

# **Unitarian Universalists and Islam: An Introduction to Interfaith Dialogue And Reading Group Guide**



**UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION OF CONGREGATIONS**  
**Washington Office for Advocacy**  
(202) 393-2255 • [socialjustice@uua.org](mailto:socialjustice@uua.org) • [www.uua.org/socialjustice](http://www.uua.org/socialjustice)

## Table of Contents:

1. What is Islam? _____	3
2. Why Should (UUs) Engage in Interfaith Dialogue? _____	3
3. Why Work with Muslims in Particular? _____	3
4. Making Contact with Muslim Communities _____	4
5. What to Remember When Working with Muslims—Etiquette and Islam _____	6
6. UUs Who Have Reached Out to Muslim Communities: Best Practices _____	6
7. Conclusion _____	7
8. Suggested Outline for Planning Group Session: Relationships Between Muslims and Unitarian Universalists in the United States _____	8
9. <i>No god but God</i> : Reading Guide for an Introduction to Islam _____	10

## What is Islam?

---

Islam is an Abrahamic faith, related to Judaism and Christianity. Followers of Islam are called Muslims and they believe there is one God (Allah) and Muhammad is his final prophet. Muhammad recited the Word of God (Quran) on the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century CE. Islam has five pillars: profession of faith (there is one God and Muhammad is his prophet), ritual prayer toward Mecca five times a day, paying of alms and community service, fasting during the Holy Month of Ramadan, and a pilgrimage to Mecca. Below are some helpful websites with more information on Islam. Additionally, in this resource guide, you will find a book club curriculum for an extremely well written book about Islam called *No god but God* by Reza Aslan (Random House Press, 2005).

### Resources

- <http://www.islamicity.com/> -A Muslim-American website that gives an excellent, non-sectarian introduction to Islam.
- <http://www.islamia.com/> -A very comprehensive website explaining Islam.
- <http://islam.about.com/od/basicbeliefs/p/intro.htm> -Simple FAQ on Islam from a converted Muslim-American woman.
- [http://www.tolerance.org/news/article\\_tol.jsp?id=273](http://www.tolerance.org/news/article_tol.jsp?id=273) – Simple FAQ from the anti-hate organization, the Southern Poverty Law Center.
- <http://www.uua.org/visitors/beliefswithin/6664.shtml> - Islam as a UU Source of Inspiration.
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muslim\\_holidays](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muslim_holidays) - A list of Islamic Holidays including dates for the next three years

## Why should Unitarian Universalists (UUs) Engage in Interfaith Dialogue?

---

Our faith calls us to be in discussion with the people in our lives. As we promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we uphold their spirituality as part of their personhood. As we respect each individual's search for truth and meaning, we encourage their faith journeys and what they hold to be sacred. As we work to build a global community, we need all people to be wholly involved, spiritually as well as politically. Our sources of inspiration call us to learn from the world's spiritual traditions. All of these things that we covenant to affirm and promote encourage us to speak with one another in a spirit of dialogue. Similarly, we believe that there are many valid paths to the Divine. We strengthen our own relationships with the Divine by learning about the experiences of others. And finally, interfaith dialogue gives us an opportunity to work for justice in our lives, communities and the world. By learning from one another, we can develop a way to build the Beloved Community.

## Why Work with Muslims in Particular?

---

Muslims are a part of our local and global communities. Their struggles are our own. Their experiences with the Transcendent Divine can teach us more about how we can

commune with the universe. Also, Islam in general and Muslims specifically have been demonized by our modern popular culture-centered society. Post 9/11 sentiment has put much stress and pressure on the Muslim- American community and the war in Iraq has put stress on the global Islamic world. By working with Muslims, we can learn more about how to work with them in a committed, sustainable and accountable way in this difficult time. Finally, just as Unitarian Universalism inspires its members to work for social justice, Islam also calls for its tenets to participate in social justice and community service.

