

# Letter to UUs and All Peoples Members

Dossier created October  
2020 Proposal created  
January 2022

Through a collaboration between members of All Peoples, a UU Congregation in Louisville, Kentucky, *The Salaam Network*, and conversations with members of All Peoples, we have developed the proposal below for the All Peoples May Congregational Meeting.

- The 4<sup>th</sup> UU Source of Inspiration makes explicit reference to Judaism and Christianity and acknowledges as sources of inspiration, “*Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.*”
- The proposal calls for an update that includes Islam as one of the family of 3 Abrahamic religions at All Peoples and UU Sources of Inspiration.
- The **proposal** is to amend the 4<sup>th</sup> Source of Inspiration at All Peoples to:

**“Jewish, Christian, and Islamic teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”**

Over the last 3 years, presentations have shared accurate information about the connections between these religious traditions and the rationale for including Islam in our 4<sup>th</sup> Source. We hope you will enter the conversation and help make the 4<sup>th</sup> Source more inclusive. We have appealed to the Article II Commission of the UUA to amend the 4<sup>th</sup> Source of Inspiration in UUA by-laws as well.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE PROPOSAL**

We are writing to you to apprise you of an important initiative taken by our small group more than two years ago. We have been participants in a number of programs organized by All Peoples, a Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Louisville, Kentucky in partnership with *The Salaam Network*, a Louisville-based interfaith educational organization. These programs have been aimed at disseminating accurate information about Islam and at highlighting the similarities amongst the three Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as Humanism. Through our engagement in this educational process conducted by highly-credentialed scholars, we have come to believe that the time has come for including Islam in our Six Sources of Inspiration.

As you are aware, Unitarian Universalists draw their inspiration from many Sources. This shows our openness to accepting the wisdom of diverse religious and spiritual traditions in order to deepen and broaden their own tradition. A number of these traditions are mentioned, directly or indirectly, in our Six Sources of Inspiration. The 4<sup>th</sup> Source makes explicit reference to Judaism and Christianity, and acknowledges “*Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.*” We consider the exclusion of Islam – the third major Abrahamic faith – from this Source to be without merit and believe that we are called upon to draw attention to the importance of its inclusion. Not only is Islam a prophetic religion whose teachings parallel those of Judaism and Christianity, it is also the faith of one-fourth of the world’s population.

In the context of our endeavor to have Islam included in our Sources of Inspiration, we would like to point to its strong historical linkage to our tradition. Islam had a profound impact on a preeminent theologian Michael Servetus who read the Qur’an in Arabic and quoted it in his writings. He refused to remove the Qur’anic citations even when he was sentenced to death by burning on the orders of Calvin. The Islamic belief which inspired Servetus in the formulation of his own theology was the Qur’an’s categorical rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity. Servetus had such a strong influence on the founders of the first Unitarian Church in Transylvania that for centuries Unitarianism

was seen as an offshoot or affiliate of Islam. It is an historical fact that the Oneness of God which is the cardinal principle of Islam inspired the very foundation of Unitarian theological teaching.

The historical connection between Unitarian Universalism and Islam has a second chapter. The Unitarians, the non-Trinitarians, could not find a place to practice their beliefs in areas dominated by Christian Lutherans in Europe. Ironically it was the *Ottoman* Muslim rulers, following the edicts of Prophet Muhammad to give protection to Christian communities, who allowed them to set up their churches and practice their faith. The only reason why the early Unitarians were able to survive was because of this protection. And so, we see that Islam has not been a religion “alien to Unitarianism” but one that has been connected with it from our very foundations.

We are aware of the fact that Islamophobia is rampant in our country and that there are widespread misconceptions and misunderstandings about Islam and Muslims. Through our educational work in the last five years we have done much to inform our community about the authentic teachings of the Qur’an and the life and work of Prophet Muhammad.

In 2020 we compiled a dossier for the consideration of the Article II Commission of the UUA. This dossier contained the perspectives of the members of our planning group, as well as those of a number of Muslims including Dr. Riffat Hassan, Founder and Executive Director of *The Salaam Network* who is an internationally-recognized scholar of Islam and a pioneer of Islamic feminist theology and interreligious dialogue. The dossier also contained letters from Muslim Unitarian Universalists and links to important supporting statements on Islam by eminent Unitarian Universalists. Links to the dossier and these statements are given at the end of this letter.

Our group was invited to present our proposal for the inclusion of Islam in our Sources of Inspiration, in the form of a video at the Annual Meeting of the UUA General Assembly in June 2021 **and this year, 2022!** We commissioned a short film entitled “*Islam a Source of Inspiration*” which was shown at the GA meeting in June, and subsequently at All Peoples, a Unitarian Universalist Church in

Louisville. The Film has received many positive reviews. We would greatly appreciate your taking the time to see, and to share with other Unitarian Universalists, this Film in which the reasons for our proposal are stated clearly and compellingly. The link to this Film is

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNoJmyiD9bc>

We are keen to share the Film with as many Fellow Unitarian Universalists as we can because we believe that our proposal has an urgency and importance that merits serious attention. **Our group as well as Dr. Riffat Hassan will be glad to participate in a conversation on our proposal with any UU congregation which is interested in such interaction.** We look forward eagerly to hearing from you.

We would like to bring to your notice that several prominent UU Ministers who are knowledgeable about Islam have signed this Letter as "Supporters." Their names and affiliations are listed at the end of this Letter. We are most thankful to them for their strong affirmation of our historic proposal. **We are especially indebted to REV. DR. ALICIA McNARY FORSEY, the most celebrated UU scholar of early Unitarianism and its relationship to Islam, for her personal support and guidance to us as we strive to bring greater awareness to UUs of the role played by Sultan Suleyman, the Ottoman Muslim ruler, to protect Queen Isabella of Transylvania and the infant Unitarian Church in that region from being destroyed by formidable Trinitarian forces which surrounded them in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. We are deeply grateful to Dr. Forsey for her invaluable time as she is currently very busy writing the screenplay for her magnum opus entitled *Queen Isabella Sforza Szapolyai of Transylvania and Sultan Suleyman of the Ottoman Empire: A Case of Sixteenth-Century Muslim-Christian Collaboration* (published by Edwin Mellen Publisher, September 30, 2009). This rare masterpiece which is likely to be made into a magnificent epic movie, has received 5 stars from all its reviewers. We believe that Dr. Forsey's matchless research**

**which utilizes little-known Hungarian, Latin, Ottoman Turkish, and modern Turkish texts, translations and documents, will bring about a paradigm shift in UU perceptions of Islam and Muslims.**

**We hope that you will join the distinguished UU ministers, scholars and members of All Peoples who have signed on as Supporters of this Letter in advance of the May 15 Congregational Meeting. All we need from you is your name and affiliation and an indication that you are in support of our proposal to include Islam in the UU Sources of Inspiration. This information is to be sent to**

**[dennisneyman@icloud.com](mailto:dennisneyman@icloud.com)**

Thanking you in advance for your consideration.

With highest regards,

Dr. Dennis Neyman,

Louisville educator (retired) and activist. Past president of All Peoples, a UU Congregation (formerly Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church;) Taught English in Isfahan, Iran 1975-79; Community Outreach Coordinator of the Salaam Network; Kentucky Coordinator of the US Peace Memorial Foundation.

Rev. Dr. Joseph Brennan,

Member All Peoples, a UU Congregation; Researcher, The Salaam Network

Rev. Summer Albayati,

Congregational Life Field Staff, Pacific Western Region, UUA

Supported by:

Rev. Dr. Mellen Kennedy

Settled Minister at Springfield Unitarian Universalist Meetinghouse, Vermont. Ordained Minister in the '*Inayatiyya*: The Sufi Path of Spiritual Liberty; Founder of Interfaith Bridge which is dedicated to

cultivating friendship and understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Rev. Dr. Susan Ritchie Parish Minister at North Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Lewis Center, Ohio, Director of the House of Unitarian Universalist Studies at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio.

Rev. Terre Balof, Minister at the Unitarian Universalist Church at Lynchburg, Virginia, Member of the Sufi *Ruhaniat* International, Dervish Healing Order.

Rev. J. Mark Worth, Minister Emeritus, Unitarian Universalist Church of Ellsworth, Maine.

Rev. Craig Moro, Minister Wy'east Unitarian Universalist Congregation. He proposed two decades ago that Islam should be included in the UU Sources of Inspiration; Founding member of Tri-Cities Interfaith Alliance (UU's, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Baha'i); Member of UU Multi-Racial Unity Action Council.

Rev. Kathleen Owens, Past Lead Minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego.

Dr. Dick Burkhart, Trustee, Saltwater Unitarian Universalist Church, Des Moines, Washington.

Rev. Dr. Lucy Hitchcock, Board Member, Unitarian Universalists for a Just Economic Community; she served thirty years of extension, new congregation, and settled ministry in Fargo and Bismarck, North Dakota, Washington County, Oregon, Seattle, Washington, Miami, Florida and the Extension Dept. of the UUA in Boston.

Rev. Kristen Psaki, Affiliated Community Minister at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Boulder, Colorado.

Rev. Dr. Alicia McNary Forsey taught at the Unitarian Universalist seminary in Berkeley as Professor of Church History for thirteen years. She remains a visiting scholar of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. She is also on the adjunct faculty of the Humanist

Institute, and co-teacher of Class 16 (a three-year certificate program) for the Humanist Institute.

Ellen Sisti Wade, Member All Peoples, A Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Marcia Dorman, Member All Peoples, A Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Patricia B. Roles, Member All Peoples, A Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Alan W. Roles, Member All Peoples, A Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Rev. Tony Fisher, Minister Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Greater Naples

#### **SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS AND AUDIO-VISUAL MATERIALS:**

**Link to the Dossier:** <https://www.allpeoplesuu.com/islam-in-uu-sources-of-inspiration/>(Fall 2020)

**Links to YouTube Sermons of UU Ministers (Distinguished Guest Speaker Series of *The Salaam Network*) on Aspects of Islam:**

**Rev. Dr. M'Ellen Kennedy:**

***"What I Love about Islam"* (UCA Sermon, Atlanta, 3/1/2017)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qk82WFmh9A>

**Rev. Terre Balof:**

***"Reflections on Islam"* (Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson, June 7, 2015)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3mZAukNs78>

**Rev. Kathleen Owens:**

***"Exploring the Koran"* (Hillcrest Sermon, 1/25/2015)**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7fMOFS\\_iRw&list=PLuD1nRtSjb\\_cj6IFV5GF6sg7ifQ-uvNRTg&index=45](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7fMOFS_iRw&list=PLuD1nRtSjb_cj6IFV5GF6sg7ifQ-uvNRTg&index=45)

**“Heart and Hand: UU and Islam” (Hillcrest Sermon, 2/23/2015)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ulbccaCGZE>

**Links to Written Sermons of UU Ministers (Distinguished Guest Speaker Series of *The Salaam Network*) on Aspects of Islam:**

**Rev. Justin Osterman:**

**“Back to the Future” (A Written Sermon – Unitarian Universalist Partner Church Council General Assembly, 6/23/2011)**

<https://uupcc.org > sermons > Back-to-the-Future>

-

**Rev. J. Mark Worth:**

**“What’s Right About Islam” (A Written Sermon – Harvard Unitarian Universalist Church, 1/24/2016)**

<https://uuharvard.org/services/whats-right-islam/>

**Rev. Dr. Lucy Hitchcock:**

**“Daring to Comprehend the Attraction of Islam” (A Written Sermon – Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Miami, 10/10/2014)**

<https://www.allpeoplesuu.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Daring-to-Comprehend-the-Attraction-of-Islam1.pdf>

**Rev. Kristen Psaki:**

**“Listen for Islam” (A Written Sermon – Castle Rock Unitarian**

Universalist Community, 2/21/2016)

<https://www.waterandbones.org/prayers-writings-1/listen-for-islam?rq=islam>

**Order of Service Arlington Street U Church, Boston, Massachusetts**

**5/6/2018)**

<https://www.ascboston.org/downloads/publications/oos/5-6-2018-oosbigprint.pdf>

## **PART 1**

### **LETTERS TO THE MEMBERS OF THE ARTICLE II COMMISSION**

LETTER BY DR. DENNIS NEYMAN

LETTER BY REV. CRAIG MORO

LETTER BY PROFESSOR RIFFAT HASSAN

LETTER BY REV. ELWOOD STURTEVANT

Dear Members of the Article II Commission,

I am writing to you with regards to a proposal to add Islam to the 4<sup>th</sup> UU Source of Inspiration.

**First, a little personal history.** My parents and 5 others began a UU Fellowship in Tampa, Florida in the 1950's that grew into a UU church so I'm a life-long UU. Currently, I am a member and past-president of the Board of Trustees of a Unitarian church in Louisville, Kentucky. For your information our congregation just voted to change our name from Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church on July 12, 2020 and we are in the ministerial search process.

Sitting under the deep, dark night sky I face the Big Dipper spilling its mysteries into the galaxies of the universe. As a Unitarian Universalist Humanist, this sight is symbolic of the Sources of Inspiration available to me as I seek to Build My Own Theology in the UU tradition. I can trek to sources of wisdom from across the world's history. I am invited to consider a variety of religious and philosophical traditions, but not Islam. Why does this matter to me and why should this concern the wider association of UU congregations?

**I have been inspired by the culture of Islam.** I would like to share how Islam and the culture of Iran, a predominately Muslim nation, have inspired me. I came to live in Isfahan, Iran, an

ancient city in the middle of the high desert in the mid 1970's. My first experiences were of landing in the middle of Ramadan – a time of fasting during daylight, of prayer, reflection on the values of compassion, giving alms to the poor and especially family togetherness.

I lived in Isfahan, regarded by travelers as the quintessence of Iran, “*Isfahan nisf-i-Jahan*” wrote a poet, “Isfahan is half the world”. In my 3 plus years teaching and learning in Isfahan, I encountered not so much the words of the Koran, but the lived out lives of Iranian Muslims – the lives inspired primarily by Islam. Here was a land of turquoise – tiled mosques inscribed with the calligraphy of Islam, a land, at the time, of acceptance of Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, Armenian Orthodox Christians, among other belief traditions. It is a land where visitors encounter a social etiquette that welcomes the stranger no matter who they are or where they are from into a family home to be treated like royalty, fashioned no doubt by centuries of aspiration for a civilized life. It is a land which inspired one of UU's most beloved songs-“*Come, come, whoever you are*”:

*Come, Come* by Rumi

Come, come, whoever you are,

Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving,

Ours is **not** a caravan of despair.

Even if you have broken your vows a thousand times

It doesn't matter

Come, come yet again, come

**I would like to mention the partnership between my UU church, All Peoples, a UU Congregation (formerly Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church) and *The Salaam Network (TSN)*** a distinguished interfaith group of scholars, activists, peace-builders, convened to respond to the growing Islamophobia and other forms of bigotry in our community and beyond. I have worked as *TSN*'s community outreach coordinator and am now one of its two directors.

Members of my church have been collaborating with *TSN* since its emergence in 2016, to disseminate accurate information about Islam, its linkages with the other two Abrahamic faiths, Judaism and Christianity, and

Important contemporary issues. We have been conducting public educational presentations in Louisville churches, a Jewish temple and synagogue, the public library, and of course our church. We have also met with the superintendent of schools, the police chief, a representative of the mayor's office to offer workshops about Islam as well as other belief systems.

Since 2017, *TSN* has presented a number of programs on important subjects such as issues relating to women in different faith-traditions and our LBGTQ

community. This spring we organized a panel-presentation of eminent attorneys and social justice activists to raise our community's awareness of anti-immigration legislation which, if passed, would do great harm to our state. In 2019, our church approved an eight-week course in its evening educational program. Entitled "*Contributions of Islam to World Civilization*" this course covered various aspects of Islam, including its early history, its role in the Golden Age in Spain, its core beliefs and practices, Sufi chant and dance, young Muslim women's life in the U.S., the lived experiences of an American and Persian-American in Iran.

The last class in this course which was well-attended and well-received, was

on "*Relevance of Islam to Contemporary UU congregations.*" In subsequent months, we have talked about Islam in small group meetings at our church.

I also had the opportunity to deliver a Sunday sermon followed by conversations with Rev. Craig Moro, Dr. Joe Brennan, Professor Riffat Hassan and UU members by means of zoom technology. More small group conversations on Islam with interested UU members are being planned in order to deepen our knowledge of Islam and how it is relevant to UU's ethical and spiritual goals.

Louisville has about 25 mosques and is the hometown of Muhammad Ali, one of the most visible Muslims in the world. As I invite Muslims to attend our Sunday services and participate in workshops on interfaith understanding and cooperation, I am troubled to know that Islam is not included as a formal Unitarian Universalist Source of Inspiration in our 3 UU churches nor within UU organizations internationally.

**Now you may ask:** How did I come upon this proposal to add Islam to UU Sources of Inspiration? In a word, "Google" – I Googled "UU's and Islam", and with a few keystrokes, found Rev. Craig Moro's proposal on why Islam should be included in the UUs Sources of Inspiration. He had written his proposal in the hope that it would someday be shared, discussed, and perhaps adopted at some upcoming annual international UU General Assembly meeting. Deeply impressed by his efforts, I reached out to him. We are immensely pleased to have him as a member of our planning group (small as yet but growing)

Adding Islam to the existing Source of Inspiration is likely to be regarded as a change of great magnitude and will, undoubtedly, take time. We hope to begin by introducing a resolution to add Islam to the UU Sources of Inspiration for our local church this fall. I hope you can assist us in advancing this proposal to other UU congregations and ultimately, to the General Assembly.

Sincerely,

Dennis Neyman, Ph.D.

Member, Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church,

Louisville, Kentucky

\*\*\*\*\*

Dear Members of the Article II Commission,

I currently serve Wy'east UU Congregation in Portland, Oregon. While serving Community UU Church in Pasco, WA, from 2005-2014, I helped to found the Tri-Cities Interfaith Alliance (<http://tri-citiesinterfaith.weebly.com>) which includes CUUC, the local mosque, synagogue, Sikh gurdwara, UCC, and Lutheran congregations. I read Arabic and taught the first class on Islam at Starr King in 1989 at the Curriculum Committee's request, bringing in guest speakers from a range of Bay Area Muslim organizations. This helped to establish a foothold for engagement with Islam at Starr King, which has since been brilliantly expanded by the late Dr. Ibrahim Farajaje and others.

I have been urging UU leaders for many years to make a change in the language of our 4<sup>th</sup> UU "Source" statement. The current statement's specific inclusion of "Jewish and Christian teachings" could potentially be seen to imply exclusion of teachings from the Islamic tradition. Including Islam with the other two Abrahamic faith traditions named in the 4<sup>th</sup> Source would strongly underline our current efforts to reach out to Muslim communities at home and abroad. To expand our language will help make our "Welcome" sign so much bigger and signal that there's a new chair at our table. "Come, Come, Whoever You Are" will acquire a new depth of meaning.

Now, with the work of the Article 2 Commission underway, the time seems ripe at last. Fortunately, there is already an abundance of material available to work with, including my detailed proposal and the extensive work of The Salaam Network and educators at Thomas Jefferson Church in Louisville, Kentucky, led by Dr. Riffat Hassan and Dr. Dennis Neyman. Materials from these groups and individuals are attached along with my proposal.

I do hope that you take the time to look these materials over. I know that all of us who have contributed to their composition and compilation look forward to hearing your comments.

In fellowship,

Rev. Craig Moro

Minister, Wy'east UU Congregation

Portland, OR

503-851-4757

\*\*\*\*\*

Dear Members of the Article II Commission,

I am writing this letter in support of the initiative taken by Rev. Craig Moro and Dr. Dennis Neyman to build a compelling case for including Islam in UU's Sources of Inspiration.

I have had the honor of receiving a Doctor of Humane Letters (DHL) degree from one of the premier UU institutions of higher learning, Meadville Lombard Theological School (MLTS), in 2013 for "outstanding academic achievement and commitment to peacemaking and interreligious dialogue." Subsequently I had the pleasure to meet Dr. Lee Barker, President of MLTS, a number of times and was greatly impressed by his range of knowledge and wisdom as well as by his deep commitment to promote dialogue and interaction amongst diverse religions and cultures.

In July 2015, Dr. Mike Hogue, Professor of Theology, Ethics and Philosophy of Religion at MLTS invited me to participate as an expert on Islam, feminism and interreligious dialogue, in the international summer Symposium on Global Religions and their Material Expressions. Later that summer I was invited to participate in the "Religion, Vulnerability, and Resilience Project (RVRP) Symposium" at MLTS.

My connection to MLTS means a lot to me – I consider myself to be a part of its theological and spiritual community. I had sought the guidance of Dr. Barker with regards to our effort to have Islam included in the UU's Sources of Inspiration. He explained the process involved in making any changes in the Purposes and Principles of UUA and assured me that he supported our initiative and was willing to write a letter to the UUA Board of Trustees. One of his suggestions was that while we continue our campaign to reach the UUA Board of Trustees, we should also begin to acquaint our local UU congregations with Islam.

In 2016, I had founded *The Salaam Network (TSN)*, an interfaith education organization comprising educators, writers, artists, and peace-and-justice activists who are committed to countering Islamophobia and other manifestations of bigotry, hatred and mistrust in Louisville, the city of Muhammad Ali, America's best-known Muslim and a universal peacemaker. We have presented a large number of public programs in a variety of venues – mosques, churches, Jewish temple and synagogue, public library and its branches, and other community forums. In our journey onward we continue to be inspired and energized by a video on "Celebrating Cultural Diversity," made by one of gifted artists, which holds before us the vision of an all-inclusive community where no one is seen as "the Other."

