

First Year Foundational Readings

First Book.

*We suggest that all groups read the chapters on Islam, Judaism, and Christianity in Huston Smith's book **The World's Religions**. This provides all members with a baseline of knowledge about the three faiths. This book gets mixed reviews. We are hoping to identify better introductory materials by replacing these chapters with substantial essays/articles about each faith. Members with ideas about this are encouraged to contribute!*

The World's Religions by Huston Smith

Questions:

- a. About your religion, what did Dr. Smith get right? What did he get wrong? What would you add? What changes in emphasis would you make?
- b. About other religions, what was totally new information for you/ what surprised you? What do you want to learn more about that was touched on here?

Muslim

No god but God: the Origins, Evolution and Future of Islam, by Reza Aslan

- a. Muslims, is Islam, as Dr. Aslan describes it like Islam in your life? What is different in your perspective? What would you add? What changes in emphasis would you make?
- b. Christians and Jews, what was totally new information for you/ what surprised you? What parts seem very much like Judaism or Christianity to you? What do you want to learn more about that was touched on here?

Who Speaks For Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think, by John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed

- a. Do you think the right questions were asked? Are there other questions that you think are as important?
- b. What answers are most interesting/compelling to you?
- c. Christians and Jews, what did you learn in this book that can help you be a better ally to Muslim women? What quotes are you able to use to interrupt ignorance about Islam?

What's Right with Islam is What's Right with America: A New Vision for Muslims and the West, by Feisal Abdul Rauf

- a. Do you agree that there is an "Abrahamic Ethic" shared by Christians, Jews and Muslims? If you don't agree, where are the differences?

- b. What did you learn about the history of Islam that you didn't know? What would you like to look into more? Muslims, what do you think was missing in the summary of Islamic history?
- c. Muslims, do you agree with Imam Rauf's description of Muslims in America. Is he missing anyone or any important themes about your community?

The Girl in Tangerine Scarf, by Mohja Kahf

- a. What are your experiences with bullying?
- b. In what ways does this story parallel the story of you or your family's immigration to the United States?
- c. If you changed your religious practice in the course of your life, what personal circumstances moved you to do so? Was there a life-changing event, like Khadra's?

Other suggested reading:

Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time, by Karen Armstrong

- a. Does this book change your opinion of Muhammad, as a leader?
- b. Are you comfortable with the way that an English academic wrote about him?
- c. Muslims, what do you think Dr. Armstrong left out? Got wrong? Got right?

Christian

The Heart of Christianity, by Marcus Borg

- a. Christians, does Dr. Borg describe Christian thought and practice that you agree with? What do you agree with? How is his description of Christian thought and practice different from yours?
- b. Muslims and Jews, what was totally new information for you/ what surprised you? What parts of this book sound "Muslim" or "Jewish" to you?

Things Seen and Unseen, by Nora Gallagher

- a. Christian members, is Ms. Gallagher's journey to faith similar to yours? Is her practice like yours? Why or why not?
- b. Were you ever secular by practice and actively sought out a church, mosque or synagogue?
- c. Have you had fulfilling religious experience in doing good works, as Ms. Gallagher did in this book?
- d. Have you experienced transcendence? What kind of experience brought you there?
- e. Have you walked a labyrinth? Is there a labyrinth near you? Would you consider going with the group?

Lying Awake, by Mark Salzman

- a. Does anyone have experience with monastic communities?
- b. Have you experienced transcendence? Can you relate to Sister John's longing for a transcendent experience?
- c. Have you ever felt mentally off-balance during moments of deep prayer experience? During other experiences of awe, such as being in an inspiring natural setting?
- d. Where is the line between ecstatic visions and brain disorders? What does a person who has ecstatic experiences need to understand the meaning of the experience?
- e. What is the role of community – at the convent in the story, but also in your lives – to comfort the sick and also to support the faith of its members?

Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith, by Anne Lamott

- a. Christian members, is Ms. Lamott's journey to faith similar to yours? Is her practice like yours? Why or why not?
- b. Did adversity bring you to a deeper faith? Does adversity do that, generally?
- c. Can you relate to Ms. Lamott's moment-to-moment relationship with God? Would you pray when your car breaks down? When do you pray spontaneously?
- d. Did music draw you to or keep you in your House of Worship?

Jewish

Embracing Judaism by Simcha Kling

- a. Jewish members, what section did you think was the most important part to explain your relationship with Judaism?
- b. What did you learn that was new information to you?
- c. What do you want to know more about?

Climbing Jacobs Ladder by Alan Morrinis

- a. Did you know about this tradition within Judaism? What was familiar to you about the people in this story?
- b. What parts of this practice relies on Jewish tradition? What similar practices are you aware of in your tradition?
- c. Would a practice like this benefit you? What themes of this book would you want to stay in touch with in your life?

Joy Comes in the Morning by Jonathan Rosen

- a. In what ways was Judaism incorporated fully in the everyday lives of these characters? Did it help them live their lives fully?
- b. What did you learn about American Judaism in this book? Jewish members, what was depicted here that is like your practice of Judaism. What was unlike it?

The Sabbath, Its Meaning for Modern Man by Abraham Joshua Heschel and Susannah Heschel (2005 edition)

- a. What is your relationship with work and rest in your faith community?
- b. What did you learn about the Sabbath that could add to your religious experience?

Other suggested readings:

Rambam's Ladder by Julie Salamon

- a. What do you think of Ms. Salamon's decisions? Do you think she lived up to the requirements of the levels of giving?
- b. When you do acts of giving, do you think it through based on your religious teachings? How do you choose your philanthropic practices?
- c. Did you know about the teachings of Maimonides? Do you want to learn more about him?

Art of Blessing the Day by Marge Piercy

- a. What poem spoke to you? Why?

For the interfaith books:

People of the Book, by Geraldine Brooks.

- a. What part of the long history of this book was most interesting to you? Do you want to read more about that time?
- b. What is your opinion about life and death issues that came up in the contemporary story? Do you agree with the mother or the daughter?

My Neighbor's Faith, edited by Jennifer Peace, et al

- a. What stories showed a spirit to spirit connection that moved you? What stories held a cultural "ah-ha" moment?
- b. In what way do these stories show religious life its own unique style?
- c. Some of the authors here have written more on their inter-religious experience. Are there any you'd like to read?

The Girl from Foreign, by Sadia Shepard

- a. Ms. Shepard comes from a complicated, multi-religious background. What did you relate to in her quest to make sense of her background and family history?
- b. To what extent did you blend different cultures and religions in your life path?
- c. Do you want to read more about small Jewish communities in the world, like those in Bene Israel?

A Thread of Grace by Mary Doria Russell

- a. Why would some people choose to risk themselves to help others? What drives people to fight for their lives? What makes people give up?
- b. How did these characters learn to forgive, or not learn to forgive?
- c. What part of the history in this book was new to you?

A History of God, by Karen Armstrong

- a. What section of this book was most interesting to you? What was a surprise?
- b. What would you want to learn more about?

Other Options:

We endorse the suggestion of adopting a tradition for the group that would help people bond initially, such as a Pot Luck supper, sharing of "artifacts," sharing family traditions, holding a poetry night, or sharing children's books about the respective faith traditions. (All meal and food options need to comply with Kashrut and Halal standards of the members.)