Islam in America has long been marginalized. Images found in books, news stories and films often unfairly portray this faith as backwards and warrior-like. In recent years, Islam has been given a one-sided description as a world full of radical and violent rhetoric. Images of the Iranian Revolution in the 1970's, Saddam Hussein's despotic regime in the 1980's and 1990's, and experiences of 9/11 and the War on Terror are often the only modern views of Islam that Americans see. However, we know these images are extremely recent in the long and proud tradition of Islam and not representative of the whole faith. Most Muslims in the United States are hard working American citizens. They give much to our rich national culture and their religious tradition adds to the diverse tapestry that is the American religious community. Many Muslims in America are Black Americans. Black American Muslims have been active in fostering Islam in America throughout the twentieth century. Recently, the United States has seen an increase in Muslims from different countries. Muslims in the United States could come from the Middle East, North or West Africa, or Southeast Asia. Foreign-born Muslims face double persecution in their new homes due to the combined stigmas of being Muslim and immigrants. Many urban areas will have a large population of both native born and immigrant Muslims. For instance, the city of Dearborn, Michigan has one of the largest populations of Muslims in the United States per capita. By understanding the history and spiritual traditions of Islam, we can have effective relationships based on spiritual, communal and justice seeking relationships.

## **Making Contact with Muslim Communities**

---

Contacting an Islamic society can be as simple as opening up the phone book. Dee Halzack of the Lowell, Massachusetts congregation said, "My experience with most Muslims I have met is that they are grateful when anyone expresses interest and respect for their religion and are quite happy to share information... Once I had a phone number, it was easy." Many other congregations confirmed that Islamic Societies and Mosques will be happy to give people tours of their worship space. Taking a Sunday school class on tours of the Mosque is a perfect reason for contacting the Islamic Center. Ms. Halzack also points out "Being aware of Ramadan will allow congregations to find opportunities to get together...the mosques have a special meal...[and] make a point of inviting the local community to some of those meals." Ramadan meals (Iftars) are a cause for celebration for Muslims. An Iftar is the feast that concludes the day of fasting and prayer. It is considered a blessing to invite friends and strangers to share in the Iftar. Look in the religion section of your local newspaper around Ramadan for Iftar announcements. Andy Fink of the Harbor Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Michigan agrees that food is helpful in bringing the two communities together. He writes,

"Our pot luck was very successful. Somehow, eating with someone loosens tensions and lowers resistance."

Both Muslims and UUs tie social justice into their faith. Working together on a common issue is a great way for Muslims and UUs to connect over shared values and be effective partners for change. For two years, the UUs of Sterling (UUS), Virginia worked with the All Dulles Area Muslim Society (ADAMS) to feed the hungry and homeless in Northern Virginia. In 2005, UUS and ADAMS started an organization called Project Hope and Harmony to promote policy change affecting the hungry and homeless in Fairfax County. Just over the Potomac River in Washington DC, All Souls Church, Unitarian (ASC) works with a local Mosque in Northern Virginia called Dar Al-Hijra on issues facing Muslim Americans. They first met to discuss conditions in Guantanamo Bay Prison and US Government treatment of suspected terrorists. In an unfortunate twist, one of the speakers that day was arrested and imprisoned on grounds of perjury in his previous grand jury case of suspected terrorism. ASC and Dar Al-Hijra wrote an amicus brief together on his behalf. Members of the Unitarian Society of Ridgewood, New Jersey were concerned about racist and prejudicial actions against Muslims after the outbreak of the Iraq War in 2003. Since then, they have shared meals together and sponsored community forums. Much like All Souls Church, they hosted a community forum on Guantanamo.

Below are a series of Islamic social justice organizations that may be able to assist churches in discerning which actions may be appropriate for outreach to and with Muslims.

- <http://www.masnet.org/freedomfoundation.asp> - Muslim American Society (MAS) Freedom Foundation- A Islamic non-profit that encourages civic engagement.
- [www.lsna.net](http://www.lsna.net) -Islamic Society of North America. A Muslim Advocacy organization in North America. Located in Indianapolis, IN and Washington DC
- <http://mpf21.wordpress.com/> -Muslim Peace Fellowship. The first organization devoted to the practice of Muslim non-violence
- <http://www.cair.com/> - Council on American- Islamic Relations (CAIR). The largest Islamic Advocacy and Civil Rights Organization in the United States.
- <http://www.hamsaweb.org/> -Hands Across the Mideast Support Alliance (HAMSA)- A progressive Mideast civil rights organization located in the United States. Offers guest speakers.

