

Islam in the African American Experience
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Among the sources from which Unitarian Universalists draw inspiration are wisdom from the world's religions, as well as words and deeds of prophetic women and men. This morning, we focus on Islam in the African American experience because many of us have a lot to learn about Muslim diversity and because many of us have a lot to learn about the experiences of African Americans. We miss too much of human experience if we listen only to the voices of dominant narratives. This homily will contain more facts and figures than usual on a Sunday morning. It is not so much remedial religious education but rather my attempt to convey how much I care about the topic in hopes that you may come to care about it, as well.

I care about it because I took a semester-long course in seminary about Islam in the African American experience taught by Dr. Ibrahim Abdurrahman Farajaje, an African American man who converted to Islam in the months following September 11, 2001. Think about the timing of that for a moment. Islam means "to surrender." Islam, he said, is about you and the Beloved. Surrender is about you and the Beloved. Those of us resistant to the concept of religious surrender might reflect on what it is like to be in love and to surrender to our Beloved. That is what is going on inside spiritually mature Muslims. Allah is the Arabic word for God – not a distinctly Muslim God but the one God.

The facts and insights I will share primarily come from that course and from Dr. Farajaje's article "History of Islam in the United States," which is available online.¹ I have 20 printed copies of the article here, which you are welcome to pick up after the

¹ "History of Islam in the United States" by Professor Dr. Ibrahim Abdurrahman Farajaje. See <http://sksm.edu/research/speeches/islamhistory.pdf>.

service. Let us begin with the Al-Fatiha (“The Opening”), the first verses from the Quran, shown on the cover of the Order of Service. Muslims recite the Al-Fatiha and other elements of prayer in Arabic regardless of their first language. The Arabic is read from right to left and from top to bottom. An observant Muslim repeats the Al-Fatiha 17 times each day during the five prayer sessions. The Arabic text with transliteration and translation in English is as follows:²

1:1 الرَّحْمَنُ الرَّحِيمُ بِسْمِ اللَّهِ

Bismillāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful:

1:2 الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

Al ḥamdu lillāhi rabbi l-‘ālamīn

All Praises to Allah, Lord of the Universe.

1:3 الرَّحْمَنُ الرَّحِيمُ

Ar raḥmāni r-raḥīm

The Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

1:4 مَالِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ

Māliki yawmi d-dīn

Sovereign of the Day of Judgment.

1:5 إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ

Iyyāka na'budu wa iyyāka nasta'īn

You alone we worship, and You alone we ask for help

² See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Fatiha>.

اهدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ 1:6

Ihdinā ṣ-Ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm

Guide us to the straight path;

صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ 1:7

Ṣirāṭ al-laḏīna an'amta 'alayhim ġayril maġḏūbi 'alayhim walāḏ ḏāllīn

The path of those on whom You have bestowed your grace, not of those who have earned Your anger, nor of those who go astray.

A member of this congregation who is fairly new said to me recently, “I am surprised that there is no time of prayer in the service. Why is that?” “Many Unitarian Universalist congregations do not have a culture that supports prayer in the Sunday service,” I said. Yet some people appreciate prayer, and some people long for it. “Joys and Sorrows” may be the Unitarian Universalist equivalent of “prayers of the people.” In the coming months, I will periodically include prayer as part of the service. By beginning with the Al-Fatiha, I am not intending to draw attention to an exotic “other” tradition, which could be termed a form of “Orientalism.” (Orientalism ostensibly elevates the “other” but really puts it down in subtle ways.) Instead, I am hoping to connect with Islam’s prayer tradition from an openness to prayer within this congregation’s culture.

Earlier this month, Yusuf Islam gave his first concert in Los Angeles in 30 years.³ Before his conversion to Islam three decades ago, Cat Stevens was a successful singer songwriter. His album “Tea for the Tillerman” was in steady rotation on my record player back in the day. Yusuf Islam’s new CD is “Roadsinger.” According to the *Los Angeles Times* reviewer Randy Lewis, “His new songs reflect a perspective of one who . . . has found what he’s looking for spiritually, but never in a proselytizing or patronizing

³ See http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/music_blog/2009/05/cat-stevens-then-yusuf-now-at-el-rey.html.

way. As he sang in a new song inspired by medieval German theologian Meister Eckhart, “To be what you must, you must give up what you are.”

“[The title track of the new “Roadsinger” CD is] about a troubadour (representing all spiritual seekers) who ultimately finds his way.” For his final encore, Yusuf Islam sang “Peace Train.” Peter Lewis concludes, “He’d ridden the train across the bridge to the part in the human spirit that refuses to give up hope for a better world.”

This morning, let us climb aboard that train to the part in the human spirit that refuses to give up hope for a better world. This morning, the focus is not on Islam in general but on Islam in the African American experience. Centuries of slavery and ongoing systemic racism continue to shape our lives as Americans, whatever our skin color or racial or ethnic identity. The Underground Railroad which helped slaves to reach freedom is a powerful reminder that resistance to oppression is possible and necessary. In our mind’s eye and with empathy that grows stronger with each heartbeat, let us open ourselves to what we might call the “underground railroad peace train.”

