



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
Spirituality · Community · Justice

## **A Vision of a Muslim Future**

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

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On the Islamic calendar, we are in the month of Ramadan, which began on Monday, and ends a little more than three weeks from now on April 9th. One of the five pillars of Islam is fasting during Ramadan from sunrise to sunset for all healthy adults. The other four pillars are making a profession of faith, praying five times a day, giving to charity, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Although all five pillars are important, the spiritual practice of fasting during Ramadan is particularly significant to many Muslims. Approximately eighty percent of U.S. Muslims fast during Ramadan. In contrast, only half as many actually pray five times a day (42%) or attend mosque weekly (43%) ([PEW](#)).

The Ramadan fast is rigorous, and requires refraining not only from eating food, but also from drinking liquids, smoking, sex, and anger. More important, however, than what you *don't* do, the spiritual practice of Ramadan is about refocusing one's freed-up time and energy for prayer, reflection, helping those in need, and spending time in community.

To UU Muslims who are also members of this congregation, and to all others who are observant: "*Ramadan Mubarak*. May you have a blessed Ramadan." And for anyone who has friends, family members, or colleagues who are observing Ramadan, may we be sensitive, compassionate, and supportive to all those who are fasting.

This Ramadan, I am acutely aware that 99% of the Gaza Strip is Muslim. And it is one thing for adults to freely choose to fast, and another thing entirely for anyone to

be deliberately starved, as is the case for many Palestinians today. I continue to pray, both for a permanent ceasefire and a safe return for all hostages. And I continue to seek out and support those individuals and groups committed to co-creating a future in which all Israeli lives and all Palestinian lives *matter*.

In preparation for Ramadan, and for this sermon on Islam, I've been reading a book titled *Two Billion Caliphs: A Vision of a Muslim Future* by Haroon Moghul, a Muslim academic turned public intellectual. His book was published by our own Beacon Press, which is part of the Unitarian Universalist Association. That title refers to the almost two billion Muslims in the world today (11). To give you some points of reference: two billion Muslims represents more than 25% of the world's population, which makes Islam the world's second largest religion.

Looking ahead, current projections have Islam on track to become the world's largest religion by 2070. Populations in most countries with a large percentage of Muslims are expected to grow *twice* as fast as the overall global population.

Here in the U.S., Muslims are currently only one percent of the population, but there has been a significant increase over the past few decades. If we turn back the clock more than 50 years to 1967, there were fewer than 250,000 Muslims in the U.S. Today that number is more than 3 million — a twelve-fold increase. Relatedly, in 1967, there were fewer than 200 mosques in the U.S. Today, there are more than 2,000 mosques — a ten-fold increase.

I should also hasten to emphasize the tremendous *diversity* of thought among the world's 1.9 billion Muslims. Most UUs are well aware that the overwhelming majority of Muslims are non-violent — neither terrorists nor terrorist sympathizers. But merely rejecting Islamophobic caricatures is insufficient reason appreciating the diverse nature of contemporary Islam.

Despite the fact that many Americans' strongly associate Islam with Arabic-speakers from the Middle East, **only 20% of Muslims are Arabs**. In fact, the countries with the largest Muslim populations (Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and Nigeria) are all democracies, disproving the myth that Islam is incompatible with democracy (Esposito, *The Future of Islam*, 11).

In the [words of a religion professor](#) from American University in D.C., consider that:

Saudi Arabia...has only the *sixteenth* largest Muslim population, behind countries such as Uzbekistan, Ethiopia, Turkey, and Iran. For what it's worth, Saudi Arabia's Muslim population is roughly equivalent to *China's* [Muslim population]. All of this should make us reconsider how we perceive not only Islam, but also the locus of its power and influence. While the Saudi government routinely casts itself as the protector and defender of the faith, the Saudi government only represents a small fraction of the world's Muslims.

Closer to home, I was pleased to see a few weeks ago that the Frederick County Board of Education voted unanimously to close schools on both Islamic Eid holidays, to begin in Fall 2025 ([The Frederick News-Post](#)). Eid is the Arabic word for "festival" or "feast." It refers to two major Muslim holidays: *Eid al-Fitr*, which marks the end of the month of fasting during Ramadan, and *Eid al-Adha*, which marks the culmination of the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. These two Eids are the two major consensus holidays for Muslims worldwide, and are only about seventy days apart (39-40). In the words of one of many members of the Muslim community in Frederick who advocated for the holiday closings: "It's not only important for [Muslim] students, but it's also important for other students" to be aware of such significant holidays.

