



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

**Practicing Safe Texts:
Misquoting Moses, Misquoting Jesus, Misquoting Muhammad**
The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

4 October 2015

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland
frederickuu.org

Introduction

Our choir will be singing three songs this morning from the Islamic tradition. And one important point that is not always clear when reading Islamic texts in English is that Allah is not a special name for a Muslim God. **Allah is simply the word for “God” in Arabic.** A Christian speaking Arabic would pray using the word “Allah,” as would a Jewish person speaking Arabic. Such misunderstandings can create perceptions of difference that mask commonalities.

I also wanted to share a story that I heard this summer at UU General Assembly from my colleague The Rev. Meg Riley in a workshop on “Unitarian Universalism and Sufism,” the mystical branch of Islam. Meg is currently the senior minister of the UUA’s online congregation the [Church of the Larger Fellowship](http://ChurchoftheLargerFellowship.org). One of her previous jobs was director of the UUA’s Washington Office in D.C. During that time, a delegation of leaders from the Middle East organized through the State Department asked to meet with a Unitarian Universalist during their visit. These Muslim visitors said, “We’ve been researching online, and we are really intrigued by this religion.” Meg reports that, “A group of men came, and we talked for several hours. It was one of the deepest theological conversations I’ve ever had outside of seminary. They really were so interested to find us.” A breakthrough moment came when the Muslims leaders had a sudden insight about these UUs they were finally meeting in person. **The Muslims nodded at each other, and said in unison, *Sufi*.** And we UUs do have commonalities with the Sufi branch of

Islam, particularly the emphasis on “Direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder,” which is our UU First Source. This emphasis on direct experience can remind us, in the words of the late UU minister Forrest Church, that “God is not God’s name,” which is but a linguistic placeholder for experiences of the spirit, the holy, and the sacred.

Continuing Meg’s story, not only did the next State Department tour group from the Middle East similarly request to meet with the UUs in the Washington Office, but also “at some point the State Department added [the UUA Washington Office] as a regular stop on the tour because the Internet was introducing Muslims to this faith that wasn’t insulting to them. And they were really intrigued by it.” If you are interested in learning more, there is a wonderful — and quite short — book available from Skinner House Press by the UU historian Susan Ritchie titled [Children of the Same God: The Historical Relationship Between Unitarianism, Judaism, and Islam](#).

Sermon

I try to schedule a sermon on Islam at least once a year for at least two reasons. First, it is important to learn about the world’s second largest religion. (There are approximately 1.6 billion Muslims in the world and 2.1 billion Christians. And current statistical projections have **Islam on track to become the world’s largest religion by 2070**.) A second reason that I try to preach at least annually about Islam is that there is a lot of Islamophobic misinformation that needs to be corrected. I’ll limit myself to just a few examples. For instance, contrary to the popular stereotypes that all Muslims are Arabic and would-be terrorists, not only are overwhelming numbers of Muslims not terrorist sympathizers, but also most Muslims aren’t Arabs, only 20% are. And the countries with the largest Muslim populations (Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and Nigeria) are all democracies, **disproving the myth that Islam is incompatible with democracy** (Esposito 11). Furthermore, “Saudi Arabia...has only the sixteenth largest Muslim population, behind countries such as Uzbekistan, Ethiopia, Turkey, and Iran. For what it’s worth, Saudi Arabia’s Muslim population is roughly equivalent to China’s” (Faith Street). **The overwhelming numbers of Muslims outside the Middle East show both the diversity of Islam in the present as well as hope for an increasingly pluralistic Islam in the future.**

Along those lines, my sermon title is inspired by the book Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy by Dr. Jonathan A.C. Brown, an Associate Professor of Islamic Studies and Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. Brown operates at the three-way intersection of his personal experience of being a practicing Muslim, his deep immersion in the history of the classical Islamic interpretive tradition, and his commitment to modern Western methods of scholarship (xiv-xv, xx). I appreciate his willingness to use the provocative title “Misquoting Muhammad,” and his subtitle is equally significant: “The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet’s Legacy” — because whether we are talking about Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Buddha, Darwin, or Freud, there are challenges and choices that must be made to interpret the legacies of these world-historical figures. To make my position clear from the outset, given what we know in the early twenty-first century, **it is insufficient to blame one's prejudice (sexism, heterosexism, racism, or classism) on historical figures or documents.** We must each take responsibility for the impact of the interpretive choices that we make.

