

JIHAD: FAITH'S STRUGGLE

A Service by Fritz Hudson

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Mullah Nasruddin, it is said, was once invited to deliver a sermon. When he got into the pulpit, he asked, "Do you know what I am going to say?" The audience replied "no." And Nasruddin then said, "Well, I have no desire to speak to people who don't even know what I will be talking about!" And he left.

The people were embarrassed. They went to Nasruddin and pleaded with him to deliver his sermon on the next day. So again, the next day, he got into the pulpit, and he asked, "Do you know what I am going to say?" The people, this time, answered, "yes." And Nasruddin said, "Well, since you already know what I am going to say, I won't waste any more of your time!" And again, he left.

So now the people were really perplexed and frustrated. They decided to make one more attempt. They invited the Mullah to deliver his sermon the following week. On the appointed day, he got into the pulpit, and he again asked, "Do you know what I am going to say?" The people were prepared. Half of them answered "yes." The other half answered "no." And Nasruddin then said, "Well then, you, who know what I am going to say, tell it to those of you who don't know." And again, he left.

So.....no, I won't ask the Mullah's question. I'm not nearly as clever as the ancient Mullah. When I do not have anything to say, as perhaps the Mullah knew he did not, I'm not brave enough to make that problem yours to solve. I am, I hope, though, clever enough, as the Mullah surely was, to know that the real value, the real substance, of any sermon is found in what its hearers say to one another when the sermon has ended.

My sermon is about jihad. Like *salaam*, *jihad* is an Arabic word. *Salaam*, we do well to translate as, Peace. That works for most of its uses. Jihad, though, well let me ask, "who here has the impression that Jihad can best be translated as "holy war"? That's understandable. Many of us American non-Muslims were introduced to Jihad through the lips of Osama bin Laden. In 1998, bin Laden published a message entitled "Jihad against Jew and Crusaders" (February 23). There he said, "Jihad is an individual duty ... The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies--civilians and military--is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it." To support his call to arms, bin Laden called upon the words of the *Quran*, in Sura 9, "O you who believe, what is the matter with you, that when you are asked to go forth in the cause of God, you cling so heavily to the earth! Do you prefer the life of this world to the hereafter? ... (9.38)

Jihad, however, does not mean "war." The word for war, in Arabic, is *harb*. Likewise, jihad does not mean "fighting." That word, in Arabic, is *qital*. Jihad, in its root, means "to strive or exert oneself." It is most often translated as to "struggle." In Sura 9, Mohammed's followers are urged: "Go forth, whether equipped lightly or heavily, and strive and struggle, with your goods and your persons, in the cause of God. That is best for you" (9:41) Sura 9, scholars agree, was revealed at the Battle of Tubuk, the Muslims' first battle with the Christians of Byzantium. It took place in 630 CE. Jihad, in this sura, is almost certainly military struggle: "holy war." Elsewhere, in Sura 4, the words of revelation seem to pronounce spiritual supremacy for this kind of struggle. The Sura says "Not equal are those Believers who sit (at home) and receive no hurt, . . . God has

granted a higher grade to those who strive and fight with their goods and their persons than to those who sit at home.” (4:95)

And yet, in the *Quran*, there is clearly another kind of struggle, another form of holy striving, another jihad. Sura 22 gives the command "O ye who believe! Bow down, prostrate yourselves, and adore your Lord: And do good, that you may prosper. And strive in his cause, as you ought to strive (with sincerity and under discipline) . . . establish regular Prayer, Give regular Charity, And hold fast to Allah! (22:77-78) The core practices of Islam - prayer (*salat*) and charity (*zakat*), revelation says, clearly call for a holy struggle, a jihad. It does not take much to see the annual month-long fast of Ramadan, and the once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca, the hadj, as holy striving as well.

