

Hearing the Word, as a Muslim:
Thirteen passages of the Qur'an and religious difference
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I am honored to have been invited to speak at this afternoon's Vespers service and want to thank the Rev. Kenneth Clark for this wonderful opportunity. He has asked that I talk about this month's theme as it relates to my own work and the theme, as you know, is Hearing the Word. Since its intent is "to emphasize the artistic, religious, cultural and other ways in which we communicate with each other," I thought I would share some reflections with you on what Islam's scripture, the Qur'an, has to say about religious differences and diversity. This will also allow me to explore what it means for a Muslim to engage in inter-religious dialogue and relationships.

Naturally, I don't speak on behalf of all Muslims and nor do all Muslims hear the word as I do; but, the word exists whether some of us choose to hear it or not. Before I say anything about it, however, I want to explain why I've chosen to focus on differences at an event that seeks to honor human connections.

There are two main reasons, one political and existential and the other scriptural and theoretical. I'm linking them because I believe that encounters with the word are most meaningful when they are also relevant to our struggles in the world and that our struggles in the world also help shape our encounters with the word.

The painful political reality is that Muslims and non-Muslims in the U.S. today live in disconnected worlds. By this I mean they live alongside each other but also across deep divides of suspicion, fear, ignorance, and anger. I know this seems like a huge generalization and one that I should perhaps not be making in a chapel, but, I'm thinking of the 2004 poll conducted by this very university in which 44% of people said they favored cutting back the civil liberties of all Muslims post 9/11.¹ A Gallop poll two years later found that 34% of people think all U.S. Muslims support al-Qaeda; 39% want them to carry special ID cards, and one in four doesn't want a Muslim like myself as their neighbor.²

So, to be a Muslim today means to live with the burden of collective guilt and the threat of collective punishment. It means, in effect, to bear the "mark of the plural," in the words of the famous Tunisian Jewish intellectual, Albert Memmi.³ By this, Memmi meant the European colonial practice of treating every colonized

¹ <http://www.news.cornell.edu/releases/Dec04/Muslim.Poll.bpf.html>

² <http://www.kuro5hin.org/story/2006/8/14/45330/1632>

³ Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991.

person as an aggregate of their entire race, a burden of representation that so-called minorities still carry today even though colonialism proper is long over.

Thus every Muslim is seen as a potential threat and entire peoples—Palestinian, Iraqi, Afghani—are being decimated for the crimes of a few. And, for the most part, we blame this wanton carnage on Islam by framing global violence either as a Muslim-led jihad or as a Western response to so-called Islamic “holy wars.”

Individual Muslims are certainly not beyond bigotry or violence and I am not here to defend them. I am here simply to bear witness to the fact that strictly, and scripturally, speaking, there is no holy war concept in Islam. This doesn't mean that the Qur'an has nothing to say about war and violence; it does. But it out-rightly forbids coercion in religion and it never uses the term jihad for war. Rather, jihad in the Qur'an refers to an existential struggle against one's own lesser self in order to better submit oneself to God's word and will. In fact that is the meaning of the word Muslim: one who submits to God's will and it is this other struggle, this other jihad, that I want to model today.

Also, and more importantly for the purposes of my talk, the Qur'an does not use vocabularies of violence to speak about religious differences and nor does it teach that religious difference in and of itself should lead us to hate or kill others. Indeed, the Qur'an tells us that God speaks to different people in different ways but always with the same intent and that differences in themselves are not bad.

This is a crucial point because violence often arises in a fear of differences. The difference can be racial, or sexual, or cultural, or religious, and sometimes we do violence to those who we think are wholly different from ourselves and at other times to those who we fear are too much like ourselves (the narcissism of minor differences that Freud speaks about). However, whether violence is fuelled by a fear of difference or by the fear of the erasure of difference, the point is that we need to understand our own attitudes towards difference if we want to make sense of the social and psychological dimensions of violence.

