

What Unitarian Universalists have to learn from Shia Islam

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I received Karima Alevi's letter in the early spring of 2004. "Honey, do you want to go to Iran?" We were standing in our yard in Lawrenceville, New Jersey. I looked up from the letter. My husband responded to my question without any hesitation. His eyes sparkled with adventure. "Sure. Why not?"

I was a little more leery. Iran? Clark and I had already been brainstorming about where our August travels would take us. Spain was at the top of my list. Iran had never crossed my mind. Yet one letter changed all of that. I began to read compulsively about the experience of the trickle of Americans who now make their way to the land once known as Persia. I began to wrap my mind around 4,000 years of history split nearly evenly in two historic epochs with the advent of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. I learned how to pronounce Iran properly and took a few Farsi lessons from my friend Pamela Karimi who was doing her PhD on Islamic Architecture at MIT in Boston.

My father in law was worried. As he told his son one day after a heated debate about the subject on the phone "Clark, I love my wife and I would never take her to Iran." To this my husband replied, "But dad, you don't understand, she's taking me!"

For 10 days in the summer of 2004, before the election of the current Iranian President Mohammad Ahmedinejad and before the cancellation of thousands of reformist candidates that hoped to run against him for the presidency, we traveled to Iran with 12 other American teachers from across the states. Karima, an American Muslim convert who spoke fluent Farsi led us fearlessly through a land she dearly loves. She even had lived there through the 1979 revolution. We saw Iran through her eyes in the beginning and then slowly through our own.

I humbly thank you for warmly welcoming me on this beautiful Sunday morning. Comparisons between the dominant expression of faith in Iran, southern Lebanon, and Iraq and our own tradition of a liberal approach to mystery emphasizing common human ethics have been the focus of my mind and heart in preparing to speak on this topic. May my words help you dive into this important territory of exploration. May you gain insight and compassion this morning. I will share with you a few stories (and later pictures for those of you who have time to stay after the service) from my travels to Iran where 95% of the population practices to some degree elements of Shia Islam. But more importantly, I will explore what we Unitarian Universalists have to learn from this tradition. What spiritual insights can we gain by studying this expression of Islam? Many things make our tradition different from Shi'ism. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, there are more than a few similarities as well. To begin, let's review the basics about Shiism and a few features of life in Iran and build from there.

The word “Sunni” refers to a “path leading to water”. It also relates to the “tradition of the prophet”. Sunnis make up the majority of 1.3 billion Muslims in the world today from Indonesia to France. Roughly 85%. They see themselves following in the line of Muhammad who they claim didn’t leave behind a successor after his death in 632 CE at the age of 62. Sunnis believe that Muhammad wanted the faithful in the community to pick the next “caliph” or guardian. Hence, they call themselves Sunnis, those that follow in the tradition of the Prophet. Yet, Shi’is also strongly claim to follow in Muhammad’s tradition. Muhammad did leave a successor, they assert, his son-in-law and cousin Ali. Hence their name “Shia” being short for Shiat Ali (or the party of Ali). Through his line, Shi’is claim that the Nur or Light of the prophet passed weaving its way through generations and bringing with it infallible leadership in the form of either 6, 7, or 12 male Imams. It’s important to note that Shi’is themselves are not a monolithic bunch. They too split into groups regarding how many infallible Imams follow Muhammad. The majority assert that 12 did. Not only are Muhammad’s words important to Shia study as they are to Sunni study, but the Shia Imams that followed him (the first being Ali) are also carefully explored in Shiism.

What is an Imam? The word is used today in predominantly Sunni American mosques to signify not only the congregational male prayer leader (nearly universally male though this is beginning to change) but also the main scholar of Islamic thought who oversees the religious practices of the mosque. For Sunnis, imams are not infallible to any extent. They are trained in one of the four major Sunni schools of law and do their best to interpret Islam for their communities. Some are liberal, some are conservative. Today, in America a very small number are women building upon the work of African American convert Amina Wadud who broke the ice in America by leading a mixed gender prayer in NYC in March 2005. For Shi’is however, the word Imam carries much more weight. Pilgrimages are made to the burial grounds of the imams, a practice which the more conservative adherents of Sunni law, who make a point not even to celebrate Muhammad’s birthday, strongly disagree with. Shi’is await the day when the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam Muhammad ibn Hasan Ali (more commonly referred to as Muhammad Al-Madhi) will return at the end of time. It always makes me despair when I read about how desperate the situation is in Iraq. I recall how one BBC article of late made a point to describe that some Shii Iraqis consider 33 year old Muktdaar al-Sadr as the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam. Recall that the name of his militia is the Mehdi Army. The constant bombardments and factional strife must indeed feel like the end of time. Shias put great emphasis on the social justice vision of the Imams and await a day when this vision becomes reality.