An ancient hadith - not a Quranic sura, but a tradition passed down from earliest times - says that Mohammed, in returning from the Battle of Tubuk said, "We return from the lesser jihad, to the greater jihad." Sufyan Ibn Uyaynah, the revered sage who died in 816, said, "Jihad in the way of God consists of ten parts of which only one is fighting against the enemy, while the other nine are fighting against the self." Muslim scholars have long spoken of this two struggles as jihad by sword and jihad by heart (Onder Bakircioglu. *Islam and Warfare*. p.70) Which is greater?

Our 3rd and 4th graders will hear a story this month that might help us out.

One day Mullah Nasruddin was visited by a neighbor he didn't like. The neighbor asked Nasruddin, "May I borrow your donkey?" Nasruddin did not want to lend his donkey to the neighbor. He told him, "I would be very glad to loan you my donkey. Unfortunately, though, my brother came yesterday and asked me the same favor. He has taken my donkey to carry his wheat harvest to the mill. Sadly, the donkey is not here."

"Oh, that's disappointing," said the neighbor. "Well, perhaps another time." And he turned around to go home. The neighbor hadn't gone two steps, though, when Mullah Nasruddin's donkey, from the back of his compound, let out a big, loud bray.

"Mullah Nasruddin," said the neighbor, turning back. "I thought you said your donkey was not here."

"He is not," said the Mullah.

"But I just heard him bray!" said the neighbor.

"My friend," said the Mullah, "who are you going to believe? Me, or a donkey?"

Mullah Nasruddin teaches sometimes by negative example. In this case we believe the donkey no matter how wise we know Mullah Nasruddin to be. Right? Why do we believe the donkey? You could say it this way: Look at our faith's statement of the sources we draw upon: we draw upon the words of prophetic men, we say, like Mullah Nasruddin. But before them, first of all, we draw on "direct experience of . . . the forces that create and uphold life." Can you think of a more direct experience of a life-force than hearing a donkey's bray? I can't.

So what happens if we apply that same test to deciding which struggle is the greater struggle, the holier struggle: jihad by the sword or jihad by the heart? In your direct experience, can you say

that military struggle opens you to the forces that create and uphold life, more than does inner moral struggle? I can't.

Jihad by sword and jihad by heart, in fact, do not exhaust the ways Islam sees the holy struggle to which it is called. Most Muslim scholars speak, as well, of jihad by tongue, through correct teaching, and jihad by hands, through good works. (Onder Bakircioglu. *Islam and Warfare*, p.70) The richness, the subtlety, the sophistication of Islamic thought and Islamic feeling has been infused into American appreciation only most painfully slowly. Our Unitarian Universalist faith, though, has long been pulling for this infusion.

In 1841 Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson discovered the ancient Persian poets, through German translations. Through him came to us Jellaladin Rumi, author of our opening words and song this morning, and also Saadi, author of words this morning's responsive reading.

In the early 1900s, Mohammad Iqbal rose to prominence in Pakistan, first as a poet and then as a close confidant of the country's political leader Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Iqbal is often called Pakistan's spiritual founder. In 1930, Iqbal wrote a book called *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. He argued there that the *Quran* provided support for democratic government and for reform in the rights of women and in criminal justice. Iqbal's poetry took its place in our Unitarian Universalist hymnal in 1993.

In the 1980s, Northern India's Islam in the Modern Age Society joined Unitarian Universalists in the International Association for Religious Freedom. From Aligarh Muslim University, Professor Jamal Khwaja proclaimed the Society's spirit in his book *Authenticity and Islamic Liberalism*. "One cannot be a Muslim unless one believes that the *Quran* was Divinely 'revealed' to the Prophet." he acknowledged. "But ... (e)very Muslim must feel free to express any lurking doubts or difficulties (if any) in traditional views or beliefs instead of suppressing his reservations." (p.1)

"The Quran can be no substitute for the laborious learning process of observation, experiment, formulation of hypotheses and their verification . . . which falls in the domain of natural and social sciences." (p.11) "As Sura 10 . . . teaches 'It is not for any soul to believe save by the leave of God.' (10:100) "(A)uthenticity," says Professor Khwaja, "is the life-blood of faith." (p.1)

In our century, in the wake of the attacks of 9/11, new Muslim voices have struggle to make their voices heard in in our country.

