gatherers began to practice agriculture in seven different places on this continent, becoming the indigenous residents of this land (*Dunbar-Ortiz 15*). And as Columbus Day approaches next month, it is important to remind ourselves periodically that many history books fail to emphasize that even though our nation’s capital (the District of Columbia) is named after him, **Columbus didn’t “discover America.” He never set foot in**

North America, much less on the land known today as The United States. Columbus's first voyage landed in what is now the Dominican Republic and Haiti. When he returned on his second voyage, what he "discovered" was that the colony of forty men he had left had all been killed by the Indigenous people. On his third trip, he landed in what is now Venezuela, and on his fourth and final trip he reached "the Caribbean coast of Central America" (43).

But now we are definitely as far back in history as we'll be going this morning. So let me give you one more historical example of Muslims in America, before moving into much more contemporary times. Given all the violence that has erupted about images of the prophet Muhammad, most commentators fail to note that **there is an image of the Prophet Muhammad holding a sword and a Qur'an on the frieze on the walls of the United States Supreme Court.** The intention of this art—which depicts many other figures—is to honor "the great lawgivers of history." But given all the controversy about contested plaques and memorials, maybe it's best to say, "Shhh! Don't tell anybody" (Hussain 28-29).

In contrast, perhaps ones of the places Muslims have been most visible in American public life is in the sports arena. **Cassius Clay, one of the most famous athletes of all time, changed his name to the very Islamic "Muhammad Ali."** There's a lot of be said about his story, including being arrested, having his boxing title stripped, and being unable to box for three prime fighting years for being a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, an objection based on the teachings of Islam about unjust wars. He famously said, **"I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong—no Viet Cong ever called me [N-word]."** In 1971, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously overturned his conviction (73-75).

In addition to Muhammad Ali, there are so many examples of prominent American Muslim professional athletes. To name only a few of the most famous, starting with basketball:

- Ferdinand Lewis Alcindor, Jr. became Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in 1971 (61-68),
- Hakeem Olajuwon (71)

Moving on to football:

- Ahmad Rashad, wide receiver for the Vikings (78)
- Muhammad Wilkerson, a defensive end for the New York Jets
- Abdullah brothers, Husain and Hamza, safeties in the NFL

- Aqib Talib, a cornerback for the Denver Broncos,
- Shahid Khan, owner of the Jacksonville Jaguars.
- Ibtihaj Muhammad, a member of the U.S. Fencing Team, who at the 2016 Olympics became the first American woman to compete in hijab.

Some interesting dynamics have arisen as these popular athletes have periodically acted in public not only as celebrities, but also as *Muslims*.

There is so much more to say about Islam in America, but my hope is that at least in some small part, this sermon can help **give lie to the perception that Islam is “new to America, foreign to America, or composed of adherents who are violent, ‘un-American,’ or a threat to our nation”** (4). Instead, as many of us here at UUCF were reminded of, firsthand, through our participation in the “Solidarity with our Muslim neighbors” rally earlier this year, as well as our recent shared meal here at UUCF with members of the Islamic Society of Frederick, the reality has always been that **most Muslims in America are our neighbors, friends, and fellow citizens**. The debates about “Islam vs. the West” or “Muslims vs. America” have far too frequently been exaggerated and exploited for political gain. May we be part of learning to tell a better, more historical, and more hopeful story about “*American Muslims*” and “*Islam in America*,” a story which has been part of America since before there was an America.