This is what led me to study the Qur'an's approach to difference and I felt that it might be healing for people who never get to hear certain aspects of the word to know what sort of understanding of religious pluralism it opens up for Muslims and what sorts of possibilities it offers for peace, understanding, and mutual recognition. So, I have selected 13 short excerpts from the Qur'an that deal with four themes: the nature of the word; how believers are asked to convey it to others; religious disagreements, and the ethical functions of diversity.

This is a lot of ground to cover in twenty minutes and I want to apologize for sacrificing depth and analysis for breadth. I want simply to introduce some

themes with a minimalist commentary that contextualizes them and draws out some lessons. For the rest, I leave it to you to hear my Word/word as you will.

Let me begin with the first set of verses that define the “word.”

Art thou not aware how God sets forth the parable of a good word?⁴ [It is] like a good tree, firmly rooted, [reaching out] with its branches towards the sky, yielding its fruit at all times by its Sustainer’s leave.

And [thus it is that] God propounds parables unto [humans], so that they might bethink themselves [of the truth].

And the parable of a corrupt word is that of a corrupted tree, torn up [from its roots] onto the face of the earth, wholly unable to endure.

[Thus,] God grants firmness unto those who have attained to faith through the word that is unshakably true in the life of this world as well as in the life to come: but the wrongdoers [God] lets go astray⁵. . .

shun every word that is untrue.⁶

Give, then, this glad tiding to [those of] My servants who listen [closely] to all that is said, and follow the best of it: [for] it is they whom God has graced with . . . guidance, and it is they who are [truly] endowed with insight!⁷

As you can tell, then, the Qur’an treats the word in both its literal sense as speech and in its metaphorically sense of revelation. Even in its literal sense, though, the word is always also an expression of one’s ethical and moral intent. However the Qur’an also makes clear that it is not enough to just listen to the word; we also need to follow the best in it and indeed to give it its best meanings. And so hermeneutic, or interpretive, choices are necessarily ethical choices.

Now of course we know, and so God must know, that not everyone has the same religious beliefs and so when the Qur’an asks us to communicate the word to others it does not compel us to force obedience to it or to our own understanding of it. In other words, possessing what one holds to be the truth is not a license to be self-righteous or to oppress others.

⁴ See M. Asad who writes that “In its wider meaning, the term kalimah (‘word’) denotes any conceptual statement or proposition. Thus, a “good word”. . . implies a call to what is good in the moral sense.” *Message of the Qur’an*, Pakistan, n.d., 376.

⁵ Abraham, 14: 24-27; *ibid.*, 376-377.

⁶ The Pilgrimage, 22: 30; *ibid.*, 510.

⁷ The Throongs; 39: 17-18; *ibid.*, 707.

And tell my servants that they should speak in the most kindly manner [unto those who do not share their beliefs]: verily, Satan is always ready to stir up discord between [humans]⁸ . . .

Servants of the Most Gracious are [only] they who walk gently on earth, and who, whenever the foolish address them, reply with [words of] peace.⁹

O Moses . . . I have chosen thee for Mine Own service. Go forth, [then,] thou and thy brother, with My messages . . . unto Pharaoh: for, verily, he has transgressed all bounds of equity! But speak unto him in a mild manner, so that he might bethink himself or [at least] be filled with apprehension.¹⁰

Call thou unto thy Sustainer's path with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the most kindly manner: for, behold, thy Sustainer knows best as to who strays from [God's] path, and best knows . . . as to who are the right-guided.

Hence, if you have to respond to an attack [in argument], respond only to the extent of the attack leveled against you: but to bear yourselves with patience is indeed far better for [. . . God is with] those who are patient in adversity.

Endure, then, with patience . . . always remembering that it is none but God who gives thee the strength to endure adversity—and do not grieve over them, and neither be distressed by the false arguments which they devise: for, verily, God is with those who are conscious of [God] and are doers of good¹¹. . .