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?feature=youtu.be&v=5h0pG53kY98>

In the course of striving to make our Beloved Community Whole, we have developed partnerships with like-minded organizations. The Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church (TJUC) has become our most valued partner which has supported a number of our educational programs. In the Fall of 2019, we had the opportunity to teach an eight-week evening course at TJUC on the "Contributions of Islam to World Civilization." Our final class focused on the "*Relevance of Islam to Contemporary UU Congregations.*" During the pandemic we have made use of zoom

technology to continue the educational process with those members of TJUC who are interested in Islam.

We are hopeful that as this process engages a critical mass of UU members, TJUC will become a model of UU and Islam collaboration. We regard this as a very important step in our effort to generate a groundswell of positive perception of Islam and its commonalities with the other Abrahamic religions as well as with humanistic and spiritual traditions which are included in UU's Sources of Inspiration.

We are sending you some of our documents and would be happy to send you any further information you need.

With best regards,

Riffat Hassan

(Professor Emerita University of Louisville and Founder/Executive Director, *The Salaam Network*)

\*\*\*\*\*

August 18, 2020

Dear Members of the Article II Commission,

At the request of my former congregant, Dr. Dennis Neyman, I am writing to add my support to the effort by members and friends of Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church ("TJUC") to recognize Islam as among the Sources Inspiration of Unitarian Universalism.

I became the Minister Emeritus of TJUC in 2018 after having served the congregation since 1987. My MDiv degree was awarded by Starr King School for the Ministry in 1987 and I received Final Fellowship as a parish minister in 1991. Over my career, I served the UUA and the UUMA in a variety of capacities, including as President of the Ohio Valley UU District.

I am pleased to have played a part in developing some of the connections between TJUC and Islam. Early in my ministry, I invited Dr. Hassan to guest preach and I served as her host on several occasions, and I had a small part in connecting TJUC members with the Salaam Network. I occasionally preached on Islamic-related subjects, and I served for many years on the board of the local Council on Religion and Peacemaking (now Interfaith Paths to Peace) where some of TJUC's continuing connections with the Islamic community in Louisville were developed. My wife and I had the pleasure of taking part in a Kentucky clergy trip to Turkey sponsored by an Islamic student group from the University of Kentucky which allowed us to meet and experience the hospitality of many practicing Muslims.

I believe that the Rev. Susan Ritchie’s work, including her book *Children of the Same God*, shows without question that there is an historic connection between Islam and that part of Christianity which developed into Unitarianism, so that our movement can legitimately claim Islam as one of its historic sources. The work of Starr King with Islamic scholars and Islam has also influenced a generation of UU ministers, so that there has been a renewal of a scholarly and developmental connection. And perhaps most importantly, individuals with their own connections to Islam are finding their way into UU congregations currently. Whether these people were raised in an Islamic household or culture, or were inspired by their individual encounters with Rumi and/or Sufism, or have come to us via some other unique path, it is my opinion that their spiritual roots should be recognized as being part of the ongoing development of Unitarian Universalism for our time.

Personally, I find Rev. Moro’s suggestion regarding making the UUA’s fourth source more inclusive to be worth putting before a General Assembly. That is, a statement acknowledging “Jewish, Christian, and Islamic teachings that call us to respond to God’s compassion and mercy by loving our neighbors as ourselves” seems to me to best acknowledge the widening scope of our movement in a positive, welcoming way.

Sincerely,

Rev. Elwood Sturtevant

Minister Emeritus, Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church, Louisville, KY

## **PART 2**

### **RE: PROPOSAL TO INCLUDE ISLAM**

### **IN THE UUs SOURCES OF INSPIRATIONS: SUPPORTING MATERIALS**

#### **1. CRAIG MORO:**

- a. It’s Time to Make a Good Thing Better**
- b. A Proposal to change the 4<sup>th</sup> Unitarian Universalist “Sources” Statement**

#### **2. JOSEPH BRENNAN:**

## Unitarians and Islam – Historic Connections

### 3. PROFESSOR RIFFAT HASSAN:

#### A MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE ON ISLAM AND UU SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

#### ***1A. Our UU “Source” Statement: It’s Time to Make a Good Thing Better!***

There is much to admire in the current statement of Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes posted on the walls of so many of our houses of worship, on the backs of orders of service, and in other prominent places. I particularly appreciate the thoughtfulness of the section that lists and describes the many “sources of the living tradition we share.” The contents of this list are packed comfortably but also tightly, so tightly that it’s difficult to take them all in at a glance while viewing them through the lens we are accustomed to using:

*1) Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;*

*2) Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;*

*3) Wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;*

*4) Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;*

*5) Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.*

6) *Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.*<sup>[1]</sup>

Whenever we take the time to unpack these words and sort them out a little, we are likely to notice something that we missed before. For example, there is the matter of *evil*. Religious liberals seem at times, in our eagerness to affirm every individual, to downplay the problem of evil in the world. Nevertheless, we do name it clearly where our second source statement affirms the “Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil”—the *evil* so often *structured* into collective entities such as Empire, Corporation, Party, State, or – sadly – sometimes even Church. Making a statement is hardly the same as mounting a campaign against the evils to which it alerts us, but it’s a good start.

Only when we’ve named what we are confronting can we do so “with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”

*Sin* is a term with which most liberals are even less comfortable than the word *evil*. We may therefore be surprised to discover that our fifth source statement warns us against a specific sin – called by its traditional name! – as it affirms “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.” How can we affirm secular-sounding notions like Humanism, Reason, and Science while warning against a religious-sounding offense like “idolatry” in the same breath? How can we distinguish a “sin” except against a background of holy or religious imperatives?

The conscientious *humanism* affirmed by these words means that we refuse to regard as infinite, omnipotent, or eternal anything which is not so. Such humanism, far from being an arrogant attempt to substitute human beings for God, is an attitude of humble resistance to the practice of idolatry, of taking any material object or structure of the *mind and spirit* as a “god”. When idols are enshrined and their worship is enforced by “powers and structures” of human authority that claim divine sanction, Humanists are no less offended than was Moses when he found his people worshipping a golden calf!

We might have been less surprised to find language about idolatry in the fourth source of our living tradition: “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.” But look at the load this statement bears already: Judaism, Christianity, God, and Love! That’s a lot of weight to carry, and this statement carries it brilliantly.

Notice how precise these words are: “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.” They do not speak of embracing any so-called Jewish or Christian teachings that call us to do otherwise than *loving our neighbors as ourselves*. Such teachings can surely be found embedded in powers and structures associated

with these traditions, and many “neighbors” over many centuries have suffered as a result. But surely such teachings are false to anything that can be called “God’s love.” We affirm with our Universalist forbears that if there is any God to speak of, this God *loves* – forever, all.

How clearly these words affirm teachings about the love of God and neighbor while not presuming to tell us whether God exists or not! What a masterpiece of economy, and of sensitivity to the feelings of people who seek the solid ground of fellowship with each other while maintaining a strong connection to Jewish or Christian roots; or to their hard-fought Humanist (or even atheist!) positions. If we are to increase the load this statement already bears with such gentle dignity and authority, we must also allow it to get somewhat bigger. That is exactly the change that I am about to propose. The time has come for this very good statement to grow, and for us to grow along with it. It’s time to make a good thing better.

Why? What is it that has changed?

We are now aware that there are not two but three major traditions in the religious “family” that includes Judaism and Christianity. The third, of course, is Islam. Muslims speak of these three faith traditions as the religious family of Abraham, to remind us that all Bible heroes, such as Abraham, Moses, Mary and Jesus, are heroes to Muslims as well. Islam raises the same cry for justice and peace, the same cry against *idolatry* and the *powers and structures of evil*, that we hear in Jewish, Christian, and Humanist teachings.

The problem is that while our current source statement invites Jews and Christians to bring cherished teachings from their own traditions into Unitarian Universalist worship and discourse, it does not extend this invitation to Muslims as well. This is remarkable, given that the term “Islam” draws our attention not only to a set of texts and teachings, but also to nearly one-quarter of the world’s people and the third largest faith community in North America today.<sup>[2]</sup>

This statement, posted in so many places where newcomers are apt to find it, warmly welcomes people who approach life from a wide range of religious viewpoints. It is a reminder that to join with us on the Unitarian Universalist journey is not a matter of “conversion,” but is instead a process of polishing the treasures we already carry with us from our home traditions while continuing to seek new ones on our own path. There is no requirement nor any suggestion that – in order to be welcome among us – a newcomer must first renounce his or her religious heritage. However, the fourth source statement as presently written does appear to extend a special welcome to some members of the religious “family of Abraham” but not to others!

Suppose that your own family has three members. Now imagine that you have received a beautiful hand-lettered invitation to participate in a great celebration, but it names only two of

you without mentioning the third. Would you guess this omission to be a simple accident? Imagine that everything else about the invitation reflects a great deal of concern for and knowledge about you and your family. Might it not seem – at least to the one left off the list – that she or he had been pointedly *dis-invited* or excluded?

I am certain that this was not the intention of the good folks who have composed and refined the current Source statement. It was first drafted in response to needs and tensions within our own religious association, with eyes turned more inward than out towards the wider world. Islam had not yet claimed the attention of most Unitarian Universalists except as an exhibit in the museum of “world religions,” one of several collections of spiritual artworks and beautiful sayings. Islam was not yet a matter requiring the same intimate sensitivity afforded to fellow UU’s who continued – and still continue – to identify strongly with Jewish and Christian *teachings*. This situation has changed. There are now among us many members of Muslim heritage, and more will be coming. Do we welcome them? How? And how well?

We may think that Islam is “covered” by that third source statement about *wisdom from the world’s religions* but I want to suggest that “covering” is not what’s needed here, or now.<sup>[3]</sup> Seeing how Jewish and Christian teachings have been so conscientiously included, it may very well appear to an outsider or newcomer that Islamic teachings have been deliberately excluded from where they ought to be.

By acting now – openly, deliberately, and gladly – to expand our language to specifically include the teachings of Islam and persons of Muslim background, we will be working toward more than our own interior health and growth. We will be modeling a proactive approach that’s sorely needed in these times when non-Muslim response to Islam is characterized by a tendency to ignore or forget, interrupted occasionally by bursts of fear- and anger-driven reaction. In such a context, the best way to show others how to do things right is to take a deep breath and do it ourselves!

I do not recommend, nor would I think it wise, to simply add the word ‘Islamic’ to our current statement, next to the words ‘Jewish’ and ‘Christian.’ That would be patchwork, just another kind of covering. Changes in human faithways cannot be entered into lightly, whether we are considering change in the practice of faith communities or changes in the written testaments of faith. Considering any change in the wording of such documents – by addition, subtraction, or substitution – will engage us at once in questions about the whole structure of faith; about its origins and its past; and about the future that is taking shape today.

We will need to ask: What is Islam besides a quick news bite during Ramadan or the Hajj, or a one-page Sunday feature in the newspaper? What do Islamic and UU approaches to questions of ultimate meaning and value have in common? Why did formal “Unitarian” thought first take

shape in Southern and Eastern Europe, on the margins between Christian and Muslim lands, and why should that matter today? Are there some natural affinities to explore and build upon?

The new statement that comes out of this process of search and discovery must be the work of at least a committee and ultimately of our whole community, but let me suggest some possible wordings, just to help get the creative juices flowing. To augment “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves,” I present the following alternatives for consideration:

- **“Jewish, Christian, and Islamic teachings that call us to respond to God’s compassion and mercy[4] by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”**
- **“Jewish, Christian, and Islamic teachings that call us to rejoice in God’s compassion and mercy by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”**
- **“Jewish, Christian, and Muslim voices that call us to celebrate God’s compassion and mercy by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”**
- **“Jewish, Christian, and Muslim voices that call us – in the name of God – to be a joy and a blessing to our neighbors.”**
- **“Teachings of the Abrahamic faith traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) that call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”**

These experimental statements retain the old one’s emphasis on *neighbors*. They highlight the desire for peaceful community so central to all of the Abrahamic traditions without suggesting that we accept the whole inventory of belief or practice from any one of them. They neither affirm nor dispute the existence of the God in whose *name* these traditions aspire to speak, but applaud their earnest efforts to do so. The new words thus retain some of the poise (if not yet quite the polish) of the old. We may find other words that do it better, but the important thing is to do it, and do it now.[\[5\]](#)

Good timing carries a message twice as far and plants it twice as deep as one that’s spoken in haste, or too late. You may have noticed that along with “Islam,” I’ve slipped – in two versions – the word “joy” into our statement where it never was before. (In fact, our current Principles and Purposes statement includes no language of happiness or joy.) *If our message today isn’t one of joy redeemed from sorrow, why should anyone listen?*

Now may be the right time to address this omission as well!

A change in language may seem like a small thing to consider. But remember that a small change in your prescription for medicine, or for your eyeglasses, may make all the difference to your

health, or your ability to see where you're going. It may be that by making room for Islam, proactively, at our own religious table, we will be daring to matter in a new way to the world. Not only for the money and good will we share through our many service projects: we will be daring to matter for the strength of our religious affirmation itself; for that joyously open vision of truth and service which is Unitarian Universalism.

Documents of faith, as much as they are descriptions of the world we see, are also lenses through which we see it. A lens needs to be polished frequently. From time to time, our prescription also needs to be updated. I propose that such a time has come.

Yours in fellowship,

Rev. Craig Moro

Wy'east Unitarian Universalist Congregation

(I welcome all constructive comments and reflections on this proposal. Please send them to: [minister@weeastuu.org](mailto:minister@weeastuu.org))  
UUA By-Laws

**\*Section C-2.1. Principles.**

***We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:***

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within

our congregations and in society at large;

- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

***The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:***

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

### **Section C-2.2. Purposes.**

The Unitarian Universalist Association shall devote its resources to and exercise its corporate powers for religious, educational and humanitarian purposes. The primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of its member congregations, organize new congregations, extend and strengthen Unitarian Universalist institutions and implement its principles.

[1] This language is contained in the by-laws of the Unitarian Universalist Association as part of our statement of Principles, Purposes, and Sources, a full copy of which is appended to this document.

[2] This resembles the religious profile of most nations worldwide that have substantial Unitarian or Unitarian Universalist populations, such as England, India, and the Philippines. Muslims are the second largest faith community in all three.

[3] Some might ask, “Why not craft a statement to explicitly recognize Buddhist teachings, which are important to many UUs (and also to many other non-Buddhists)?” The question suggests its own reply. Buddhism—like Hinduism, Taoism, and Shinto—is not confessional or covenantal in the way that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are usually understood to be. “Membership” in one Abrahamic faith community requires—or at least implies—*disaffiliation* from or *renunciation* of membership in any other. This is quite different from the situation in Japan, for example, where one might participate in both “Buddhist” and “Shinto” rites and celebrations, possibly without distinguishing between the two. The same can be said of “Hindu” and “Buddhist” observances in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia (where earlier “animist” beliefs and practices also persist alongside these great historic, literate traditions.)

[4] *Compassion, mercy*, and the phrase “In the name of God” echo key phrases of the Qur’an, as will be instantly recognized by readers of Muslim background.

[5] Some colleagues who reviewed an earlier version of this proposal remarked that Islam has not been a “source” on par with Jewish and Christian teachings – steadily supplying textual material for use in Unitarian or Universalist sermons, etc. – until quite recently. For a different view on the relationship of Islam to early Unitarian (and other anti-Trinitarian) thinking and motivation, please see Dr. Susan Ritchie’s magisterial 2009 Minns Lectures series at [http://www.minnslectures.org/archive/Ritchie/2009\\_series.php](http://www.minnslectures.org/archive/Ritchie/2009_series.php) and her book *Children of the Same God: The Historical Relationship Between Unitarianism, Judaism, and Islam*

## **1B. It’s Time to Make a Good Thing Better: A proposal to change the 4<sup>th</sup> Unitarian Universalist “Sources” Statement**

Our current 4<sup>th</sup> UU *Source* statement is a masterpiece of economy: “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.” What mouthful: Judaism, Christianity, God, and Love! That’s a lot of weight to carry, and this statement carries it brilliantly.

Notice the precision: “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.” There is no suggestion that we should embrace any so-called Jewish or Christian teachings that call us to do otherwise than *loving our neighbors as ourselves*. Such teachings can surely be found embedded in powers and structures associated with these traditions, and many “neighbors” over many centuries have suffered as a result. But

surely such teachings are false to anything that can be called “God’s love.” We affirm with our Universalist forbears that if there is any God to speak of, this God *loves* – forever, all.

Please note how these words affirm teachings about the love of God and neighbor but don’t presume to tell us whether God exists or not! They speak with great sensitivity to the feelings of people who seek religious fellowship with each other while still maintaining a strong connection to Jewish or Christian roots; or to their hard-fought Humanist (or even Atheist) positions. If we are to increase the load this statement already bears with such gentle grace, we must also allow it to get somewhat bigger. And indeed, the time has come for this very good statement to grow, and for us to grow along with it. It’s time to make a good thing better.

We are increasingly aware that there are not two but three major traditions in the religious “family” that includes Judaism and Christianity. The third, of course, is Islam. Muslims speak of these three faith traditions as the religious family of Abraham, to remind us that all Bible heroes, such as Abraham, Moses, Mary and Jesus, are heroes to Muslims as well. Islam raises the same cry for justice and peace, the same cry against *idolatry* and the *powers and structures of evil*, that we hear in Jewish, Christian, and Humanist teachings.

The problem is that while our current source statement invites Jews and Christians to bring cherished teachings from their own traditions into Unitarian Universalist worship and discourse, it does not extend this invitation to Muslims as well. This is remarkable, given that the term “Islam” draws our attention not only to a set of texts and teachings, but also to nearly one-quarter of the world’s people and the third largest faith community in North America today.

Our current 4<sup>th</sup> statement reminds us that to join with us on the Unitarian Universalist journey is not a matter of “conversion,” but is instead a process of polishing the treasures we already carry with us from our home traditions while continuing to seek new ones on our own path. There is no requirement nor indeed any suggestion that – in order to be welcome among us – newcomers must first renounce their religious heritage. However, the fourth source statement as presently written appears to extend a special welcome to some members of the religious “family of Abraham” but not to others!

Suppose that your own family has three members. Now imagine that you have received a beautiful hand-lettered invitation to participate in a great celebration, but it names only two of you without mentioning the third. Would you guess this omission to be a simple accident? Imagine that everything else about the invitation reflects a great deal of concern for and knowledge about you and your family. Might it not seem – at least to the one left off the list – that the third member has been pointedly *dis-invited* or excluded? Seeing how Jewish and Christian teachings have been so conscientiously included in our current statement, it may very

well appear to an outsider or newcomer that Islamic teachings have been deliberately excluded from where they, too, belong.

I am certain that this was not the intention of the good folks who composed then refined the current Source statement. It was first drafted when Islam had not yet claimed the attention of most Unitarian Universalists except as an exhibit in the museum of “world religions,” one of several collections of spiritual artworks and beautiful sayings. Islam was not yet a matter that seemed to require the same careful sensitivity afforded to fellow UU’s who continued – and still continue – to identify strongly with “Jewish and Christian teachings”. This situation has changed. There are now among us many members of Muslim heritage and more will be coming soon. Do we welcome them? How? And how well?

Changes in human faith-ways cannot be entered into lightly, whether we are considering change in the practice of faith communities or changes in the written testaments of faith. Considering any change in the wording of such documents – by addition, subtraction, or substitution – will engage us at once in questions about the whole structure of faith; about its origins and its past; and about the future that is taking shape today. This will take time. It will take study. It will also no doubt involve creating and empowering a working group or commission to frame and phrase a new, more inclusive statement. (I offer some concrete suggestions in the Reference Pages that accompany this document, and of course I offer my eager assistance!) I also believe that the initiative must come from the highest levels of leadership in our movement.

Documents of faith, as much as they are descriptions of the world we see, are also lenses through which we see it. A lens needs to be polished frequently. From time to time, our prescription also needs to be updated. I propose that such a time has come.

Yours in fellowship,

Rev. Craig Moro

Wy’east Unitarian Universalist Congregation

[minister@wyeastuu.org](mailto:minister@wyeastuu.org)

## **2. UNITARIANISM AND ISLAM – HISTORIC**

**CONNECTIONS JOSEPH BRENNAN D.S.W., M.**

**Div.**

I am the Reverend Doctor Joseph Brennan, and ordained priest, a Consultant to *The Salaam Network* and a member of All Peoples Unitarian Universalist Congregation. My colleague Rev. Craig Moro has shared with you the reasons underlying his efforts over two decades, to have Islam included in our Sources of Inspiration. I want to follow up by sharing with you two very important historical reasons for doing that. Not many Unitarian Universalists are aware of these reasons which constitute a very strong historical connection between their beliefs and Islam.

**I want to talk to you first about Michael Servetus.** (1511-1553) a Spanish physician and theologian. Many Unitarian Universalists have little awareness of the importance of his work and his contributions to Unitarianism. Born in Spain when the Muslim community had significant influence on the intellectual development in Europe, Servetus was a progressive thinker, a scholar of the classical scriptural languages, and reportedly, taught himself to read the Qur'an in Arabic.

Theologically Servetus was influenced by Islamic thought, particularly its rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, and the doctrine of Original Sin. His two major writings, *On the Errors of the Trinity* and the *Restitution of Christianity*, incorporated citations from the Qur'an. For instance, in his work *De Trinitatis Erroribus*, he cited Surah 4: *An-Nisaa'*:171 which states: “*Believe then in God, and His Apostles, and do not say God is a Trinity. Desist from this assertion, for your own good. God is but One God.*”

Unlike Christian theologians of the time, Servetus repeatedly referred to Jesus, as he is mentioned in the Qur'an, as the “Son of Mary” (e.g. in Surah 3: *Al-Imran*: 45, Surah 5: *Al-Maa'idah*: 46 5: 46). Following the teachings of the Qur'an, Servetus considered Jesus to be a prophet, but not divine, as taught by Christian scholars of the time. Servetus was denounced by the Christian community for his refusal to withdraw his non-Trinitarian teachings and his citations of the Qur'an.