It used to be easier to make an argument that you were holding a certain opinion because a sacred scripture told you to. But over the years, close readings have *both* traced the **complicated history of transmitting sacred teachings** (which periodically results in copying errors that diverge from the original version) *and* exposed the **limited historical contexts** in which teachings were originally given, making it questionable to apply them to all times and places even if we did have an unadulterated copy of the original.

There is a lot to say about the history of each of the world’s religions, but I will limit myself for now to setting the stage for a look at “Misquoting Muhammad” by briefly comparing the ways we have also seen people “Misquoting Moses” and “Misquoting Jesus.” One of the traditional ways that the importance of the Torah was defended is that these first five books of the Bible were considered authoritative because Moses, the great leader of the Israelite people, was understood to have written them. But one of the first loose strings that people began to pull that led to the unraveling Mosaic authorship was noticing that near the end of the Torah, Deuteronomy 34 describes Moses’ death and burial — but **how could Moses write about his own funeral and the aftermath?!** Centuries of further study discovered increasing numbers of

loose threads making it clear eventually that the Torah was stitched together from at least four separate documents, all of which did not come into their final form until many centuries after Moses. If you are curious to learn more, two accessible introductions are **Who Wrote the Bible?** and **The Bible with Sources Revealed**, both by Richard Elliott Friedman.

Turning to Misquoting Jesus, I highly recommend Bart Ehrman's book by that name, which also inspired the title of Brown's book on Islam. Jesus — like Moses and Muhammad — did not write down his own teachings. Instead, the Gospel of Mark, the earliest collection of Jesus's teachings of which we have a copy, was not written until decades after Jesus' death. Moreover, if you look closely at almost any version of the Bible, on many pages you will see very tiny footnotes that say things like "Other manuscripts say...." We do not have the originals for any major sacred scriptures, and in the case of the Christian scriptures, when you add up all those instances of "Other manuscripts say....," "The best estimate is that there are between **300,000 and 400,000 textual variants** among the manuscripts. Yet there are only 140,000 words in the New Testament" (Stewart 32). In all fairness, however, I should hasten to add that the vast majority of these 300,000 - 400,000 discrepancies are minor, such as misspellings. **Less than 1 percent of the variants are potentially meaningful** for our understanding and interpretation of the text (38-40).

The situation of manuscript transmission is different in Islam because about twenty years after Muhammad's death, one formalized official copy of the Qur'an was made from all of the "recitations, prayers and scattered parchments of Muhammad's followers" (17). And if you've never read the Qur'an before, there are ways in which it is much more accessible than the Bible in that the Qur'an is much shorter, weighing in at approximately four-fifths the length of just the New Testament, which itself is significantly shorter than the Hebrew Scriptures. But there are other ways in which the Qur'an is much more difficult for newcomers: the text is nonlinear; its 114 chapters (or surahs) are arranged not in chronological, narrative, or thematic order, but approximately in order of longest to shortest (Brown 8). If you are interested in studying the text for yourself, HarperCollins is publishing a **new academic Study Quran** next month with lots of accompanying introductory essays and explanatory annotations in the tradition of their bestselling Study Bible.

But as significant as the Qur'an is to the Islamic tradition, also of great importance are the Hadith, which are collections of the prophet Muhammad's sayings and actions. (*Hadith* is from the Arabic word for "report, account, or narrative" — comparable to the Talmud in the Jewish Tradition, which records the supplemental Oral Tradition to the Torah.) For example, the Muslim practice of praying five times daily and the details of how to fast during the month of Ramadan are not in the Qur'an, but in the Hadith (18). And unlike with the Qur'an for which one definitive version was made twenty years after Muhammad's death, with the Hadith, "reports of the Prophet's words or deeds were forged by the thousands" (22, 44), greatly increasing the likelihood of misquoting Muhammad. (For a parallel to the situation of forging Hadith in Islam, see Bart D. Ehrman's important book Forged: Writing in the Name of God — Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are.)

