

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 9, August 14, 2011, dedicated to the glory of God!

“Allah: A Christian Response”

Part I of II in the sermon series “Islam and Christianity”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation.

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During the month of Ramadan in 610 A.D., an illiterate Arab businessman had an experience that changed the history of the world. Every year at this time, Muhammad ibn Abdallah used to retire to a cave on the summit of Mount Hira, just outside Mecca, where he prayed, fasted and gave alms to the poor. By 610, the 40-year-old Mohammad had become deeply concerned about the growing divide between rich and poor in the Arabian Peninsula. The rich were becoming richer and treating the poor worse and worse. The nomadic code of compassion and concern for the poor was being abandoned. Murder was increasing. Hunger, starvation and poverty were arising at an alarming rate (sounds strikingly like our times). A compassionate man, Mohammad was beside himself as he climbed Mt. Hira and entered the cave.

All of that changed on the 21st night of Ramadan, when Muhammad awoke to a devastating presence, the angel of the Lord Gabriel, who squeezed him tightly and said, **“READ!”**

As an illiterate man, he answered, *“I am not one of they who can read.”* The Angel insisted, *“Read!”* Again Muhammad said, *“I am not one of they who can read.”*

Now the Angel Gabriel embraced him and repeated this exchange saying, *“Read in the name of Allah (God) who created mankind from a clot of blood. Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One, who by the pen taught man what he did not know.”* Now Mohammad repeated the angel’s words aloud and two years later, when he first spoke of this encounter to his wife, he recalled to her, *“It was as if the words were impressed on my heart.”* He was so frightened that he fled the cave. As he was leaving, he heard Gabriel’s voice saying, *“O Muhammad, you are God’s messenger and I am Gabriel.”* (Drawn from Karen Armstrong’s *Islam*, pp.3-4 and Stephen Schwartz’s *The Two Faces of Islam*, pp. 9-10).

Having been visited by Gabriel several more times, in 612, Mohammad began to share these revelations beyond his family. He began to lead prayers with all who would join him. In time, the revelations were written down as 114 suras (or chapters), which now compose the holy book of Islam known as the Quran, which translated means, “the recitations.” These suras are vastly different in length, some a few sentences and some pages in length. It is the 114 suras that imams chant in the five time daily prayers of the mosque. Having received the revelations over 22 years, Mohammad died in 632 - having recited these all to scribes who gave us the Quran in Arabic.

It is now 1,401 years later. With the “sliver of the sun” appearing in the east we have arrived at the 14th day of Ramadan (around 4:30 a.m.). Next Sunday, is called “the Night of Power,” Laylat al-Qadr.

It is said in Islam that on Laylat al-Qadr, whatever you prayerfully ask of Allah will be granted.

Last year on Laylat al-Qadr, I was in a remote section of

Cairo, Egypt, praying with Imam Belal and hundreds of Muslim faithful in the Bani Hashim Mosque. In this mosque that had been opened for eight years, I was told that I was the only (known) Christian to have ever crossed its threshold. As the men and boys touch their heads to the ground (before me) in supplication and surrender, and the women and children did the same in a screened in area behind me, I sat quietly, observing and offering only one prayer to our one God. *“God of Abraham, help your children to be at peace. Guide us that we may live in harmony with you and one another.”*

I prayed over and over for God’s peace to be upon God’s people. As the imam sang and the faithful responded, I felt God’s peace within and around me. Perhaps, on this most historic “Night of Power” - just perhaps - this one prayer offered from the depth of my soul would reach the ears and heart of Almighty God - Allah - and be granted. In my heart of hearts, I felt that night (and still feel today) that if we cannot find a way of peace, the Night of Power, along with Christmas Eve and the first night of Passover and all our holy nights and days of religious joy, will be no more. I believe that like the people on the Arabian Peninsula 1,400 years ago, we humans created have such a divide between ourselves religiously and economically, that we need God to grant us peace.

God of Abraham, hear our prayer . . .

This week, over half of the world’s population - 1.3 billion Muslims and 1.7 billion Christians - 3 billion people worldwide - will worship one God. The question is : Are we worshipping the same God?