The history of Islam in this country from the time of the Middle Passage of the Atlantic slave trade to the mid 20th century *is* the history of African American Muslims. Learning about this history means encountering both “Islamophobia” and systemic racism. Dr. Farajaje calls it “racialized Islamophobia.” “‘Islamophobia’ refers to unfounded hostility towards Islam. It refers also to the practical consequences of such hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals (or those perceived to be Muslim) and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from political and social affairs.”⁴ An important aspect of Islamophobia is viewing Islam as something monolithic and static. No religion is monolithic and static, including Islam.

Is every question or criticism of Muslims and Islamic culture Islamophobic? No, of course not. According to Dr. Farajaje, we can tell the difference between sincere

⁴ “History of Islam in the United States” by Prof. Dr. Ibrahim Abdurrahman Farajaje, page 1. See <http://sksm.edu/research/speeches/islamhistory.pdf>.

questions and comments and questions and comments rooted in Islamophobia by running through these screening questions:

- 1) Do we see Islam as something monolithic and stable or as something diverse and dynamic?
- 2) Do we see Islam as “other” and separate or as similar to and interdependent with other religious traditions?
- 3) Do we see Islam as being inferior to other traditions or as being different from and equal to them?
- 4) Do we see Islam as an aggressive entity or as a cooperative partner?
- 5) What do we mean by “Islam”?
- 6) Do we see Muslims as being manipulative or sincere?
- 7) Can we engage with Muslim criticisms of “the West” or do we reject them out of hand?
- 8) Is discriminating behavior against Muslims OK with us or do we challenge this behavior?
- 9) Is anti-Muslim discourse seen as natural, or do we see it as a problem?

With these questions echoing in this sanctuary, here are some facts, figures, and estimates. In the year 610 of the Common Era, at age 40, Muhammad (Peace and Blessings be upon Him) received his first revelation; the revelations came periodically for 23 years, ending in the year 632. The Qur’an is rhythmic prose, not a story. There are 114 chapters and 6,236 verses. The Qur’an has been memorized by millions of people.

Africa itself has a special place in Islam because 1) The first group of Muslims to leave Mecca went to Abyssinia (now called Ethiopia); 2) According to one of the original teachings, an African slave was one of the first to become a Muslim (his name was Bilal, and he was the first muezzin, or person who chants the call to prayer); and 3) Africa is not connected to European colonial power, that is, Islam was not brought to Africa with an intent to serve the ruling class.

Muslims visited the land that is now the United States along with the earliest contingents of explorers from abroad in the 16th century, and African Muslim slaves were taken here beginning in the early 17th century. It is estimated that round 20% to 60% of the Africans enslaved and brought to this country were Muslim.⁵ The life stories of a few African Muslims are known from mid-19th century reports of the New York Ethnological Society.

For reasons related to the appalling conditions of slavery, Islamic traditions tended to disappear as its first or second generation practitioners died. There are exceptions, such as in the Georgia Sea Islands, where Muslim culture survived for generations. “In the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) went to the Georgia Sea Islands, where they gathered stories from the descendants of the Muslim slaves, Bilali and Salih Bilali. They spoke of their ancestors as still wearing Islamic style clothing, practicing Islam, speaking and writing Arabic.”⁶ The great grandchildren of Bilali and Salih Bilali told of how their grandmothers wore hijab (head covering) and cooked rice cakes for the children at the end of fasting days.

There were three primary institutions through which African American Muslims connected with each other, grew spiritually, and supported each other: The Moorish Science Temple, The Nation of Islam, and The Ahmadiyya Muslim Movement. To understand the appeal of the Moorish Science Temple and The Nation of Islam, we must

⁵ I recall, the 20% figure is the low-end estimate I came across in reading for the “Islam in the African American Experience” course at Starr King School for the Ministry. The 40% to 60% estimate is by Dr. Farajaje in “History of Islam in the United States,” referenced earlier, page 3.

⁶ “History of Islam in the United States” by Dr. Ibrahim Abdurrahman Farajaje, page 4.

try to understand the spiritual trauma, psychological trauma, and all too often physical trauma experienced by African Americans in the post-Civil War South. When the roughly 250 year history of slavery in this country ended with the Civil War, the fortunes of most African Americans did not improve significantly. Individuals and institutions found ways to keep many African Americans essentially as indentured servants on Southern farms.