Relatedly, I was glad to hear that New York City made a significant change just a few months ago, that allows mosques to broadcast the Muslim call to prayer at midday on Fridays and in the evenings during Ramadan — without obtaining a permit and regardless of sound restrictions in city neighborhoods. In the words of mayor Eric Adams, "Today we are cutting red tape and saying clearly, 'If you are a mosque...you are free to live your faith in NYC'" ([CNN](#)).

As someone who grew up Christian in South Carolina, I was always able to take for granted that my religious practices and holidays were normative, and would be respected, politically represented, and officially taken into consideration. Today, as a UU minister committed to cultivating religious pluralism and multiculturalism, I am grateful to see a growing awareness and respect for religious diversity — even as there

remains a long way to go.

Let me give you a few more points to consider about how our mass media shapes our collective perceptions about Islam:

- Even though “Muslims make up 25% of the global population and Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the world — Muslims only comprised 1% of characters shown on popular television series in the U.S.”
- “The majority of the Muslim characters were depicted as adult Middle Eastern or North African [MENA] men, despite the fact that Muslims are the most racially and ethnically diverse religious group in the world.”
- “Over 30% of the Muslim characters were perpetrators of violence.”
- “The ratio of male Muslim characters to female ones in these television shows is 174 to 1...and only one identified as an LGBTQ Muslim” ([NPR](#)).

How certain populations are represented by our media matters greatly. Biased portrayals perpetuate stereotypes, and fail to help us collectively imagine the true present-day diversity of Islam, and a more equal and inclusive future for Islam.

If we consider only American print media, “(t)he average article mentioning Muslims or Islam in the United States is more negative than 84% of articles” relating (*separately*) to Muslims, Catholics, Jews and Hindus from newspapers in the U.K., Canada and Australia.” This means we would have to read six articles mentioning Catholics, Jews or Hindus in U.S. newspapers to find *one* that was as negative as the *typical* article mentioning Muslims ([The Conversation](#)). The takeaway again is that such a systematic anti-Muslim bias exacerbates stigmatization and prejudice, threatens constitutionally-protected religious rights and freedoms, exacerbates stigmatization of Muslims, and undermines our collective attempts to co-create a better, more equitable and inclusive future for all.

Now let me *also* be clear that I am *very much* on the side of Muslims — and all religious peoples the world over who are seeking to create a more open-minded, open-hearted, pluralistic, and progressive version of their beliefs and traditions. So, if you are wondering whether I am on the side of Muslims seeking to create a more egalitarian, gender-liberated, LGBTQAI+ and welcoming Islam? Of course I am. In fact

that's the support and acceptance I want for all others all over the planet. I hope to always side with love — wherever, whomever, whenever.

And just as I am deeply troubled by my country's acrimonious representations of Muslims in the media, I am also troubled by the periodic controversies that flare up in academia and elsewhere, around whether Americans should "have to respect" Muslim blasphemy laws.

I don't want to get lost in the weeds around specific details, but one recurring flashpoint is around images of Muhammad, the founder and prophet of the Muslim faith. It is inarguable that many Muslims today believe it is offensive to show images of Muhammad. So although, on the one hand, I want to be sensitive, respectful, and not unnecessarily insulting to anyone. On the other hand, in both our secular and our religious colleges and universities, any individual's personal religious expressions must, by long tradition, be balanced against our traditional American academic freedoms to explore any topic in an untrammelled way, and our constitutional rights to freedom of speech and expression.

Pedagogically, one possible option might be to offer content warnings before showing any potentially offensive materials; another option might be to offer alternative assignments as needed. Or we could skip controversial materials altogether — but then we'll miss the many Muslims today who are not offended by images of Muhammad. More significantly, we'll miss learning that, *historically*, Muslims themselves in various parts of the Islamic world "have created and enjoyed figural representations of Muhammad. There exist numerous images of Muhammad created by Persian and Turkish artists from the 13th century until today, many of which were miniatures or illustrations in book manuscripts. Some images depict Muhammad with his face obscured with a veil or a halo, but some images show his face" ([Inside Higher Ed](#)).

If we allow only one theologically-conservative version of Islam to control the playing field, then both Muslims and non-Muslims will be denied the opportunity to learn about the diverse history of Islam. After all, what is college for if not an opportunity to inquire independently into whatever you've been told is sacrilegious, to

have a chance to explore for yourself the complexities around religious blasphemy traditions and the many considerations around giving offense.

