

“Towards a Unitarian Universalist *Tawhid*”

Rev. Bob Janis-Dillon

The First Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hunterdon County

May 2nd, 2010

In countries across the Muslim world, you will hear the call to prayer recited each day at dawn, the first of five prayer times during the day. In beautiful Arabic tones that sound almost like singing, the Muezzin recites the profession of faith that every Muslim knows by heart: “I witness that there is no God but God, and Mohammed in the prophet.” Hearing these words, every Muslim will be reminded of her faith, reminded what the center of life is for her: not what happened at work that day, not her hobbies or her health, not even her family, but God. Five times every day, she reorients her life around her understanding of God.

Few, if any, of us are Muslims. But I think it is worthwhile for each of us to consider: what is the center of our life?

This is a sermon about Unitarianism. But it is not about Unitarianism from the Protestant perspective, which is what is the specific version of Unitarianism which our tradition inherits, grapples with, and accepts or rejects or transforms or renews or whatever. Instead, we look today at Unitarianism from the Muslim perspective. Unitarianism, in its most basic definition, means belief in one, and only one God, but I want us to go a little deeper than this basic definition here today. Some of us believe in no Gods, some of us believe in one God, a few of us believe in many Gods. Many of us aren’t sure. That’s fine. This sermon is not concerned with counting the number of Gods you believe in. That question gets old after a while. I am interested in asking you: what is the center of your life? And here the concept of Islamic Unitarianism might help us answer that question for ourselves.

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world and has the second most adherents, after Christianity. Like Christianity, Islam has roots in the theology of Judaism and the culture of the Middle East. Also like Christianity, as Islam has expanded to other cultures it has taken on a local flavor wherever it goes. Many times this local flavor includes some brand of mysticism; mysticism (often in the form of Sufism), is very common in Islam and has been for many centuries. Fundamentalism, in its modern form, is a much more recent development in both Christianity and Islam. Both Islamic and Christian Fundamentalism sprung up around the turn of the 20th century as a reaction to scientific advancement and fears of a new way of life. As in Christianity, fundamentalists are a small but powerful minority in the Islamic community as a whole.

Islam, proclaimed by Mohammed in the 6th and 7th Century of the Common Era, is the most recent of the major world religions. Some of you may already know about the life of Mohammed and the recording of the Qur'an, which Muslim tradition states was revealed to Mohammed directly from God. Many of you also may have heard of the Five Pillars, the central tenets of Muslim faith: the *Shahadah* or profession of faith, praying, fasting at Ramadan, giving of alms to the poor, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca. As I said, this sermon I will not attempt to give an overview of 1400 years of Muslim history in 14 minutes, instead I'll use our shared time to focus on what aspect of Muslim tradition: their Unitarianism. Their Unitarianism is actually expressed in the *Shahadah*, or profession of faith, the first Pillar. The religious Muslim recites the *Shahadah* several times every day. It's the first thing they say in the morning, in the five daily prayers the *Shahadah* is said, it's said every time they wash and last thing at night. And again, this is what they say, over and over: "there is no God but God, and Mohammed is the prophet." (Wherever they live, Muslims say this in Arabic, the language of Mohammed).

But *Tawhid*, Muslim Unitarianism is much more than a simple declaration that there is only one God. It describes a unity of all things, or as we might say in Unitarian Universalism, an interconnectedness. The Iranian Muslim scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes, "Unity is the alpha and omega of Islam...Unity is, in addition to a metaphysical assertion about the nature of the Absolute, a method of integration, a means of becoming whole and realizing the profound oneness of all existence...The *Shahadah* means that man should not be compartmentalized either in his thoughts or his actions. Every action, even the manner of walking and eating, should manifest a spiritual norm which exists in his mind and heart."

Everything is connected. Sound familiar? And because everything is connected, we should integrate our lives, so that our inner life reflects our outer life and vice versa.

A Muslim I was talking to helped me put this in perspective. He said, the beauty of the Muslim prayer system for him is that he is reminded five times every day that God is at the center of his life. He says the daily prayer helps make it very difficult for him to stray from his best intentions, from what God requires of him. It is not that he is a perfect human being: indeed, he admits to the same urges and temptations that most of us live with. But, he says, it is impossible for him to stray for very long, because the straying becomes such a burden to lift up to God every single day, five times a day. He would have to stop praying, because as long as he's praying five times a day, it's just easier to stay on track than to have to be dishonest with God over and over again. So, he knows that as long as he shows up at prayer, it will keep him on the right track in his life. His life is simplified for him. He's doesn't have to worry so much about how he will behave in each and every situation – as long as he shows up for prayers, he knows

the rest of life will fall into place. Although we worship less often, and although our list of commandments is held in the heart and not in any book, I have heard some of you say similar things about coming to church on Sunday: it keeps you steady through the week.