Between the 1890's and World War I, an extraordinary migration occurred within this country. This "Great Migration" saw millions of African Americans leave the rural South for the industrial cities of the North in hopes of better economic opportunities and a chance to avoid violence at the hands of whites. Dr. Farajaje writes, "The Great Migration basically created a population of Black refugees from the horrors of the apartheid South. Race riots, police-sanctioned torture and executions, castrations and rapes created a climate of racial violence that led many to seek an identity outside of these horrors. People were looking for something that would help them find meaning in what appeared to be a meaningless and violently chaotic world."⁷

The Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam were both products of the search for meaning. Noble Drew Ali founded the Moorish Science Temple in 1913. The Moorish Science Temple published material to help refugees from the South learn how to read and write in English. He taught that Black people in the United States were descendants of Moroccans. His teachings drew from Theosophy and Freemasonry. Noble Drew Ali was murdered in 1929, and membership dropped, yet around 10,000 African Americans had been affiliated with the Moorish Science Temple by 1950.

The Nation of Islam began in the 1930s, when Wali Fard Muhammad began teaching Elijah Muhammad and others in Detroit, Michigan, that African Americans were descendants of the "original Black nation of Asia, the Tribe of Shabazz" and that they had lost their original religion, Islam. In his theology, white people were the descendants of a genetic mutation developed by a mad scientist. Fard and later Elijah Muhammad,

⁷ "History of Islam in the United States" by Dr. Ibrahim Abdurrahman Farajaje, page 4.

blended these teachings with elements of Islam. By the 1950's the Nation of Islam had spread throughout the United States and became the major voice for Islam in the United States. The Nation was persecuted by the FBI and the CIA.

For 15 years, Malcolm X was the face of the Nation of Islam. In 1964, Malcolm X broke ties with the Nation of Islam and embraced Sunni Islam. He was known as El-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz at the end of his life. With the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975, there have been name changes and shifts in leadership, organizational names, and emphasis too intricate to adequately summarize in my short time this morning.

African Americans came to Islam not only through the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam, but also through the Ahmadiyya Muslim Movement. This movement began in the Punjab region of India in the 1880's and is considered "heretical" by many Muslims for its belief in ongoing prophecy. However, the Ahmadiyya thought of themselves as a renewal movement within Islam.

The first Ahmadiyya missionary to the United States, Mufti Muhammad Sadiq, arrived in 1920 during a period of great anti-Asian hostility. The 1917 Oriental Exclusion Act, the 1921 Johnson Act, and the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act essentially prohibited immigration by those outside of Europe. These Acts had a major impact on the development of the Muslim community in the United States. These Acts created a context in which the predominant racial/ethnic group in the Muslim community would continue to be people of African descent up until the 1960's, when these Acts were repealed.

In 1917, the Ahmadiyya published the first English interpretation of the Qur'an for the United States. For decades, they provided the majority of English-language Islamic literature for all of the various African American communities. Women converts, especially African American women, played a central role in the life of Muslim communities. "From the early 20th century until the 1960s, when Muslim immigrants from other countries began to arrive in the United States and openly attack the Islamicity of the Ahmadiyya, the movement was predominantly African American with African

American leaders.”⁸ To state the obvious, immigration patterns played a major role in shaping the history of Islam in this country.

To bring us up to the present day, in the U.S. prison-industrial complex, the rate of conversion to Islam may be more than 30,000 each year. It is estimated that more than 300,000 prisoners are converts to Islam.⁹ One quarter of the people in the world identify as Muslim, but only 18% of Muslims in the world speak Arabic as the language of their daily life. Today, 60% of Muslims in the United States are of African descent.¹⁰ There are about five African American Muslim scholars of Islam in the U.S. The Muslim woman scholar Dr. Amina Wadud spoke at one of the Claremont colleges recently.

I conclude by jumping back in time to 15th century Transylvania (Transylvania is now part of Romania). There has been a Unitarian presence in Transylvania for over 500 years. In 15th century Transylvania, Unitarians partnered with Sultan Sulayman. Unitarians flourished in Muslim Turkey. Unitarians and Muslims have a history of cooperation and mutual respect that dates back 500 years. Recollection of this tradition of cooperation and mutual respect was lost by the wayside as history lurched onward, but we can begin again. If we do not influence each other in positive ways, we will do so in negative ways. The choice is ours.

We must choose to learn, choose to educate ourselves about the diversity within Islam. Part of current tension in world Islam is that the wahabi’s (Saudi’s) are attempting to “purify” Islam despite the fact that there is no such things as religious purity. There is always “mixity”! For example, the Nation of Islam is not “fake Islam” but rather Islam mixed with other things. We cannot deny that there are tensions between immigrant Muslims and “indigenous” Muslims (African American Muslims). Media images create a template against which we see, and that is precisely why we need to proactively educate ourselves and educate each other.

⁸ “History of Islam in the United States” by Dr. Ibrahim Abdurrahman Farajaje, page 7.

⁹ “History of Islam in the United States” by Dr. Ibrahim Abdurrahman Farajaje, page 9.

¹⁰ Statistics in these three sentences are from the “Islam in the African American Experience” course at Starr King School for the Ministry.

African American contributions to Islam are many. Let us pause in acknowledgement and gratitude. May our identities always hold many possibilities. May all religious congregations be locations of resistance to oppression. May it be so!