It was such a vision in Iran along with a grab for power that prompted the late Ayatollah Ruhullah Musavi Khomeni to interpret Shia tradition in a radically new way. He is still today often referred to as “Imam Khomeni” a title of respect and indicative of the power he amassed while alive. Now, he’s not considered one of the 12 classic Imams. However, given that the 12<sup>th</sup> imam is said to be in hiding waiting to return at the end of time, Khomeni argued that the clerics can serve in his place. Veylat al faqih or “rule of the clerics” was instituted in the heyday and political frenzy following a very popular revolution against the American backed and tyrannical Shah in 1979. For the first time in Iranian Shia history, clerics were put in charge politically with the creation of the

Guardian Council that, for instance, vets the candidates hoping to run for Presidency or the Majlis (Parliament). Of course, for hundreds of years before Khomeini, clerics had influenced politics. Religious groups in America today influence our politics. But Khomeini did something very different with Veylat al faqih. It's something that as you heard in the reading, young men in seminary today are challenging directly.

Iran today, a country slightly larger than Alaska with nearly 70 million people, is in great transition. It's challenging living there. Between 150,000 and 200,000 young educated Iranians leave each year in what is called the "brain drain". Many of these young people are secularized. Tired of religion in a system of veylat al faqih and others bring their practice of Shia Islam here to America. Like Sunnis, Shias practice what is commonly called the Five Pillars of Islam (the declaration of faith, prayer, alms giving, fasting during Ramadan, and pilgrimage to Hajj). Unlike Sunnis, Shias often prayer with a small clay stone situated on their prayer mats. Their foreheads touching it reverently in the prayer. This clay, from the ground of Kerbala, located in modern day Iraq, signifies a unique history. There in 680 CE, the grandson of the Prophet, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Shia Imam Hussein, along with 70 members of his family were murdered by Sunnis who were consolidating power and definitely intent on stamping out the Shia claim to religious authority. Since that time, Shias have stood as the minority view, often subjugated by the majority interpretation of their faith. Within this view new holidays were formed, new places of pilgrimage emerged. To travel to Kerbala, for example, can mean much more than a trip to Mecca. To travel to visit the grave sites of the Imams and prayer their for their intercession strikes the Sunnis as near blasphemy. But Shias have their own way of working the Islamic structure allowing for the drawing of images (banned in more conservative Sunni schools) and many Shias venerate Fatima, the mother of Hussein in a similar way to Catholics venerating Mary. Both women lost their sons in violent injustice.

So, now that we have some background. What does this all mean for us as UUs? Of course we come from an intellectually rich tradition. One of the things I love about UU gatherings are the fascinating people I encounter. Well read, thoughtful, articulate, and genuinely interested in the world, as UUs we pride ourselves on being on top of current events and perhaps more in tune than the general public with the various dimensions of religions life in our multifaith and interconnected world. Indeed, educating ourselves with an open mind and heart is an emblematic aspect of our tradition and aids us in our pursuit to realize the ethics of our Seven Principles. Consider that we encourage our children to study the common threads found in all religions, as well as coming to wrestle with the obvious differences. But beyond the obvious, what does this mean?

Let me tell you what it means for me. I resist the notion that vast swaths of humanity are to be labeled two dimensional and easily dismissed as members of an "axis of evil". I see it as my duty as a citizen of the world to fully encounter each individual as unique, irreplaceable, and complex. As a scholar, I find some fascinating parallels between the UU tradition and the Shia tradition. Both are minority views that have been persecuted in history. Both favor rigorous intellectual efforts and debates in the training of leaders. Both emphasize the need for continual interpretation of religious thought and

both traditions draw upon a theme of mercy and justice which gratefully we share with many more traditions the world over. I also stand against the system of *veylat al faqih* as do many Iranians today. I urge my sisters and brothers there to creatively work both within and without of that system to bring about the changes they hunger for, changes that guarantee transparency in government, rule of law, and protection of civil liberties. Having studied Shia Islam and having traveled and met with Iranians from all walks of life, I know that these ideas are not the sole property of westerners. True they came to light in our tradition due to the Enlightenment and through the multiple civil rights struggles both in Europe and America that followed pushing us to expand our circle of concern in order for these principles to be applied to all. Yet, these ideas are alive in Iran. They live in the jail cells of the student activists and the newspaper editors of banned reformists papers. They live in the hearts of those who leave and struggle for change on the outside. They also live in the hearts and minds of the young clergy studying today in places like Qom.

We went to Qom. “Why do you want to go to Qom?” our travel guide was surprised. Mr. Sufi (that really was his name and he was a Shia Sufi) thought we’d prefer the dazzle of the underground party world of the rich and disenchanted youth of Tehran. It’s true, we did drink a nice glass of banned wine at a party in the wealthier sections of northern Tehran, but I can drink of glass of wine anywhere. But when do you get to go to Qom?