In 1552 the Spanish Inquisition took action against Servetus, but he escaped their hands. Later, the French Inquisition declared Servetus worthy of death but had to burn him in effigy, due to his escape. In August 1553, Servetus traveled to Geneva where he was recognized and at John Calvin's request was imprisoned by the city magistrates. The trial of Servetus lasted through October, at which time the Council of Geneva condemned him to death. He was burned at the stake on October 27, 1553. The Calvinists and the Catholics both wanted him dead, but the Calvinists got to him first.

In later times there has been a re-evaluation of Servetus. For instance, Reverend Peter Morales, former President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, has said, “Servetus dared to use reason and evidence to counter religious hierarchy and authority. He was willing to call for tolerance and humility in religious debate. He was courageous to look outside the scriptures of

his own faith tradition. He sought to cross cultural borders.” (“Servetus: Our 16th Century Contemporary”)

### **Unitarian Church in Transylvania**

After having pointed out that Servetus had been deeply influenced by Islam and Qur’anic teachings which he refused to d

Under Suleiman the Magnificent, also known as Suleiman the Just (1494 – 1566), Ottoman Turks became a world power and conquered much of Hungary. The area of Transylvania where the anti-Trinitarian Unitarian Church was located came under

the jurisdiction of Sultan Suleiman. It became a safe haven because the Muslim Ottoman Turks extended their protection over the kingdom and created the conditions under which Unitarianism could grow, free from persecution. This was acknowledged by Rev. Justin Osterman in his sermon delivered on 23, June 2011, “As Unitarians, we are the direct beneficiaries of Muslim tolerance towards other faiths. Without the protection of the Ottoman Turks, our faith might never have had the chance to establish a foothold in Europe and our liberal religious views might never have survived to help shape contemporary culture.”

### **Conclusion of this part**

Even a cursory review of the thinking of Servetus shows how deeply he had been influenced by Islam. He, in turn, was a formative force in the early Unitarian Church in Transylvania which was able to survive and thrive under Muslim rule which granted them religious freedom.

These historical facts are not known to the majority of contemporary Unitarian Universalists. Unfortunately, the events of 9/11 led to the intensifying of negative stereotypes of Islam as a barbaric religion which promoted terrorism. A study of Islam shows, however, that religious tolerance was a part of its history since the time of Prophet Muhammad and his Covenants with non-Muslims. The Qur’an prohibits coercion in religion. All the early Muslim caliphates and empires offered protection to non-Muslim monotheists like Jews, Christians, and Unitarians. For Muslims, so long as a person’s faith was rooted in the Bible or embraced the Oneness of God, it was understood as complementary to Islam.

### **Considering Islam as a Source of Inspiration**

I know that discussing Islam is difficult. Our first thoughts may evoke fears, paranoia, stereotypes of terrorism. So why are Unitarian Universalists being called upon to consider Islam as an additional Source of Inspiration? The fact is that until recently, like many Unitarian Universalists including myself knew little about Islam, its contributions to society, or our church’s theological and historical connections with Islam. Our emphasis on the importance of reason, our constant search for truth, and the call to be all-embracing Universalists, challenges all of us to examine, perhaps for the first time, the reality of our Islamic community.

## **Prophet Muhammad and his Covenants**

Who was Prophet Muhammad, what did he teach about tolerance of those of differing faiths, and his doctrine of justice? I would like to share with you what I have personally learned about Islam, in the hope that we all might become more open to Islam's true message, and begin to increase our dialogue with those who, like Unitarian Universalists, search for a deeper meaning of life and faith.

Unlike many current stereotypes Prophet Muhammad was a man of peace, and not of war. Himself an orphan, he made a special effort to care for the widows and orphans and those in need. Upon entering the city of Mecca in 630 CE, after years of exile and persecution, he declared a state of amnesty for all those who had previously been his armed adversaries. The only property destroyed upon his return to Mecca, were the pagan idols.

During his life, the Prophet achieved agreements among the Arab tribes of Medina which had been battling for a long time, as well as between them and the Jewish communities of this city. The statements of these mutual agreements were written down in a document known as the "Constitution of Medina", that is preserved to this day.

Modern research has discovered some one hundred Covenants, some authored by the Prophet, others by his successors. They were intended for Muslim and non-Muslim communities alike. One such famous document is "The Covenant of the Prophet Muhammad with the Monks of Mount Sinai". In it the Prophet writes to the monastery that for, "All those who professes the Christian religion (there will be) a covenant of protection. If anyone breaks the covenant herein proclaimed, or transgresses its commands, he has broken the Covenant of Allah and makes a mockery of his religion". The document goes on to say, "I am behind them, defending them from every enemy. There shall be no compulsion or constraint against them." Reflecting on the Prophet's words, we could say that it is this tolerance and acceptance that we so badly need today.

The newly-discovered Covenants have been adopted by a new organization of Muslim scholars and leaders who pledge their lives to fulfilling the guidance they present under the title of "The Covenant Initiative." These will be extended worldwide to all Muslims, Sunni, Shi'ite and Sufi. The leaders have declared and endorsed "The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World", by which they will commit themselves to the tolerance taught by the Prophet. Those who promote violence and terrorism in the name of Islam are to be condemned for violating cardinal teachings of the Qur'an and the practices of Prophet Muhammad.

## **Why are we advocating that Islam should be included in the UU Sources of Inspiration**

I have pointed out two highly-important historical connections between Unitarian Universalists and Islam. I would now like to offer my thoughts on why Islam should be included in the UU Sources of Inspiration.

Inspiration is a positive inner force that motivates us to lead our lives in such a way as to enhance our own sense of self-value while promoting universal human dignity.

We find inspiration through our personal beliefs, through the lives of exemplary persons, through the examples of religious or spiritual leaders who, through their lives and commitment, demonstrate a model of how we ought to live our lives. Islam, through its history, its leaders, its contributions to the world of knowledge, and exploration, should present our UUA membership with a rich Source of Inspiration that will enhance our movement to attain world justice and peace. By extending our UU horizons to discover the true sources of Islamic inspiration, we will greatly enhance our own fellowship and our understanding of the need to broadening our Sources of Inspiration.

### **UUA and Islamophobia**

At the end I would like to point out that UUA is cognizant of Islamophobia. The 2016 UUA General Assembly Action of Immediate Witness recognizes the need for the UUA membership to improve contacts with our Muslim neighbors and combat Islamophobia. In my view, the proposed Eighth Principle should also include Muslims among those groups listed as oppressed communities.

In the end I want to share with you that I have spent much of my life seeking to understand theological truths and how they apply toward achieving social justice. My study of Islam has led me to believe that, like Unitarian Universalism, it is fundamentally committed to the pursuit of social justice for all. This is another strong reason why I believe that it should be included in our Sources of Inspiration.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **3. A MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE ON ISLAM AND UU SOURCES OF INSPIRATION**

**– Riffat Hassan**

I am Dr. Riffat Hassan, Professor Emerita of the University of Louisville and the Founder/Executive Director of *The Salaam Network (TNS)* an organization of interfaith

educators, writers, artists, and social justice advocates, who are committed to countering Islamophobia and building a knowledge-based culture free of bigotry, hatred and racism. *The Salaam Network* is located in Louisville, Kentucky, the home of Muhammad Ali, the best-known American Muslim and a global peacemaker. Following in his footsteps, and those of Thomas Merton, another great Kentuckian, our motto is “*Striving to make the Beloved Community Whole.*”

Since its beginning in 2016, *The Salaam Network* has presented a number of educational programs at diverse academic, religious, and other community-based forums. Its Unitarian Universalist members facilitated its partnership with Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church which has been renamed All Peoples Unitarian Universalist Congregation (to which I will be referring in my presentation as All Peoples). Since 2019 we have presented several programs jointly. I have personally received strong and sustained support from All Peoples in teaching Islam to Muslim women and other interested persons.

In the last two years I have been involved in a conversation with Rev. Craig Moro, Dr. Joseph Brennan and Dr. Dennis Neyman – three eminent Unitarian Universalists – regarding the inclusion of Islam in the UU Sources of Inspiration. Since any change in the Sources of Inspiration requires the assent of the leadership of the UUA, a dossier containing relevant materials was submitted to the Article 11 Study Commission in September 2020. While waiting for a positive response from the UUA, it was resolved that the collaborative work between *The Salaam Network* and All Peoples would continue.

As the only Muslim participant in the afore-mentioned conversation, I would like to begin by stating – for the benefit of those who may not know this – that Muslims regard the Qur’an as the Word of God transmitted through the agency of Archangel Gabriel to Prophet Muhammad who lived in Arabia (570-632 CE). As such Muslims regard the Qur’an as the highest source of authority for them. The Qur’an commands them to accept the earlier prophets amongst whom Prophet Abraham is regarded as a model of faith and submission to God. He forms a critical link amongst Jews, Christians and Muslims. A powerful testament to this is provided by the emergence of “Abrahamic faiths” as perhaps the most important rubric within which the discipline of interreligious dialogue has developed since the 1970s.

The Catholic scholar of Islam [Louis Massignon](#) has stated that the phrase “Abrahamic religion” (referred to as “*Din e Ibrahimi*” by the Qur’an) denotes that Judaism, Christianity and Islam come from one spiritual source. Though there are significant doctrinal differences in the three Abrahamic religions, their common spiritual origin implies that they form one “family” and have many commonalities, particularly with reference to their ethical values.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> UU Source of Inspiration, reference is made to “*Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.*” I would like to reflect for a moment on the second part of this Source, namely, “*loving our neighbors as ourselves,*” and ask you what you think “love” means in this commandment? Do you think it means that each time you see your neighbor you *feel* warmly toward him or her? In Judaism, commandments relate to *actions* not *feelings*, likewise in Christianity for Jesus was a Jew and proclaimed that he had come to fulfill Jewish law. What is being commanded in “*love your neighbor as yourself*” has nothing to do with how you feel about, or toward, your neighbor. It means that regardless of how you feel about, or toward, your neighbor, you have to be considerate and kind to her or him in your actions.

Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, commands its followers to treat their neighbor – who, incidentally, is not just the person living next door to you, but all human beings – as you would treat yourself and as you would have others treat you. The Qur’an links *Haqooq Allah* (the Rights of God) to *Haqooq al ‘ibad* (Human Rights). In other words, it teaches Muslims that obedience to God cannot be separated from kindness toward one’s fellow human beings. This is reiterated in many *hadiths* (oral traditions) of Prophet Muhammad, for instance, “*The truly righteous are those who want for their brothers and sisters what they want for themselves,*” “*You will never enter paradise until you have faith and you will not complete your faith until you love one another,*” and “*What actions are most excellent? To gladden the heart of human beings, to feed the hungry, to help the afflicted, to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful, to remove the sufferings of the injured,*”

UU Sources of Inspiration include ethical and spiritual insights and values from diverse religious and wisdom traditions. The 4<sup>th</sup> Source makes specific reference to the commandment to treat others as one treats oneself that is central to Judaism and Christianity. I have shown that the same commandment is equally central to Islam. There is, therefore, no logical or theological reason for excluding Islam, the third Abrahamic religion, from the 4<sup>th</sup> UU Source of Inspiration.

In looking for likely reasons for this exclusion, I am led to think of two possibilities and would like to reflect on each of them. The first possibility is that perhaps the UU Sources of Inspiration were written at a time when Islam was not well-known in the West. However, since the Sources of Inspiration were incorporated by the UUA in 1984 (amended in 1995 and 2018) it is difficult for me to understand how the UUA could have not known about Islam considering the global impact of events such as the Islamic Revolution of Iran (1979).

The second possibility is that though the UUA framers of the Source of Inspiration knew about Islam, they did not see it as a Source of Inspiration in line with their other Sources. Without questioning their reasons for this judgment, I would like, as a Muslim, to clarify to you why Islam is a Source of Inspiration to me and about 1.8 billion Muslims in the world. However, prior to doing this I would like to draw your attention to Islamophobia which has escalated to an unprecedented level in recent decades.

The causes of Islamophobia are old and complex. Since its first appearance in Europe in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Islam has been seen not only as the “Other” but as the “Adversary.” The major reason why Islam has been seen in oppositional terms by many Westerners, is that, historically, it has been seen as the greatest challenge to Christianity, the dominant religion of the West. In his epic poem, *Dante*, the great poet of medieval Christianity consigned Prophet Muhammad to all but the lowest circle of Hell for the “sin” of splitting the world of Christendom. The aim of the Church-sanctioned Crusades in the Middle Ages, was to expel Muslims who were seen as infidels from the Holy Land. Here it is apt to mention that the terms “Crusade” and “Holy War” are interchangeable though very often, the former is wrongly associated with *Jihad* which is one of the pillars of Islam.

Though the eight hundred years of Muslim rule in Spain were the Golden Age of Islamic and Jewish Art, Literature, Philosophy and other branches of knowledge, and for the most part a time of peaceful coexistence amongst Muslims, Jews and Christians, they are referred to as the Dark Ages in many history books still taught in the U. S. and other Western countries.

The negative imaging of Jews through the centuries in Europe fueled the anti-Semitism which led to the Holocaust. A new form of anti-Semitism aimed against Arabs (who are also Semites) and other Muslims has manifested itself in an exponential increase in violence toward them. This violence is often justified as a defense against *Jihad* which is defined as militant aggression by Muslims against non-Muslims. This definition is dangerously misleading. *Jihad* is a core Qur’anic concept and it means “struggle”. *Jihad* has two forms – the greater *jihad* and the lesser *jihad*. The greater *jihad* is struggle against one’s own shortcomings. As stated in a well-known *hadith* of Prophet Muhammad, “*The greatest Jihad is to battle your own soul, to fight the evil within yourself.*” The lesser *jihad* is struggle against social ills.

Islam does not sanction acts of aggression and permits only defensive wars. Its self-understanding is that it is a religion of Peace which is one of the primary meanings of the word “*Islam*”. Guided by the Qur’anic words that “*God loves not aggressors,*” as well as by his gentle and peace-loving temperament, Prophet Muhammad did not engage in any offensive wars and always sought to resolve conflicts through peaceful negotiations. In his view, wars were not needed for the defense of Islam. His *hadith* “*The best way to defend Islam is to practice Islam*” contains a lesson for all Muslims.

There is much historical evidence to show that Prophet Muhammad was extremely mindful of the rights of minorities. In one of his proclamations to Muslims he warned them “*Beware! Whoever Is cruel or harsh to a non-Muslim minority, curtailing their rights, overburdening them, or stealing from them, I will complain (to God) about that person on the Day of Judgment!*” His Manifesto to the Monks of St. Catherine’s Monastery in Sinai (626 CE), and his Pact with the Christians of Najran (631 CE), as well as the recently-discovered Covenants of Prophet

Muhammad with the Christian world, clearly demonstrate that his attitude toward Christians and other communities living under Muslim rule was one of respect, responsibility and magnanimity. It has been correctly pointed out by a commentator, “Muhammad treated his enemies better than we treat those who love us.”

The Prophet’s Covenants were made binding on all Muslims for all time. The Turkish Sultan Sulaiman who gave his protection to the nascent Unitarian Church in Transylvania in the 16<sup>th</sup> century exemplifies the influence which Prophet Muhammad’s Covenants had on future Muslim rulers for many centuries.

Many in the Western world wrongly associate acts of terrorism perpetrated by extremist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and Daesh with *jihad* or Islam. They refuse to acknowledge the strong denunciation of these extremist organizations and their barbaric actions by Islamic communities all over the world. Here it needs to be pointed out that increasing incidents of violence against Muslim minorities in non-Muslim countries are lending credence to the militant rhetoric of Muslim extremists who allege that the Islamic *ummah* (global community) is under siege and must defend itself.

Aside from projecting the image of Islam as a religion of violence spread by the sword, proponents of Islamophobia also denigrate it by propagating false stereotypes including the following: a) It does not honor fundamental human rights particularly freedom of religion, b) It is misogynistic, and c) It is monolithic, exclusivist and anti-dialogic as well as anti-modern. I will address these fallacious assumptions as I talk to you about the ethical and spiritual aspects of Islam which are a source of deepest inspiration to me.

I will start by talking to you about **FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS** affirmed by the Qur’an. While it is not possible to list all the human rights affirmed by the Qur’an which outnumber the rights mentioned in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), I would like to talk about the ones which are often highlighted by those who accuse Islam of being anti-humanistic.

**Right to Life:** The most basic of fundamental human rights is, of course, the right to life. The Qur’an upholds the sanctity and absolute value of human and points out in Surah 5: *Al-Maa’idah*: 32: “...this did We ordain unto the children of Israel that if anyone slays a human being – unless it be (in punishment) for murder or for spreading corruption on earth – it shall be as though he had slain all humankind: whereas if anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he had saved the lives of all humankind.”

**Right to Justice:** Numerous Qur’anic passages have pointed out that the duty to be just and to seek justice is a moral imperative for Muslims. In Surah 5: *Al-Maa’idah*: 8, it tells the believers: *“O you who have attained to faith! Be ever steadfast in your devotion to God, bearing witness to the truth in all equity; and never let hatred of anyone lead you into the sin of deviating from justice. Be just: this is the closest to being God-conscious.”*

Practice of social justice is one of the major themes of the Qur’an which constantly enjoins not only *“‘adl”* (legalistic justice) but also *“ehsaan”* (compassionate justice) which shows the Qur’an’s sympathy for the downtrodden, oppressed, or vulnerable classes of human beings, such as women, slaves, orphans, the poor and infirm, minorities, and other socially disadvantaged individuals and groups.

One of the pillars of Islam is **ZAKAT** (literally “purifying welfare dues”) which refers to money which Muslims are required to pay annually on their income and the value of all their possessions. Often mistranslated as “charity” (which is voluntary and not obligatory), *zakat* is sharing of one’s wealth based on the belief that ultimate ownership of everything belongs to God and that whatever we possess is a “trust” from God which needs to be “purified” by being shared with anyone in need ranging from the nearest of kin to the wayfarer whose name one does not know.

The paramount importance of *zakat* which is almost always mentioned in the Qur’an in conjunction with *salat* (prayer) is found in many passages including the following in which a stern warning is issued to those who observe outward piety without practicing kindness and compassion toward those in need: *“Have you ever seen a human being who contradicts the (essence of) faith (in God and His Judgment)? Then such is the one who thrusts the orphans away, and feels no urge to feed the needy. Woe, then, unto those who pray, but their hearts and minds from (the essence and message of) their prayers are remote, those who (want but) to be seen and praised, whereas they refuse to help others (who need help) (Surah 107: Al-Ma’un: 1-7)*

**Right to Sustenance:** In the context of justice reference must be made to economic justice. It is pointed out by the Qur’an that every living creature depends for its sustenance upon God and has the right to partake of what belongs to God, the Universal Creator and Sustainer. This means that every human being has the right to a means of living. It also implies that those who hold economic or political power do not have the right to deprive others of the basic necessities of life by misappropriating or misusing resources which have been created by God for the benefit of humanity in general

**Right to Freedom:** One of the commonest stereotypes of Islam is that it is authoritarian. It needs to be noted that the Qur’an is deeply concerned about liberating human beings from every kind of bondage. The greatest guarantee of personal freedom for a Muslim lies in the Qur’anic decree

that no one other than God can limit human freedom, and that “*Judgment (as to what is right and what is wrong) rests with God alone*” (Surah 12: *Yusuf*: 40). In the context of the authoritarianism of rulers, the Qur’an gives to responsible political dissent the status of a fundamental right. Even Prophet Muhammad, though the recipient of Divine revelation, was required to consult other Muslims in public affairs.

The Qur’anic proclamation in Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 256, “*There shall be no coercion in matters of faith*” guarantees freedom of religion and worship. This means that non-Muslims living in Muslim territories should have the freedom to follow their own faith-traditions without fear or harassment. This is also stressed in the Covenants of Prophet Muhammad with followers of revealed religions. The Qur’an recognizes the right to religious freedom not only in the case of other believers in God, but also in the case of non-believers in God if they are not aggressing upon Muslims (Surah 6: *Al-An‘am*: 108).

***Right to Acquire Knowledge:*** A common stereotype of Muslims is that they are mostly illiterate. Here, it needs to be stated that knowledge has been at the core of the Islamic world-view from the very beginning. Surah 96: *Al-‘Alaq*: 1-5, which Muslims believe to be the first revelation received by the Prophet Muhammad. reads: “*Read in the name of thy Sustainer, who has created – created human beings out of a germ-cell! Read – for thy Sustainer is the Most Bountiful One who has taught (humankind) the use of the pen – taught al-insan (human being) what he did not know!*” Prophet Muhammad exhorted Muslims “*Seek knowledge from cradle to grave.*” His famous personal prayer was “*God grant me knowledge of the ultimate nature of things,*” and one of the best-known of all his oral traditions is “*Seek knowledge even though it be in China.*”

Next, I would like to talk about **WOMEN’S RIGHTS IN ISLAM**. Islam is often seen as a misogynistic religion which discriminates against girls and women in multiple ways. As a pioneer of feminist theology in Islam, I can state on the basis of my forty-seven years of study and research in this area, that this is not the case. Two theological assumptions on which the superstructure of men’s alleged superiority to women have been erected in Judaism, Christianity and Islam are: (1) that God’s primary creation is man, not woman, since woman is believed to have been created from man’s rib, hence is derivative and secondary ontologically; (2) that woman, not man, was the primary agent of what is customarily described as the “Fall,” or man’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, hence all “daughters of Eve” are to be regarded with hatred, suspicion, and contempt. These theological assumptions were Christian in origin deriving from texts in *Genesis*: Chapters 1, 2, and 3. However, due to the dominance of Christianity, they were incorporated in Jewish and Muslim culture.

