

Discussion and Reflection Guide – Part Three  
by Pat Kahn

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*Muhammad*

THE STORY OF A  
PROPHET AND REFORMER

*Sarah Conover*

FOREWORD BY EBOO PATEL



*From the UUA Bookstore:*

In the pages of [\*Muhammad: The Story of a Prophet and Reformer\*](#), young readers will encounter a man very different from the figure often presented in Western popular culture.

Drawing from biographies, the Quran, and hadith, Sarah Conover, co-author of [\*Ayat Jamilah: Beautiful Signs: A Treasury of Islamic Wisdom for Children and Parents\*](#), relates the story of a radical prophet who challenged the rich and powerful, guided his community of followers through a dangerous time of persecution and exile, formed alliances with people of different beliefs, and preached "love for humanity what you love for yourself."

Written for readers 12 and up (and suitable as read-aloud for ages 10 and up), and with a foreword by Eboo Patel, founder of Interfaith Youth Core and a member of the President's Council on Faith-Based Neighborhood Partnerships, this beautiful book will educate and inspire youth and adults of all faiths.

## **Introduction**

The Discussion and Reflection Guide – Part One provides a framework for exploring the book, [\*Muhammad: The Story of a Prophet and Reformer\*](#) with multigenerational groups, including children age 10 and up along with youth and adults. The guide is designed to be flexible in implementation and can be adapted for various settings within and beyond the congregation, including interfaith groups. The guide presents a 75- minute workshop which can be expanded to multiple sessions. The ideal size for a group is 8-10 participants; for larger numbers, consider multiple groups and recruit additional facilitators. Ensure that each group has representation of multiple ages/generations.

Parts Two and Three are 90 minute sessions designed for multigenerational groups of youth and adults. Part Two focuses on Islam today, comparing and contrasting the book with stereotypes of contemporary Muslims and engaging participants with the question, "What does the story of Muhammad have to do with me?" Part Three focuses on interfaith relationships described in the book, as well as interfaith roots of early Unitarianism in Europe and interfaith/multifaith cooperation today.

## Implementation

Before the session:

When publicizing the session, encourage participants to answer these questions BEFORE reading the book (parents can help record answers for children):

- What do you know about Muhammad? What do you know about the religion of Islam?
- What is the source of this knowledge? (personal relationship with Muslim people, learned in a book/online, heard on the news, studied in school)

For the session:

Sessions can be done as a series of three related workshops, or as stand-alone workshops. The art project described in Session One can be included in subsequent sessions if desired.

Decide whether you would like to serve refreshments such as mint tea, water, dates, pita bread, yogurt, or hummus. Refreshments could be available on a table during a short break or throughout the session. You might also consider enhancing the space with pillows or cushions for those who would like to sit on the floor (in the manner of sitting around a camp fire). Tables and chairs are needed for the art project.

The most important qualities for leaders of this program are curiosity and a commitment to lifelong learning. Multigenerational programs provide an excellent opportunity to engage youth in shared leadership with adults; adolescents rarely find themselves in communities that welcome their leadership, and this program invites congregations to be a sorely needed exception. Leaders may wish to read (and share) the article [“A Book Group for All Ages”](#) from the *UU World* magazine about a multigenerational book group formed by a congregation in Illinois. For more information on multigenerational faith formation, read “Best Practices in Intergenerational Faith Formation” by John Roberto from [Lifelong Faith Journal Vol. 1.3/4](#).

## Session Plan – Part Three

### Goals

- To understand the role of interfaith allies in the book
- To learn about interfaith roots in early Unitarianism and the 1893 Parliament of World's Religions
- To explore contemporary interfaith relationships
- To recognize the gifts that all ages bring to the group
- To develop multigenerational relationships.

### Materials

- Chalice, candle and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- Small table and cloth for the chalice
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Name tags
- Optional: Copies of the hymnbook *Singing the Journey*
- Laptop with Internet access, projector, and screen

### Preparation

- A few days before the session, email Handouts 1 and 2 to all participants to read in preparation for the discussion
- Post chalice lighting words (if hymnbooks are not available).
- Place the table with the chalice in the center of a circle of chairs.
- Set up the portion of the Ware lecture video before the session begins
- Optional: Recruit a song leader.

### Description

#### Chalice Lighting (5 minutes)

Welcome participants to the circle. Light the chalice, or ask for a volunteer. Say or sing the words to “Building Bridges” Hymn 1023 in *Singing the Journey* or select a song from Part One or Two.