## **What to Remember When Working With Muslims— Etiquette and Islam**

---

Before interacting with Islamic communities, it is important to be aware of Islamic customs and traditions. Reza Aslan describes in *No god but God* that Islam is a faith based on orthopraxy instead of orthodoxy. This means mainstream Islam is a faith based on proper adherence to rituals and practices rather than proper interpretation of myths and stories. For this reason, etiquette is very important to Muslims and most

etiquette in Islamic culture is centered on bodies. When meeting with Muslims--especially at a Mosque--it is encouraged that one wears modest clothing. Long sleeves and pants/skirts are recommended. Women may wish to wear a Hijab--or head scarf. The Hijab is seen as a sign of modesty and respect in Islam and women wear it for a variety of personal reasons--both spiritual and political. In Islamic culture, it is rude to point the bottom of one's feet or shoes toward another person. And all people are required to remove their shoes before entering the prayer space in the Mosque. When meeting a Muslim, it is customary for people of same genders to shake hands and for every one to greet each other with the traditional salutation response of "Assalamu Alaykum" (peace be with you) to which the recipient responds with "wa alaykum assalam" (and may peace be upon you).

Much like in Judaism, Islam has a series of dietary laws called "Halal". Kosher and Halal are very similar in practice, but should not be considered the same thing. Any medium to major sized urban area will have grocery stores and butchers that specialize in Halal. To be safe though, in the case of group dinners or pot lucks, one may ask the Islamic society if they could recommend a Halal food provider.

Below are many resources on Islamic culture and etiquette including some rules of Halal food preparation.

- <http://www.bahagia.btinternet.co.uk/customs.htm> -Comprehensive guide to basic Islamic customs and etiquette written by a British convert to Islam.
- [http://www.wefound.org/texts/Islam\\_files/IslamEtiquettes.htm](http://www.wefound.org/texts/Islam_files/IslamEtiquettes.htm) -Thorough description of common etiquette in Islam from a Saudi scholar.
- [http://www.christianmuslimforum.org/downloads/Etiquette\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.christianmuslimforum.org/downloads/Etiquette_Guide.pdf) -A guide for Muslim and Christian interfaith dialogue.
- <http://www.faithandfood.com/Islam.php> -A basic overview on Halal from the Faith And Food Organization.
- <http://www.isaiowa.org/content.asp?ID=1677> -A comprehensive description of Halal from the largest Halal certifier in the United States.

## **UUs Who Have Reached Out to Muslim Communities: Best Practices**

---

There are already many UU communities who have reached out to their local Islamic communities. They have found their relationships with Islamic communities have been fruitful, inspiring, productive and at times challenging. Often their relationships are based on dialogue and learning from each others' spiritual and political journeys. Other times, they are about sharing sacred space and relationship with the divine. And other times, they are based on a shared program for social justice. The First Unitarian Congregational Society of Brooklyn met members of the Muslim community in New York City while protesting racist attacks against an Arab-themed public school. They formed a relationship which led to sharing a dinner during Ramadan, holding a series of community forums about Muslims in New York City post 9/11, and giving support to the Arab American community during a difficult and trying time with the New York City School District. Interim Minister of FUCSB said of her experience working with Muslims,

"I cannot remember feeling more proud, grateful, or honored as a Unitarian Universalist..."

The Islamic Society of Southern Prince George's County, MD uses the Davies Memorial Unitarian Church in Silver Spring, MD as a worship space and a cultural center to teach Arabic. A member of the Islamic Society, Khalil Shadeed, participates in the annual interfaith worship services at the Goodloe Memorial UU Church in Bowie, Maryland. Speaking of his organization's experience with the two churches, Mr. Shadeed says, "We value the Unitarian Universalist perspective and the continued contributions of Rev. Snively and Rev. Crestwell."

## Conclusion

---

Islam is a complex and beautiful faith. Reaching out to Islamic communities can be beneficial for communities for many reasons. Working with Muslims gives your community an opportunity to learn about different faith practices, learn about new cultural experiences, and strengthen capacities for social justice. Working with Islamic communities in a respectful and sustainable way can create meaningful cross-cultural and inter-religious relationships. Be open to dialogue and new possibilities and one may find a relationship with local Muslim communities can be a wonderful growing and life-affirming experience.

