

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Sunday, June 12, 2022

The Rev Dr Scott Couper

“Unus Deus, Duo Fides”

Hebrew Scripture: 1:1, 3, 6, 9, 12, 14, 20, 26, 31

Christian Scripture: John 16:12-16

Trinity Sunday

First Sunday after Pentecost



Throughout its history, our church in part through its ministers has admirably lived-out the call of the gospel. During the 1940s, Milton Czatt preached against the involuntary internment of Japanese citizens. During the 1960s, Allen Vander Meulen attended Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'Great March' on Washington, controversially prayed at an anti-Vietnam War rally, adopted a child of color, and hosted a Muslim student. During the 1980s, Jack Bixby led our church to be a Just Peace church and fostered the détente between the Soviet Union and the United States by sponsoring exchange visits between citizens to and from Brattleboro.

During the 2010s, Carra McFadden led our church through the process of becoming Open & Affirming so that today we celebrate Pride Month.¹ I am proud that in 2022, Centre Church embarked on four very important ministries of which it can be proud: the opening of a prayer space for Muslims in our community, the re-settlement of an Afghan refuge family, the hosting of the 'Free Store' that assists refugees to acquire clothes, and finally the on-going support of Loaves & Fishes that aids the feeding of those refugees. Because these four ministries are so inspiring, for the next five weeks in our sermon series we will reflect as Christians on our theological relationship with Muslims.

Our sermon series reflects on the *resonances* between Islam and Christianity. I do not wish to say 'similarities', but rather 'resonances'. Both faiths are intricate; so to say 'this is similar to that' is too crude. Both faiths contain their own contradictions, so they cannot necessarily be easily compared. And neither Christianity nor Islam are monoliths whereby we can say 'Islam is this and Christianity is that'. The word 'resonance' speaks more to how Christianity and Islam are 'similar', yet also different. 'To resonate' implies the faiths 'speak with' rather than simply 'duplicate' one other. 'Resonate' conveys a depth of meaning

¹ Dorothy Vander Meulen, *This Jewell on Main Street: Centre Congregational Church at 200 Years- 1816-2016* (Manchester City, VT: Shires Press, 2015), 16, 18-19, 20, and 22, respectively.

on different levels; perhaps like the relationships between notes, keys, and octaves.

I wish to preface and qualify this series by stating that by emphasizing resonances I do not deny nor ignore real differences between the faiths. Believe me, sharing my apartment with Farid Emami, a young twenty-two-year-old *imam*, has taught me that we really view the world through different vantages. How Farid feels men and women should dress, his views on what foods can and cannot be consumed, his subtle behavioral attitude towards women, and his conservative (almost Pharisaic) perspectives on music and dancing point to real differences we share. Yet while there are differences, I will suggest in this series that the differences are more socio-political and cultural than theological. [Indeed, many evangelical *Christians* in the USA resonate with Farid's Islamic theological views and seek to legislate a closer marriage of church and state, patriarchy, and conservative social mores that so many of the refugees feared and fled in Afghanistan!]

In this series, we will examine five 'resonances' that Islam and Christianity share with one another. Monotheism (today), sacred history that conveys a relationship between God and God's representatives (Matt Deen), peace, moral

responsibility and accountability, and a gravitation toward mystic traditions that transcend each faith's respective orthodoxies.²

Some four thousand years ago, someone had the bright idea of monotheism: the theological belief that there is only one deity, an all-supreme being that is universally referred to as 'God'. Today, scholars dispute who were the first to conceptualize and articulate a theology that affirms that only one God exists. High on the list is the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten (1,353-1,336 BCE), who is often referred to as the first monotheist.³ Others claim that Zoroastrianism, an ancient Persian religion that may have originated as early as four-thousand years ago, is the world's first monotheistic faith.⁴ Interestingly our Afghan neighbors speak Dari, a dialect of the Persian language and much of Afghanistan is located where the ancient Persian empire once was. I am not going to argue in this message who was first. What can perhaps be fairly stated is that no matter who were the first monotheists, "monotheism [likely first] reached its highest

² John Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions, from One of America's Leading Experts* (New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2002), 73-75.

³ Rebecca Denova, "Monotheism and the Ancient World," *World History Encyclopedia*, October 17, 2019, found at: <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1454/monotheism-in-the-ancient-world/>, accessed June 12, 2022.

⁴ "Zoroastrianism", *History.com*, February 18, 2018 and updated October 8, 2019, found at: <https://www.history.com/topics/religion/zoroastrianism>, accessed June 12, 2022.

expression” in Judaism.⁵ For example in the book of the prophet Isaiah it states, "For this is what the Lord says - he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited - he says: 'I am the Lord, and there is no other'" (Isaiah 45:18). Next week, we will learn more fully that Christianity sprung from Judaism and that Islam sprung from Judaism and Christianity. Hence, the three major monotheistic faiths are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Monotheism is perhaps the most fundamental common denominator of all three faiths.