In the context of women’s rights it is important to point out that all the major religions of the world – Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam – developed in patriarchal cultures in which their sacred texts were almost exclusively interpreted by men. All major religions are unmistakably patriarchal if they are to be assessed on the basis of their cultural

manifestations. In 1974 when I started to interpret the Qur'an from a non-patriarchal perspective, I was the first Muslim woman in recent history who distinguished between normative Qur'anic teachings and patriarchal Muslim culture which regards women as inferior and subordinate to men.

My reading of the Qur'an clearly affirms woman-man equality in Islam. The equality of women and men in creation is mentioned in over one hundred Qur'anic passages. The story of woman's creation from Adam's rib is not found in the Qur'an which states that all human beings were made from one substance at one time. The Qur'an does not hold woman responsible for beguiling man to disobey God and be exiled from the Garden of Eden. Both man and woman disobeyed God by going near the forbidden Tree but they acknowledged their wrongdoing and are forgiven by God. Hence in Islam there is no "Fall" story and no concept of "Original Sin" according to which all human beings are born sinful due to the transgression of Adam and Eve.

The Qur'an is very protective of the rights of women because it recognizes their state of disadvantage and vulnerability in patriarchal societies. In this context it is important to note that there is more Qur'anic legislation pertaining to the maintenance of justice in the home so that the rights of all members of the household are equally honored, than on any other subject.

Prophet Muhammad made a special reference to the relationship of women and men in marriage in his Farewell Pilgrimage Sermon (March 6, 632) which, like the Sermon on the Mount by Prophet Jesus, has a normative significance for believers, *"O People, it is true that you have certain rights with regards to your wives, but they also have rights over you. Remember that you have taken them as your wives only under God's trust and with His permission. If they abide by your right, then to them belongs the right to be fed and clothed in kindness. Do treat your wives well and be kind to them for they are your partners and committed helpers."* There are also a number of Prophet Muhammad's *hadiths* related to women which are well-known to Muslims. Amongst these are *"A good man treats women with honor," "Paradise lies under the feet of your mother,"* and *"The most perfect man in his faith among the believers is the one whose behavior is most excellent, and the best of you are those who are the best to their wives."*

As Muslim women are becoming better educated about their Islamic rights, they are taking a stand against cultures which discriminate against them in multiple ways. In the interest of truth, those who engage in Islam-bashing on account of misogyny would be well-advised to examine the history of women's oppression in Western countries, including the U. S.

In the context of national leadership it is of interest to observe that amongst the small number of women who are political leaders in their countries, there are thirteen who are Muslim. They hail from Pakistan, Turkey, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Kosovo, Northern Cyprus, Senegal, Mali, Mauritius, Tanzania, and Singapore.

With regards to what I find inspiring in Islam, there is so much that I would like to share with you, but given the limitations of a short presentation, I will mention only a few Islamic teachings that are particularly relevant in contemporary interreligious considerations.

In Surah 49: *Al-Hujurat* : 13, the Qur'an states, "*O humankind! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another.*" This statement makes three important declarations: a) all human beings have a common origin, b) division of humanity into different groups is part of God's design, and c) the purpose of diversity is to promote dialogue amongst different groups. There are several Qur'anic verses which point out that diversity of religions is sanctioned by God for a positive reason. For instance, Surah 5: *Al-Maa'idah*: 48 states: "*If God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but (He willed it otherwise) in order to test you by means of what he has vouchsafed unto you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works!*"

The Qur'an instructs Muslims "*Call thou (all humankind) unto thy Sustainer's path with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the most kindly manner*" (Surah 16: *An-Nahl*: 125). With reference to Jews and Christians, the Qur'an exhorts Muslims, "*Do not argue with the followers of earlier revelation save in the best way*" (Surah 29: *Al-Ankabut* : 46) and instructs them to say "*O followers of earlier revelation! Come to a word that is equitable between us and you.*" (Surah 3: *Al-Imran*: 64)

Within the ethical imperative central to Qur'anic teaching, namely, to enjoin the good (*al-mar'uf*) and forbid the evil (*al-munkar*), Islam is open to cooperating with any religious perspective. The Qur'an makes it clear to Muslims that they are not privileged above anyone else simply on account of professing Islam. Its open-minded and non-exclusive spirit is reflected in a verse that has no parallel in any other religion: "*Verily, those who have attained to faith (in this divine writ), as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians – all who believe in God and the Last day and do righteous deeds – shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve.*" (Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 62; this verse is repeated in almost identical form in Surah 5: *Al-Maa'idah*: 69)

The egalitarian spirit of Islam is embodied in its core beliefs, practices and values. In the context of today's movement against racial discrimination, it is extremely important to state that racism is totally repudiated by Islam. This was stated with clarity and emphasis in Prophet Muhammad's Farewell Pilgrimage Sermon which as stated earlier, has normative import for Muslims: "*All humankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; a white has no superiority over a black nor a black has any superiority over a white except by piety and good action.*"

Friends, my hope in talking to you today is that you will begin to see and understand why I am so inspired by a religion I share with one-quarter of the human race. It is also my hope that you will think about what I have said with an open heart and mind and give earnest consideration to whether the wisdom and values of Islam would be a source of inspiration to Unitarian Universalists.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **PART 3**

### **TESTIMONY ABOUT MUSLIMS AND UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS**

#### ***WHY SHOULD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS CARE ABOUT ISLAM?***

Have you ever heard a voice singing in a language that you do not understand and felt tears start to come, or the hair stand up on the back of your arm? If you have not, I hope that you will, someday.

Have you ever heard a person's story and found that you can never feel the same about them again, after feeling their joy and sorrow?

Have you ever heard the story of a people for the first time and thought, "I never knew. I never knew that's how things were for them"—?

One-quarter of the world's people profess a faith that flows through these words: "There is no god but God. Muhammad is the Messenger of God." Why do they say this? Who is the man, Muhammad, and what is the message that he carries? How are these questions wrapped together with the question of God?

Its time for someone to take a leap and dare to learn – and learn in depth – about the person and the message that have shaped and continue to shape so many of our lives. *Never, ever have one people had an opportunity to do so much good – for another people, for themselves, and for the peace of the world – by simply listening, by simply agreeing to hear a story.*

Which people should take this leap? Everyone, ideally – yes, of course. But who is really ready?

If not the people who walk the “Unitarian Universalist” way, then who? And if not now, when?

Peace and blessings,

Rev. Craig Moro

Minister, Wy’east UU Congregation

Portland, OR

\*\*\*\*\*

## **About Us Without Us**

A Call to Our Unitarian Universalist Siblings from Muslim Unitarian Universalists

*“Though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times...”*

Unitarian Universalists, particularly white Unitarian Universalists, today are facing the call to reconcile with the white supremacy roots of our tradition and society. One of the first steps in this process is to acknowledge the ways in which (white) Unitarian Universalists and UU institutions have both 1) been complicit in allowing white supremacy to sustain itself in our faith and 2) Acted in ways that uphold and even benefit from white supremacy culture. While this work needs white Unitarian Universalists to actively engage this call, historically this effort to dismantle white supremacy culture has occurred with UUs of Color, and People of Color organizations like DRUUMM (Diverse Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries), and more recently BLUU (Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism) leading the way.

The same complacency and benefitting occurs when we examine how Unitarian Universalists have engaged faith traditions we include as our “sources,” particularly traditions with deep roots in communities of color. The openness of Unitarian Universalism and its theologies is incredibly healing and welcoming. However, this spaciousness of what is considered “the sources of our living tradition,” can also be deeply harmful if not engaged with intention, accountability, and – perhaps most of all – humility. Without these three spiritual orientations, Unitarian

Universalists approach to our “sources” can and do **recreate the colonization and appropriation of cultures embodied by white supremacy.**

As Muslim Unitarian Universalists, we have observed the ways in which our sibling Unitarian Universalists have misappropriated and harmed the faith of our communities, families, and ancestors. We write this statement today to both name this reality in greater depth, and to make asks out of love for our faith and our Unitarian Universalist community.

We know it is often with the best of intentions, but it must be acknowledged and addressed:

**Unitarian Universalists have been culturally misappropriating and  
exotifying the Islamic traditions  
in many ways for many years.**

UU Minister, the late Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley defines [cultural appropriation](#) as,

“First, it is most often a form of racial or religious prejudice, or in the most general terms, cultural appropriation is a form of plagiarism. It is consciously or unconsciously seeking to emulate concepts, beliefs or rituals that are foreign to a particular framework, individual or collective. It is incorporating language, cultural expressions, forms, lifestyles, rituals or practices, about which there is little basis for direct knowledge, experience or authenticity, into one’s being. It is also the superficial appreciation of a culture without regard to its deeper meaning.

And finally, cultural appropriation is acting in ways that belie understanding or respect for the historical, social and spiritual context out of which particular traditions and cultural expressions were born.”

Bowens-Wheatley lifts up the importance of self-determination that is often squashed by cultural misappropriation and cultural racism,

“Cultural racism finds its roots in the legacy of White supremacy and in placing more value in imagination than in history or facts. Toni Morrison’s book, *Playing in the Dark* is a literary critique of one form of cultural racism which focuses on the White imagination. One of the most widespread assumptions of White supremacy within the system of free enterprise is that the images, symbols, rituals, practices, and/or religious expressions of any culture can be freely appropriated by another, with or without permission. The power of the White majority to decide what is valued as ‘normal’ or acceptable, and to impart subtle and often unconscious messages about what is ‘right’ and what is not, is especially critical when we consider children”

For a Muslim and UU Muslim, the process of interpreting their sacred texts into practice is a matter of self-determination and (potentially) invitation. When UUs without a deepened

knowledge of Islam nor a relationship with Muslims, use Islamic prayers and sacred texts to create “feel good” interpretations, then you impede the self-determination of Muslims and UU Muslims. As Rev. Bowens-Wheatley says, “I would extend the definition further to say that self-determination is a basic human right. In a Unitarian Universalist context, it also means the right to interpret one’s culture and theology”.

When white and/or non-Muslim Unitarian Universalists engage with the Islamic traditions with an orientation of self-development or self-gain. The implicit question of this orientation of a white/non-Muslim engagement has been “How does this piece feed me as a Unitarian Universalist?” **without considering the communities and cultures being taking from.** This orientation “draws upon” the Islamic traditions as a source of our faith only in the sense that it selects the beautiful pieces that “feel good,” while not attempting to deepen understanding of where those pieces – and the ones being ignored – come from, and how they are important to those who call the Islamic traditions their spiritual home. This orientation white-washes and seeks to “sanitize” a complex collection of traditions, selecting only what is a “good fit” for the existing majority culture.

For example:

- If you have ever used something from one of the Islamic traditions holy sources because you thought it was “beautiful” or “powerful,” without deepening your understanding of its meaning and context, you have culturally misappropriated from and/or exotified the Islamic traditions.
  0. One recently shared instance is this [“Muslim Prayer for Peace”](#) on the UUA’s Worship Web, which not only combines two random verses of the Qur’an, but also fails to name the chapters they were pulled from and ignore their broader context in the surrounding verses and in the history of the Islamic traditions.
- If you have selected readings from Rumi, Hafiz, or any other Sufi mystics without informing yourself and others of their Muslim origins and beliefs, you have culturally misappropriated from and/or exotified the Islamic traditions.
  1. One common instance is the UU hymn “Come, Come, Whoever You Are,” which uses words from a poem by Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, but fails to include the theologically essential words “though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times.” These omitted words highlight the merciful nature of Allah – central to Islamic theologies – and the acknowledgment that it is human nature to make mistakes, including ones that cause harm.
- If you have participated in “Wear a Hijab”-like actions in solidarity with Muslims who choose to cover their head without expanding your understanding of the myriad of reasons as to why some Muslims embody their faith in this way, you have culturally misappropriated from and/or exotified the Islamic traditions.

Once again, we know that these actions by Unitarian Universalists are done with the best of intentions. However, in the ongoing struggle for our mutual liberation from white supremacy culture, we must acknowledge that even with no intent to harm, there can and is still an impact.

The treatment of the Islamic traditions as something to engage only when beautiful or convenient has unfortunately also led to practices that have erased and/or ignored the presence of Unitarian Universalist Muslims. For example, for the last three years, our faith's General Assembly has overlapped with the sacred month of Ramadan – with virtually no acknowledgment, or invitation to engage it in relationship with Muslims/Muslim Unitarian Universalists. Imagine what incredible possibilities for faith formation and justice could have come from acknowledging and centering the experience of our neighbors UUs are often saying “we love” or “are welcome here,” typically at times when those neighbors have been attacked.

## Are Muslim UUs really welcome in UU spaces? Or is it simply our pain and our poetry?

Perhaps one of the most egregious erasures in recent years occurred at the 2016 General Assembly in Columbus, Ohio. The planners of the Opening Ceremony chose to move forward with its celebration of “interfaith engagement” despite the planned Muslim speaker being unavailable. Was any effort made in attempting to find another voice, perhaps even a female, trans or genderqueer one? Or was it too inconvenient to ask one of the several UU-Muslims **sitting in the front rows?** Unfortunately, the decision to omit the existence of Muslims – both beyond and within UUism – in this ceremony was not only insulting because of its erasure of our existence, but also deeply painful and traumatic. When highly politicized statements came from a Jewish leader invited to speak, there was no opportunity for a Muslim perspective to respond or counter. There wasn't even an attempt to address or apologize for this appalling oversight by UUA leadership. The events of that General Assembly clearly demonstrated that **failing to engage in accountable relationships with Muslims and UU-Muslims not only exoticizes our experiences, it also enables the oppression and destruction of our communities.**

In the wake of the latest terrorist attack on Muslims in New Zealand, many Unitarian Universalists are yearning to show their **reactionary** solidarity with “Muslims.” That pain and grief is real, and the love behind that yearning is beautiful. However, it is not nearly enough.

Unitarian Universalists must grow beyond this reactionary solidarity model of showing up, and develop the spiritual practices of committed partnership and ongoing relationship that are essential to dismantling white supremacy in our engagement with the Islamic traditions and their followers. **How and when** Unitarian Universalists, particularly white Unitarian Universalists, show their solidarity with marginalized communities matters.

Part of the “solidarity with Muslims” that has shown up among Unitarian Universalists has been the search, creation, and promotion of materials for worship. Materials that – almost entirely – have been generated by white, non-Muslim Unitarian Universalists. Materials that – almost entirely – remove the context and history of the content being shared from institutional platforms. Materials that have been shared without consultation from the very people who would be most fed and sustained by them – Muslims. Unitarian Universalist Muslims.

This statement is not about intention. At this stage in our conversations and self-assessment of the insidiousness of white supremacy culture within Unitarian Universalist culture, we should not have to clarify that this statement is not about intention. ***It is about the impact of intentions shaped by white supremacy culture.*** It is about the impact of intentions formed in a culture that does not observe a spirituality of humility. It is about the impact of intentions formed in a culture that does not require accountability to the people and cultures that have been historically treated as “less than.”

We write this statement to call on Unitarian Universalists to engage in accountable, intentional, and humble solidarity with Muslims, including Muslim Unitarian Universalists. **We write this statement to call on Unitarian Universalists to stop acting for us and start acting with us.**

Include Muslims and Muslim Unitarian Universalists in our conversations about solidarity, relationship, and the Islamic traditions as one of Unitarian Universalism’s “sources.” Include us in this faith, not just our trauma, our poetry, and our holy texts.

As Muslim Unitarian Universalists, we invite our non-Muslim kindred in Unitarian Universalism to explore the following ways of beginning to dismantle its practices of exoticification, white supremacy contributing to cultural racism, and cultural misappropriation of the Islamic traditions, and move forward with the spiritual orientations of accountability, intention, and humility:

- Recognition of Unitarian Universalist Muslims
  - 0. Lifting up of OUR voices, not the white voices that have found our words
  - 1. Creation of space for Unitarian Universalist Muslims in collaboration with us
- Consultation on methods for incorporating worshipful, prophetic, and lifespan religious education content from the Islamic traditions
- Building ongoing relationships with Muslim communities and individuals beyond the reactionary solidarity that follows traumatic policies or attacks
- Expanding understanding of Muslims beyond “mosque-going” Muslims, and engage in intentional relationships with “un-mosqued” Muslims, which includes some of our LGBTQ+ Muslim siblings

In solidarity,

Ranwa Hammamy Sana Saeed

\*\*\*\*\*

**A MUSLIM WOMAN’S UNSOLICITED RESPONSE TO REV. MORO’S PROPOSAL**

Dear Rev. Moro,

I found your petition, on the Unitarian Universalist Association site as I searched to find more about UU's approach and inclusion of Islam. I must say, your petition answered several questions for me, as I have been struggling internally to join my local UU church.

As a deeply spiritual person raised within the culture of Islam, I grew up in a home full of love that shined out almost as bright to all our fellow man as it did in our home. For nearly all of my childhood, I knew no other way to honor God but through the love of His people – as I was taught this as a child of an Abrahamic faith. As the daughter of a physics professor and a social worker, I knew there would always be an internal battle with the dogma of Islam as it often flew in the face of the very fields that my parents dedicated their lives — science and seeing the equality of all humans. I know well this experience is shared by many Americans who grew up in similar environments.

As an adult I have tried connect my own ideas of religion and spirituality, and have relied heavily on my upbringing. Naturally, Universal Universalism has met so many of the things I look for in joining a community on a similar path – except for one major thing. The culture (founded in a religion) that has done so much to shape who I am is conspicuously missing in the fourth principle. It is this fundamental failure to see the common teachings in Christianity, Judaism, **and** Islam (Abrahamic religions) that has made me question if the Unitarian Universalism is truly for me. Is this a religion that I can pass down to my children, with honesty? Is a picture of a woman with her head covered on the home page of the chapel website, and a few books in the chapel library enough for me to experience the vulnerability that comes along with embracing your faith? Should my place for spiritual refuge in a world that wants to vilify my culture so, also be another place that doesn't get that God's teachings of loving thy neighbor are nearly identical for the Abrahamic religions? Should my place for spiritual refuge in a world that now wants to vilify my culture so, also be just another place that doesn't get... me.

I thank you Reverend Moro, for bringing up something so close to my heart. Something, I have struggled with as it relates to the Universal Universalists so much that it has prevented me and my family from joining. As much as we truly would like to do. While these omitted words may mean little to many, to some they mean having a place to be understood properly – a place to call home.

Sincerely,

Aminat Danmole

Unitarians have an historic connection with Islam. Michael Servitus (1511-1533) may not be familiar to many, but he is a key figure in the development of the Unitarian Church. He was born in Spain, just a few years after the expulsion of the Muslims from Spain in 1492. A scholar fluent in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, he also learned Arabic. He is said to have been influenced by Islamic theology especially his position on the Nature of God and his rejection of the dogma of the Trinity. He quoted segments of the Qur'an in his tract "On the Errors of the Trinity" and in "The Restitution of Christianity."

The doctrine of the Trinity, proclaimed in 325 A.D. by the Council of Nicaea, stated that the nature of God was one in which there were three equally functioning persons – Father, Son and Holy Ghost – who performed different functions but were integral parts of the same unified God. Islam had always held that there was one divine entity and that Jesus was one of the prophets and not divine. Through his studies of the Bible and the Qur'an Servitus concluded that he could not support belief in the Trinity and rejected the Christian doctrine of salvation through Jesus. This position placed him in contradiction with both the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant denominations. Living in the era of the Muslim culture in Spain, he quoted the Qur'an in his writings and refused to denounce it. This led to his eventual burning at the stake in Switzerland by John Calvin. However, his doctrine has become a common understanding among the followers of Unitarianism.

There is another little-known item of history that is also of importance to the followers of Unitarianism. This occurred in 1541 with the Siege of Buda. During this battle the Kingdom of Hungary became divided between the Kingdom of Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. During the battle Suleiman the Magnificent personally commanded the Ottoman army and defeated the Hapsburgs. The result was that the region known as Transylvania where the Unitarians gathered, fell under the domination of the Ottomans.

This single historical event was fortuitous for Unitarians, for had their churches fallen under the dominion of the Lutheran Hapsburgs their fate might have been questionable. Ironically, Unitarians found more tolerance under Muslim control than they would have under Christian rule.

The Muslims had a law of tolerance permitting non-Muslims to practice their own religion. With the Edict of Torda (156) there was an era of religious tolerance for members of all faiths. This edict follows a tradition of Islamic edicts of religious tolerance proclaimed by the prophet Muhammad himself: The Pledge of Najran (c. 631), The Manifesto to the monks of St. Catherine's Monastery (c. 620), The Proclamation of Jerusalem (c. 638), and the letter from the Christian Patriarch Ishoyahb (c. 639). Leaders of the country were supporters of the anti-Trinitarian teachings of Michael Servitus, and Francis David, of Unitarian persuasion, became a preacher at the court. It is of historical importance to note that living under Muslim rather than Christian rule protected the small Unitarian community in its earliest years, and allowed it to prosper.