# Suggested Outline for Planning Group Session: Relationships Between Muslims and Unitarian Universalists in the United States

---

Adapted from workshop from Mennonite Central Committee (used with permission)

**Session length:** 50-60 minutes

**Session objective:** Plan steps toward an accountable and fruitful relationship with neighboring Islamic communities

## 1. Gathering (5-10 minutes)

Light a chalice. Read opening words 610 (*The Journey of Love*), 609 (*To Serve the People*), and 607 (*Beloved Presence*) from *Singing in the Living Tradition*. Reflect on themes of service, love, and mystery.

## 2. Initial discussion (10 minutes)

Pose this question: As you picture entering into relationship and dialogue with persons of the Muslim faith, what misgivings, fears, or questions enter your mind? Take time to hear these from the participants and, if possible, make the list visible to the group. The purpose is not simply to “list and dismiss.” Rather, these questions will help to shape the actions the group chooses to take later in the session.

## 3. Listen to stories (10 minutes)

Read the stories listed in “UUs Who Have Reached Out to Muslim Communities: Best Practices” and “Making Contact with Muslim Communities” on Page 4. What made these stories successful? What aspects seem most appealing to you?

## 4. Small group dreaming/discussion (10 minutes)

Assemble participants into groups of three or four. Ask them to respond to the following questions:

- If we were to begin a relationship and dialogue with Muslims in our area, where and with whom might we start?
- What resources are available in our group or our area (gifts, meeting/recreation places, hobbies, interests, local organizations) that might serve as a point of meeting with local Muslims?
- What specific steps should we take first?

## 5. Gather ideas (15 minutes)

Gather results from small group discussion, again making ideas visible to the group, if possible. As ideas are presented and discussed, help the group move toward consensus on an action plan. Detailed planning is not the objective, but get a sense for a general direction and a first step. It may be useful to return the group's attention to the responses in #2: Do the group's hesitations or questions need to be addressed in some way before moving ahead?

## **6. Closing (5 minutes)**

Close by reading 608 (This Clay Jug) from *Singing the Living Tradition*. Extinguish the chalice.

# ***No god but God:***

## **A Reading Group Guide for an Introduction to Islam**

An important key to success for interfaith dialogue is to have at least a basic knowledge of the faiths in question. Islam as a faith and practice is shrouded in mystery for many who do not belong to it. Western views of Islam have traditionally been a mixture of orientalist/neo-colonialist fiction and racial prejudice<sup>1</sup>. Recent geo-political events have made cultural misconceptions even stronger.

It is recommended that people who wish to participate in genuine and accountable interfaith dialogue with Muslims understand the basic tenets of the culture and faith. This should not be difficult because, much like Unitarian Universalists, Muslims are generally comfortable and experienced in explaining their faith to people who are not familiar with it. In preparing for your work with Muslims, the book *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* by Reza Aslan<sup>2</sup> is recommended. *No god but God* has been selected for its length, ease of reading, concise description of Islam and clarifying the many misconceptions toward the faith.

The following questions are linked to chapters. It is recommended several congregational members or a reading group works through the text together. The group may work through the group as quickly or slowly as they wish. These questions are only for the benefit of the group, they may be utilized (or not) as the group leaders see fit.

### **Preface-**

1. What are your current perceptions of Islam and Muslims? On what would like more clarification?
2. What do you think of Aslan's claim that, "Like puritans of other faiths... the jihadists' principal goal is the 'purifying' of their own of their own religious communities...(XVI)", does this adhere to what you think of radical Islam?

### **Prologue: The Clash of Monotheisms**

1. Aslan claims "Religion, it must be understood, is not faith. Religion is the story of faith. It is an institutionalized system of symbols and metaphors...that provides a common language ...(XXV)"; does this description fit your view of Unitarian Universalism?
2. Aslan claims we are currently witnessing the "Islamic Reformation" on par with the Protestant Reformation of the 1600's (XXVIII), do you see any connections to what is happening today and what happened four hundred years ago?
3. After reading Aslan's defense of being an apologist for Islam, do you agree that there is "no higher calling than to defend one's faith..."?

