

## World Religions: Islam

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I want to start by telling you a story, which starts by going back in time to the year 610, into the country that is now Saudi Arabia. Living near the city of Mecca is a man named Muhammad. He's around 40 years old, married to a woman named Khadijah, who is much older than he. They met when she was looking for a reliable, loyal, and honest man to assist in her trade business, and Muhammad came to work for her. She became not only his wife, but his comfort and support in life, as well as his spiritual guide, and an important part of Muhammad's destiny. Although Muhammad is now, at the time of our story, a merchant, he is not able to read or write, like many people of his time.

Arabia in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century was in great turmoil and strife. The land was stark and held few resources, at least that anyone knew about at that time, and the tribes who inhabited the area were in violent conflict. While traditionally nomadic, the people were moving into cities and towns, and age-old practices and values were changing. Muhammad was not only a devout and loyal man, he was also practical and a keen observer of life. He yearned for stability, unity, and peace for his people.

In the ninth month of the lunar year, Muhammad goes to a cave in the mountains near Mecca for a time of retreat and renewal. In the night, he is visited by the angel Gabriel, who overwhelms him in an embrace that pushes Muhammad to the limits of his spiritual, mental, and physical endurance. At that moment, the angel orders Muhammad to "RECITE!" And, though terrified, Muhammad begins to speak the first words of the Koran in response to Gabriel's command.

Shocked by what is happening to him, Muhammad runs from the cave, going higher up the mountain in his terror, thinking it would be better to kill himself than to be possessed by a demon. But, before he can take his own life, Gabriel stops him by speaking again, assuring him that he has been chosen to be an apostle of God.

As the night goes on, Muhammad returns to his home and the arms of his wife. Khadijah listens to her husband's story of the evening's events, amazed but convinced that her husband must follow God's command and fulfill his role as the channel of this new revelation.

And, so he does. Muhammad continues to be visited by Gabriel, speaking the words of the Koran. As the Koran is revealed to him, Muhammad shares it with the people of his village. What he shares becomes the foundation of the faith of Islam, a term which means "surrender to the will of God." The ninth month of the lunar year becomes the celebration of Ramadan, when the faithful renew their commitments to living a life in accordance with the will of God.

Flash forward now about 1500 years or so. Islam is one of the fastest growing religious traditions in today's world, with over 1 billion adherents and growing. There are over

1000 mosques in the United States alone. It is one of the “religions of the book” – along with Judaism and Christianity, the third of the Abrahamic traditions focused on the one God.

As with any religious tradition, Islam embraces a complex set of beliefs and practices, many culturally specific to the Arab world from which it emerged.

The Five Pillars of Islam describe, in general, the central points of belief and practice of Moslem people. They are:

1. Shahada: There is no God but God, called Allah in Islam, and Muhammad is his messenger and prophet.
2. Salat: The faithful pray in the direction of Mecca five times a day at dawn, in the early and late afternoon, at sunset, and at night. The faithful pray together communally on Friday at noon.
3. Sawm: That during the month of Ramadan, the faithful will fast from sunrise to sunset each day.
4. Zakat: That the faithful, by the end of Ramadan, will give alms to the poor in the amount of 2.5% of their total assets.
5. Hajj: That, if possible, the faithful will make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during their lifetime.

As Unitarian Universalists, we draw inspiration and insight from the world’s religions, but those who follow Islam within our ranks are few and far between. While many of us point to one of the Abrahamic traditions, such as Christianity or Judaism, as a part of our religious heritage and foundation, it is estimated that only 1/10 of one percent of Unitarian Universalists identify Islam as either their religious tradition or current spiritual inspiration. Given the state of world events, especially since September 11, 2001, UUs and others have become more and more interested in Islam and the beliefs and practices that the faith embraces.

I want to look at Islam through the lens of our Unitarian Universalist tradition, seeking the ways in which we may be similar and those in which the traditions differ, as a way of expanding our understanding of the Moslem world view.

We share with Islam a vision of the sacred as integrated, that is to say that they are also unitarian in their belief about God. The prophet Muhammad is revered and exalted as the messenger of Allah, but is not considered anything but human in the Islamic tradition. Moslems recognize that history is packed with individuals (around 124,000 in their estimation) who played a prophetic role in the development of humanity, including Jesus, Moses, Adam, and Abraham, names that we recognize from our own tradition.

While UU’s believe that many people at many times may be wise and inspired teachers and, possibly, prophets, Moslems believe that Muhammad is the final, and definitive, prophet of Allah. Within the Moslem tradition, within the Koran, there are references to both Old and New Testament stories. However, Moslems believe that the Koran represents the final and closing revelation of God to his people.

In Islam, all are equal before God. Therefore, each is imbued with inherent worth and dignity, a concept familiar to Unitarian Universalists. No one is set aside as special, there is no priestly class, and all are welcome to become Muslim if they believe and profess that there is only one God and Muhammad is his prophet. Muslims believe in the ongoing development of character, through a lifelong devotion to spiritual practice, to perfect their faith. Moral and ethical development is an expected aspect of Muslim life. There is similarity between what we might identify as Unitarian Universalist values and Moslem values. Both value all life deeply, plant, animal, and human, and seek to treat it with care and respect. Both traditions value the concept of free will, especially in the area of religion. Both place an emphasis on deeds, not creeds, and both encourage a life of compassion, charity, and concern for others.