\*\*\*\*\*

# **PART 4**

## **LEARNING ABOUT ISLAM: ACTIVITIES AT THOMAS JEFFERSON UNITARIAN CHURCH, LOUISVILLE, KY (2019-2020)**

**Every important initiative, campaign or movement starts with a group of like-minded persons who are committed to the pursuit of their common goal with insight and steadfastness.**

**The effort to build a compelling case for including Islam in the 4<sup>th</sup> UU Source of Inspiration was started by Rev. Craig Moro, minister serving Wy'east UU Congregation in Portland, Oregon, who is a scholar of the three Abrahamic faiths. Dr. Dennis Neyman, who has been a UU since birth had been deeply inspired by Islamic culture due to his lived experience in Iran, had come upon Rev. Moro's proposal to "*Make a Good Thing Better*" by including Islam in the UUs Sources of Inspiration. He shared this proposal with Dr. Joseph Brennan, fellow UU member of TJUC, and Dr. Riffat Hassan, founder of *The Salaam Network (TSN)*, an interfaith education organization set up in Louisville in 2016.**

**Both Dr. Neyman and Dr. Brennan have been leaders of *TSN*, the former as Community Outreach Coordinator and Director, the latter as Consultant. Being eminent members of both TJUC and *TSN*, they made possible a strong partnership of the two organizations which have co-hosted many significant educational programs for the local community.**

**Dr. Neyman, Dr. Brennan, Dr. Hassan, and Rev. Moro form a small planning group which has adopted a two-pronged approach in seeking to advance its proposal to include Islam in the 4<sup>th</sup> UU Source of Inspiration. Changing anything in a core UU document is a long and arduous process and the support of important UU leaders is required for bringing our proposal to the**

**attention of the General Assembly. We are submitting this dossier to Dr. Elias Ortega, President of Meadville Lombard School of Theology who is also a member of the Article 2 Commission, requesting him to assist us in advancing our proposal to other UU congregations and ultimately, to the General Assembly.**

**The second part of our approach is to build on the work which has already been done at TJUC to familiarize its members with various aspects of Islam.**

**As the account which follows will show, TJUC has supported many activities in the past year to promote better understanding of Islam amongst its members. We intend to continue our conversation with those UUs who are interested in exploring the similarities or commonalities between Islamic beliefs, practices and values and their own. We believe that if we are successful in getting the support of a critical mass of TJUC's members for our proposal to include Islam in the 4<sup>th</sup> UU's Source of Inspiration, we will have a model of UU-Islam cooperation and collaboration which can be emulated in other UU congregations.**

### **ACTIVITIES AT TJUC RELATING TO ISLAM (2019-2020)**

1. **Mini Workshop** by Professor Riffat Hassan on “*Issues Related to Women and Gender in Islam,*” with Students from Centre College, Danville, March 25, 2019. Several TJUC members took part in the Workshop.

1. A group of young Muslim women from the local community wanted to study with Professor Riffat Hassan to learn about the rights and responsibilities given to them by the Qur'an. Professor Hassan is a founder of feminist theology in Islam and her progressive, non-patriarchal interpretation of the Qur'an differs greatly from the conservatism of local mosques. The study could not, therefore, be conducted in any of the 25 mosques in Louisville. TJUC is highly supportive of women's rights and gladly collaborated with TSN in holding the Women's Study Group meetings once a month in the Hearth Room. The **multi-part Seminar** on “*Normative Islamic Education for Muslim Women*” consisted of the following sessions:

- “*Introductory Session,*” May 5, 2019;
- “*Historical Background,*” June 16, 2019;
- “*Theological and Ethical Framework of the Qur'an,*”

Part One: “*The Qur'an on Creation,*” July 7, and August 4, 2019:

Part Two: “*The Qur'an on the Divine Purpose,*” September 8, October 6, and November 3, 2019;

Part Three: *The Qur'an on Fundamental Human Rights,* December 1, 2019).

A number of TJUC and TSN members attended the Seminar. They included Dr. Joseph Brennan an expert in Christian theology who was a Consultant to the Study Group, Dr. Dennis Neyman, an eminent member and a Past President of TJUC, Rev. C. J. Wright, Jim Aalen, Lane Stumler and Aneesah Nu'man.

1. A **Consultation on a Research Project** by Professor Matthew Pierce with Professor Riffat Hassan on “**Muslim Communities in Kentucky**” on July 26, 2019. One of the goals of this Project was to facilitate interreligious dialogue between Unitarian Universalists and other religious communities with various Muslim communities in Kentucky.

1. A **Presentation** on “**A Historical View of Muslims and Christians on Pilgrimage to Jerusalem During the Ottoman Period,**” by Dr. Robert E. Schick, August 21, 2019. A large number of UUs attended this presentation and participated in the Q & A segment.

1. **Course on “Islamic Contributions to World Civilization”** (fall 2019): For eight weeks, *The Salaam Network* had the honor of presenting a Series on “**Islamic Contributions to World Civilization**” in the 2019 Fall Open Campus program at the Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church, Louisville. An outline of the course is as follows:

**September 25: *The Edicts of Prophet Muhammad and Muslim-Christian Relations in Early Islamic History.*** Presenter: Dr. Brad Bowman, Professor of Islamic History, University of Louisville

**October 2: *Europe’s Islamic Past.*** Presenter: Dr. Gregory Hutcheson, Professor of Spanish, University of Louisville

**October 9: *The Core Religious Beliefs and Practices of Islam.*** Presenter: Dr. Riffat Hassan, Professor Emerita, University of Louisville

**October 16: *Islam’s Contributions to World Civilization.*** Presenter: Dr. Saleem Seyal, M. D., Calligrapher.

**October 23: *Islamic Mysticism – About Sufism, with Music and Movement.*** Presenter: Jim Aalen, Sufi: leader of chant and dance, will lead the class in Sufi chanting and dancing.

**October 30: *Muslim Women: The Expectations, Stereotypes, and Realities of being a Muslimah in America.*** Panelists: Dr. Linda Omer, Mariam Ba, Clara Ana Ruplinger, Lena Aslam, and Dehabo Kerow. Panel Moderator: Dr. Linda Omer.

**November 6: *Lived Experience in Iran (1975-1979).*** Presenter: Dr. Dennis Neyman (UU Leader) in conversation with Dr. Fariba Kashan, Professor of Applied Mathematics, Kentucky State University, Frankfort

**November 13: *Relevance of Islam to Contemporary UU Congregations.*** Presenters: Dr. Riffat Hassan, Dr. Joe Brennan, Dr. Dennis Neyman, Consultant: Rev. Craig Moro.

It was a source of great encouragement to us that our classes were well-attended and well-received. The documents relating to the perspectives of the presenters in the final session on the relevance of Islam to contemporary UU congregations are in Part Two of this Compilation.

1. Dr. Dennis Neyman was the presenter and moderator of the **Chalice Circle Meeting** on February 14, 2020. He invited the participants in the meeting to “Think about Islam as a UU Source of Inspiration.” Dr. Neyman shared his background, his sojourn in Iran, and his work as a director of *TSN* which had presented several programs to disseminate accurate information about Islam in the community. It was evident that those who were present at this meeting were interested in learning more about Islam.
1. Ellen Wade who is in charge of Rentals/Promotions at TJUC has facilitated programs by Muslims and is very supportive of bridge-building between UUs and Muslims, also had a **Chalice Circle Meeting** on May 13, 2020. Its topic was “**4<sup>th</sup> UU Source of Inspiration and a proposal to include Islam.**” The discussion started in the earlier Chalice Circle Meeting was continued with those present. They had the opportunity to talk to Dr. Dennis Neyman, Rev. Craig Moro and Dr. Riffat Hassan who had joined the meeting by zoom.
1. Dr. Dennis Neyman delivered a sermon to the TJUC congregation on May 24, 2020. After the Chalice lighting, he recited the Opening Song by the beloved Muslim Sufi poet **Rumi**:

Come, come, whoever you are,

Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving,  
Ours is **not** a caravan of despair.  
Even if you have broken your vows a thousand times  
It doesn't matter  
Come, come yet again, come

Dr. Neyman started by sharing his background as a lifelong UU, and his sojourn in Iran. He spoke on “***How I am Inspired by the Culture of Islam.***” He referred to Rev. Craig Moro’s proposal to change the 4<sup>th</sup> UU Source of Inspiration and said:

“The current 4<sup>th</sup> UU Source of Inspiration that guides our worship and discourse invites Jews and Christians to bring cherished teachings from their own traditions into Unitarian Universalist worship and discourse. But this does not extend this invitation to **Muslims** as well. As I invite Muslims to attend Sunday services, participate in workshops on interfaith understanding, the contributions of the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam as well as Humanist teachings to the pursuit of knowledge, I would like to know that Islam is included as a Source of Inspiration for Unitarian Universalists and not excluded by omission from our Sources of Inspiration.”

## FUTURE ACTIVITY

A Course called “***Continuing the Conversation – Add Islam to UU Sources of Inspiration,***” will be taught in the TJUC Fall Open Campus, on October 28, November 4, and November 11, 2020. The course description reads as follows:

**Class Description:** Using videos, readings, interviews with Muslim UU’s, and brief lectures, participants will explore the relevance of Islam to contemporary UU congregations. “**Islam, A Source of Inspiration**”: A proposal to change the 4th Unitarian Universalist “Sources of Inspiration” statement. Our current 4th Source statement invites Jews and Christians to bring cherished teachings from their own traditions into Unitarian Universalist worship and discourse, it does not extend this invitation to Muslims as well.

Presenters will include Dr. Dennis Neyman, Dr. Joseph Brennan and Dr. Riffat Hassan. Facilitators will include Rev. Craig Moro. UU members who have been a part of the ongoing Conversation on including Islam in UU Sources of Inspiration are expected to be present.

# PART 5

## UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST MINISTERS' POSITIVE PERSPECTIVES ON ISLAM

**REV. CRAIG MORO:**

**TIME TO MAKE A GOOD THING BETTER, 2008**

**WRITE MERCY AND LOVE, 2016**

**WHO'S THE GIRL IN ROW 81, 2016**

**GRAMMAR OF FAITH, 2017**

***"COME, COME"*, 2019**

### **OTHER SERMONS ON ISLAM BY UU MINISTERS**

**(Available on YouTube and Google)**

**REV. DR. M'ELLEN KENNEDY:**

**"WHAT I LOVE ABOUT ISLAM" (UUCA Sermon, Atlanta, 3/1/2017)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qk82WFmh9A>

**REV. J. MARK WORTH:**

**WHAT'S RIGHT WITH ISLAM (Harvard Unitarian Universalist Church,  
1/24/2016)**

<https://uuharvard.org/services/whats-right-islam/> (a written sermon)

**REV. TERRE BALOF:**

**REFLECTIONS ON ISLAM (Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson,  
June 7, 2015)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3mZAukNs78>

**REV. KATHLEEN OWENS:**

**HEART AND HAND: UU AND ISLAM (Hillcrest Sermon, 2/23/2015)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ulbccaCGZE>

**KRISTEN PSAKI**

**“LISTEN WITH ISLAM” (Castle Rock Unitarian Universalist Community,  
2/21/2016)**

<https://cruuc.org/foodforthought/listen-for-islam/>

\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*

**Time to Make a Good Thing Better**

**Rev. Craig Moro**

**Reading: From the Qur'an, Chapter 5, "The Table Spread"**

Most scriptures focus on the concerns of a particular religious community, either ignoring others as if they did not exist or else treating them as adversaries or sometimes even worse—as vermin to be exterminated. The Qur’an is an exception to this pattern. In order to do its work on behalf of a particular community, time and again it has to take other communities into consideration, and other faith traditions. You could say that it undertakes a study of comparative religion, not the same as we might do it in a university today, but quite remarkable for its time in the way it honors not only the books but also the leaders and the followers of other faithways. Here, in a chapter called “The Table Spread”, it spreads a variety of traditions on the table so we all can have a look:

..We revealed the Torah to Moses, in which there is guidance and light: By its laws.. the Prophets... judged those who call themselves Jews and so did the Rabbis and jurists of law.... We ordained in Torah for them: “A life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth and for a wound an equal retaliation.” But if anyone remits such retaliation by way of charity it will be an act of atonement for him...Then in the footsteps of those Prophets, We sent Jesus the son of Mary confirming whatever remained intact from the Torah in his time, and gave him the Gospel wherein was guidance and light, corroborating what was revealed in the Torah; a guidance and an admonition to those who fear God....

To you, O Muhammad, We have revealed this Book in truth. It confirms whatever has remained intact in the scriptures which came before it and also to safeguard it. Therefore, judge between people according to God’s revelations and do not yield to their vain desires, diverging from the truth which has come to you. We have ordained a law and a Way of life for each of you. If God wanted He could have made all of you a single nation. But He willed otherwise in order to test you in what He has given you; therefore try to compete with each other in doing good deeds. Ultimately you all shall return to God; then He will show you the truth of those matters that you’re arguing about now...

I hope that we can find that truth at least a little before the end. It will be a shame if we can’t. This morning, let’s look a bit at what’s on our own “table spread,” in the hope of at least discovering what good deed we might try doing next. It might not put us ahead of any other worshipping community, but maybe it will move us forward a bit from where we’re sitting now.

#### Sermon

Evil and sin are lurking here among us where we don’t expect to find them. There is also something missing from where we know it ought to be. I call your attention to the statement of Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes that adorns the walls of so many of our houses of worship, the backs of so many orders of service, and the by-laws of our religious Association. Take particular note of the section that lists and describes the “sources of the living tradition we share.” The contents of this list are packed comfortably but also tightly, so tightly that it’s difficult to take them all in at a glance while viewing them through the lens we are accustomed to using:

- 1) Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- 2) Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- 3) Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- 4) Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- 5) Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.
- 6) Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Whenever we take the time to unpack these words and spread them out a little, we are likely to notice something that we missed before. For example, there is the matter of evil. Religious liberals seem at times, in our eagerness to affirm every individual, to downplay the problem of evil in the world. Nevertheless, we do name it clearly where our second source statement affirms the “Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil”—the evil so often structured into collective entities such as Empire, Corporation, Party, State, even Church. Making a statement is hardly the same as mounting a campaign against the evils to which it alerts us, but it's a good start. Only when we've named what we are confronting can we do so “with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”

Sin is a term with which most liberals are even less comfortable than the word evil. We may therefore be surprised to discover that our fifth source statement warns us against a specific sin—called by its traditional name!—as it affirms “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.” How can we affirm secular-sounding notions like Humanism, Reason, and Science while warning against a religious-sounding offense like idolatry in the same breath? How can we distinguish a “sin” except against a background of holy or religious imperatives?

The conscientious humanism affirmed in these words means that we refuse to regard as infinite, omnipotent, or eternal anything which is not so. Such humanism, far from being an arrogant attempt to substitute human beings for God, is an attitude of humble resistance to the practice of idolatry, of taking any material object or structure of the mind and spirit as a “god”. When idols are enshrined and their worship is enforced by “powers and structures” of human authority that claim divine sanction, Humanists are no less offended than was Moses when he found his people worshipping a golden calf!

We might be less surprised to find language about idolatry in the fourth source of our living tradition: “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.” But look at the load this statement bears already: Judaism, Christianity, God, and Love! That’s a lot of weight to carry, and this statement carries it brilliantly.

Notice how precise these words are: “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.” They do not speak of embracing any so-called Jewish or Christian teachings that call us to do otherwise than loving our neighbors as ourselves. Such teachings can surely be found embedded in the powers and structures of these tradition (even at some points in their scriptures) and the neighbors of many Jews and Christians have suffered as a result.\* But surely such teachings are false to anything that can be called “God’s love.” We affirm with our Universalist forbears, that, if there is any God to speak of, this God loves—forever, all.

How clearly these words affirm teachings about the love of God and neighbor while not presuming to tell us whether God exists or not! What a breathtaking masterpiece of economy, and of sensitivity to the feelings of people who seek the solid ground of fellowship with each other while maintaining a strong connection to Jewish or Christian roots; or to their hard-fought Humanist, (or even atheist!) positions. If we are to increase the load this statement already bears with such gentle dignity and authority, we must also allow it to get somewhat bigger. That is exactly the change which I am about to propose. The time has come for this very good statement to grow, and for us to grow along with it. It’s time to make a good thing better.

Why? What is it that has changed?

We are now aware that there are not two but three major traditions in the religious “family” that includes Judaism and Christianity. The third, of course, is Islam. Muslims speak of these three faith traditions as the religious family of Abraham, to remind us that all Bible heroes, such as Abraham, Moses, Mary and Jesus, are heroes to Muslims as well. Islam raises the same cry for

justice and peace, the same cry against idolatry and the powers and structures of evil, that we hear in Jewish, Christian, and Humanist teachings.

The problem is that while our current source statement invites Jews and Christians to bring cherished teachings from their own traditions into Unitarian Universalist worship and discourse, it does not extend this invitation to Muslims as well. This is remarkable, given that the term “Islam” indicates not only a set of texts and teachings, but also nearly one-quarter of the world’s people and the second largest faith community in North America today.<sup>[1]</sup>

This statement, posted in so many places where newcomers are apt to find it, warmly welcomes people who approach life from a wide range of religious viewpoints. It is a reminder that to join with us on the Unitarian Universalist journey is not a matter of “conversion,” but is instead a process of polishing the treasures we already carry with us from our religious homes—any religious home, not only a Jewish or Christian one. There is no requirement, request, or even suggestion that in order to be welcome among us a newcomer must first renounce his or her religious heritage. However, the fourth source statement as presently written does appear to extend a special welcome to some members of the religious “family of Abraham” but not to others!

A colleague of mine recently suggested that we should put the Sources statement first for people to see, instead of the seven Principles. Quite an idea! You can look at the Sources as a table spread with the riches our tradition offers. American food! Chinese! Indian! Middle Eastern! New cuisine and old! What a great invitation to come and join us at the feast inside! It’s what brought me in the first place, when I poked my head inside the UU church in my home town and saw the colorful banners representing all the flavors of the world’s religions, not just the same old Protestant hamburgers!

But suppose for a moment that your own family has three members. Now imagine that you have received a beautiful hand-lettered invitation to a great celebration, but it names only two members of your family without mentioning the third. Would you guess this omission to be a simple accident? Imagine that everything else about the invitation reflects a great deal of concern for and knowledge about you and your family. Might it not seem—at least to the one left off the list—that she or he had been pointedly dis-invited or excluded?

I am certain that this was not the intention of the good folks who composed the current statement. It was drafted in response to needs and tensions within our own religious association, with eyes turned more inward than out towards the wider world. Islam had not yet claimed the attention of most Unitarian Universalists except as an exhibit in the museum of “world religions,” one of several collections of interesting artworks and beautiful sayings. It was not yet a matter requiring the intimate sensitivity afforded to fellow UU’s who continued—and still

continue—to identify strongly with Jewish and Christian teachings. This situation has changed. There are now among us many Unitarian Universalists of Muslim background, and more will be coming. Do we welcome them? How? How often? And how well?

We may think that Islam is “covered” by that third source statement about wisdom from the world’s religions but I want to suggest that “covering” is not what’s needed here, or now. Seeing how Jewish and Christian teachings have been so conscientiously included, it may very well appear to an outsider or newcomer that Islamic teachings have been deliberately excluded from where they ought to be.

My colleagues Marge Keip and Gail Taff have accurately raised another concern, namely that—viewed historically—Islam has not been a “source” for us in the same way that Jewish and Christian teachings have. But this is true of several “sources” that did not necessarily supply texts for use in Unitarian or Universalist sermons or books of earlier centuries. The sixth source statement about “earth centered traditions is one example—Native American and other teachings from non-literate societies did not figure much into the Boston Unitarian scene between the Revolution and the First World War! Many of us might also agree with our most famous Unitarian American, Ralph Waldo Emerson, that the direct experience of “mystery and wonder” our first source describes has only rarely been tapped for its rich healing nectar.

But by acting now—openly, deliberately, and gladly—to expand our language to specifically include the teachings of Islam and persons of Muslim background, we will be working toward more than our own interior health and growth. We will be modeling the proactive approach so sorely needed in these times when the response of most non-Muslims to Islam is characterized by a tendency to ignore or forget, interrupted occasionally by bursts of fear- and anger-driven reaction. In such a context, the best way to show others how to do things right is to take a deep breath and do it ourselves!

After almost twenty years now of spending the lives of our women and men and our national treasure on wars in predominantly Muslim lands that have killed hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians, how many of know anything more about Islam than we did before this started? Can you turn to your neighbor and tell him or her just three things about Islam or Muslim people that you didn’t know before? Could you also tell your neighbor how or where you learned? And if you learned any of it here, can you say hallelujah?

It’s time to take a look at how our religious movement can respond to the new times in which we’re living. It’s time to think about what we say, especially in the first few words we say to any newcomer. We do a good job now, but it’s time to make a good thing better.

I do not recommend, nor would I think it wise, to simply add the word ‘Islamic’ to our current statement, next to the words ‘Jewish’ and ‘Christian.’ That would be patchwork, just another kind of covering. Changes in human faithways cannot be entered into lightly, whether we are considering change in the practice of faith communities or changes in the testaments of faith. Considering any change in the wording of such documents—by addition, subtraction, or substitution—will involve us at once in questions about the whole structure of faith: its origins, its past, and its future taking shape today.

We will need to ask: What is Islam besides a quick news bite during Ramadan or the Hajj, or a one-page Sunday feature in the newspaper? What do Islamic and UU approaches to questions of ultimate meaning and value have in common? Why did formal “Unitarian” thought first take shape in Southern and Eastern Europe, on the margins between Christian and Muslim lands, and why should that matter today? Are there some natural affinities to explore and build upon?

The new statement that comes out of this process of search and discovery must be the work of at least a committee and ultimately of our whole community, but let me suggest one possible wording, just to help get the creative juices flowing. To replace and augment “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves,” I propose:

“Jewish, Christian, and Islamic teachings that call us—in the name of God—to meet our neighbors with love and to take their hands in joy.”

This statement retains the old one’s emphasis on neighbors. It highlights the desire for peaceful community so central to all of the Abrahamic traditions without suggesting that we accept the whole inventory of belief or practice from any one of them. It neither affirms nor disputes the existence of the God in whose name these traditions wish to speak, but applauds instead how earnestly they try to do so. The new words thus retain some of the poise (if not yet quite the polish) of the old. We may find other words that do it better, but the important thing is to do it, and do it now.

