

## Aspects of Islam

Main Line Unitarian Church, Devon, PA

### Opening Words & Chalice Lighting:

Actually, in its purest form, Islam is incredibly tolerant. That makes what's going on in the world really bizarre.

~ *Steve Earle, country / rock singer*

The Holy Qur'an teaches that whoever kills an innocent, it is as if he has killed all mankind; and whoever saves a person, it is as if he has saved all mankind. The enduring faith of over a billion people is so much bigger than the narrow hatred of a few. Islam is not part of the problem in combating violent extremism - it is an important part of promoting peace.

~ *President Obama, Speech in Cairo, June 2009*

### Check-in / Sharing: What is on your mind today?

### Focus Readings:

Studies confirm that the majority of Muslims living in the West don't share the fundamentalist agenda of their self-appointed leaders. Yet conservatives are still most likely to be called upon by the media and policymakers to represent the Muslim community because they fit a convenient stereotype of what a Muslim should look and act like. As a recent RAND Corporation study points out, "They present a better photo-op, so the media tend to choose them when they need a pictorial illustration for a story about American Muslims."

So Americans are often left with two extreme views on Islam - one promoted by Muslim ultraconservatives and the other, an equally dangerous one, represented by professional anti-Muslim bigots.

The challenge for the millions of Muslims excluded by these groups is that they don't have the financial and institutional backing enjoyed by the fundamentalist organizations, many of which are financed by rich donors from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.

Most Muslim Americans are well assimilated into the mainstream of American life. And because there are few organized spiritual and cultural outlets for them, the moderate and progressive Muslim American majority is harder to find than the vocal conservative minority.

~ *Ahmed Nassef is editor of MuslimWakeUp.com*

Jack and Olivia were the most popular names for babies born last year - but the Office for National Statistics was accused of being 'disingenuous' after it emerged that Mohammed is an increasingly widespread choice for boys. If taken together the various different spellings of Mohammed make the name the second most common name in England and Wales - and by far the most popular in both London and the West Midlands. The ONS was criticized for treating the various spellings of Mohammed as different names. Figures for five alternative spellings, made a total of 7,576 and put Mohammed and its alternative spellings ahead of the official second place name, Oliver, of whom there were 7,413.

There were 8,007 Jacks.

~*The Daily Telegraph – 9th Sept 2009*

Medieval Islam was technologically advanced and open to innovation. It achieved far higher literacy rates than in contemporary Europe; it assimilated the legacy of classical Greek civilization to such a degree that many classical books are now known to us only through Arabic copies. It invented windmills, trigonometry, lateen sails and made major advances in metallurgy, mechanical and chemical engineering and irrigation methods. In the middle-ages the flow of technology was overwhelmingly from Islam to Europe rather than from Europe to Islam. Only after the 1500's did the net direction of flow begin to reverse.  
~*Guns, Germs and Steel, 1997, Jared Diamond*

It was the first religion that preached and practiced democracy; for in the mosque, when the minaret is sounded and the worshipers are gathered together, the democracy of Islam is embodied five times a day when the peasant and the king kneel side by side and proclaim, God alone is great. I have been struck over and over again by this indivisible unity of Islam that makes a man instinctively a brother. When you meet an Egyptian, an Algerian and Indian and a Turk in London, it matters not that Egypt is the motherland of one and India is the motherland of another.

~*Sarojini Naidu, the first woman to be President of the Indian National Congress - The Ideals of Islam, 1917*

### **Focus Questions:**

1. How much do you feel that you know about Islam? What has been the primary source of the information that you have?
2. Have you, personally, any Muslim friends / acquaintances or have you lived in a Muslim country? How has this affected your concept of the Islamic faith and the Muslim people
3. In any of the readings or the 'At-A-Glance' information was there anything that surprised you? Do you believe what you heard / read?
4. What do you see as the common points between Islam and Universal Unitarianism?

**Check-out /Likes & Wishes:** How are you feeling after this session?

### **Closing Words & Extinguishing Chalice:**

Fight in the cause of God against those who fight you, but do not transgress limits. God does not love transgressors.

~ *The Qur'an S2:190*

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.  
Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds;  
Most Gracious, Most Merciful;  
Master of the Day of Judgment.  
Thee do we worship, and Thine aid we seek.

Show us the straight way,

~*The Opening of The Qur'an as translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali*

## **Islam At-A-Glance**

### **History**

The word Islam means "submission to God". The origin of Islam dates back to the creation of the world and to Adam and Eve. They are considered the First Apostles of God, which includes Abraham, Moses and Jesus. The Prophet Mohammed was born in 570AD. At the age of 40 he concluded he was to proclaim there was only one God; Allah. In 630AD his army captured Mecca and the first Islamic state came into existence. Mohammed died in 632AD. The Qur'an, the central religious text of Islam, initially a verbal record given to the illiterate Mohammed by the archangel Gabriel, was in a stable written form by 652AD. Two main divisions came about almost immediately: the Shiite sect (15%) and the Sunni sect (85%). The Shiites live mainly in Iran and Iraq. Since Mohammed, Islam has grown, until today there are about 1.2 billion believers, second only to Christianity.