*Building bridges between our divisions,  
I reach out to you, will you reach out to me?  
With all of our voices and all of our visions,  
Friends, we could make such sweet harmony.*

**Activity: Creation of Covenant** (10 minutes)

## Materials

- Newsprint, markers, and tape

## Description

Participants will come with different experiences regarding the creation of a covenant; many youth will be familiar with the practice from being part of a religious education group; adults may have participated in the development of a congregational covenant. Point out that how we each behave affects everyone in the group, an example of interdependence. Like lighting a chalice, creating a group covenant is a common ritual in UU gatherings. Explain that a *covenant* is an agreement people make with each other. Ask:

- Has anyone in the group created a covenant? If so, ask if they are willing to help co-lead the covenant creating process.
- What guidelines will help group members be comfortable with, and respectful of, each other?

List responses on newsprint. Encourage positive wording. If participants do not suggest them, you may wish to include:

- Respect confidentiality; personal sharing stays in the room.
- Show concern for each other's welfare; when it's their turn, everyone has the right to either pass or share.
- Make sure everyone is heard; one person talks at a time.
- Be inclusive; help everyone feel like they are part of the group.
- Speak from your own experience; use "I" statements.

Ask participants to confirm their agreement with the covenant and thank them for sharing the responsibility of keeping the covenant together.

**Alternate Option:** Use the covenant created in Session One or Session Two.

**Activity: Introductions and Interfaith Relationships in *Muhammad*** (15 minutes)

## Description

Ask participants to introduce themselves and share why they chose to read the book *Muhammad* and attend this session; ask for a show of hands of those who attended Session One or Two. Each person should speak for a minute or less.

Read this passage from *Muhammad* on page 57:

*The Qurayash refused to let up on the most vulnerable Companions – the poorest – so Muhammad has suggested some young men and women migrate south. The Christian king there, the Negus, might allow them to worship freely. It was a gamble, but after all, The Believers and the Christians worshipped the same God, the God of Abraham. Surely the Negus would protect them.*

Ask participants to describe what happened next in the story (the king hears testimony from both sides and does, indeed, offer protection to the Companions, pages 58-63). Are participants surprised to hear that a Christian king would protect the right of Muslims to worship in their own way?

Share this passage from the foreword by Eboo Patel, the founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core (page xii):

*I especially appreciated the way the author brought to life the key role that non-Muslims played in the life and Prophethood of Muhammad. How two Christians, Bahirah and Waraqah, were among the first to recognize Muhammad’s spiritual significance. And how a pagan, Muhammad’s uncle Abu Talib, risked his own life to protect the Prophet from those who wished to harm him. So frequently we hear the perversion that Islam is a tradition that seeks either separation from others or domination over them. These stories highlight the relational dimensions of Islam, an important lesson for both Muslims and non-Muslims.*

Ask participants if they have heard comments like the ones Patel describes, that Islam is separatist. Have they heard stories about the opposite? Have they experienced either attitude in their own relationships with Muslims?

### **Activity: Interfaith Relationships – Then and Now (25 minutes)**

Ask participants to think of a time when they experienced an interfaith relationship or gathering. Say something like:

Have you ever spent time exploring religion with a friend or acquaintance whose religion is different from yours? Have you ever worked on a service or justice project with people from a different faith community and talked with other participants about their faith? Have you ever attended or taken part in an interfaith or multifaith religious service or ceremony? Let’s go around the circle and each share *one* such experience? Why is it memorable to you? What do you value most from the experience?

Ask participants to take out Handouts 1 and 2 that were emailed before the session (have a few printed copies available). Ask if participants were surprised to learn of how far back in time the roots of Unitarian “interfaith” relationships can be found. Invite participants to share something from the history that particularly impressed them.

Show the first 10 minutes (or longer as time allows) of the 2013 [Ware Lecture](#) by Eboo Patel (Patel begins speaking at 22:00) making sure to include the excerpt found on Handout 2.

**Activity: So What?** (15 minutes)

While the history is interesting, it is not as important as what interfaith relationships mean to us today. What do you think Unitarian Universalism has gained from interfaith relationships? Has anything been lost? What does it mean to us, individually and collectively, to have an interfaith history? In what ways is it part of your identity as a Unitarian Universalist? Your congregation's identity?