One of my favorite things to do now is listen to recitations of the Qur’an. Farid has the Qur’an memorized completely in Arabic, from beginning to end, though he is not conversant in Arabic. I read the Qur’an in English while listening to its recitation ‘in Mecca’ on YouTube and in our church’s Islamic prayers space.⁶ I always assumed that of the three monotheistic faiths, Islam was the most fiercely monotheistic. So it came as a great surprise to me while reading the Qur’an, that God, speaking through the prophet Mohammed, Peace Be Upon Him, frequently refers to Godself as ‘we’ - in the plural. This astounded me! What?! How can this be?! Islam’s mantra is ‘There is no other God but Allah’. In fact, the Shahada, an

⁵ “When Did Monotheism Start?”, *All About History*, found at:

<https://www.allabouthistory.org/when-did-monotheism-start-faq.htm>, accessed June 12, 2022.

Note: I do *not* endorse this organization or the above source for theological or historical information.

⁶ YouTube, “#mekkahlive”, <https://www.youtube.com/hashtag/makkahlive>, accessed June 12, 2021

Islamic oath, one of the Five Pillars of Islam, declares: "I bear witness that there is no deity but God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God".

How could it be that God refers to Godself as 'we' in the Qu'ran?

While all three faiths are monotheistic, all three faiths hold within them an apparent contradiction, at least linguistically. There are two scriptures in Genesis chapter 1:26 and 3:22, whereby God refers to God's self in the plural. Genesis 1:26 reads, "Then God said, 'Let *us* make [humans] in *our* own image, in *our* likeness ...". Huh. One possible explanation for this 'plural God' is that God was referring to Godself *and* the heavenly host, that is the archangels, the angels, the cherubs (those are the fat babies), the seraphs, paraffins (wait, those are birds, right?), and whatever else was believed to be 'up' there. It is interesting to note that one of the primary titles of God occurring more than 2,500 times in the Hebrew scriptures, 'Elohim', is written in the plural form.⁷

One explanation for Islam's apparent monotheistic contradiction is that God refers to Godself in the plural (*nahnu*) in order to linguistically indicate God's "supreme authority and majesty. [...] A study of the language of kings [even in English medieval literature] reveals that [kings] too modeled their names in the plural form. Although the king was one being, special emphasis was made on

⁷ Hope Bolinger, "Why Does God Refer to Himself in the Plural in Genesis 1:26 and 3:22", *Christianity.com*, November 14, 2019. Found at: <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/bible/why-does-god-refer-to-himself-in-the-plural-in-genesis-126-and-322.html>, accessed June 22, 2022.

using the pronoun ‘we’ to make distinct his dignity, high status and rule over his kingdom. The plural pronoun for a singular being has been used throughout human history for people who commanded higher respect”.⁸

Arguably, Christianity holds a much larger contradiction of monotheism within its claim that Jesus is God. I am not going to lecture on third and fourth century Greco-Roman philosophy to try to explain the Trinity. We need only understand that our concept of the Trinity is troubling to Jews and Muslims alike – indeed truth be told, half of us here are troubled, or at least confused, by the Trinity (how is it that if Jesus is God, he prays to ‘a father’)? Happy Trinity Sunday!

Our devotional lesson this morning is simply that we as Christians have much in common with our Muslim brothers and sisters. We are similar in our

⁸ Al Islam: The Official Website of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, “In the Holy Quran, Why Does God Refer to Himself in the Plural?”, found at: <https://www.alislam.org/question/quran-god-plural/>, accessed June 12, 2022. Also see:

(Fataawa al-Lajnah al-Daa’imah, 4/143).

“Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, sometimes refers to Himself in the singular, by name or by use of a pronoun, and sometimes by use of the plural, as in the phrase (interpretation of the meaning): ‘Verily, We have given you a manifest victory’ [al-Fath 48:1], and other similar phrases.

(Al-‘Aqeedah al-Tadmuriyyah by Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah, p. 75).

These words, *innaa* (“Verily We”) and *nahnu* (“We”), and other forms of the plural, may be used by one person speaking on behalf of a group, or they may be used by one person for purposes of respect or glorification, as is done by some monarchs when they issue statements or decrees in which they say “We have decided...” etc. [This is known in English as “The Royal We” – Translator]. In such cases, only one person is speaking but the plural is used for respect. The One Who is more deserving of respect than any other is Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, so when He says in the Qur’an *innaa* (“Verily We”) and *nahnu* (“We”), it is for respect and glorification, not to indicate plurality of numbers.

“The Meaning of the Pronoun “We” as Used in the Qur’an”, *Islam Question and Answer*, found at: <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/606/the-meaning-of-the-pronoun-we-as-used-in-the-quran>, accessed June 12, 2022.

adherence to monotheism despite our seeming contradictions. “There is no other God but Allah.”

This was the word of God. And it was preached to the people of God. And the people of God responded, “Amen”.