

**East is East and West is West**  
**October 11, 2009**

*Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,  
Til Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat,  
But there is neither East nor West, border, nor breed, nor birth,  
When two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of the earth!*

Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Ballad of East and West," from which that famous first line comes, is one of his admiring tales of English soldiers and Muslim resistance fighters in British-occupied India. Of course he calls the Muslims bandits, not resistance fighters—from the perspective of the occupier the insurgent is always an outlaw. The two strong men of the poem are a "bandit" who steals a regimental Colonel's favorite horse and the Colonel's son, who goes to get it back. They have a harrowing chase and each passes up the chance to kill the other. In the end they are "blood brothers," bonded by courage, fighting prowess, and bravado in the face of death. East and West meet and become comrades.

Is battle really the only ground where this transformation of foes into comrades can take place? If so, we should fear for the future of our world. We know too well that the field of battle is not poetic; nowadays before the Colonel's son and the insurgent ever met, someone would have been blown up—no epic pursuit, no chance for enemies to admire each other. Instead we face the quagmire of war whose resolution tops the headlines this very week—and at the center is a cultural, political and religious divide. Authors John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed spent hours pouring over Gallop poll data to examine what caused the gap between East and West—and concluded that misinformation about one another was a chief cause of extremism on both sides.

We need a better meeting place for East and West. That's part of the reason David decided to offer a discussion class around Islam, using Karen Armstrong's short history of Muslim religion and culture as the primary text for our exploration. Armstrong's book offers a solid basic grasp on the history of the Muslim world, and points toward a more informed understanding of why the present situation is such a mess. Whether you choose to take the class or not, consider reading this book, and then pass it along to someone else who wants to understand Islam better—or to someone you hear saying insulting or ignorant things about Muslims.

One of the most reassuring discoveries Armstrong offers is the confirmation that Islam is still a religion in evolution. The world's more than 1.6 billion Muslims have many different notions about how their spiritual path is to be followed. Islam's response to the demands and hazards of the modern world is still taking shape; liberal and moderate voices within Islam exist just as in Christianity or Judaism and have since the earliest successors to Muhammed. Esposito and Mogahed found that the West forms its impressions based on a small radical minority in the face of what they saw as a "silenced majority." Yet it is striking how little many of us actually know about Islam. Unitarian Universalists believe that all world religions have important truths to share, still it seems we've had a harder time finding those truths in Islam.

Language is one barrier. Huston Smith points out that Westerners wrestle to appreciate the power of the Qur'an for Muslims. English writers such as Carlyle and Edward Gibbon dismissed

the Qur'an as tiresome and incoherent, and contemporary English-speaking people often find the Qur'an in translation heavy going. Yet for Muslim readers the Qur'an in Arabic is the most beautiful writing imaginable; most agree with Muhammad, who called it "that incomparable Book, one piece of which puts all your golden poetry to shame." The spoken word in Arabic has a music and rhythm of its own that does not translate well, content or context. For Muslims, to hear the Qur'an is to listen to Allah speaking. As Smith says, "In the Qur'an God speaks in the first person."

Translation alone doesn't take all our discomforts away. In 2005, a Gallop poll asked US citizens what we admire most about Muslim societies and the most frequent answer was "nothing." Many have the ideologue-induced, media-hyped idea of the Islamic threat instilled within them and those of us who try to think independently are uneasy with a sense of democracy that assumes the presence and priority of God in political decision-making. If democracy does take root in the Arab world, it results in Islamic republics, not secular states, and that is worrisome. This grows out of a basic premise in the religion—which seeks to make the religion a part of all activities of life. The first mosque was a place where people gathered to talk about all concerns—social, political and military. The Qur'an prescribes tolerance for religious minorities in an Islamic society, and in fact in the medieval world it was far safer to be in the religious minority in a Muslim country than in Christian Europe. Still, as Westerners, we mistrust the guarantee of religious freedom that any religious state can offer. We should take note that fairly recent polls found 46 percent of our fellow citizens surveyed who thought that Christian scriptures should inform legislation.

Those of us on the liberal side of the spectrum are uneasy with a way of thinking about women and men that doesn't feel like equal respect and freedom (though as Armstrong points out strictures about women were added four generations after Muhammad's time to mimic the patriarchy of Byzantine Greek Christian culture.). Though modern Islam contains assumptions about appropriate gender roles that we can't accept uncritically, we also need to know that Muhammad in his time, gave women new rights and freedoms.