**Activity: Now What?** (15 minutes)

Ask participants to reflect on the discussion about interfaith relationships. After a few minutes, ask participants to share their thoughts on what they might do with this information; in what ways might they share this with their friends and families, in the congregation, or with others outside of the congregation. Finally, ask participants to consider ways in which they can become (or continue to be) a "bridge builder"; what concrete actions will enable them to promote "sweet harmony" in their relationships with people of other faiths? Record ideas on newsprint and ask for a volunteer to share with the group via email after the workshop.

**Closing** (5 minutes)

To close, read, or ask a volunteer to read, these words from Bishop Desmond Tutu:

*There is no faith that promotes violence...no faith that says it is a good thing to steal...no faith that says it is a good thing to kill. All of our faiths in different ways tell us how we can be truly human, that we are interdependent, that we are made for interdependence.*

If time allows, consider singing "Building Bridges" again. Ask participants to extinguish the chalice together by forming a close circle around the chalice and extending their arms, palms up, toward the chalice flame. Have participants blow **gently** on their palms to collectively extinguish the flame.

## Handout 1: UU's and Interfaith Relationships – European Roots

In both the 2010 Minns lectures and the forthcoming Skinner House book *Children of the Same God*, Susan J. Ritchie makes the groundbreaking historical argument that, long before Unitarianism and Universalism merged in the United States, Unitarianism itself was inherently multi-religious. She demonstrates how Unitarians in Eastern Europe claimed a strong affinity with Jews and Muslims from the very beginning and how mutual theological underpinnings and active cooperation underpin Unitarian history but have largely disappeared from the written accounts. With clear implications for the religious identity of Christians, Jews, and Muslims as well as Unitarian Universalists, and especially for interfaith work, *Children of the Same God* illuminates the intertwining histories and destinies of these traditions (*from the [book's description](#)*).

Excerpts from the Minns lectures:

European Unitarianism was formed in large part through the particular desire to honor Christianity's close kinship with Judaism and Islam...The Anti-Trinitarian debate has always been inextricably engaged with issues of multi-religious tolerance. A large part of [Miguel] Servetus' motivation in taking on the Trinity was his concern that the doctrine unnecessarily separates Christianity from Judaism and Islam.

The grounds for religious toleration were prepared for in the everyday lives of actual persons, who were already living in deeply multi-cultural and multi-religious ways. These people experienced the negotiations of intermarriage and friendship before any legal proclamation of toleration; and they felt a spiritual attraction to Islam and an appreciation of the safety it accorded progressive Protestants long before the publication of any theological treatise.

...Protestant movements like Unitarianism would never have developed and matured in Hungary and Transylvania to the extent that it did if it were not for the political protection of the Ottoman Empire from the Counter-Reformation.

...we are living in a time of promise. More people than ever are identifying as Jewish and Muslim Unitarian Universalists, and more people seem to be approaching their religious identity in newly flexible ways. An increasing number of Jewish Unitarian identified persons are actively practicing both sides of a hyphenated faith. This is also true of an increasing number of Muslim Unitarian Universalists, a number of whom...have found the close relationship...described between 16th century Transylvanian Unitarians and Muslims helpful to them as they try to find a way in our congregations.



## Handout 2: UU's and Interfaith Relationships – In the United States

An excerpt from the story, "[A Chorus of Faith](#)" in *A Chorus of Faiths*, a Tapestry of Faith youth program

Interfaith cooperation was in evidence over a century ago, at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago (also known as the World's Fair) in 1893. The Fair was the world's first major theme park, offering the first Ferris wheel rides, and introducing popular treats such as Juicy Fruit(R) gum and Cracker Jack(R) caramel-coated popcorn. The World's Fair also inspired another first: an unprecedented gathering of leaders from religious traditions all over the world, in part organized by Unitarian minister Jenkin Lloyd Jones. From the very beginning, Unitarian Universalists have been at the forefront of interfaith cooperation.

At the conclusion of the Parliament, Charles Bonney, President of the Columbian Exposition, proclaimed, "From now on, the great religions of the world will make war no longer on each other, and instead on the giant ills that afflict humankind."

Though Jones believed in a unity among religions, the Parliament's success did not depend on participants sharing that belief. Instead it rested on members of diverse traditions knowing their differences, but still committing to work together. This incredible vision, that people of different beliefs, practices, and perspectives could come together to solve the ills of the world, underlies interfaith work today.