Few of us probably learned much about Islam when we were younger, although we might have been exposed to Islamic art or cultural references in stories like the 1001 Arabian Nights. Most of what we may know now about Islam comes from the current strife in the world, conflicts between those who embrace fundamentalist Islamic visions which does not represent true Islam any more than fundamentalist Christians represent the true nature of Christianity.

Muhammad spoke of the importance of religious tolerance, of the need to respect the faith of the people among whom Moslems found themselves. The decision to follow Islam requires an unforced, voluntary commitment. For most of their history, Moslems have not attempted to impose their faith on others, demand conversion, or eliminate other religions from being practiced.

Despite the reports we may see on the news, Islam doesn't exalt violence any more than Judaism or Christianity do. While the notion of "holy war" or jihad is a part of the Moslem tradition, it refers more to the concept of the individual's inner war of faithfulness and righteousness than to the need to engage in violence against others. And, we are aware that the history of all three of these religious traditions includes incidents of horrible conflict and violence directed at the "other," the non-believer, the outsider. Infidels. Heretics. Pagans. Gentiles. Our faith traditions have ways in which to identify the "other," and they are not all positive, affirming, respectful terms.

Religions of the Abrahamic tradition, from which we draw our roots, emphasize the need for people to be bound together in love and justice. But, we know that they can also be the death of wonder and freedom, especially when fundamentalism becomes a part of the religious landscape.

Theologian and author Karen Armstrong reminds us that the term "fundamentalism" developed here in the United States at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, associated with Protestant Christians who said that they wanted to go back to the fundamentals of their faith. However, despite the discomfort that Jews or Muslims might understandably feel at being labeled with this initially Christian term, we now apply the term fundamentalism to any religion's people who espouse similar ideals and desire similar ends at those Christians did for their faith at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And, according to

Armstrong, fundamentalism has erupted in every single major worldwide faith during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, including Judaism, Islam, Sikhism, Confucianism, and Hinduism, along with Christianity.

While it is certainly those who engage in violence who make the news, and thus come into our awareness, the vast majority of fundamentalists in any religion do not advocate for the use of violence nor consider themselves violent people. Most of them are religious people who see themselves as struggling to live a religious life, according to their beliefs and perceptions, in a world that, to them, seems increasingly hostile to their faith.

Author Armstrong defines fundamentalism as “a kind of revolt or rebellion against the secular hegemony of the modern world. Fundamentalists typically want to see God, or religion, reflected more centrally in public life. They want to drag religion from the sidelines, to which (they feel it has) been relegated in a secular culture, and back to center stage.” When people feel that the central religious principles of their faith have been betrayed by the larger community around them, they can feel a need to move to a state of “ultra-orthodoxy” in order to, as they see it, re-establish the desired centrality of faith and practice to daily life.

What’s the motivation for fundamentalism? Profound fear – fear that modern secular society will wipe out religion and destroy faith. And, out of that fear, fundamentalists seek ways to get the attention of mainstream society and move it back to a more godly way of life, a return to the centrality of faith in daily practice and experience. In the case of many of the world’s Moslems, the face of that secularity is represented by Western culture. The perceived enormity of the threat of secularism may perversely justify, in the fundamentalist mind, the severity of the actions taken, even to the extreme of violence, to bring the world back to a place of living in the faith.

Jim Wallis, who is editor-in-chief of Sojourner’s Magazine, a liberal Christian publication, believes that the best response to bad religion, which is what he calls fundamentalist interpretations, is better religion, not more secularism. He sees the need for us all to take our religion MORE seriously than fundamentalists take theirs, and “to critique, through our faith, the theocracy and violence and power utilized by fundamentalist movements.” He reminds us of the need to “assert the vital religious commitments that fundamentalists leave out of their view of religion, commitments to compassion, social justice, peacemaking, religious pluralism, and democracy.”

In this effort, Unitarian Universalists are uniquely positioned among the faithful to serve the needs of our time. Our Seven Principles reinforce our faith in and commitment to compassion, social justice, peacemaking, religious pluralism, and the use of the democratic process. We cannot, however, be prophetically and proactively involved in this process if we regard fundamentalists as merely radical lunatics, worthy of disdain or by simply ignoring them and hoping that they will go away. We must find ways to deal with the disenchantment and disenfranchisement of our brothers and sisters with whom we share the world.

We have to find ways to be in conversation with others from a place of compassion for differences and integrity with our values, be they religious, moral, or spiritual. For that to happen, we need to know about the faith traditions of those with whom we share this planet. Moving beyond our own beliefs and practices, we need to learn about what is important to those who follow Islam or embrace other religious values. Then, from our place of knowledge and understanding, we can begin to ask ourselves some important questions, such as: How do we take our faith and hope into the world? How do we take into our neighborhood, our city, our nation, or world the vision we have for a better future?

If we take our Unitarian Universalism seriously, and I'm sure we do, we find that it impacts not only our thinking about life, but our living of life, as well. What we truly believe, let us do. What we are truly committed to, let us act on. In Shallah – May God be willing. Amin.