

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Sunday, July 3, 2022

The Rev Dr Scott Couper

“Prophets of Peace”

Three of Five sermons in a series entitled:

"Sibling Faiths: Fundamental Resonances of Christianity and Islam"

Christian Scripture: Matthew 8:1-12

Holy Communion

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost



When the author John Esposito asked the question “Does the Quran condone terrorism?” in his book *What Everyone Needs to Know of Islam*, he first responded brilliantly, “This is the kind of question no one asks of his or her own religion; we save it for others!”¹ Although Esposito does not reference the book *Orientalism*, he raises a common historiographical dynamic whereby authors

¹ John Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions from One of America's Leading Experts*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), 119.

reflect critically of other cultures and faiths, yet remain blissfully unreflective about their own.

Orientalism is a 1978 book by Edward W. Said wherein the eponymous term 'Orientalism' is a critical concept that describes the West's commonly contemptuous depiction and portrayal of 'The East', i.e. the Orient. Societies and peoples of the Orient are those who inhabit the places of Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East.² Said argued that Orientalism, in the sense of the Western scholarship about the Eastern World, is inextricably tied to the imperialist societies who produced it, which makes much Orientalist work inherently political and servile to European and North American power, á la Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld.³

This Orientalism is obvious in the writings of Congregational missionaries who evangelized and arguably colonized much of Turkey and Armenia during the early 1800s. One missionary wife wrote to her mother, "Pray most of all that we may abound in love towards those who are around us. They are ignorant, deceitful, ungrateful and unwholesome...Familiarity with their wretchedness also [tends] to diminish that warmth of sympathy with which we have been

² Edward Said, Edward, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books), 1978 and 2003.

³ *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (3rd ed.). 1999. p. 617.

accustomed to regard those who are destitute of the gospel". Wow. Can you feel the love there?!⁴

One of the wonderful benefits of learning more about Islam for me is that in doing so I actually learn more about my own faith: Christianity. And this sermon series, is intended to, in a small way, accomplish the same praxis: the process of reflection, action, and reflection again. As we celebrate and reflect upon the Fourth of July, I cannot help but remember one of the key questions asked by those in the United States who were so traumatized by 9/11 was "Why do they hate us?" That is, why do *Muslims* hate Americans, for example in Iran, many did and still do refer to us as 'The Great Satan'?⁵

Our question in part stems from the fact that many Christians in the United States understand themselves to be followers of Jesus Christ and perhaps his key foundational teachings are The Beatitudes that Kate read so beautifully for us this morning: among others, blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek, blessed are the merciful, and blessed are the peacemakers. Yet contrast these lessons with a bumper sticker I saw just on the window of a pick-up truck yesterday. On the

⁴ Letter from Sarah Smith to parents dated February 5, 1834, quoted in Edward Hooker, *Memoirs of Sarah Smith*, 184. Found in:

Philip Crossman, "The Vicarious Crusaders: New England Missionaries in the Ottoman Empire and the Early American Image of Islam", submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, Vermont College of Norwich University, Montpelier, Vermont, 1993, 135.

⁵ Hamid Dabashi, "Who Is the Great Satan?", *Al Jazeera*, September 20, 2015.

bumper sticker were three M-16 rifles propping-up a cross, as would a tripod, with an American eagle superimposed over the top of all. Contrast the Beatitudes with our own nationalist mantra 'America First' and its proponent holding-up a Bible in front of St John's Church wherein the Bible it reads "in Christ there is no Greek or Jew" (Galatians 3:28). And sadly, any critique of United States foreign policy can be applied to all administrations. Carter supported the brutal dictator that was the Shah of Iran. Obama carried-out more drone strikes in his first year than his predecessor did during his entire eight-year presidency. Indeed, the Biden administration is as hypocritical as any previous in regards to his support and fawning over Saudi Arabia who violates United Nations' human rights precepts as a matter of course (especially as it concerns Yemen for which I have advocated for some time).