Good timing carries a message twice as far and plants it twice as deep than one spoken in haste, or too late. You may have noticed that along with “Islam,” I’ve slipped “joy” into our statement where it never was before (In fact, our current Principles and Purposes statement includes no language of happiness or joy.) If our message today isn’t one of joy redeemed from sorrow, why should anyone listen? This seems like the right time to address this omission as well! To meet our neighbors with love and to take their hands in joy. Right here, right now.

By speaking of “hands” this change also recalls us to the human body, which you may have noticed after almost three years is something that I often do in my preaching. Our UU tradition explicitly affirms the human body in ways other faith traditions do not, but this affirmation is not yet expressed in our Principle/Sources/Purposes language. Perhaps the time has come address this omission as well. Gay marriage, right to die, reproductive choice—these are all very bodily concerns! The human being is a gift, a grace, and a good animal all at the same miraculous time. We *know* this already. Maybe we should *say* it, too.

A change in language may seem like a small thing to consider. But remember that a small change in your prescription for medicine, or your glasses, may make all the difference to your health, or your ability to see where you need to go. It may be that by making room for Islam, proactively, at our own religious table, we will be daring to matter in a new way to the world. Not only for the money and good will we share through our many service projects: we will be daring to matter for the strength of our religion itself, for that joyously open vision of truth which is Unitarian Universalism.

If such a change comes, our movement will have you to thank—especially those of you who took the time last fall to meet and go over this already brilliant, humane, and conscientiously written document, and then make suggestions for how it could be improved. And you did this on top of all the other things you’ve been doing here, all the incredible time and energy you’ve all been putting in to make this good thing better. Many thanks. I hope that won’t be the last time we pool our thoughts and offer them to our movement as a whole. Hallelujah!

Documents of faith, as much as they are descriptions of the world we see, are also lenses through which we see it. A lens needs to be polished frequently. From time to time, our prescription also needs to be updated. I propose that such a time has come—the time to make a good thing better is indeed right here, right now.

Can you say, Amen? Then I’ll say,

Blessed be.

### Notes

\*Psalm 137:

1. O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!
2. Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

Matthew, Mark, and Luke taken all together use the word “Jews” only 16 times.

John uses it 65x—often to identify people who are killers or conspirators. Here’s a typical passage:

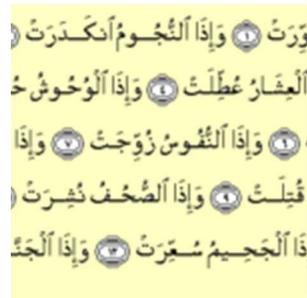
John 7:1 After these things Jesus walked in Galilee: for he would not walk in Jewry, because the Jews sought to kill him.

[1] This is also true of most nations worldwide that have substantial Unitarian or Unitarian Universalist populations, such as England, India, and the Philippines.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Write *Mercy*, and Live

Rev. Craig Moro



*“He wrote Mercy on himself...*

*(Qur’an 6:12)*

[We could call the first two decades of our new millennium the time of the suicide bomber and the mass shooter so common and pervasive have such acts become. Religious thoughts and feelings seem to set these acts in motion. Religiously, how can we respond to them? How can we apply our second UU principle, in which we “covenant to affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations”?]

### Readings



words have power over you? How far does *that* power go? Do these sound like questions worth asking?

Let's keep them in mind now as we sing.

## Sermon

If you characterize the times we live in by the most dramatic images in the news, we could call this the time of the suicide bomber and the mass shooter. Not pleasant subjects for a religious service but I hardly need to tell you that many such bombings and shootings are motivated, at least in part, by “religious” beliefs, and conducted as if they were religious ceremonies. The media have told you that already, sometimes stressing religion over political and economic issues, but this is understandable. The choice to destroy one's own body along with the bodies of as many other people as possible must always involve religious questions, questions about an ultimate meaning or purpose in life and death.

It is tempting to follow the media's lead in another way, and to treat suicide bombing in particular as something unique to Islam and Muslims, but this is just not true. I am tired of body counts and comparing who has lost more people on each side of the world's many conflicts. Such numbers just make us number and number—but I can't avoid mentioning a few numbers now. Between 1980 and 2000 there were 271 known suicide bombings worldwide. Of these, 168 were carried out by one group—the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam—while *all other conflicts combined* account for 103.

The Tigers perfected the techniques of suicide bombing, often training young girls, called “Birds of Freedom,” to use those belts, wires, and detonators. These “birds” and “tigers” claimed to act on behalf of the Tamil-speaking minority's struggle *for* autonomy from the government of Sri Lanka and that nation's Sinhalese majority, and *against* military and paramilitary repression. (There wasn't much media coverage here, perhaps because Sri Lanka is not an oil-producing nation. Or was it because disputants on both sides all have dark skins? I hope that's not it, but I'd be foolish not to consider the possibility.) You may be surprised to learn that, if we focus on the *religious* identities of the disputants, this was largely a conflict between Hindus and Buddhists.

Many of us who are not Hindus or Buddhists still have an image of the kind of Buddhist or Hindu we would be—peaceful cross-legged meditators taking deep breaths, perhaps. Fewer of us can imagine ourselves as Muslims. So saturated are we with images of the “Muslim terrorist” that few may want to try. But whatever statistics tell us about religion and terrorist acts, no one seems to be asking the questions about Hinduism or Buddhism that we hear asked of Islam. Is there something about this religion's teachings or its scriptures—something written deep in its

‘core’—that encourages believers to erase themselves along with as many other persons as possible from the pages of Life?

Speaking of *pages*, we know that people seek support for whatever they want to do in the religious scriptures they prefer. In Sri Lanka, a sacred Buddhist text called the *Mahavamsa* has been cited in support of genocidal attitudes towards the Tamil people. That was never widely reported, whereas press reports often mention passages from the *Qur’an* which seem to promise rewards in Paradise to those who die fighting in the way of God. What rarely receives mention are those passages which caution believers not to be so certain that the fights they pick are necessarily what God would have them choose.

What receives almost no mention is that while the Qur’an’s words are the *holiest* words in Islam, it is not the *only* book of religious authority for Muslims. There are also the *Hadith*, narratives of the words and deeds of the prophet Muhammad. [Show stack of books.] Here’s one that speaks to our concern today:

“The *first* of people against whom judgment will be pronounced on the Day of Resurrection will be a man who died a “martyr”. He will be brought [forward] and God will [remind him of all the gifts he had received in life]. [Then God will ask]: And what did you do [to thank me]? [The man] will say: I fought for you until I died a martyr. [God] will say: “You have lied – you only fought so that it might be said [of you]: *He is courageous*. And that’s just what people said.” Then God ordered that the man be dragged on his face until he is cast into Hell-fire...” [\[1\]](#)

Got that? On Judgment Day the man is asked what he made of all God’s gracious gifts. He’ll say, “I fought for you until I died a martyr,” and God will say, “You lie. You fought so that people would say that you were brave. You fought for a distorted image of yourself.” This man’s act of “martyrdom” puts him number one on the list of those who will be punished. It’s a good idea to pay close attention to what comes *first* on a list in a religious book; and you should know that idolatry—serving idols or images—is the number one sin for Muslims, the same as for Jews and Christians. This “martyr” only worshiped himself.

Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, asserts the power of the Word to shape the World. God says “Let there be Light,” and *that’s* what makes it happen. That goes for speaking. What about writing? According to another Hadith

“The first thing created by God was the Pen. God said to it: Write!, so the Pen asked: What shall I write, my Lord? And God commanded it to write whatever is going to be up until the Coming of the Hour...” [\[2\]](#)

Time and again the Qur'an repeats that God has only to say to something, "Be!" and it is. God's word—written or spoken—has enormous power, so it seems fair to ask: could God use a word to change *himself*? Can God change God? Has God ever done so, and does the Qur'an have anything to say about it? You might be surprised to hear that the answer is, *Yes*. He did so one time only.

- Say: "To whom belongs whatever is in the heavens and the earth?" Say: "To God." He wrote Mercy upon himself... [But] those who destroy themselves do not believe. (Qur'an 6:12)

مَرًّا فَإِنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُ

—*He wrote Mercy on himself*. God wrote *Mercy* into God's very being, embedding it into his "text," or his "program" you might say. Some translations say that God "prescribed" mercy for himself, like some kind of therapy or treatment that God self-administers, or maybe it's God's own spiritual *practice*. Over and over, the book calls God *the Compassionate, the Merciful*, but here's how God came to be that way. ***He wrote Mercy on himself***. It's the single most radical act since Creation itself. Maybe it came before Creation, but I don't think so. The text suggests it was a response by God to something very peculiar about his most peculiar creation: human beings.

Let's play with this idea. When God decides to change the world with a flood or a plague, what are the people up to? We can also ask: what are the people doing when God himself decides to change? The Qur'an gives us a hint: "He wrote *Mercy* on himself...but those who destroy themselves do not believe." God writes *Mercy* on himself when we write *Destruction*. God writes *Mercy* when we write *Death*; when we cross ourselves out, or try to erase each other. We think we're being heroes, martyrs, saints, but here's nothing radically fresh about crashing a plane into a building or opening fire in a crowd. There's nothing new about bombings or mass shootings. What's radical is to write *Mercy*, and live.

There have been moments in my own life when I've felt like I could detonate all on my own, without any wires or explosives, and take out everything around me; moments when I've lost all compassion for myself or for anyone else. I've always found some relief in thinking through such feelings, and what led to them. Maybe I review the many good things in my life, and remember those whom I love. What if instead I'd found my way into a group of folks who not only shared my explosive feelings, but also worked to validate and amplify them? Can I be sure of what I'd do? Here's the Qur'an again:

- And when they come to you—those who do believe in our signs—say: “Peace be upon you! Your Lord has written Mercy upon himself, so that if anyone among you does evil out of ignorance, then afterwards repents and tries to make restitution, then indeed He is forgiving and compassionate.” (6:54)

That’s supposed to be God talking again. *When they come to you...say: “Peace be upon you! Your Lord has written Mercy upon himself...”* Get that? You say it: *Peace be upon you!* These are words for us to say to each other. Maybe what we call “the word of God” is really what we ourselves most deeply need to hear, or to say to each other, but feel we can’t. So, we say that it’s what “God” says. Did God really look at some point into God’s own heart—whether God is a *he* a *she*, or an *it*—and find too little of something that was needed?

Was mercy missing, or insufficient, or dormant, so that God had to *add* it to God’s self, *increase* it, or *wake* it up? Was there too much of some “bad” quality, like anger? Too little or too much: does mercy make God bigger, smaller, or just *better*? If a word can do it for God, will a word do it for us? I can’t tell you if there’s any God “for real,” just that there always seems to be one to speak of and that I can’t just stay aloof from the conversation and leave it to those who have dominated it for so long—not when so much is at stake.

Just like you, I want to make these crazy actions stop. I want to grab these kids and say: This is not what God wants from you! Maybe I can convince at least some of the Muslim kids by showing them where the Qur’an says that the only change God ever worked on himself was to fill himself with mercy. If that won’t work, I’ll try something else. I’ll have to think of something else anyway for the Hindu or Christian kids—and the others of any faith or lack thereof—who can only think to express their rage by turning themselves into a bomb. I know that words are not enough, but sometimes they’re all we’ve got. And I know that every self-styled “martyr” has loaded him or herself much more full of words than bullets or explosives before “carrying out the mission”.

It’s strange that among all the lovely concepts from the world’s religions that find a place in our UU Principles—love, freedom, respect, the inherent worth and dignity of every person—we do not find the word *mercy*. Our second principle says that “We covenant to affirm and promote justice, equity and *compassion* in human relations,” but compassion is not quite the same as mercy. Compassion means “feeling pain together,” from com pati—to suffer with. It speaks of a human capacity to feel connected with each other. But sometimes we can’t connect or identify with each other anymore.

When injustices and inequity—real or imagined—sweep our world like a flood, rage and despair may wash all sense of connection away. If it doesn’t kill us, we may rise up, feeling clean and cold, ready to do terrible things; riding a pure “religious” feeling; on we go, ticking and ticking,

second by second till...boom. Moments come when we can't identify with one another. It is precisely at those times that all authentic religious traditions call for *mercy*, or they should. Perhaps our second principle is incomplete. Maybe it should read "We covenant to affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations. And mercy, if this is not enough." Or perhaps *Mercy* should stand as a principle all by itself.

Or maybe mercy is not a "capacity," not an ordinary ability of the heart or mind. *Mercy* may be an affair of the last moment, past our wit's end and the end of our abilities. The word points to something gracious, transcendent, and alive; something which may be encountered, but can never be accounted for; prayed for, but never planned on. Maybe it would be wrong to try to make a principle of mercy, to put it into bylaws. Maybe all we can do is write it by hand, with a highlighter pen, right across the page in front of us. Do you see the statement of UU Principles in your order of service? Maybe if you've got a pen you'd like to take it out and write *mercy* there. Don't worry about where to place it, just write so you can't miss it. You don't need a highlighter. Any pen will do.

"The first thing created by God was the Pen. God said to it: *Write!*, whereupon the Pen asked: What shall I write, my Lord? And God commanded it to write whatever is going to be up until the Coming of the Hour..."

I can't tell you if God created the Pen or did so using human hands. But I can tell you that the Pen is holy and that this is why: We are pens, not bombs, not guns. We write our lives with that which fills us, until it all runs out. We are blood-pens, sweat-pens, pens filled with tears. We may write with a fine point or a broad one, but who can read it if we just leave smears? What kind of pen are you? What kind might you become? You will write so many things, great and small, on the pages of the world you cross. But before you go further, stop for a moment. Stop, and write *mercy* on yourself. Maybe you don't believe that you can, but do it anyway. Let mercy enter deep into the program of your being, deep into your text. Write *Mercy*, and live.

I'm telling you all this because I don't have a place where I can stand and tell the world. And I hope you can pass this message on to everyone you meet, so maybe it will reach the right persons before it's too late. Here is the message: Look as high or as deep as you must, inside or outside, until you find mercy. If you don't find it in whomever or whatever you worship, then stop and turn away: it isn't God, or it isn't worth your devotion. If you don't find mercy in whatever you read as "scripture," write it there yourself. Deface the pages if you must, or close the book and put it down.

Take a fresh sheet of paper. Write: *Mercy*. Then say it aloud. Shout it, or sing it, or say it in a whisper. Take it with your breath, hold it in your lungs, and mix it with the blood in your heart. Write *Mercy*, and live it, if only for a moment. Then do it again, and again, and again: Second

by second, minute by minute, till the Hour comes at last when the Word shall be written on us all.

*So may it be.*

[1] Forty Hadith Qudsi, tr. Ezzedin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies, Dar-al Koran al-Kareem publishing house, Beirut, 1980. Italics added, *Allah* changed to ‘God’, Hadith 6. Adapted by C.Moro

[2] The History of al-Tabari, vol. 1, tr. Franz Rosenthal, SUNY press, 1989, p. 200-201. Adapted by C. Moro

\*\*\*\*\*

## ***Who’s the Girl in Row 81?***

**Rev. Craig Moro**



**(Dedicated to the Memory of Rachel Corrie, killed March 16, 2003)**

*“..And when she who was buried alive is questioned:*

*For what crime was she killed?”*

*(Qur’an 81: 9-10)*

**Opening Words (Rumi)**

*The world of fantasy is broader than the world of concepts and of sensibilia. For all concepts are born of fantasy. The world of fantasy likewise is narrow in relation to the world out of which fantasy comes into being. From the verbal standpoint this is the limit of understanding; but the actual reality cannot be made known by words and expressions.*

*Someone asked: Then what is the use of expressions and words?*

*The Master answered: The use of words is that they set you searching and excite you, not that the object of the quest should be attained through words. If that were the case, there would be no need for so much striving and self-denial. Words are as when you see afar off something moving. [Whoosh! Whoosh!] You run in the wake of it in order to see it, it is not the case that you see it through its movement. Human speech too is inwardly the same; it excites you to seek the meaning, even though you do not see it in reality.[1]*

## **Sermon**

For those of you who have come here this morning for a talk *about* Islam, I want to thank you and honor you for your good intentions, before I go on to disappoint them. I think that talks “about” other religions and the good ideas they can give us have a certain value. They may inspire us to want to learn more, and that’s good. But they are also a little bit like reading a field-guide about the great outdoors, without ever daring to go there for a walk.

I also want to honor the good intentions of those of you who have said, to heck with the field guides, and decided to just pick up a copy of the Qur’an—the holy book of Islam—and get to know the religion by reading a few stories. Read a few stories, see if anything moves or touches you, then maybe give some thought to the rest of the religion: Has anyone here ever tried that? How did it go? Were you able to find any stories? There aren’t many. The Qur’an is not that kind of book. It’s just about as long as the New Testament, but it’s not a collection of narratives at all. It *mentions* many stories, and assumes that we know them, but it *tells* very few.

What I would like to do this morning is to combine these two approaches: to tell you just enough about what steps to watch out for, then to go inside the Qur’an together to try to understand why those who first heard its words were so powerfully affected. I’ll first read a passage from one of the other sacred ‘books’ in Islam, called the Hadith—*traditions* passed through the generations about the sayings and deeds of the prophet Muhammad. Muhammad had been a traveling salesman, a caravan trader, but not exactly an ordinary one. Some dissatisfaction with his world and its ways nagged at him. For a whole month every year...

He used to go in seclusion to a cave...where he would fast and pray for days on end...Suddenly one day the Truth descended on him... An angel [the archangel Gabriel, as we'll learn later] came and commanded him: "READ!" The Prophet tells us that he replied: "'But I don't know how to read.' Then the angel seized me and pressed me so hard that I could not bear it any more. He then released me and said again, 'READ!' and again I replied, 'I do not know how to read.' ...Then he seized and crushed me until finally I said, 'What should I read?' and he said 'READ! In the name of your Lord who created; who created humankind from a clot of blood; READ: And your Lord is most generous.'" Then the Prophet rushed home to his wife, Khadijah, with his heart beating severely and lay down on the floor and said "Cover me up! Cover me up!" So she covered him with blankets until his fear began to pass. Then he told her everything that had happened and said, "I fear I'm losing my mind!"

(From Sahih Bukhari, 1:3, translated by C. Moro)

(When he felt better, his wife suggested they should go visit her uncle and consult him about what had happened. Uncle was an old, blind man, a Christian in fact, who was considered wise in religious matters. When he heard the story, he told them he believed that Muhammad had received a gift from the Holy Spirit and had been chosen as a prophet, like so many others before him. This was not madness, but true revelation, not the kind of thing that waits for you to get ready for it. There's a rush and a whoosh to it.)

If you just read the Qur'an, you can find references to the angel, but you won't find this story—the story about how the book began—that places the whole of the book in context. You'll only learn that by learning the tradition, which starts us with a man and an angel in a cave. In a display of overpowering psychophysical force, the angel commands the man to read: *Iqra'*! The word can mean 'read', or 'convey', or 'recite'. The whole scripture takes its name from this first word—*al-Qur'an* means The Reading, or The Recitation. Please bear with me if you hear me speak of it as something with a will and purpose of its own. Muslims consider it to be something almost alive; the most direct, articulated presence of God in the world, like Christ is for Christians; a book so powerful that it compels an illiterate man to read, whether he wants to or not.

Muhammad doesn't get beaten up by the angel every time he receives a message to pass on, but he quickly learns that "Read!" means, do it now! He begins to repeat what he hears at once, word for word, including the commands to do so. If the angel says "Read!" Muhammad also says "Read!" If the stage command is "Say!" he will say "Say!" and only then say what follows. Recently I read a good description of the earliest Muslim community as a "little band of Qur'an reciters," that clustered around Muhammad. Some folks, who were moved by what they heard him say, began to repeat it. Those who could write would take it down, check it for accuracy with Muhammad, then pass it on to still others. These first Muslims were, above all, "Qur'an reciters." Hearing these words, and passing them on, was Islam at the time. Mostly listening and talking: What did you hear today? What was happening when the words came? What should we do, now?

Word by word, line by line, over a period 22 years, this is how Muslims believe the Qur'an was transmitted, from God first to the angel Gabriel, then to the prophet Muhammad, and now to us. The words and lines are arranged in chapters called *surahs*, which means literally, 'steps', or 'rows'. There are 114 of these rows. In which one would you expect to find that very first revelation Muhammad heard in the cave? You might be surprised to hear that it's not at the beginning of the book, but comes in row 96. The very last words that Muhammad is said to have recited like this are found in in the middle of row 5, not at the end of the book.

What does this strange arrangement tell us? I don't think it would be un-Islamic to say that one of the things it means is that we can start anywhere. You can open the book and find yourself on any one of these rows or steps, but not for long. They're too narrow, thin like a razor's edge. They keep you moving—no long stories, remember—just one powerful utterance after another, the subject shifting all the time. And remember that these words are not for you just to hear, but to repeat, like when someone said something to you as a kid, and then said: "Pass it on!" You do it because first in all these rows of all these speakers, it's God who's talking. You are now part of an ongoing command performance. It ends when the world does. Given that we can join it anywhere, let's hear now from rows 80-81.

Just as the Qur'an takes its name from that first overpowering command to recite it as it comes, each *surah* or row takes its name from the most striking image in its verses. Surah 80 is called, "He Frowned." Here is the first part of it.

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

He frowned and turned away

Because the blind man came to him.

And what makes you so sure that *he* won't take it to heart?

Instead, you pay attention to the man who is sufficient unto himself.

It's not your fault that he gets nothing [from these words you recite.]

But as for the one who rushes to you in fear,

you're oblivious to him...

There's an extra word at the top of this row, a kind of label you'll find at the top of every chapter of the Qur'an. It always says either 'Meccan' or 'Medinan', meaning that the chapter below was

revealed either at the city of Mecca or the town of Medina. The Mecca chapters came to the prophet much earlier, when he was still living in his home town and his religious career was just beginning. The one I just read is from Mecca, from long before the prophet was “preaching to the choir,” when very few people who bothered to listen liked what they heard him saying.