- Khaled Abou El Fadl, professor at UCLA Law School, immediately after the attacks, wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, " Muslims, American and otherwise, should reflect on the state of their culture and the state of Islamic civilization ("Terrorists Forget Islamic Tolerance"). In 2005, our U.U. Association's Beacon Press published Professor El Fadl's book *Islam and Tolerance*.

- Muqtedar Khan, now professor at the University of Delaware, immediately after the attacks, published a "Memo to American Muslims" in the *New York Post*: "I write with the explicit purpose of inviting . . . the American Muslim community in soul-searching reflection and reassessment." (10-19-2001) He then set up a website – Ijtihad.org. It calls modern Muslims into "strenuous effort" to bring "innovative thinking" to Islam. Sura 42 in the *Quran*, it reminds us, "Allah's reward will be for those who conduct their affairs through mutual consultation." (42:38) Professor Kahn then says "We should all consult among ourselves and conclude what God is

telling us. --- To take away from me my right to interpret Islam, you have to deprive me of my humanity." In 2003, Professor Khan was invited to speak to the National Imam's Conference in Washington D.C.

"In the name of Allah, Most Merciful, Most Benevolent," he said, "Imams, you must become tolerant, more open and more willing to accept new ideas. There is a demand for liberalization from within the community and from outside. On issues of women, on relations with other faiths and other communities, you must interpret Islam with utmost compassion and acceptance of others. "Dear Imams – Go bridge the gap between our communities and the larger community. That is where our future is. May Allah bless us all. (www.ijtihad.org)

How strong are these voices now in American culture? Who truly speaks for Islam's spirit in our world? I suspect Muslims themselves are troubled to answer these questions. Yet we are called to join them, even in their confusion. We are most fortunate, here in Rochester, to have Muslim neighbors who have invited us into their internal struggle. Who among us here watched or attended any one of Regina Mustafa's weekly Community Interfaith Dialogue on Islam programs at our Library? Who has attended any one of the Rochester Muslim Community Center's monthly open houses? This month these relationships will bring these neighbors among us to continue our open conversation about faith. Some may even be here today. Some will be with our children in their classes this month.

In our confusion, in our struggle, our jihad, even here we can find guidance again from Mullah Nasruddin. Hear, as our 5th and 6th graders will hear in their class, how he resolved his own confusion.

One day, Mullah Nasruddin and his son set out for the market with their donkey walking along behind them. They soon passed several men sitting outside a shop drinking tea. They heard one say, "Look at that man! How can he be so mean as to make his child walk all the way to the market when he has a donkey the child could ride?"

The Mullah immediately picked up his son and put him on the donkey's back. They continued down the road, but soon came upon several women who were also on their way to the market. "For shame," said one woman to another. "Look at that child, riding the donkey while he makes his father walk. Doesn't he have any respect for his elders?"

Right away, the Mullah took his son off the donkey, and he got on himself. They had traveled on slightly farther. But the next person said to the Mullah, "How can you be so selfish, riding the donkey while your son walks."

So the Mullah picked up his child and placed him on the saddle in front of him. Of course the next person they passed said, "How mean you are. How can you overload your donkey like that?"

The Mullah was by now in complete despair. There is only one thing left to do, he decided. He and his son dismounted from the donkey. With great effort, he managed somehow to lift the donkey and place it on his own back. When he reached the market like this, everyone laughed at the stupid man carrying his donkey instead of riding it.

So, in great shame, Mullah Nasruddin put down the donkey. He heaved a huge sigh, and then he said to his son, "It's just not possible to please all people, is it? It's probably best what you know is right and to please God."

To Muslims, God Allah long ago showed the path to peace, to *salaam*, through struggle, through *jihad*. In Sura 49, Allah's voice rings out: "O humankind, we have created you from a single pair of a male and female and have made you into nations and tribes not that you may despise each other. The noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is she or he who is the most righteous of you. We made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another." (49:13)

Now let the real sermon begin.

Daoona nan sij ahlaam, as our choir sang. Let us weave our dreams together.