

The Qur'an
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Opening Words – (#609 Saadi, Responsive Reading)

To worship God is nothing other than to serve the people.

It does not need rosaries, prayer carpets, or robes.

All peoples are member of the same body, created from one essence.

If fate brings suffering to one member

The others cannot stay at rest.

Readings

1. From The Koran: A Very Short Introduction by Michael Cook:

It is in the nature of a scripture or a classic to be two things at once. On the one hand, it is a product of its own time. Indeed, it is precisely this temporal distance that calls forth the elaborate pattern of scholastic activity that comes to surround such a text - the efforts to preserve its original wording, explain its obscurities, interpret its meaning, and so forth.

And on the other hand, it has authority in our time. Were it to lose this authority, it would no longer be a scripture or a classic, just a text of interest to people who are curious about the past. Being these two things at once is a tense assignment...

2. From The Qur'an: A Biography by Bruce Lawrence:

There will be more headline stories about the Qur'an. Though they will likely concern its abuse rather than its use, it is its use that will finally matter most in the decades and centuries ahead. Scholars will continue to debate its style and content, its medieval and modern interpretations, and also its application in law and politics as well as interfaith dialogue. Muslim intellectuals will strive to understand it within the range of their own experience and reflection, whether as traditionalists or feminists, Islamists or modernists, trained or self-taught scholars. Each could be queried for her or his approach to the text, but what they all share needs to be restated: Muhammad was the Prophet of God...and the Qur'an as now received, recited and read remains the Word of God for all time. Beyond these common assumptions they have enormous differences.

3. From The Qur'an, translated by Bruce Lawrence:

Even if the ocean were ink

For writing the words of my Lord,

The ocean would be exhausted

Before the words of my Lord were exhausted,

Even if We were to add another ocean to it.

Sermon

The Muslim celebration of Ramadan began yesterday. Muslims around the world participate in this celebration by fasting during the daylight hours; engaging in charitable giving and volunteer work to help people in need; seeking forgiveness for wrongs they have done and making plans for personal improvement over the coming year; renewing their commitments to practices of prayer and reflection...and by reading the Qur'an.

As Ramadan commemorates the first verses of the Qur'an being revealed to Muhammad, Muslims are encouraged to read the Qur'an in its entirety during Ramadan and I—though I am not Muslim—thought that I might take part in the celebration as a respectful outsider by reading the Qur'an, too. After all, I am passionately interested in religions...and I love to read...and I've yet to work up the necessary discipline for fasting.

So I set about reading the Qur'an...yes, well, reading the Qur'an turns out to be a formidable task. One of the first things you learn about the Qur'an is that a Qur'an in translation is not the real Qur'an. To really understand it, one must read it in Arabic. Further, the Arabic of the Qur'an is not the Arabic that is spoken today, that one would learn in a language class, so that even Muslims who speak Arabic also learn Qur'anic Arabic in their study of their Scripture. *And*, it is sometimes said that the very act of transcribing the words of the Qur'an to writing is an act of translation in itself, as the Qur'an, in its purest form, is recited. It is meant to be spoken and heard. The oral Qur'an is the real Qur'an.

So right away, as a mono-linguistic English-speaking non-Muslim who wishes to read the Qur'an, I am about four steps removed from what is considered, in its purest form, the Qur'an. [Author Bruce Lawrence](#) encourages me, if somewhat halfheartedly, writing, "Distance from the source handicaps us, *yet we can still learn about Islam by engaging with the Qur'an*, even as a written text, translated from Arabic to English" (*The Qur'an: A Biography* by Bruce Lawrence, pg. 8). So it seems that the quest for some measure of understanding is still a worthy journey, and one that I, though ill-fitted for the task, can still engage.

But if reading the Qur'an is a formidable task, it is also something of a forbidding task. If it's true that the Qur'an seems very distant for many of us non-Muslim Westerners from our culture and experience, it is also true that it is as close to us as our newspaper, our television, our computer. The Qur'an, for all of its seeming impenetrability, has penetrated the various devices that bring us our news, with talk of *jihad*, of veiled women, of female genital mutilation, of Shiites and Sunnis, of Shari'ah, of Madrassahs...Didn't all of these things arise from the Qur'an? And if that is so, isn't it a good thing that the Qur'an is distant from us?

Let me say, first of all, that much of what we may expect to find in the Qur'an is not there.