### **Beliefs**

- There is only one God without limit, called Allah.
- Muhammad received the Qur'an, a copy of the eternal Qur'an which is inscribed in heaven.
- God created heavenly beings called angels to serve God and they are opposed by evil spirits.
- God sent his prophets to the earth at their appointed times, and the Prophet Muhammad was the last and greatest messenger of God.
- There will be a last day of world history called the Day of Judgment. Good and evil will be weighed in the balance. The wicked will be punished and the just will enjoy eternal life in Paradise.
- Everything in the universe has a predetermined course. Nothing happens without the will or knowledge of God.


### **Practices**

The Qur'an outlines 5 obligations or pillars, that are essential to the lives of Muslims:

- **Confession of one's faith in God and his prophet Mohammed:** The most basic Islamic recitation is: 'There is no God but God; Mohammed is the Prophet of God'
- **Ritual Worship:** 5 times a day, Muslims direct their recitations toward the city of Mecca, the home of the holy shrine the Ka'ba
- **Almsgiving:** The Zakat tax is paid by Muslims for the benefit of the poor (Annually - 2.5 percent of one's wealth. Note - that is one's wealth – not one's annual income).
- **Fasting:** Fasting from dawn to dusk during Ramadan
- **Pilgrimage:** Every Muslim is expected to make a pilgrimage, or Hajj, to the holy city of Mecca, once in their lifetime

### **Symbols**

Islam has no formal symbols.

 The star and crescent is the best-known symbol used to represent Islam. It is on the flags of several Islamic world, notably Turkey and Pakistan. However the symbol is not Muslim in origin. Rather, it is an icon adopted during the spread of Islam and was originally the insignia of the Ottoman Empire, not of Islam as a whole.

**The color green:** has a special place in Islam, and is often used to represent it among other world religions. It is used on mosques and other important places, as well as on the flag of Saudi Arabia. Some say green was Muhammad's favorite color and that he wore a green cloak and turban, while others believe it symbolizes vegetation and life. In the Qur'an, it is said that the

inhabitants of paradise will wear green garments of fine silk. While the reference to the Qur'an is verifiable, it is not clear if other explanations are reliable or mere folklore.

## **Calendar**

**Ramadan:** is the whole month of the ninth month of the (lunar) Islamic calendar. This varies in date on the (solar) Western calendar. Between sunrise and sunset during Ramadan, adult Muslims do not smoke, eat, drink or have sex. They are encouraged to read the Qur'an from beginning to end during the holy month.

**Id al-Fitr (Festival of the Breaking of the Fast):** A period following the conclusion of Ramadan, which lasts three days. It is celebrated with feasts and the exchange of gifts.

**Id ul-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice):** commemorates the Prophet Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, who was replaced by a lamb. Animals are killed to benefit the poor. It occurs 2 / 3 months after Ramadan.

**Hajj (Annual Pilgrimage to Mecca):** consists of several ceremonies meant to symbolize the essential concepts of the Islamic faith, such as submission, brotherhood, and unity, and to commemorate the trials of the Prophet Abraham and his family. Required once in a Muslim's lifetime, over two million Muslims perform the pilgrimage annually.

## **Common Misconceptions**

**Muslims are Arabs.** Although countries such as Iraq, Qatar, Egypt and Jordan are mainly Muslim, the majority of Muslims are spread around the world with communities in most countries. The US has around 7 million Muslims or 2 ½ percent of the population

**The Sword of Islam.** The concept that the rise of Islam, especially in the century after Mohammed's death was spread by the sword is a myth. People in many lands chose Islam and it has spread to countries where there have been no armies (Indonesia, Africa and the US)

**Jihad:** The common perception is that jihad means holy war against those who do not accept Islam. Jihad means struggle and it is primarily used in the context of a life long struggle that a Muslim will undertake to develop temperance, generosity and to prepare for the eventual reckoning.

**Islam and Women.** Another perception is that Islam oppresses women. The Qur'an does lay out different rules guiding men and women, but they are mainly aligned to the different roles each sex played in society, and was incredibly progressive for its time. Historically Islamic communities have given significant rights to women in areas such as divorce, ownership rights and political elections. Women have been leaders in four of the five most populous Muslim-majority countries (Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Turkey). However different cultures have oppressed women sometimes under the guise of a branch of the Muslim religion. The Taliban is an example.

**72 Virgins.** The myth is that the Qur'an promises 72 virgins to any suicide attacker who dies on behalf of Allah. In fact the Qur'an forbids suicide in all situations. A dubious quote attributed to Mohammed states 'The least reward for the people of Heaven is 80,000 servants and 72 wives.' This is probably where the number came from and there is little corroboration for the quotation.