My point is all this is not to denigrate the United States. No, far from it. I love our country and I celebrate the freedoms that we have. This morning my point is that if we criticize Islam for *jihad*, suicide bombings, and the sanctioning of Taliban extremism, then we must acknowledge that the Islam, nor any other faith, has a monopoly on hypocrisy.

That so-called 'Christians' committed genocide against Native Americans on this continent is a Christian hypocrisy. That Christians wore white hoods and today carry tiki torches chanting "Jews will not replace us" is a Christian hypocrisy. That

there has been 22,150 gun-violence deaths and 302 mass shootings in the United States thus far in 2022 is hypocrisy for nation in which so many consider themselves Christians.⁶ As our beloved friend Daniel Sicken teaches us, that I pay the United States government taxes to spend more money on violent warfare than nine of the next largest military spenders combined is Christian and clerical hypocrisy.⁷

The flip side of Islamic and Christian hypocrisy is, of course, that both faiths advocate peace. Muslims greet with the phrase, *As-salaam alaykum*, which means, “Peace be upon you”. To which a common response is, *Wa-alaykum as-salaam*”, which means, “And peace be upon you also”. Please feel free to say it with me, and I invite you to greet our Afghan neighbors the same way: *As-salaam alaykum / Wa-alaykum as-salaam*.

Perhaps you have heard it said, even from Matt Deen and I from the pulpit, after referencing the Prophet Muhammad, ‘Peace Be Upon Him’ (PBUH). Yet this refrain of honor is not just articulated after Muhammad’s name, but also Jesus’ and Moses’ names. Muslims say ‘Peace Be Upon Him’ to acknowledge that it is

⁶ Gun Violence Archive, “Gun Violence Archive 2022”, July 3, 2022. Found at: <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>, accessed July 3, 2022.

⁷ Ten percent of federal spending is on the military. Nearly half of discretionary spending is spent on the military. “U.S. Defense Spending Compared to Other Countries”, Peter G. Peterson Foundation, May 11, 2022. https://www.pgpf.org/chart-archive/0053_defense-comparison#:~:text=Defense%20spending%20accounts%20for%20more,of%20the%20annual%20federal%20budget.

through Moses', Muhammad's, and Jesus' lives and their love for God and humanity that the will of God is made known and a vision of how human beings should live in this world is demonstrated.⁸

Islam, like all world religions, neither supports nor requires illegitimate violence. The Qur'an does not advocate or condone terrorism. The God of the Qur'an is consistently portrayed as a God of mercy and compassion as well as a just judge. The concept of *jihad*, literally means 'struggle', and does not primarily refer to violence or warfare. If *jihad* is violent, it is only to be defensive in nature. The defensive nature of *jihad* is clearly emphasized in the Qur'an when it commands "And fight in the way of God with those who fight you, but aggress not: God loves not the aggressors" (2:190). Often western Christians understandably judge Muslims with prejudice as condoning 'suicide bombing', such as happened in 9/11. Yet, the phenomenon of suicide bombing is as much an Islamic contradiction as is the Christian west's justification of 'Mutually Assured Destruction' or 'MAD' as a policy for strategic nuclear defense; MAD is simply suicide bombing, but on a global scale.

Friends, on this Fourth of July let us pray that our nation be one of peace. A fundamental tenet of Christianity is repentance, and to repent we need to individually and collectively recognize our sins and our hypocrisies. Then and only

⁸ Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam*, 116.

then can we be on a path of peace which both the prophets Jesus and Mohammad preached.

We gather together around this table with bread and wine remembering that which Jesus taught on the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called servants of God” (Matthew 5:9). Let us this morning ask ourselves, ‘Do we believe and live-out Jesus teachings as Christians and as citizens of the United States of America?’ Friends, Happy Fourth of July. May the United States of America be included in God’s blessing of all nations and peoples.

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