For instance: if we want to read the story of Moses, it's in the Torah. If we want to read the story of Jesus, we turn to the Gospels. If we want to read the story of Muhammad, we read...No, not the Qur'an.

Now it is commonly understood that the words of the Qur'an were revealed directly to Muhammad, and so many passages are understood in the context his life, but if you want the biography of Muhammad you must go outside the Qur'an to what is known as the Hadith, traditions and reports about the Prophet that were joined with the Qur'an as complementary texts.

As for veiled women and genital cutting--and I use this term purposefully instead of the euphemistic "female circumcision"—veiling and genital cutting are cultural practices that predate Islam. The Qur'anic justification for veiling women apparently hinges on a verse that calls for the modesty of both men and women and tangentially refers to a veil (with no specific instructions), while genital cutting has no justification within the Qur'an at all and is rejected by the vast majority of Muslims. (This is not to say that it is not practiced by Muslims, in Somalia for example, and they justify it as part of Islam).

What about *jihad*, holy war? It is mentioned in the Qur'an, but there is much debate on just what it means, with some scholars saying that Muhammad spoke of "the greater jihad" as the moral struggle with oneself.

The Sunnis and the Shiites split off from one another *after* the Qur'an and so are, of course, not mentioned *within* it, just as you don't have references to Lutherans or Catholics within the New Testament.

The point is: what we *hear* about and learn to associate with the Qur'an is made up of an almost impenetrable mixture of isolated facts, half-truths, mistakes, misinformation, and lies...it is no wonder we find the prospect of reading it forbidding. It is no wonder that we feel no connection to this tradition. It is no wonder that we might lose impetus for the whole project. How might we connect with what seems so foreign? Why would we try?

Well, recent estimates of the percentage of people in the world who identify as Muslims range from 20% to 25% of the total population. Not an insignificant number. And though Islam is a diverse religion--as one might expect from a religion that includes so many people and that covers the wide variety of countries and cultures that it does--we can say with some assurance that the Qur'an lies at the heart of all of these forms of Islam. There is a practical reason to learn something about the Qur'an, and that is to know more about the world in which we live and the spiritual practices of our neighbors.

But lest we undertake this as an anthropological project, observing from a distance the workings of another culture, we might also look to our connections.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have an important historical connection to Islam dating from our Unitarian roots in the Transylvania of the 16th century. It was only because of the protection and support of the Islamic ruler of neighboring Turkey that Queen Isabella and King John Sigismund were able to rule Transylvania and to enact the very first Edict of Religious Toleration, allowing Lutherans and Catholics and Calvinists and Unitarians to practice their religion freely, a circumstance unheard of at the time in Christian Europe. The Sultan of Turkey had his own geopolitical reasons for such support, but was also drawing from a tradition in Islam that practiced tolerance of differing faiths. Though tolerance is often overshadowed in modern Islam by the antics and atrocities of fundamentalists, it does present itself throughout the history. The Qur'an itself says, "No compulsion is there in religion."

Another possible connection for some of you...one word: Rumi. How many of you know Rumi? Rumi is, by some accounts, THE bestselling poet in the United States. I know that some folks in this congregation have told me that he is one of their favorite authors. Now Rumi was a Sufi, and Sufism has a very Universalist flavor, so readers of Rumi can forget or never realize that Sufism is an Islamic mystical tradition. But it is one thing to revel in the way Rumi opens his arms to the world, writing "I am not a Christian, I am not a Jew, I am not a Zoroastrian, and I am not even a Muslim," but it would be irresponsible scholarship not to recognize that he grew into that recognition from the fertile soil of The Qur'an and the stories of the Prophet Muhammad.

Also, Islam shares with Unitarian Universalism a deep respect for knowledge. Writer, broadcaster, and critical commentator on Islam, Ziauddin Sardar, writes, "The Qur'an constantly asks questions – have you not looked around you and studied the cosmos, have you not looked into the history of other nations, have you not traveled on the earth to explore its flora and fauna? – and urges the believers to engage with the material world" ([*What Do Muslims Believe?*](#) pg. 48). The aforementioned Rumi wrote,

“Ignorance is God’s prison; knowing is God’s palace.” The Prophet Muhammad said, “The ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr.” We share that. There is power in learning, in teaching, in understanding and asking more questions and expanding ever wider and ever deeper that ocean of awe.