And as we wrestle with our concerns and fears, at the same time, Muslims are uneasy with modern Western culture, too. Islamic tradition calls the time before Islam *jahiliyyah* (*ja-hi-lee-yah*), the chaos. Mecca, Medina and the rest of the Arab world were divided and disorganized. Mecca was a nominal democracy, but its real social order was focused on personal and family wealth, prestige, and power. It was a violent, materialistic, and self-interested culture where community loyalty and cohesiveness were very low. David notes that modern American culture, at least at its worst, has a lot in common with that pre-Islamic society, and wonder whether our resemblance to a new *jahiliyyah* has something to do with the mistrust so many in the Muslim world feel for America. We can imagine them looking at us and thinking, is it even possible to be religious in America, to live a faithful life?

With all these areas of uneasiness, is there a meeting ground for East and West? Is there wisdom in Islam for Unitarian Universalists to seek? Can the Flaming Chalice look to the Crescent and Star for light to navigate by? Perhaps the larger question for us—a people who claim to seek "wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life"—is whether we can learn from Islam. Think about what a good religion looks like to Unitarian

Universalists: We like our religion because it has no iron-clad doctrines, no prescribed set of spiritual practices for everyone. Some of us maintain daily prayers, meditations, or other spiritual disciplines, but most don't. For us, making justice, offering compassion to others, and seeking knowledge about the ethical are the real tests of a religious life's authenticity.

One meeting place has long been Sufi poets such as Rumi and Hafiz. They offer a wonderful sense of the closeness and availability of the Divine in our lives, which is very much akin to our Transcendentalist view that the Divine Spark flares within each of us and that everyday experience is permeated with holiness, if we can only learn to see it.

“Come, come, whoever you are; wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving—ours is no caravan of despair; though you have broken your vows a thousand times, come yet again, come!”

That's Unitarian Universalism, isn't it—whoever you are, welcome; though you have often fallen short of the mark, a place is still waiting for you! Still, to truly learn from another faith tradition, we have to go beyond the beautifully phrased insight that gives me a new way of expressing what we already believed. We need to look for the deep wisdom of Islam, the gift powerful enough to transform lives. For that, I need to risk looking at where Islam challenges my comfortable certainties and preconceptions. I need to seek out insights that disturb my habitual ways of thinking and living.

The discipline of the Five Pillars is one of those. It pushes us to question our own commitment, our own discipline. What concrete ways are there for Unitarian Universalists to show our faith? When do we declare our belief? Perhaps each of us would have our own Pillars. How about a discipline of appreciation, saying “thank you” to the people around us and to the Universe? Most of us would benefit from a discipline of loving thoughts and speech, stopping five or ten times a day to remind myself that all the people in my life are a gift. We surely can embrace a discipline of activism, working to make change by being genuinely engaged in the democratic process. Could we have a holy month in which we work toward justice every single day? Discipline could be a meeting ground—if we're as serious about ours as Muslims are about theirs. What would your Pillars be? Are they strong enough to build a spiritual life on?

The core of Islam, the idea of submission deeply challenges us. We think of submission as self-abasement, yet Muslims understand it as changing your life to accept the invitation of that larger than ourselves. That might be a meeting place, too. As I grow to understand and articulate what is transcendent in my life and in the world, do I really give my life to it? If I believe in an all-encompassing Love, what would a life of surrender to that power look like? Can I embrace that life with total commitment—or will I hold something back, will I retain the right to be hateful or sarcastic on special occasions, will I insist on keeping exceptions to the rule of Love?

Finally, what do I have to learn from a faith that says life, community, and faith must be completely intertwined? The Muslim ideal of *Tawhid* (taw-heed) Unity, teaches that ultimately everything is wrapped up in Allah, the Source of All. This already seems like common ground to me. Doesn't my Unitarian Universalist faith also teach Unity, that the Universe is woven in a single and sacred fabric? No exceptions. No crossed fingers. *Everything* is part of a single great Unity that is holy. Now if that's true, shouldn't I be striving always—that's *jihad*, by the way, a

word that actually means striving in faith—to make that Unity more apparent, more visible, more generously available in my life and in the world?

Can East meet West, and West meet East? Perhaps liberal religion has something of value to offer to Muslims as well—but in order to enter a genuine dialogue, we have to be as serious about our faith as they are about theirs. When our two faiths stand face to face with one another, letting ourselves be challenged by each others' strongest truths, then perhaps the twain shall meet, to learn from each other and to grow in understanding together. The world will be better for it.