20<sup>th</sup> Century – 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Curricula that develop what Eboo Patel calls "an appreciative understanding of the world's religions" have been around for more than 60 years; from Sophia Fahs 1947 program *The Church Across the Street*, to the UUA's *Neighboring Faiths* curriculum and most recently, Tapestry of Faith programs like *Building Bridges* and *A Chorus of Faiths*, part of a joint venture of the UUA and the Interfaith Youth Core (founded by Eboo Patel) and funded by the Shelter Rock congregation designed to develop UU youth as interfaith leaders.

Eboo Patel, author of *Acts of Faith*, and the 2013 Ware lecturer

Excerpt from the Ware lecture:

The fact is, you don't have to look very far at all in UU thought or literature to find that language. The idea of difference as enriching is woven into your tradition. Beautifully expressed by Adlai Stevenson, the US presidential candidate and Unitarian lay person, "There's nothing to fear in difference. Difference, in fact, is one of the healthiest and most invigorating of human characteristics, without which life would become meaningless."

Even more, you believe that difference is holy. Listen to the words of Unitarian Universalist minister Greta Crosby. "All of us together, all the eyes of all the creatures, are the eye of God. That is why we need each other. Our many ways of seeing that together, we may rejoice and see clearly and find the many keys to abundant life." Not only do you believe this, you act on it.

A core part of UU practice is to introduce your children and young adults to an appreciative knowledge of other religious traditions. You organize interfaith service projects, make visits to other houses of worship and faith communities, publish loving books about other traditions, like the wonderful recently published *Muhammad, the Story of a Prophet and Reformer* by Sarah Conover, published by Skinner House Books, your press.

Perhaps most impressively, your communities continue to nurture young people who are inspired by the UU tradition to become interfaith leaders.

Peter Morales Fall 2013 UU World *"Belief is the Enemy of Faith"*.

I believe the future of religion is a spirituality that is interfaith at its core. I am convinced we Unitarian Universalists have a historic opportunity to help create that future. For the last several years I have spoken about the momentous changes in the American religious landscape. Young people are rejecting all religion in numbers we have never seen before. While this is troubling at one level, at another level I find cause for great optimism. The good news is that people, at least in the developed world, are rejecting cultural and religious exceptionalism. By religious exceptionalism I mean the conviction that my religion possesses the truth and, by extension, yours is false. As people mix more and more, they come to appreciate the contributions of all the great religions. All across the country we see students at college campuses engaging others from different religious backgrounds in interfaith settings. Religions are not all the same, of course. Yet certain common themes and core values emerge in all of them. Among these are compassion, community, the practice of a spiritual discipline, and the pursuit of a difficult path toward a new level of consciousness.

## Find Out More

### Links to Tapestry of Faith sessions about Muhammad or Islam:

[Session 15](#) of Creating Home – K/1

[Session 15](#) of Signs of Our Faith – 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> grade

[Session 9](#) of Moral Tales – 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> grade

[Session 9](#) of Windows and Mirrors – 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> grade

Workshops [13](#) and [14](#) of Building Bridges - youth

[Workshop 2](#) of Virtue Ethics – youth

[Workshop 7](#) of Gather the Spirit – multigenerational

### Other resources on Islam:

[Unitarian Universalists and Islam: An Introduction to Interfaith Dialogue and Reading Group Guide](#)

“[Exploring Islam with Children](#)” – by Michelle Richards on UU-Parenting blog

“[A Story of Muhammad: A Window into Islam](#)” by Susan Lawrence on Call and Response blog

[Ayat Jamilah: A Treasury of Islamic Wisdom for Children and Parents](#) by Sarah Conover

PBS series “[Life of Muhammad](#)”

[Islamic Society of North America](#)

### Interfaith Resources:

[Ware Lecture](#) by Eboo Patel at General Assembly 2013 in Louisville, KY

2011-2012 UUA Common Read [Acts of Faith](#) by Eboo Patel with accompanying [study guide](#)

[A Chorus of Faiths: Unitarian Universalists as Interfaith Leaders](#), a Tapestry of Faith program for youth, in partnership with IFYC

[Interfaith Youth Core](#) founded by Eboo Patel

[Parliament of World Religions](#)

[The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions](#), from the Tapestry of Faith program for adults, Faith Like a River

[A Chorus of Faith](#), a story from the Tapestry of Faith program for youth, A Chorus of Faiths

[The VUU](#): Church of the Larger Fellowship Muslim-UU Connections October 20, 2013

[Children of the Same God](#) by Susan Ritchie (to be published by June 2014)

[2009 Minns Lectures](#)