The first words of row 80 are the same words that begin every row: “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.” But these words seem odd next to what follows: “He frowned and turned away.” Who frowned and turned away from whom? The Qur’an itself doesn’t tell us, but tradition does. The prophet was somewhere in public, reciting from memory some revelations that had come earlier, and trying to explain them to a small crowd. He wasn’t in the ‘heat’ of receiving revelation at the moment, but had other things in mind. He was trying to gain the interest and maybe the support of a very rich and powerful leader of Meccan society who happened to show up that day. How good it would be for the new religion if such an important person could become a believer!

There was another person in the crowd, a blind man who was old and poor. Hardly a leading citizen, there was nothing at all attractive about him, but he listened earnestly to what Muhammad had to say. He even approached the prophet for clarification, and asked him to repeat a few words. The prophet was feeling impatient that day. Maybe he was feeling some resentment that so many of the people who were drawn to him and his Message were, if not “losers”, let’s say “non-winners” and now here comes this old duffer spoiling his chance to make a good impression on someone really worthwhile.

So he frowned (‘abasa), or the word can also mean “made a stern face;” and turned away (tawalla), toward the much more attractive rich man. Tawalla is from waliya, which means to turn towards or be a friend, so Muhammad has acted like the exact opposite of one. Neither frowning nor turning may have been seen by a person—certainly not the blind man, but they were witnessed by God. Suddenly Muhammad finds himself in that not-so-pleasant grip of revelation again—a new incoming message, reproaching him for what he is doing at that very moment! Look at you, concentrating on that self-satisfied rich fop while this blind man is the one who’s eager for God’s word! Straighten up! Get back on track!

Listeners today who know the tradition may be struck by the irony of the prophet neglecting a blind man when it was a blind man who first confirmed his prophethood. Of course, not all Muslims do know this story, which puts row 80 in context. They are left like we are, with thoughts of our own frowning, and turning away from those who come to us for something they need, something that we were given so we could share it freely. But, look! She’s blind, he’s over the hill, they won’t get it. Why waste my time, why cast my pearls before people whom I wouldn’t even want to be seen with?

You see, the Qur'an never waited for Muhammad to get ready for it. It's not waiting for you to find a story in it that moves or touches you. It's too busy telling your story, right now; involving the reader in the Reading, at every moment. A Muslim might say that it sees us, like God does, and questions our actions and our habits. From whom do we frown and turn away? Who is so unattractive and unimportant that all we want from them is their silent compliance while we move forward with our own plans? What *person* or what *people*, who make only the occasional gesture to get our attention, but we resent even that, until at last they get so frustrated who knows what may happen?

We'll hear from another unimportant person in row 81. I'll read the first part of it in Arabic so you can get a feel for its driving rhyme and rhythm. It's called al-Takwir, or "The Folding Up," and begins like every surah with *bismillahir rahmaanir rahiim*: "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful..."

*Ithaa a-shams kuwwirat*

*Wa ithaa an-nujuum*

*inkadarat Wa ithaa al-jibaa*

*suyyirat Wa ithaa al- 'ishaar*

*'uttilat Wa ithaa al-wuhuush*

*hushirat Wa ithaa al-bihaar*

*sujjirat Wa ithaa an-nufuus*

*zuwwijat Wa ithaa al*

*ma'udah su'ilat Bi ayyi*

*thanbin qutilat*

This row takes its name from an image in the second line: "When the sun is folded up..."

When the sun is folded up

and when the stars become like mud

and when the mountains are just-gone...

It's Judgment Day. What we call 'Nature' begins to collapse, and we, too, are swept up in seconds:

...when the ten-month pregnant camels are abandoned  
and when the wild beasts close in  
and when the seas boil over...

To the people who first heard these words, a she-camel just about to give birth was one of the greatest things to possess—your family’s wealth and health growing by a whole camel before your very eyes. You’d never abandon such a treasure, unless the world was coming to an end—which it is. If the prophet had lived in our times the verse might have been: “When the SUV’s are abandoned, with the soccer teams inside.” We don’t know much about pregnant camels here, but we love our cars and kids.

Now these things we love are left behind and the things we fear come close. I tried translating the next verse as “when the wild beasts close in,” but it could also be “when the monsters rally,” or “when the creatures of the waste gather.” Muslims say the Qur’an is untranslatable, and I do like the original language best of all—*ithaa al-wuhuush hushirat*—the whooshing sound of things our senses can’t quite translate into anything we know, rushing past on all sides, or rushing in on top of us.

...when the wild things close in on you  
and when the seas boil over  
and when the souls are sorted by kind  
and when the infant girl who was buried alive is questioned  
for *what* crime was she killed?

Great things are happening on land from which there’s no escape on the boiling seas, when our ‘souls’ are sorted by what kind of souls they are. The word *nafs* can mean soul or self, and comes from a verb that means to be precious or priceless, so I could have translated the line about souls as “when our precious selves are sorted.” We will be sorted for judgment, but who will be first to testify? The important people, who always get to cut in line? Kings and queens and bosses and owners? Will my turn come soon? Can I say something now? [Hop like a kid and raise hand.]

No. The first human voice in all this cataclysm of collapsing sun, boiling seas, rushing beasts, and departing mountains, is the voice of a little girl who has been buried alive. Suddenly all of our attention turns to her. Female infanticide was widely practiced in Arabia at the prophet’s time, and it was one of the first social practices he felt commanded to change. Some well-off families who wanted sons found it impractical to raise a girl. First you worry about paying her

dowry when she gets married, then you have to watch her give sons to strengthen another clan! Other families felt they were just too poor to feed a daughter.

Of course they'd have found a way to feed a pregnant camel, because she had some practical value. It was a *practical* decision to take an unwanted newborn girl somewhere out of town; dig a little hole, cover her with a little soil; then off you go—your big precious self like a mountain departing—while she's still alive. The problem was solved, and you hadn't technically committed a murder. All you did was leave. The soil was just a covering, not a weapon, right? Today, maybe you'd use a bulldozer to make it look like you were really just doing your job, while at the same time making sure the girl got really buried.

Remember that Muhammad had been a caravan trader, who often camped on the outskirts of a town. Perhaps he had come across the remains of such a child, maybe more than once. Maybe he'd pushed the soil back over many little bones, and tried to cover them over in his memory as well. But now he's a prophet, and God blows the dust off this unimportant, forgotten little girl with a cataclysmic blast. *For what crime was she killed?* For simply being born when she was, and born female? For being what God made her to be? Who will answer for her death? Who will speak for her?

You see, I made a mistake a moment ago, when I said the little girl's voice was the first human sound we would hear in the whoosh and crash of this pivotal moment in our existence. No: she'll be "questioned," but a tiny infant still can't speak, and this one's voice was crushed. The voice we hear behind all other voices in the Qur'an, remember, is God's. God passes the words to the angel Gabriel, who passes it to the Prophet. This child has no words yet, and no justice. But she does have representation: God, Gabriel, Muhammad...and now *us*. I was brought onto a whole team of speakers representing her when I first stumbled across row 81—and now so have you. Remember, the work of the Qur'an is to involve us directly in it, as we ***Read! Recite! And pass it on!***

Imagine the impact of these words in the early days. Some of the Prophet's listeners must have had a friend or relative who had buried a daughter alive. Some must have even done it themselves. Think of what it meant for such persons to recite the words of row 81. Even they must bear witness, and give the little girl the representation she deserves. Here was someone *as* precious as I am to myself, and I left her in a hole. There, I've said it. Now you can pass it on.

Pass it along with the question: Who *deserves* to be buried alive, under dust and gravel, glass and rubble, under layers of injustice and poverty and despair? For what crime are so many buried alive each moment, every day? How can we sigh and say, "They must bring it on themselves?" How can we dare to think they are less important, less precious, than we are? Do

we think we can “pass” on this question, until everything is over? No, the Qur’an says: when everything is over, that’s the first question that will be waiting for us. It’s not the only one. As we continue down row 81, we read:

When the records are open [or: the scrolls unrolled]

And when the Heavens are uncovered

And when the fire is kindled

And when the Garden is brought close

Every precious self will learn what it fetched (you’d use this verb for a dog fetching, or for something ‘fetching’ a price)

The sun may have collapsed and the mountains departed, but our Records unroll before us, becoming the very ground we stand on. The idea of each individual’s *record* is well-developed in Islam, like our childhood idea of Santa Claus carried to the tenth power and far beyond those few anxious weeks before Christmas. Every action of ours is recorded, including “inner” actions, and intentions. Elsewhere in the Qur’an we’re told that on that last Day “whosoever has done an atom’s weight of good will see it;” likewise for an atom’s weight of evil. We stand on the razor’s edge of this line between Fire and Garden, waiting for what comes next.

But now I call to witness the planets...

And the night when it darkens

And the dawn as it breathes [away the dark]...

The Qur’an is pausing for a moment, as if to let us look around and catch a breath of air. It calls to witness the planets, and the night, and the dawn as it “breathes away the dark.” What do we do with this little breathing space? The book’s tone sharpens and reproaches us as if it’s reading our minds:

...No, your companion is not crazy (or the word could mean ‘possessed by genies’)...

He’s not holding back secrets from you,

And no, it’s not the word of Satan...

What does this sudden shift in subject mean? It means we've been spotted, just like Muhammad was when he frowned and turned away. We're caught as we try to dodge the impact of what we've been hearing—to weaken the message by casting doubts on the Messenger. "Who is this guy who hears voices, anyway? He's crazy, he's possessed by genies. Or maybe he's holding back, just telling us what he wants us to hear! Hey, maybe it's really the Devil talking! That's right! Why listen to these crazy satanic verses?"

But the book replies calmly and firmly, *No*. It's not genies or madness or devils. You know better. Listen to the next words:

So, where are you going?

This is nothing but a reminder to the worlds

To whomsoever among you wishes to go straight

*So, where are you going?* Calm down. There's no need for flinching or dodging. The Day is coming, but it's not here yet. The sun is still shining, the mountains are in place, your camels are about to deliver and the SUV is still out there in the parking lot ready to schlep the soccer team wherever you need to go. This is just a reminder of what's happened, what's coming, and where we are now. To call this a "reminder" means that you knew, already—you just needed to hear it again. Now that you've heard, there's a chance you'll still go straight.

*Go straight.* That's all it says, as plain and simple in Arabic as in English. Not get saved, be righteous, be perfect, be holier than your neighbors. Just, go straight. Go straight—don't dodge—and the way you respond to the old, the poor, the weak and the helpless, will be the way you know deep down already; the right way to act in the name of the Compassionate, the Merciful—the First in the line of speakers who have passed this message on to you. Now the Qur'an signs off for a while, to give you a chance to think about it:

What do you want, anyway,  
if not what God, the Cherisher of the worlds,  
wants for you?

If there is such a Cherisher, what more could you want? It's such a good question, I had to pass it on.

*Amin.*

### **Closing Words (Rumi)**

“These words are not so mighty and have no power. How should they be mighty? After all, they are merely words. On the contrary, in themselves they are a cause of weakness. Yet they influence to the truth and excite to the truth. Words are an intervening veil. How can two or three letters compounded together be a cause of life and excitement?”[\[2\]](#)

I hope we’ve given you some idea of how they do it for nearly one-quarter of the human beings with whom we share this world. May the time we share together today excite in us many more such ideas, and stimulate for many days to come our hunger for the truth.

(Arabic: “Amen.”)

بازا بازآ هرآنچه هستی  
فر و گبر و بت پرستی  
رگه ما درگه نومیدی ن  
دبار اگر توبه شکستی  
لانا جلال الدین بلخی ر

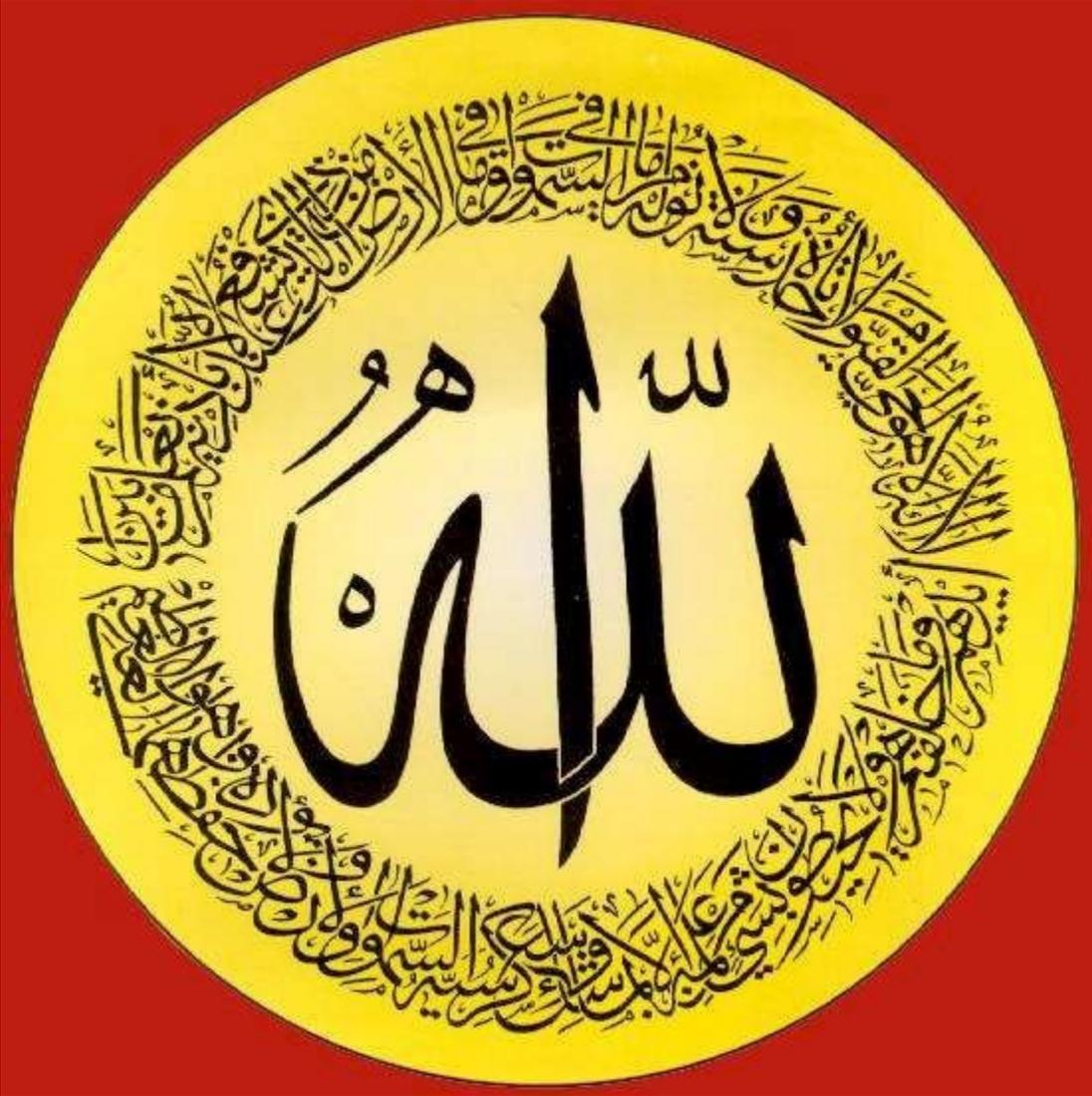


Rachel Corrie in American female casual dress. Cover photo shows her in Palestinian female “crisis clothing”—a post-1945 innovation which does not resemble the “traditional” clothing of the area.

\*\*\*\*\*

# The Grammar of Faith

Rev. Craig Moro



The Qur'an verse above (Surah 2:255, known as the Throne Verse) is written "coming and going." If we imagine the circle as a clock face, the text of the verse begins with the word Allah (God) written with its initial letter placed dramatically in the center. It then continues from about 3:14 and proceeds counterclockwise, crossing the top of the circle, until 8:45. Next, it continues from about 3:16 and moves clockwise, through the bottom to about 8:44. Artist unknown. -CM

## Introduction

Do you see the cartoon that's up on the screen? (See end of document.) Finding a word that's "no-er than 'no'" is an ambitious goal for a teenage boy, or girl, or for a parent. I could use one myself at times, and I'll bet you could, too.

My goal today is also a bit ambitious, or more than a bit. I want to give you a feel for the Arabic language, particularly as it is used in the Qur'an and Islam. I think that one of the things that seems to distance us from so much of the Muslim world and from Muslim people is that Arabic, the language of scripture in Islam (although not the language most Muslims speak at home), is so opaque to most of us. The script itself is presented to us in the media as a flash of hooks and daggers, sharp points and slashes. All we hear of it is the shouts of bearded men in street protests or the screams of grieving mothers. We never see pictures of Muslims smiling, much less laughing. We don't learn what moves or touches them, what's *there* besides pain and anger, what it's like for *them* to find a flower in the snow.

I have a reading knowledge of Arabic that's imperfect, but enough for working through passages of the Qur'an with a dictionary open in front of me. I've done a little Arabic calligraphy, making my own pens and trying to cut the points in the proper shape for writing the script from right to left. I don't know the language well enough to teach much of it to you in one morning, so I'm going to concentrate on a few words of vocabulary and just a bit of grammar. The point is to demystify what is after all just another form of human speech—to make it seem a bit less strange and a bit more accessible. That's a fairly humble goal.

Of course, my real goal is to make peace more possible and war less acceptable—at the very least in your hearts if not in the hearts of our leaders. I count on you to go on trying to reach them in the ways you already do. I just hope that maybe I can give you some new tools or ideas for doing so, a new handle on a situation that is exhausting humankind, though of course not a handle on God. But first, let me give you a little bit of Arabic to listen to. Don't worry—I'll translate in a few moments.

## Reading: The Throne Verse (Qur'an 2:255, transliterated from front page)

Allah, la ilaha illa huwa, al-hayyu al-qayyum. La takhuthuhu sinatun wa la nawmun. Lahu maa fii as-samawaati wa ma fi-l-ardi. Man thaa alathii yashfa'u 'indahu illa bi ithnihi. Ya'lamu maa baina aydihim wa maa khalfahum, wa la yuhiituuna shay'in min 'ilmihi illa bimaa shaa'a. Wasi'a kursiyyuhu as-samawaati wa-l-ardi, wa la ya'uduhu hifzahumaa, wa huwa al-'alii al-'athiim.

### Sermon

God, there is no god but he, the Alive, the Everlasting. He doesn't doze, much less sleep. Whatsoever is in the heavens or the earth, is his. Who is it that can plead for others with him, except by his permission? He knows what is before them and what is behind them, while they grasp nothing of his knowledge except what he wills. His throne spans both the heavens and the earth, and caring for them both is no burden for him, for he is the High, the Mighty.

This high and mighty passage is called the Throne Verse, and it is one of the most beloved passages of the Qur'an. It's a favorite subject for Arabic calligraphy, one of the world's great graphic arts. The prophet Muhammad himself is said to have called it the greatest single verse in the book. [1] You'll find it carved in stone or glazed in tile on the walls of countless mosques; framed in plaques in Muslim homes; worn as an amulet or applied as a decal on taxicab windows from Morocco to Indonesia; and committed to memory by millions upon millions of people. It's one of the rare passages of this scripture that provides something like a description of God, of a Reality (the book cautions us) that no one can actually picture. But hanging it on your wall or from a loop around your neck helps give people a sense of safety in a world where that's not easy to come by.

The Throne Verse tells us that God is active even in apparent stillness. God doesn't get tired, doesn't sleep, and will never even need to doze—sleep doesn't take him, the Arabic says literally. There's no weariness in God, in the Ground of Being, in Ultimate reality, you could say. God does not share our great human problem of fatigue. Stuff keeps coming at us even when we've done all we can with it. Sometimes I feel like I'm standing below sea level in a hurricane, trying to beat the water back with a stick. It's useless, but if I stop for a moment I'm sure I'll drown. I'm sure you know the feeling. But our verse affirms that even at such times, something (or someone) bears our mass—effortlessly, without any lapse.

The first line in Arabic is Allah, La ilaha illa huwa: "God, there is no god but he." This line could easily cause some confusion, because in translation it seems to suggest that God is something like a human male, or else why say "he"? You should know that in Arabic, the bodily

process called menstruation is also referred to by the pronoun “he.” Arabic–like Spanish, Italian, or French–assigns male or female gender to every noun and doesn’t permit a neutral like English does (or German.) But being God is not a “guy thing” any more than menstruation is.

Islam maintains a radically non-anthropomorphic understanding of God. God is not a father, son, brother, or husband; mother, daughter, or wife; not a king or a political party, and certainly not a president! Don’t try to see God as some kind of “person.” The Throne Verse does speak of God’s throne (or ‘chair’) but is silent about just how God would park Godself on this seat.

When I learned in biology class that living beings can display either bilateral symmetry (two more or less equal sides like people or frogs, with the major plumbing and wiring running down the middle) or radial symmetry (like a starfish, reaching out in all directions, or the flower in our children’s story.) I immediately thought that if there should happen to be any God at all, God’s symmetry must be more radial than otherwise. This could mean that his “throne” of heaven and earth is something God surrounds like a raindrop surrounds the core of dust each raindrop has; covering and interpenetrating at the same time. This would also mean that we live in a universe soaked through with and surrounded by God.