Qom is the city where the clerics study. It’s also the most conservatively dressed city in the country and dress in Iran for both men and women is politically charged. Today women are being arrested in Tehran for what is called “bad hijab” or head covering. This doesn’t happen in Qom because women wear generally wear the more modest chadors rather than hijabs. In Qom, we met Shia Iraqis who at the time (and this was in 2004) thanked us profusely for America’s toppling of Saddam. In Qom, we were invited to Azerbaijan by a Shia cleric who was amazed that two Americans had found their way to his city of study. Come visit me in Azerbaijan! We still have his card. In Qom, my study of Shia Islam came alive. Here the sister of the the 8<sup>th</sup> Shia Imam (known as Imam Reza) is buried. A huge shrine decorated in mirror after mirror endlessly reflecting light honors her. We loved the mosques. At one point in the trip, Clark said the perfect religion for him would combine a UU philosophy and the ritual of moving the body in a space like a mosque. There’s something about walking into a building of open space. No benches, no chairs, just repeat line tessellations that are intended to signify infinity and transport the mind beyond itself. The more mosques we saw, the more I liked Clark’s idea.

According to Afshin Molavi, the Iranian-American author of “The Soul of Iran” about 70% of Shia seminary students today support ideas of democratic reform and frequently debate its merits with the more conservative brethren in approved formats called “bahs” which in Farsi means debate or argument. Certainly key principles of Unitarian Universalism converge with the thinking of men like Mohammad ali Abtahi whom you heard about earlier. We too, love to debate within our circles and challenge each other’s interpretations of truth and justice. Currently, clerics like Abtahi have more

freedom to express these ideas within their bahs. Iran today has the dubious distinction of being the country with the highest capital punishment per capita according to a recent report by Amnesty International. In the last 2 years in particular, hundreds of reformists professors have been fired from public universities and many student activists have been arrested. The jails and prisons are literally full. Yet, in the seminaries, clerics continue to study Islamic jurisprudence and philosophy which includes according to Molavi “rigorous Arabic grammar, basic logic, rhetoric classes, in addition to countless readings of Qur’anic commentaries by Shi’a scholars.” Western philosophers such as Hegel and Kant are also studied.

I conclude by returning to the opening sura of the Qur’an. You heard these words recited in Arabic prior to the beginning of my sermon by Imam Bilal Hyde. Imam Hyde trained in religious studies at the University of California, Berkeley and often participates in interfaith gatherings in the Bay area. expressed through the Arabic language of the Qur’anic text. These are the most repeated words of the Qur’an by both Sunnis and Shiis. Let me share with you University of Chicago Professor Michael Sell’s translation.

In the name of God  
 The Compassionate the Caring  
 Praise be to God  
 Lord Sustainer of the worlds  
 Master of the day of reckoning  
 To you we turn to worship  
 And to you we turn in time of need  
 Guide us along the road straight  
 The road of those to whom you are giving  
 Not those with anger upon them  
 Not those who have lost the way

I encourage each of you to continue your educational journey regarding Shia Islam. Pick up a copy of Molavi’s book “The Soul of Iran”. Not only is the history of Shiism explored, but this country, so often featured in bold headlines in the news, is examined in a nuanced and compassionate way. Through my own studies, I’ve found great hope in the elements we share with our Shia brothers and sisters. This hope clears my vision and enables me to see the world in its complexity and frees me from being manipulated by those who would have me see it otherwise. The struggling emphasis today in Iran on challenging the dominant structures of power and instituting democratic reform parallels our hunger for social justice work as UUs. The human heart longs both for meaning and freedom to search for this meaning. As a UU, I’ve chosen to embrace a tradition that combines both head and heart. I’m encouraged to deepen my own capacity for compassion inspired in part by my study of the Qur’anic verses like al-Fatihah. I’m also inspired to deepen my intellectual understanding, my love for debate, inspired again in part by my reading about the bahs in the Qom seminaries and the rich history of textual exegesis in the Shia tradition. But most importantly, I encourage each of you to be open to what you will learn both intellectually and intuitively from the careful study of this tradition. You will find common ideas, hearts, and insights housed in the bodies that so

easily have been negatively labeled. Truly, the dismantling of this error is a key gift we can give the world today.

Recommended Books for further reading:

1. *The Soul of Iran: A Nation's Journey to Freedom*, Afshin Molavi
2. *The Middle East and the Islamic World Reader*, Edited by Marvin E. Gettleman and Stuart Schaar
3. *Mecca and Mainstreet: Muslim Life in America after 9/11*, Geneive Abdo
4. *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelation*, Michael Sells