And do not argue with the followers of earlier revelation otherwise than in a most kindly manner—unless it be such of them as are bent on evil-doing—and say: “We believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you: for our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto [God] that we [all] surrender ourselves.”¹²

Here again one could say that God knows, and we know, that speaking with one another in a fair and gentle way is not enough to iron out mutual differences,

⁸ The Night Journey, 17:53; *ibid.*, 426.

⁹ The Standard, 25 63; *ibid.*, 557.

¹⁰ O Man, 20: 41-42; *ibid.*, 473.

¹¹ The Bee, 16:125-128; *ibid.*, 416.

¹² The Spider, 29:46; *ibid.*, 613.

specially where it comes to religious beliefs. So, how, then, are we to live with these differences and the insecurity, pain, or anger that they might induce?

For those who have never thought of the Qur'an as a pacifist text, the next two verses might be truly instructive.

And if they [try to] argue with thee, say [only]: "God knows best what you are doing. [For, indeed,] God will judge between you [all] on Resurrection Day with regard to all on which you were wont to differ."¹³

Say: o ye
That reject Faith!
I worship not that
Which ye worship.
And I will not worship
That which ye have been
Wont to worship.
Nor will ye worship
That which I worship.
To you be your Way,
And to me mine.¹⁴

I cannot do an extensive exegesis of these verses but I read them as forbidding both exterminating and assimilating the other. They do this by affirming that religious differences do, and will, exist and by opening up two possibilities for Muslims to deal with them. One is simply to bear witness to the differences since only God can judge between humans regarding whatever they differ on. The Qur'an repeats this message in innumerable verses. The other is to learn to live with our truth and let others live with theirs even if it means having to go our own separate ways.

Here as a believer one runs into a paradox: how do we reconcile a belief in the universality and the universal goodness of God's word with religious diversity or with the fact that many people don't believe in religion at all? To put it another way: how can we believe something to be true for everyone and yet not fall into a genocidal self-righteousness? In essence, can universalism of any sort—religious or secular—ever be good or liberating?

¹³ The Pilgrimage, 22:68-69; *ibid.*, 516.

¹⁴ Al-Kaffirun, 109; from A. Yusuf Ali, *The Qur'an*, New York, 1988.

Entire books can be and have been written on these issues and I'm still struggling with them myself so I can't do more than take a very tiny jab at this problem and I will do that by looking at how the Qur'an treats difference itself.

There are several passages dealing with difference and religious diversity but I picked two.

And among [God's] wonders is the creation of the heavens and earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colours: for in this, behold, there are messages indeed for all who are possessed of [innate] knowledge.¹⁵

Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of [God].¹⁶

This is a recurrent theme in the Qur'an: that all sorts of differences, including religious differences, exist by God's will and exemplify the richness and diversity of human life. Indeed, differences are the very substance of creation since all that is created is multiple and diverse. Only the uncreated God is one.

Since we can only come to know one another through our differences, one could say that differences make possible an ethical engagement with the wor(l)d. That is why trying to wipe them out in the name of our own beliefs or, worse, in the name of the divine being who created them, is ultimately self-defeating.

And so I read the word as teaching that one can be a believer and still live with others on the basis of respect and kindness. And, even if as a believer one takes the self to be paradigmatic, one does not need to hate or fear the Other. Indeed, in the Qur'anic sense, this interface between the Self and the Other is what brings us to a full self-awareness and moral consciousness.

To submit to God's word, or to be a Muslim, then, is to live with our own truths without acting in life-denying ways vis-à-vis others and thus to believe in a form of universalism that does not have to be oppressive because it treats differences as ontologically given and as making possible a politics and a theology of mutual recognition. This is how I hear the word as a Muslim and this is the word on which, and in which, I dwell in the hope that, as the Qur'an promises, "everything reveals its truth in the end."¹⁷

¹⁵ The Byzantines, 30:22; Asad., 619.

¹⁶ The Private Apartments, 49:13; *ibid.*, 794.

¹⁷ The Moon, 54:3; *ibid.*, 818.