And there are others, I’m sure. Connections. Points of commonality. Opportunities for solidarity.

But, listen, I don’t want to sugarcoat this. Islam is not gentle and mild in all of its manifestations. Cruel, senseless, intolerant things are happening in the name of Islam which we must face. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, whose autobiography is called [Infidel](#), recounts many of these atrocities from the crystal clear lens of her own personal experience:

“I first encountered the full strength of Islam as a young child in Saudi Arabia,” she writes. “In Saudi Arabia, every breath, every step we took, was infused with the concepts of purity or sinning, and with fear. Wishful thinking about the peaceful tolerance of Islam cannot interpret away this reality: hands are still cut off, women still stoned and enslaved, just as the Prophet Muhammad decided centuries ago. The kind of thinking I saw in Saudi Arabia, and among the Muslim Brotherhood in Kenya and Somalia, is incompatible with human rights and values.”

Wishful thinking *cannot* interpret away reality. That is precisely why I think that we need to connect with those elements of peace, justice, and tolerance in Islam. We have to find tangible ways to support the many Muslims who reject violent and unjust practices. *And* we need to ask ourselves how we, as a nation, are supporting those unacceptable interpretations of Islam that we are so quick to judge.

Who was it--in the 1980s Afghanistan struggle against the Soviet Union—who was it who supported the efforts and ideology of one Osama bin Laden and the mujahideen, which would later splinter and morph into the Taliban? Who supported them? The CIA, the Carter Administration, the Reagan Administration...

What about the recent allegations that Erik Prince--the director of Blackwater, a private military company funded through our tax dollars—that [Erik Prince "views himself as a Christian crusader](#) tasked with eliminating Muslims and the Islamic faith from the globe," and that Prince's companies "encouraged and rewarded the destruction of Iraqi life"?

What about Guantanamo? Abu Ghraib? What about the flat-out justification of torture? What about the ongoing drone strikes in Pakistan?

Are the atrocities of our enlightened society less important because they occur in distant places? Because we don’t claim to support them? How are we feeding into the paranoia, fear, and anger that helps to subvert and pervert Islam into the very thing we fear the most?

And if we can stop fueling the most dangerous interpretations of the Qur’an, we can begin to encourage, support, and respect the most positively transformative interpretations. I don’t believe in wishful thinking...but I do believe in thinking. The ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr and can often be more powerful.

There are scholars doing important historical critical work on the Qur’an right now that could open new as well as re-newed interpretations. Religions are constantly interpreting and reinterpreting their source

documents, as are philosophers and ethicists and citizens and leaders. It happens with the Torah, and the Gospels, and the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, and our Principles and Sources and Purposes...and it is happening with the Qur'an. In [an article on Koran study](#) and research from The Atlantic Magazine of January 1999, Toby Lester notes that Islam's own history shows that the prevailing conception of the Koran is not the only one to have ever existed. The very idea that the Qur'an is the literal and matchless Word of God did not become orthodoxy until the tenth century.

What does all this matter? It opens doors. "What a re-examination of Islamic history offers Muslims," says Algerian Mohammed Arkoun, a professor of Islamic thought at the University of Paris, "is an opportunity to challenge the Muslim orthodoxy from within, rather than having to rely on 'hostile' outside sources." The scholars look forward to an Islamic renaissance.

And, of course, there are Muslim Unitarian Universalists, just as there are Unitarian Universalists from a variety of other religious, ethical, and earth-based traditions. That is as it should be. Dividing us into groups sometimes makes it easier to talk about and define things, but the vision we hold together is one of unity.

The author of our opening words was a Muslim from the 13th century, and happened to be a favorite of a prominent figure in our own tradition, Ralph Waldo Emerson. The words that we read earlier also appear, in a slightly different format, above the entrance to the Hall of Nations in the United Nations Building in New York.

All peoples are member of the same body, created from one essence.
If fate brings suffering to one member
The others cannot stay at rest.

The Qur'an says:

"O humanity! We have created you male and a female; and we have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another."

So that we may know one another...

So may it be.

Closing Words (#610, Mohammed Iqbal, adapted)

The journey of love is a very long journey. But sometimes with a sigh we can cross that vast desert. Search and search again without losing hope. We may find sometime a treasure on our way. Our hearts and our eyes are all devoted to the vision.