You need to know a little more grammar to understand what the first line of the Throne Verse really says. Allah, La ilaha illa huwa: “God, there is no god but he.” We’ve already talked about how “he” (huwa) doesn’t mean some guy. La does mean “no,” but this is a very special kind of “no.” It’s followed by an accusative case ending on the next word, which changes it from a simple “no” into a form which may be unique to Arabic—the “No of Absolute Negation.”<sup>[2]</sup> It’s the “no” that’s “no-er than ‘no’” our cartoon teenager is searching for in our cartoon on the screen. La ilaha: There is absolutely no god, no-er than no god, none at all. This is where we all must start on the path to authentic faith: in a world emptied of gods. It’s a sort of spiritual spring cleaning, an initiatory atheism that must come first before any faith can follow. You shouldn’t rush through it, but rather take a good long time experiencing no god at all before going on to confirm The God (if you ever find that you can—or must.)

The next verse after the Throne Verse makes this even clearer. One of its lines speaks of those who turn toward God as those who dis-believe in false gods, tempters, or idols. But the Arabic word is much stronger than the English ‘disbelieve.’ It’s from the root kafara, which also gives us the word kaafir or ‘infidel’, so you reach faith in God by becoming an infidel to every substitute for him, every imitation. No one becomes muslim without first becoming an infidel to anyone and anything less than God, any idol that we feel tempted or compelled to serve, whether that temptation comes from within or without. The threshold of true faith is radical defiance of such compulsions. You are called to cross it of your own free will. (A called will that’s still free.) So here come the next call, like a trumpet for the whole world to hear:

La ikraha fi-l-deen.<sup>[3]</sup>

Can you hear the similarity in these lines? 1) La ilaha illa huwa... 2) La ikraha fi-l-deen... La ilaha/La ikraha...Do you hear that? There's more to it than a rhyme. You're hearing the No of Absolute Negation again, the No that's "no-er than 'no'". The Throne Verse is known by a special name because it tells us more 'about' God than almost any other passage of the Qur'an, but this very next passage has no special name, to my knowledge. Maybe it should, because its first line conveys a powerful message about how to do religion right, and how we often get it wrong—terribly wrong.

La ikraha fi-l-deen. I've seen this translated as, "Let there be no compulsion in religion," but that's much too weak. The Arabic word can be read as compulsion or coercion, but it's more visceral than those words are. It's used elsewhere in the Qur'an [49:13] to describe how you'd feel about eating "the flesh of your own dead brother." It's something that's not just compulsive—it's also deeply hateful. And the grammar of faith expresses how it is absolutely forbidden in the conduct of our religious lives. I can't make anybody pray or worship against their will. You can't make anyone believe: No; no; no-er than No! Don't you even try!

If we accept this verse for what it says, it forbids us not only from doing what's hateful to others but also from doing it to ourselves. There is to be nothing hateful, coercive, repulsive, or compulsive in the way we conduct our religious lives. No self-distortion, self-mutilation, or self-destruction. Do I need to get into all the hateful acts that have been and are being done in the name of religion? The Qur'an doesn't single out one religion, but addresses them all in perfect radial symmetry. There are no sacred suicides, murders, or truck attacks on pedestrians. There is no holy terror, no blessed burning of dissidents at the stake, no faith-ful picketing of funerals with signs that say, "God Hates Fags!" Talk about abusing the flesh of your own dead sibling! No hate, says the scripture, no compulsion—la ikraha fi-l-deen!

This doesn't mean that there will be no challenges or struggles in religion. To keep faith free of hatefulness is one of the most difficult things about "keeping the faith". Keeping watch for traces of hateful compulsion is like keeping a miner's canary, to distinguish rightly guided faith from that repulsive mockery of religion that sends us out to look for victims, targets, or captives. Maybe we could call this the Canary Verse for how it warns us when the religious air gets foul and poisonous, like canaries once did for workers underground. On the other hand, there are no canaries mentioned in it, or mines. Let's see if the passage itself might offer us a better name.

You might remember that many people hang the Throne Verse like an amulet from a loop around their necks. The nameless verse we've been examining also ends with the image of a loop:  
...Man yakfuru bi-l-taghuuti wa yu'minu bi Allah fa qad astamasaka bi-l-'urwati al-wuthqaa la infisaama laha...

La ilahā / La ikrahā /La infisaama [4] Are your ears picking up the similarity again? Yes, it's that special way of saying 'No,' once again, "no-er than No". "Whosoever rejects false gods or idols and puts faith in God has taken hold of an unbreakable 'urwah ." 'Urwah can mean a buttonhole, a handle, or yes, a loop. It's a feminine noun, and it's used with the No of Absolute Negation again in a construction that literally means "there's absolutely no splitting for her." Infisaamun means a split, and it's also the word used in modern times to mean schizophrenia.

A few years back, I was invited for dinner at a mosque where I know lots of people. I arrived early and was talking to a friend when I noticed something dangling from underneath my car. We popped the hood and he said, "Oh, it's your alternator belt—no, it's half of your alternator belt!" The belt had split and not much was left. As more folks arrived, several noticed my hood up and came over to help analyze the problem. There was enough power left in the battery to start the engine a few more times, so long as I didn't drain it down any further, so they advised me to drive with my headlights off when I left, and one kind family drove just in front of my car to protect and guide me through the dark.

It's sobering to think that the great power of an automobile relies on a loop—something like a big rubber band—that's at once flexible yet definite in its span. When one of these big loops of rubber and fabric loses its flexibility and splits or gets stretched out, the car's systems can't work together. I'm cautious about using an automotive metaphor for human or spiritual systems, but you can see how important flexibility can be for these as well. The Throne Verse calls God the Alive, the Everlasting, the High and the Mighty. I wonder if we can also think of "him" as the Flexible? Very little can remain Alive for long unless it remains flexible as well. God the Flexible, the Definite. God, the Infinitely Definite?

There is nothing flexible about idols of clay or stone, even if they seem solid and definite. What is hateful in religion is so often what's rigid and inflexible about it. But our unnamed verse says: "Who puts faith in God has taken hold of a loop that does not split (or break.)" So perhaps we could call this verse the Verse of the Loop, or the Handle Verse. The Handle Verse. In spite of all of this complex-sounding grammar and vocabulary, it's really quite simple to grasp. It's about letting go and being held. Let go of the false; be held by what's true. *Behold! Be held!* We all break down sometimes, and need a tow, or at least someone to guide us as we travel through the dark—someone flexible, but in whom we can trust. Flexible, but definite. Who would that be for you? **[Pause]**

Thanks for sticking with me through this long lesson on a grammar of faith and the concept of No that's No-er than No. In order to mean anything, Faith needs limits just like grammar does. Limits like these: No idolatry. No victims, targets, or prisoners. No compulsion, no hateful forcing of your beliefs on others. No splitting off on some "religious" tangent into a

fantasy world that's divorced from the real one. Keep a grip. Keep a firm hold on a flexible handle. **[Nod to Linda for calligraphy slide]**

One last grammatical note: If you ever go looking for the noun 'Allah' or God in an Arabic dictionary, you won't find it easily. You first have to find the verb from which it is derived, the verb *ilaha*: to become a god, to deify. 'God' in Arabic (as in English) is derived from a verb, an action, and may therefore have more to do with a process than with a kind of being, or some kind of "guy" who sits out in space, in a very big chair at a very big desk. The God-process: Maybe I'm making too much of the grammar of this particular faith, making it sound too liberal, too First-Amendment friendly, too much like Unitarian Universalism. Or maybe not.

According to the Prophet Muhammad, the Throne verse—describing God in process terms—is the greatest single passage of the message he delivered to the world. I don't think that I'm making too much of the verse that comes right after it, with its message that there is to be absolutely nothing hateful in religion when I say it may be just as great. I don't know how you can make too much of that message, given our world situation today. It may be that someday, perhaps right here on American soil, someone will produce a great version of the Handle Verse in beautiful looping calligraphy, like those of the Throne Verse that can already be found. Maybe someone already has. For now I'll leave this handle in your hands—with all of its dots and squiggles and loops—and trust that you'll know how long to hold onto it. And when to let it go.

Amin.

### **Closing Words**

"Let there be nothing hateful in religion..."

It's up to you and me to make it so. It's up to us all to keep it that way. And I think that we're up to the task. Stay alert. Stay flexible. And stay safe and sound until we meet again.

Blessed be.

[1] Sahih Tirmidhi 216. Tirmidhi's is one of six 'sound' collections of *ahadith* or traditions of the prophet.

[2] In Arabic, *laa al-nfiyah li al-jins*, "No of the expulsion/denial/rejection/prohibition for kind/category, etc." I am grateful to my friend Na'eem 'Abdurrahman for this definition and his suggestions on this sermon.

[3] Qur'an 2:256

[4] If we regard these three proximate verses together as a single unit, the ‘no’ to *ikrahun* can be taken as central or pivotal, coming between the absolute ‘no’ to gods and the ‘no’ to splits or divisions.

\*\*\*\*\*

**“Come, Come...”**

**Rev. Craig Moro**

## **Reading**

Before we sing hymn #188, have a look at the bottom of the hymnal page, where you’ll see that the words are attributed to the great Persian poet and Sufi mystic, Jalal al-Din Rumi. I have to caution you that several scholars have pointed out that this poem is not found in the earliest collections of his work, but closely resembles the work of two other poets who lived around his time.<sup>[1]</sup> Many websites claim that it can be found inscribed on Rumi’s tomb at Konya, in what today is Turkey, though I haven’t been able to verify that this is true, either.

But I think it’s safe to say that the poem is very much in Rumi’s spirit. I’m assuming that most of you have heard of Rumi. Though he lived eight centuries ago his works, translated by Coleman Barks and others, have in recent years been the best-selling books of poetry in the U.S. Rumi was Muslim, of course, but his work appeals across every religious “line”. People are touched by his generosity of spirit, his devoted search for higher meaning and deeper love, and his insistence that the rubble of our flaws and failed efforts can be re-envisioned as stepping stones that bring us closer to what some call God, some call by different names, while others choose no name at all.

You’ll also see at the bottom of the page that it was the Rev. Lynn Ungar who set these words to the tune we know so well. Last year I wrote to ask her how the hymn we know came into being. She wrote back:

“The short answer about the song is that the poem was on the front of a Starr King commencement invitation during the time I was at SKSM — maybe 1989? — and it just seemed like it wanted to have a tune to go with it. So I gave it one. I happened to be taking a class with Mark Belletini at the time, and I brought it to class for something — I don’t really recall what. This was when they were working on the grey hymnbook and Mark was chair. Mark brought the song to the hymnbook commission and they were looking for religious diversity and wanted more songs by Muslims. Sufi was close enough. So they decided to include it. The rest is history.

I left out the line “Though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times” because I couldn’t get it to fit. No one wants to sing a five-part round. Mary Grigolia figured out a way to include it as an *ostinato* (low chant) part, which I think works nicely.”

“Though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times...” I think that line adds a whole dimension to the poem, that we don’t quite get without it. You should try sometime! For now let’s just sing as it appears. (\*see last page)

## Sermon

Okay, I’d better come clean with you now before we go much further. I didn’t really just want Lynn Ungar to tell me how she came to set those words to music. I wanted her to tell me that something I’ve been telling congregations for years is actually *true*. Today Lynn is the Religious Education Director for the world-wide Church of the Larger Fellowship, that reaches out to isolated individuals or families who wander alone, far from any UU caravan— in rural areas, foreign job postings, military service—and yes, even in prison. The CLF helps such wanderers feel connected to fellow worshipers like us, and to a common purpose by making sermons, readings, and children’s educational materials available wherever they are needed.

At Starr King School for the Ministry, one of Lynn’s classes was called *Meeting Islam*, which I think was the very first class on that great religious tradition to be taught there. Even the instructor was just beginning to approach this tradition by way of a very steep learning curve. He had just finished a summer intensive in Arabic and was currently enrolled in a UC Berkeley class reading key religious texts in that language. Interestingly enough, he had also been Lynn’s district youth group advisor some years before. Today he serves a small UU congregation in Portland, Oregon, that meets in a senior center on the east side of the river.

Where—until recently—he used to boast that he is really the “godfather” of our cherished hymn, sort of implying that maybe his name should also appear at the bottom of the page. Lynn’s note makes it all too clear that, really, it does not. But our class *did* have a section on Islamic

mysticism and we *did* take a look at Rumi—so maybe Lynn forgot that *my* class was her real inspiration? You can see that I'm not having an easy time turning away from what has become a sort of habit, making claims that I shouldn't.

By way of repentance for my past misleading comments, I've brought with me the Persian original of the poem. I have spent enough time studying that language to want to learn much more. To help me prepare for today, I asked some friends to help me work through it. Dr. Bahram Tavakolian who is an anthropologist colleague of my wife. He was born in Iran and speaks Farsi or Persian as their first language. As I wandered this small poem's great spaces, they helped keep me from getting lost for long. The poem itself is about finding your way back.

*Bâz â, bâz â har ân-che hast-î bâz â  
gar kâfir-o gâbr-o bot-parast-î bâz â  
în darge-hé mâ darge-hé nawmêdî  
nîst Sad bâr agar tobe- hê -shekast-î  
bâz â*

*Bâz â, bâz â...* “Come, come...” is a good beginning for our song, but the Persian original adds a dimension of meaning that’s more like “Come back”, or “return”. This is not our very first invitation to a brand-new place, but a call to come home, to a place where we already belong. (Bahram tells me his dad would urge his kids to *Bâz â, bâz â!* “Come on! Keep up!” when they were dawdling on the streets of L.A. Next comes:

*Har ân-che hast-î, bâz â...* “Whoever you are” is close, but “whatsoever you are” is more accurate. We use labels to make others into “what-s” more than “who-s” don’t we? Religious identity makes for some of the most powerful labels we can use, and that power can be put to violent purposes, 800 years ago or today. Labels are used to make persons into victims, targets, *things*—to put them outside of community, or the possibility of love. And then outside of life itself. The poem acknowledges this labeling trick, but then calls out, “Come back! Whatsoever you are—or someone says you are—come back!”

*Gar kâfir-o gâbr-o bot-parast-î bâz â...* This is a list of such labels that have just as much power now as they did in Rumi’s time. The list includes atheists, unbelievers, Zoroastrians and *bot-parast-î*, whom we identified as those who “give faith to something other than God: king, rock, power, magic,” that is, idolaters. These are the worst kinds of sinners according to all three of the great Near Eastern religious traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But the poem invites them to simply *Bâz â!* Come on, come along, come back now.

*În darge-hê mâ darge-hê nawmêdî nîst...* We know this line as “ours is no caravan of despair” but it would be closer to say “This doorway of ours is not a doorway to despair (or hopelessness, or even disappointment).” *Darge* can also mean “threshold” and it’s the term used for a community of Sufi seekers, gathered around a spiritual master, someone like Rumi himself. I like that: not a fortress or a palace, but a threshold. As much in as out, as much out as in—a very special kind of a place that could be anywhere, everywhere, or no one place at all. You can feel why the translator chose the word “caravan” for such a shifting “space”, if you’ll forgive my air quotes.

And now we come to the line Lynn mentioned at the end of her note about setting words to music: “I left out the line “Though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times” because I couldn’t get it to fit. No one wants to sing a five-part round. Mary Grigolia figured out a way to include it as an *ostinato* (low chant) part, which I think works nicely.” Have you heard it sung that way? I’ve heard it sung by choirs a few times, and I agree that it works very well.

In Persian it goes: *Sad bâr agar tobe- hê -shekast-î bâz â*. *Sad bâr* means a hundred times, not a thousand but let’s set this small difference aside for now. The big word here is *tobe*, the soft

Persian reading of the Arabic *taubah*, or “repentance”. They look the same in both languages, and I thought that I recognized it right away as the title of a chapter in the Qur’an, but how did we understand the meaning? We said we might use it to describe making a “spiritual U-turn”. I love that—a U-turn. Turn too hard, too fast, too angrily, and you could spin out or crash. A good U-turn is firm, but gentle. *Sad bâr agar tobe-hê -shekast-î, bâz â...*

The idea is that we can profoundly change our direction of travel. But first we must *want* to! I think you’ll find an idea like this in every religious tradition, but it’s particularly central to that family of religions I mentioned before—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—and yes, our own religious caravan blending travelers from the old Unitarian and Universalist movements. The idea of repentance is expressed many ways in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish tradition, most often by forms of the word *shuv*—“return”.

In the Bible’s book of Amos we hear it again and again as God chides the people for the injustices they have committed, all-too-sure of themselves as chosen and privileged by virtue of their prayers and pious religious ceremonies. You see what your violence, greed, and arrogance have done to the socially weak and the helpless. You’ve sold the poor for a pair of sandals, “but still you have not returned to me!” says God over and over. You will fall a long way, for a long time, before I return to you.

The very first book of the New Testament tells us that “Repent!” was the very first word of Jesus’ public ministry. “Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand. (Matt 4:17)” Here he uses the Greek *metanoëō*, which means something like “change your mind” or perhaps “change your ways”. You’ll find this idea expressed over and over throughout the Gospels, the Acts, the letters of Paul, and right on through to the final book of Revelation.

Moving on to Rumi’s own Islamic tradition, the chapter of the Qur’an called *Repentance* contains one of its most famous “clobber passages” that serve the ends of ISIS-type “jihadis” or mosque-defacing “Islamophobes” equally well—especially when it’s taken out of context:

...Slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captives and besiege them and lie in wait for them in...ambush... (9:5)

It’s a favorite passage for *all* who like to cherry-pick this book for calls to violence—no matter what their religious persuasion. It works pretty well for that purpose so long as you ignore the verses that follow:

But if they repent and [pray] and pay the poor-tax, then leave their way free. (9:6) ...If they repent and pray and pay the poor-tax, then they are your *brothers and sisters in faith*. (9:11)

The real concern seems to be with establishing some sort of regular, disciplined charity and social assistance—something much more than making a feel-good donation now and then. The Qur'an's idea here is something like making a U-turn, not just for your own spiritual benefit, but also in order to pick up those who've been left behind on the road. Repentance becomes a matter for the community as well as the individual. Don't you hear that in our song as well, when we sing about "our" caravan? It's hard to imagine a *caravan* that's only meant for me—a caravan of one!

*Sad bâr agar tobe-hê -shekast-î, bâz â...* "You've broken your repentance a hundred times." I can see why the translator of the long version of our hymn chose to say that you've broken your *vows*, and a *thousand* echoes *vows* better than a *hundred* does. But the important thing is that it all sounds very, very familiar, even to religious liberals like most of us, who seldom use religious terms like "repentance". We may not use the word very often, but we know the idea well—at least as well as religious conservatives do.

In what ways do we hear religious liberals call for *repentance*? What do they say we should make a "U-turn" from doing like we've always done it in the past? Any ideas? Broad strokes are okay here. [Congregation] Think about issues related to climate change, pollution, economic justice and industrial technology. Think about our national histories of slavery and genocide, about immigration, and the rights of workers and sexual minorities. Ask yourself if you have ever benefited from the wrongs long done to others, and if you're comfortable with that.

How about religious conservatives, like the "values" voters who have thrown their weight behind a casino-building, white supremacist, serially unfaithful braggart who crows about grabbing women's genitals? How does their "repentance list" differ from the liberal one? [Congregation] Could we say that being ***unrepentant*** about racism, sexism, religious bigotry, and the treatment of our natural world has been, how shall we say, Trump-eted recently as a sign of moral, spiritual, (or "real American") virtue? Never change your mind, never admit a mistake, never say you're sorry! Just keep driving, burning, shooting, and degrading whatever you want. Beautiful! Isn't it odd to think that this approach should be selling as something that's closer to "traditional" religious values than what liberals have to offer?

It does nothing to "conserve" traditional Jewish, Christian, or Muslim values—or *American* ones, so far as I can see. The call to repentance, to turn, turn, and come round right is *right* at the center of our shared religious heritage, not somewhere out in *left* field. Here are the seven principles that all member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association *covenant to affirm and promote*:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

A covenant is a kind of ritual promise, or a set of such promises. We make a covenant when we want to make a change—from an ineffective, desperate, or destructive way of doing things to something that’s better, and more *true*.

Every promise in a covenant reflects both what we want to turn towards and what we want to turn away from. When I covenant to affirm and promote *the inherent worth and dignity of every person* I renounce doing the opposite: I repent of all racism, sexism and identity-based violence or discrimination of which I may be or have ever been a part. If I would affirm and promote *justice, equity, and compassion in human relations*, I renounce using pain, isolation, fear, or death to work my will on others. May I never (or never *again*) make you my victim, my target, or my prisoner. May I always see your human face, and never just an “idolater” or “unbeliever”; a “liberal” or “conservative” or *whatever* sort of thing.

We call these promises our principles. That’s not an easy word to sing, but what do you think of “vows”? Ours is no caravan of despair: it’s a covenant of vows. I know I’ve broken all seven more times than I can tell. Maybe you have, too. But the good news is that you can only break your vows a hundred times (or a thousand) if you make them just as often. Maybe that’s what step-by-step-by-stumble-by-step looks like for you, or for me. We’re not “there” yet, I’m certain. Not yet at our final destination.

But we are on the threshold, and that’s a place worth reaching. If you stumble or wander off the track, don’t despair, friend—just come right on back. *Bâz â! Bâz â!* Come, yet again, come! [Open hymnal to #188] Thanks, Rumi, for expressing the core of our faith with such simple beauty. And thanks, Lynn Ungar, for something we can sing so easily, and with such joy. And no thanks, there’s no need to add my name to this list, or to the bottom of the page...unless you really want to, maybe just in pencil...?

*Come, yet again, come.*

## **Closing Words**

Now is not the time, my friends,  
to build ourselves a wall

Let us stand here in the doorway

and welcome,  
welcome,  
all to All.

*So may it be.*

**\* *“Come, Come...” as sung by Unitarian Universalist Congregations***

Come, come, whoever you are  
Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving  
Ours is no caravan of despair  
Come, yet again, come

[1] For example, see: [http://www.dar-al-masnavi.org/corrections\\_popular.html#84](http://www.dar-al-masnavi.org/corrections_popular.html#84)