When conservative evangelical Pastor Rick Warren (of *The Purpose Driven Life* fame) offered the invocation at President Obama’s inauguration on January 20, 2009, he created a firestorm among his conservative brethren when he not only acknowledged God as our Father (Christianity) and “the God of Israel” (Judaism) but added, “You are the compassionate and merciful one toward everyone you have

made.” This final phrase of his opening acknowledged as well the God of Islam - Allah - who is spoken of throughout the Quran as compassionate and merciful. Conservatives skewered Pastor Warren calling him a blasphemer and adding, “Allah cannot be God.” They went on to say, you choose Jesus or Allah - but they are incompatible because Allah cannot be God to the Christians.

I find this perspective strange and filled with lies. As I worshiped in Arabic-speaking Christian churches throughout my time in the Middle East, “Allah” was one the word I recognized all the time. Genesis begins, “In the beginning, “Allah” created the heavens and the earth.” “Allah” is the Arabic name for God - no more, no less. Arabic Christians definitely worship “Allah” - although they are clear in pointing out their differences with Islam.

In his 2011 book, *Allah: A Christian Response*, Yale Divinity School professor of theology Miroslav Volf writes: “For monotheists to worship God means, among other things, to espouse a set of values about what ultimately matters in human life. To worship a different god is to espouse a different set of values. A clash of gods is a clash of ultimate values. That’s why the question of whether a given community worships the same god as another community has always been a crucial cultural and political question, not just a theological one” (p. 7).

For example, when the war in Iraq got underway and tensions began escalating between Muslim communities and some Western governments, U.S. Deputy Undersecretary of Defense Lt. General William Boykin suggested that, “Allah is not a real God and that Muslims worship an idol” (not a theologian and certainly not a diplomat either). Pat Robertson was blunter. He said, “The conflicts between Islam and the West concern the matter of whether, the moon God of Mecca known as Allah is supreme or whether the Judeo-Christian Jehovah, the God of the Bible, is supreme.” Robertson’s claim that Allah is the moon God of Mecca is historically false

and turns the differences between the God of the Quran and the God of the Bible into a bad and damaging caricature. Nevertheless, Robertson correctly expressed the political impact of a radical difference between the gods that people variously worship.

So what is the truth of Allah? Do Muslims, Christians and Jews worship the same God? I believe the answer is "Yes."

What I am about to say may be disconcerting to some of you. To others, you feel supported in your long held beliefs. I am deeply grounded my conviction that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior. Nevertheless, I affirm a number of things about Allah.

I believe that there is only one God in our monotheistic faiths. We do understand God's character differently; the object of our worship is the same. Islam and Christianity describe God as loving and just, even if we have differences of understanding how God's love and justice are seen and known. The God of Islam and the God of Christianity - the one and only God - commands that we love our neighbors, even though the way in which we should love our neighbors differs. We both have robust moral frameworks to our faith traditions. We both (should) resist contemporary culture's claim for self-pleasure rather than love and justice for all, as the hallmark to the good life. In addition, both Christians and Muslims are called to love (the one) God with all our hearts, souls, strength and mind.

Whether we do this through the teachings of Jesus or the revelation given to Mohammad, it is all about God. Jesus points to his father. Mohammad points to Allah as the only true God to worship and praise. Like two brothers glorifying their heavenly Father, the words differ, but the measure of meaning points to only one God. While the Holy Trinity is the greatest stumbling block for the Quran and contemporary Muslims, it is also the greatest stumbling block for every great

teacher in the church (drawn from Volf, pp. 14-15).

We need to struggle with the truth claims of our faith as we actively seek to find common ground with our sisters and brothers in Islam and Christianity. We need to read the Gospels and our Bibles as people of faith, not as ideologically and politically combative captives of our various cultures.

Laylat al-Qadr, the “Night of Power,” is only one week away. One year ago on this night, I was asked by my interpreter, named Mohammed, why I had come to Egypt and the Bani Hashim Mosque. I answered, “If I were not here, then we all may not be here one day.” He understood. We ALL need to figure out how to live, love and practice our faiths in ONE GOD. The future of our life on this fragile globe we call home depends on this.

I invite you to join me in praying: *“God of Abraham, help your children to be at peace. Guide us that we may live in harmony with you and one another.”*

In part II of this sermon series. I will delve even deeper into the agreements and disagreements between Islam and Christianity. In the meantime, may we reach out in love to another and may peace prevail. *Salaam alakem! (Alakem Salaam!).*

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