And although there is much more to say about the complex tradition that has developed around interpreting some of the internal contradictions within the Qur'an in which later revelations to Muhammad are usually understood to trump or "abrogate" earlier sayings with which they may be in conflict (98-100) — as well as much more to say about the complex interpretive traditions around the Hadith (23) — I want to be sure to address the even more important issue of **interpreting the Qur'an today.**

One fascinating dynamic of the intersection of Islam (as well as Christianity) with the modern world is the significant increase of individuals interpreting scripture in *isolation* — outside of either a community of interpreters and often without any training in the interpretative traditions that have developed over the centuries (168). At it most damaging, the result is someone like Osama bin Laden proof-texting — using isolated, out-of-context verses and oversimplified, idiosyncratic interpretations — to justify horrific acts of violence in the name of Islam (126). But it's important to keep in mind that **the Christian tradition has also been used to inspire not only tremendous acts of forgiveness, mercy, and compassion, but also to justify acts of terror such as the Inquisition and the Crusades** — which strengthens my conviction that the responsibility for the results of one's interpretation is on the individual and/or community of interpretation much more so than the text in question.

So, when I hear the common diagnosis that what Islam needs is a Muslim "Martin

Luther,” I think that the situation is more complicated. One of Luther’s major teachings was *sola scriptura*: salvation through “scripture alone.” But in retrospect, we can see the ways that in questioning the authority of the Roman Catholic Pope through the Protestant Reformation, Luther ended up making a “Paper Pope” out of the Bible. The Bible still has to be interpreted even if you take the hierarchy of religious leaders out of the equation (161). The much more important change needed is a shift toward pragmatism: asking about the *fruit* — the results — of one’s engagement with sacred scripture. **If your interpretation increases hate, fear, inequality, and violence instead of love, joy, justice, and peace, you’re doing it wrong** — and the problem is much more with *you* than with the book you are reading. (I would make the same argument in support of reading banned books: the problem is much less the text than whether we are teaching the practice of reading responsibly — what has been called “practicing safe texts.”)

Behind the question of interpretation is the question of *authority*. And the more progressive (or theologically liberal) you are, the less troubled you are by passages of scripture that are offensive to modern understandings of gender, sexuality, and science — and the more willing you are to simply dismiss those passages as obsolete (Brown 288-9). As many of you have heard me say before, the **liberal turn in theology** is the move *from* authority vested in religious hierarchy and ancient myths about infallible revelations from above — and the move *toward* authority vested in reason (what is logical) and experience (what you know to be true from your firsthand experience or what has been proven through the scientific method). From the perspective of Unitarian Universalism, Islam is part of our Third Source (“Wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life”), but our tendency is to let go of the passages that no longer seem relevant to our globalized pluralistic, postmodern age.

Our opening hymn this morning, “Where Is Our Holy Church?” is a strong example of a theologically liberal reinterpretation of religion: our *holy church* is not merely buildings such as this one but wherever people gather in a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Our *holy writ* is not merely an ancient document, but each person’s “Direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder.” Our *holy One* is not a being out there somewhere, but movements of people led by the transforming spirit of love to “confront powers and structures of evil with justice and compassion.” Our *holy land* is not a piece of geography, but the “goal of

world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” And *our paradise* is not first and foremost a hope in a next world, but “working for justice, equity and compassion” for all in this world, here and now.

In that spirit, I will conclude with the following words from the progressive theologian Brian McLaren:

There are two kinds of Christianity, along with two kinds of Islam, Judaism, and every other religion and non-religion too: one of social control and one of social transformation; one to hold people down, one to lift them up; one an opiate to pacify people into compliance, the other a stimulant to empower people to imagine a better world, a better future, a better life — giving them the courage to live in peaceful defiance of violent, corrupt, and greedy powers-that-be. Neither kind is perfect, and both kinds contain good and sincere people. But if those who use God and religion for social control are left to define faith, the religion they define will be a false one, an ugly one, an idolatrous one.

May we lend our hearts, our hands, our minds, and our wills to creating movements of social transformation to lift people up, empower them to imagine a better world, and join in solidarity to challenge injustice.

For Further Study

- Carl Gregg, “The Future of Islam”
- The New York Times, “A Find in Britain: Quran Fragments Perhaps as Old as Islam”