### **Chapter 1- The Sanctuary in the Desert: Pre-Islamic Arabia**

1. What was pre-Islamic Arabia like? How did it inspire the growth of Islam?

2. How is the story of the birth of Muhammad similar to the birth of Jesus? Why are *Topoi* important?

## **Chapter 2- The Keeper of the Keys: Muhammad in Mecca**

1. Why is Mecca important to Muslims? What is the Ka'ba?
2. What is the Quran? What is its role in Islam?
3. What was Muhammad's relationship with his wife, Khadija, like?
4. Why did Muhammad and his followers leave Mecca?

## **Chapter 3- The City of the Prophet- The First Muslims**

1. What do "Muslim" and "Ummah" mean? What is the difference?
2. What was early Medina like?
3. What is the role of polygamy in Islam? What are the rules set on it? What do you think about this form of polygamy?
4. What is the hijab? Why does it exist?
5. What is haditha? How does it differ from the Quran?
6. What are the roles of women in early Medina? How and why has it changed?

## **Chapter 4- Fight in the Way of God: The Meaning of Jihad**

1. What does jihad mean? What is the difference between "lesser jihad" and "greater jihad?"
2. How does jihad compare to Just War Theory? For more information on Just War Theory, please visit [uua.org/peacemaking](http://uua.org/peacemaking)
3. What is Islam's relationship to Judaism? How has it changed over the years?
4. In what ways has jihad been used against the Muslims?
5. Has your view of jihad changed after reading this chapter? How or how not?

## **Chapter 5- The Rightly Guided Ones: The Successors to Muhammad**

1. What was the conflict after Muhammad's death? How was it resolved?
2. What is a Caliph? Why were they important?
3. What is the difference between Sunni and Shi'ite?

## **Chapter 6- This Religion is a Science: The Development of Islamic Theology and Law**

1. What is the difference between Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy? Where does Islam fall between the two? Where does Unitarian Universalism fall between the two?
2. What are the five pillars of Islam? Why are they important?
3. What is the importance of calligraphy in Islam?

4. What is the argument between the rationalists and the traditionalists? Do you see any similar conflicts within Unitarian Universalism?
5. What is Shariah? Why is it important? What is a *fatwa*?
6. How was the Quran developed? What does it mean when Aslan says "the Quran is a living text (169)"; do you see any parallels to our faith?

### **Chapter 7- In the Footsteps of Martyrs: From Shi'ism to Khomeinism-**

1. Why did the Shi'ites split from the Sunnis?
2. Karbala is in modern day Iraq; how do you think this makes the political situation there more difficult?
3. What is an Imam? What are the different connotations of an Imam?
4. How was Ayatolla Khomeini able to capitalize on growing tensions between Iran and the West?

### **Chapter 8- Stain Your Prayer Rug with Wine: The Sufi Way**

1. What is Sufism? What other mystical traditions are you familiar with?
2. What is the Sufi's relationship with orthodoxy and orthopraxy? What is the Sufi's relationship with the divine presence?
3. Why do Sufis face such persecution?

### **Chapter 9- An Awakening in the East: The Response to Colonialism**

1. What were the early responses to European imperialism in the Middle East?
2. Who was Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab? What is Wahhabism?
3. How does Wahhabism compare to religious fundamentalism around the world?
4. How did Wahhabism grow into Radical Islamic Terrorism?

### **Chapter 10- Slouching Toward Medina: The Islamic Reformation**

1. Aslan claims that Arab and Islamic nations need to find their own brand of "Islamic Democracy" in order to have their religion survive (260). What do you think?
2. What is the difference between Secularism and Secularization? How does this difference play out in our modern world?
3. Why is it important for people of faith to engage in conversations with Muslims?

<sup>1</sup> Said, Edward. "Islam Through Western Eyes". *The Nation Magazine*. January 1, 1998. <http://www.thenation.com/doc/19800426/19800426said>

<sup>2</sup>Aslan, Reza. *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. Random House Publications. New York, NY. 2005