Here's the way I often frame the situation for my World Religion students at Frederick Community College: There has never been one monolithic "Islam"; rather, there have always been Islams — *plural*. One can likewise historically trace all the competing Christian(ities), Hinduism(s), Buddhism(s), Judaism(s), Paganism(s), etc.

Having grown up in a theologically conservative Christian congregation, I'm intimately familiar with parallel situations within some conservative branches of Christianity that wish to impose their understandings of morality or religion on the rest of us. These are challenging waters to navigate. I'm also acutely aware that one person's "blasphemy" can be another person's art seeking to push, provoke, and challenge us into new ways of thinking and living ([Chronicle](#)). We should no more allow our universities, art galleries, or other public spaces to be unduly influenced by fundamentalist Islam than by fundamentalist Christianity — or by any spokespersons of any religious traditions.

This brings us back full circle to Haroon Moghul's book *Two Billion Caliphs: A Vision of a Muslim Future*. The word "caliph" comes from the Arabic word (خَلِيفَةً), for "successor," "deputy" or "steward;" it has a connotation referring to a "successor of the messenger of God." Traditionally, the caliph is the successor to the Prophet Muhammad and a leader of the entire Muslim world unified as one caliphate.

But Moghul invites us to consider a different Muslim future: not of one single caliph "*to rule them all*" from one geographic center that imposes a monolithic Islam upon all Muslims (176). Moghul's vision is more akin to a Protestant Reformation in which there are as many distributed, democratized, and diversified Islams as there are Muslims (174, 179). In Moghul's words, "We must free Islam from the grip of religionized politics and politicized religion" (180).

If you are curious to learn more, one place to start is *The Study Qur'an* published by Harper Collins; like a Study Bible, this primer includes not only the text of the sacred scripture, but also essays, commentaries, and annotations to give you historical and theological context (30).

Two tips for the uninitiated, if you've never read the Qur'an before:

1. The book is not chronological: surahs/chapters are organized from the longest to the shortest. (xi)
2. The term *Allah* does not refer to a special “Islamic God”; Allah is just the Arabic word for “God” (For example, a Jew or a Christian praying in Arabic would pray to “Allah.”) (ix)

For now, I’ll end with a parallel note from UU history.: Is it good or bad news to move from a single caliph to two billion caliphs? Some people might call it blasphemous. Others might say it’s just an option.

Relatedly, the word “heretic” comes from the Greek word for “to choose”. If someone calls you a heretic, etymologically speaking they’re just calling you a *chooser*. You’re choosing your own beliefs for yourself instead of allowing someone else to choose them for you. This shift in thought from the idea of one caliph to two billion caliphs can be good news in the sense of more choices, more freedom, and more wisdom all around.

A parallel from UU history comes from our own Unitarian forebear Michael Servetus, who in 1531 published a book with a not-too-subtle title *On the Errors of the Trinity*. To him, his book was not bad news. Having read the Bible for himself in the original Greek, Servetus was surprised to discover that the word “trinity” wasn’t even in there. In his view, the error isn’t believing in the Trinity; rather, the error is thinking that the Trinity is a core, mandatory Christian doctrine. In Servetus’ view, belief in the Trinity was optional.

Servetus wrote his book to share what he thought was good news: that this doctrine of the Trinity that had been keeping Jews and Christians and Muslims apart — and even sometimes killing one another — was optional. His hope was that this realization could bring the three Abrahamic faiths closer together — an outcome some Christian powers of that day hated.

The truth is, much of what theologically-orthodox adherents of any religion *claim* to be essential is actually *optional*. The more you dig into religious history, the more you see how the theological distinctions religious leaders have claimed as crucial and unchanging are actually historically contingent beliefs that have evolved and changed historically over time.

In every religion, there is both original and historical diversity. The more you dig into any religious tradition, the more you will find a plurality of Islams, Christianities, Judaisms, Buddhisms, Hinduisms, Paganisms, and more.

In that spirit, I want to consider the words of a hymn whose lyrics were written by our 19th-century Unitarian forebear, Theodore Parker, about the type of religion we are seeking to live out:

Be ours a religion  
which like sunshine goes everywhere,  
its temple all space,  
its shrine the good heart,  
its creed all truth,  
its ritual works of love.