

Either or Both?

By Sana Saeed February 12th, 2017

A reading from the Quran, verse 49:13:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (they who are) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).¹

¹ This is among the most famous verses of the Quran. From a male and a female can be understood as a reference to Adam and Eve (Q), but also to the creation of each human being from the fluid of a man and a woman (T). **Some interpretations reflect a gender neutral idea of this verse, where humans were created from one soul (nafs) and no one came before the other.** That people have been divided into diverse peoples and tribes that they may come to know one another indicates the manner in which differences in tribe, race, ethnicity, language, nationality, and religion can be sources through which human beings gain a deeper appreciation for the reality of the human condition. In this regard, the Prophet has said, “God does not look at your bodies, nor at your forms. He looks at your hearts.” In another ḥadīth, the heart is presented as the reality that determines all other dimensions of one’s being: “There is in man a clump of flesh. If it is pure, the whole body is pure. If it is polluted, the whole body is polluted. It is the heart.” The outward diversity that divides human beings is thus one of the greatest tests that human beings confront in the life of this world, as in 5: 48: And had God willed, He would have made you one community, but [He willed otherwise], that He might try you in that which He has given you. So vie with one another in good deeds. Unto God shall be your return all together, and He will inform you of that wherein you differ. The combination of nobility and reverence marks a remarkable transition from the attitudes of pre-Islamic Arabia, in which reverence (taqwā, which also has the sense of “God-fearing,” or just “fearing” in pre-Islamic Arabia) and nobility were considered polar opposites. This late Madinan verse thus signals a revamping of the moral order of Arabia to one in which true worth is no longer determined by lineage and grandiose displays of valor and generosity, but by the depth of faith and piety.

Verse 49:13, From the Nasr, Seyyed Hossein; Dagli, Caner K.; Dakake, Maria Massi; Lombard, Joseph E.B.; Rustom, Mohammed (2015-11-17). **The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary.** HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

If there is one verse in the Quran that I hold close to my heart this verse is one of them as a multi-religious Unitarian Universalist Muslim. It's a verse that lifts diversity and love for our neighbors and each other as THE MOST honorable act above other things. To love each other, to listen to each other and to learn about each other. Today, this verse is not only essential, but points to a message of the revolutionary nature of love. Yet, when I turn on the news or pick up the newspaper, I'm left thinking where is this love today? Can Americans come together to truly to love each other? To even listen to each other?

I realized over the last few years that this verse calls me to live up to being in right relation with the communities around me and emphasizes the importance of learning about our neighbors in the spirit of solidarity. It's a call to recognize and affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people. The same call lifted up by Muslim poet, Hafiz, who wrote in another poem "From the large jug, drink the wine of Unity, so that from your heart you can wash away the futility of life's grief." Hafiz touches on the important message in verse 49:13, using your heart to move towards unity. I find within this poem and verse a call to use empathy and deep listening to get to know those who you may not know at all yet. The same call that brought me to Unitarian Universalism and the same call that led me to pursue ministry at Harvard Divinity School.

My pluralist journey expanded in 2009, when I was hired as the Director of Youth Programs at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington in Virginia even though I was and still am a Muslim. Except, now I'm a Unitarian Universalist Muslim aka UU Muslim. I dove head first into work and learning about UUism mostly from middle and high-schoolers. At the same time, I remember visiting my Pakistani Muslim parents in that first month I was hired and witnessing a complete parental freak out. Why? because my younger brother had googled UU's

only to stumble upon websites declaring it was a cult. Unknown to me he had convinced my parents I had been hired by a cult. To some degree I don't even think my brother cared if I had joined a cult, he just enjoyed watching my parents freak out on me. It turned out to be a blessing in disguise, because I was finally able to sit with my family and talk to them about why I really liked working in a church community and many years later seeing their surprise at the fact I was serious about it.

For the longest time I always felt like I was toeing the line between completely belonging in a UU community and being okay with wanting to stay Muslim too. You see, I like being Muslim – a lot. I love the Pakistani Muslim culture I grew up in,

the prayers my grandmothers taught me to recite when I'm scared, I love the traditions,

the rituals and

the 10 day long weddings too.

But, now I love being a UU too...which I attribute to the UU tweens and teens I've learned so much from.

One of the more powerful experiences I had in my UU journey was around a time of great struggle with my family. My family of five migrated to the U.S. in 1998. Ten years later of helping with our family businesses while going to school as did my brothers we found out only four of us were given our citizenship. My middle brother Shamoan was all of a sudden undocumented, given around 60 days to move out of the country. But, he stayed in the US to

finish his undergraduate degree where he was holding down a 4.0. A few months later he was pulled over while driving and he was arrested for being undocumented.

After being held in a local prison in Virginia Beach he was transferred to a detention center in Youngstown, Ohio many miles away from us. My family lived in fear for those two weeks, because we weren't able to communicate with him and we weren't told what happened to him.

We began to plan regular road trips to Youngstown, Ohio. Now usually, I disliked family road trips, because my family is full of opinionated, strong, stubborn and politically inclined people and we drive each other nuts. But, these trips became essential to us. We had intense experiences sharing stories with the other detainees and strangers that came into our lives during this journey. He ultimately was deported and now has settled in London and isn't permitted to return.

My brother was detained in the same year when UU's were mobilizing to head to Arizona for the 2012 Justice General Assembly focused on immigration issues and human rights. In that same year, the youth I worked with at the time began taking an interest in immigration issues through meeting with neighboring youth who were dreamers. Dreamers are undocumented students hoping to attain college degrees around the country. That year was a learning year for all of us as we decided to raise \$10,000 to take fifteen members of our youth group to GA. It's a year that stays in mind in terms of the energy of the youth who squeezed every drop of learning

they could about injustices linked to immigration. And the larger support I felt through my UU community where I was able to share the story of my brother and be held.