For a Muslim, there is no distinction between spiritual life and secular life. Every aspect of life is weaved into the same pattern: the Mosque, the family, work, politics, everything. There is a line of the Qur'an which describes how integrated God is in everyday life. After a lot of lines describe how magnificent and transcendent and all-powerful God is, God says in the Qur'an, "We created the human, and we know what he whispers to himself. We are closer to him than his jugular vein." (God uses "we" in the Qur'an, as a sign that God is not a person like other people, but something entirely different).

"We are closer to humans than her jugular vein." God is not some otherworldly presence that descends every now and again, but an everyday presence and the center of the life of the Muslim. And so I ask you again, what is your center? This is a deeply important question, I believe. It defines how you will live your life, what you will be most faithful to, what you will return to again and again.

I had some interesting conversations about this with a few people at the congregation. Harriet Scooler told me a very interesting story. She said when she worked in a large company, she went to a training once where people were asked to list the priorities in their lives. Some people listed work as the highest priority in their life. Not surprisingly, over the years they did very well at work, and were promoted. Harriet listed "my family" which was, and remains, the center of her life. She is no longer working at the company. She does not regret the way she prioritized life one bit. Her family has always been her center, she knows this well, and this helps her integrate her life.

Kim Mason said the center of her life is "connections" – the connections she's made with a certain number of close friends and family. Rather than her center being one thing like God or family, for her the center is the relationships between her and others. Just as a Muslim does with prayer to God, Kim returns again and again to her connections. She nourishes her friendships on a regular basis, and in times of trouble she turns to them for solace. They inspire and sustain her.

I found Harriet's and Kim's answers both fascinating – and I'm looking forward to hearing yours – but mine is slightly different. For me, the center of my life is a creative energy that I feel in my life. There is an energy in my life that I feel and that connects me to the universe. It often appears when I'm being creative, when I'm out in nature, or when I'm in meaningful relationship or community. My whole life I've felt a kind of quiet confidence that I could always

tap into this energy, when I needed it, but I can't really tell you why. It is an energy of creative transformation – a kind of love that I feel within myself that sustains me, challenges me, In emotional, psychological terms, I guess this energy is the totality of my relationship to the universe on the deepest level of my being. For shorthand, I sometimes call this creative energy “God”. But this isn't the type of God that might exist or might not exist, it simply is. It can't really be proven or disproven, it is just a way of describing the totality of the universe that I feel within me but is much, much larger than I am, much, much bigger than my ego. It's something I can tap into that is at my core, but also connects me with the world outside of my ego.

Now this energy may sound wonderful, and it is, but it is also very challenging. However you prioritize your life, there are sacrifices involved. Harriet didn't get that promotion, because she refused to make work the center of her life. For Kim, putting her connections first may mean giving up other things. There are times in my life where a certain path I could've taken didn't feel true to my relationship to this creative energy, and I had to let that path go. Like Harriet I've had opportunities in my life I've had to let go: a high paying administrative position, a chance to work at a bed-and-breakfast at a deserted Caribbean island (I still miss that one!) At the time it was hard to give up these opportunities, but as long as I pursued them, I didn't feel in balance in my life. But if I had never followed that creative energy I never would have ended up in ministry, where I feel very much at home, I never would have lived the life I had. So what you put at the center is crucially important.

So here is what Unitarian Universalist *tawhid* might mean. It means that we integrate our lives – that we don't compartmentalize the different spheres of our life. If we think an act is immoral if we do it at home, it should be immoral if we do it at work and if we do it while we're on vacation. What we integrate it around, as you heard, can vary from person to person. But I think it's important for us all to consider what is at the center of our lives. What is the first thing we turn to in the morning and the last thing we turn to at night? What do we put before all else? I invite to pay attention to whatever that truly is. If you know what your center is, don't apologize for it, and make sure you are true to it, because this will determine your call to living your best life. As the Unitarian essayist and minister Ralph Waldo Emerson says,

“A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.”

May what we worship uplift us, inspire us, and connect us to those around us. And may the center of our life bring us into a place of peace with ourselves and peace with the universe that is our home.

Peace be with you all,

AMEN