I haven't really had the courage to say I'm a UU Muslim openly, not until this past summer. I've been conflicted about my desire to be part of two religions and two communities, though I have been going to services at First Parish Cambridge in Harvard Square and keeping up with my Islamic prayers at home or at Harvard Divinity School this past year. It brings up a lot of questions for me, particularly about being in community. What does it mean to be part of a faith community? Is being active in a religious community the only way of being seen as a legitimate UU or Muslim by others? Who is in our faith communities? And most importantly who is not here and why?

This past spring something changed for me. I went to Finding Our Way Home an annual conference for UU's of color where an old friend, Ranwa Hammamy, came up to me and said guess what we've been doing while you've been away. She proceeded to tell me she's been organizing UU Muslims (we now have a Facebook group! YAY).

Thanks in part to her proposal, we had a prayer space at the UUA's general assembly this summer, including a space for iftars. It was mind blowing for me to be going from an emotionally engaging UU worship service then 2 hours later praying and breaking fast with a group of devoted UU Muslims. Heck the whole thing was emotional! I remember sobbing and being grateful I felt safe to express myself within a community of multi-religious friends. In even greater news, since GA- Ranwa has been ordained as one of a handful of UU Muslim ministers.

As a person of color and a UU Muslim, I have grappled with formulating a 30 second elevator speech introducing what I believe in and what Unitarian Universalism means to me. It's hard to articulate, because at times I've experienced backlash from people denying my identity because of their own fears and anxieties. Some people are afraid of things like interfaith dialogue thinking that attending such a dialogue would be admitting there is more than one religious truth. But, imagine being confronted by someone who believes and practices more than one path or holds more than one truth. People being multi-religious, what a frightening thought! Or is it instead, something radical pointing to a future where UU communities will reflect a revolutionary love where people are truly building a beloved community by learning about each others nations and tribes.

Right now, being a UU Muslim is an experience and all about feeling for me - and that's a pretty good place to be. It's not about one religion lacking something compared to the other that makes me want to be multi-religious...it's about the fact that both traditions challenge me to be compassionate, affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people and be fearless when confronted by discomfort as exemplified by my ancestors.

Perhaps Rev. Abhi Janamanchi, a UU Hindu minister explains it better as he writes about sharing his journey,

“As a minister, I share my own religious journey, not because it is more important than anyone else's, but because it is part of building and sustaining relationships. I consider myself a UU-Hindu; flavored by the Islamic heritage of my father, Buddhist spiritual

practice, and the study and exploration of other world religious traditions. My Unitarian Universalism helps me be a better Hindu, a better human being. It celebrates my identity as a religious hybrid and a theological crossbreed.”

Being multi-religious or a “religious hybrid” as Rev. Jananmanchi puts it, isn’t a new thing. While being multi-religious is a rising trend in the USA according to a 2009 Pew Research Center report; it’s something that has existed historically in many South Asian countries, including Pakistan for much longer.

To reflect back on Rev. Jananmanchi’s words calling us to focus on “building and sustaining relationships” it leaves me questioning as a UU Muslim-: How do we build and sustain relationships with multi-religious UU’s in our communities? How do we minister and support them in their journeys? Ministering to people with multi-religious identities isn’t just an issue of being more welcoming, this is an issue of pastoral care for me.

While UU's are eager to build community outside of their UU congregations with multi-faith partners, people holding hybrid or multi-religious identities within Unitarian Universalism such as UU Muslims, UU Hindus, UU Jews, UU Buddhists, UU Pagans, UU Atheists/Humanists and UU Christians can be overlooked. How could engaging the interfaith center that exists *within* Unitarian Universalism, especially with the rise in UU Muslim identities, help Unitarian Universalists to engage in interfaith organizing?

It is pertinent for us to start thinking of how to create and sustain welcoming spaces for the multi-religious or those seeking pluralism, because more people will be coming to our community in the next four years searching for answers or refuge. Imagine how our spaces and communities could look in the future as we expand to welcome the multi-religious such as UU Muslims and interfaith families. Some churches could have a set of Muslim prayer rugs for those who would like to pray in a chapel. Another way to expand would be to have a small group exploring the Quran together like Bible study. Or study both the Quran and the Bible together.

These might seem like small acts of creating welcoming spaces, but to others they can be large gestures of radical hospitality. To go back to Hafiz and his poem,

“From the large jug, drink the wine of Unity,

So that from your heart you can wash away the futility of life's grief.

But like this large jug, still keep the heart expansive.

Why would you want to keep the heart captive, like an unopened bottle of wine?”

Being in solidarity means opening your heart beyond what your mind may not understand fully, and practicing deep listening from your soul. It means to practice radical hospitality everywhere, not just in this church. It calls us to take church home. Do you have Muslim neighbors? Buddhist neighbors? Humanist/Atheist neighbors? Jewish neighbors? Pagan neighbors? Have you ever sat down with them over dinner and asked them “friend, what nourishes your soul?” Which poem feeds you? Which books feed you? Which verse from your holy book do you hold close to your heart? Being a welcoming congregation doesn’t just happen in this space. It happens in your home, in your car during rush hour (if you have rush hour in Nantucket) and in your workplace too.

To answer my earlier questions, can Americans come together to truly love each other? To even listen and learn about each other’s nations and tribes? I think they can in Unitarian Universalist communities. As we begin to use our imagination to think about what it means for us to be welcoming congregations in the upcoming years, I leave you with a question to contemplate for this week: how do you imagine expanding the vision we UU’s seek to have of ourselves as pluralist communities welcoming the multi-religious and interfaith families? Amen.