

Introduction

Re-chisel then your ancient frame and build up a new being — Such being, being real being — or else your ego is a mere ring of smoke.

— Muhammad Iqbal

Meeting Muslims

The Islamic *ummah* and the Christian Church are the two fastest growing religious movements in our world: perhaps 60% of humanity claims to be either a Muslim or a Christian. Given these dynamics, it is incumbent upon adherents of these faiths to assume the posture of intentionality in learning about each other to gain increased knowledge (Q. 12:76) and wisdom (Q. 18:60–62). This wisdom and knowledge will help Muslims, Jews, and Christians learn how to best honor God in their inter-religious interactions. All three traditions teach that God loves all within the beautiful creation (Q. 30:22). The people of God should be tolerant; never striving against each other (Q. 22:67) because Allah is ultimately responsible for the rich diversity of cultures worldwide.

All of us should be inspired by the vivid example of the Prophet Muhammad who asked God in exemplary humility for the continual development of his knowledge (Q. 20:114). All of us should follow the clear example of Jesus Christ who called upon God to be glorified through love, humility, and acts of service for others — even one's enemies. As Muslims, Jews, and Christians begin to study each other's traditions they will come to appreciate that their distinct traditions hold "vast areas of agreement" about God's work and share in common many ethical and moral standards.¹ The Ten Commandments (a distinctly Christian term), and in Judaism, the Decalogue, for example, are largely repeated in some variant form within the Qur'an.² As Muslims and non-Muslims interact with increasing regularity, it would be ideal if both communities could gain a deeper appreciation for how the faiths of others confront the pressing social justice issues of our times.

Sadly, many people of faith only learn about each other through biased lenses, which, at best, are incomplete and, at worst, are unfair and inaccurate. Simplifications and incorrect assertions have often been assertively broadcast as indisputable fact. Muslim imams, Jewish rabbis, and Christian clergy have often been at the forefront of advancing a

host of negative, simplistic views about each other. Some Evangelical critics, for example, have even argued that the Arabic term *Allah* is actually a reference to an ancient moon-deity and not comparable to the God of Jewish and Christian revelation. Such an absurd claim is easily refuted by the millions of dedicated Arabic-speaking Christians who also lovingly refer to God using the Arabic term *Allah*. Other Christian and Jewish critics have berated the life and example of the Prophet Muhammad as a paradigm of violence, deceit, or debauchery. Florida-based internet preacher Bill Keller calls Islam a “1,400-year-old lie from the pits of hell” organized by “a murdering pedophile”.³ The early twentieth-century Protestant missionary Samuel Zwemer (1867–1952) derisively called the Prophet a “clever imposter from the first day of his message to the day of his death” and suggested that Muhammad was a pedophile and womanizer. Protestant missionary Duncan Black MacDonald (1863–1943) assured other Christians that Islam would invariably “collapse” as soon as the distorted “legend of Muhammad crumbles and his character is seen in its true light”.⁴

Among many Jewish and Christian communities, “Islamophobia” (or “Crusadeaphobia”) has been increasing since the tragic events of 9/11. European and North American media sources have often castigated Islam in generalized pasquinades that emphasize the denial of human rights, the promotion of violence against innocents, and the harsh oppression of women.⁵ An entirely different view of these social justice concerns emerges from the pages of the Islamic tradition. This book, written to aid non-Muslims in better appreciating their Muslim neighbors, focuses on how Muslims actually address a host of specific, pressing social justice issues.

This is a critical lens for inter-religious dialogue because the ideals of social justice are at the heart of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Justice is a central keyword that is also often found at the foundation of how many Muslims worldwide view their faiths. The Qur’an commands all believers to “Be just” (4:134; 6:153). The elusive term “social justice”, however, can mean many different things to different people. Some have argued that the term can be used as a blunt “instrument of ideological intimidation”, when evocation of its absence is used to advance a given political agenda.⁶ The advance of social justice is ultimately foundational for almost all religious sensibilities because the transforming power of faith is not only directed towards the realization of one’s own individual salvation (or satisfaction) but also towards the progressive enhancement of all humanity. The work of social justice, in its broadest sense, is a calling that unites all of us — no matter our spiritual or cultural background — to work with hopeful effort to make our fragile world a better place to live in for our cherished children and grandchildren.

The Torah, the Bible and the Qur'an instruct Jews, Christians, and Muslims to learn from God's call to Abraham chosen to become a blessing to all of humanity (Gen. 12:3). The sweeping inclusivity of this divine intention reminds believers that a day will eventually become reality when the "whole earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Habk 2:14). While the cold shadows of our uncertain world seem to offer scant glimpses of such a remote ideal, people of faith are nonetheless called to press forward to bring such visions into the reality of our shared experiences. Jews, Christians, and Muslims speak of God's promised kingdom, which will provide all of humanity with a living hope — even those who are oppressed. At the same time, these three visions of faith offer little promise to believers that such a realm of shared social justice will arrive anytime soon or that it will be realized without great effort. Jesus lamented that God's Kingdom would remain "hidden from our eyes" (Luke 19:42) until the "final days". Faith traditions worldwide call adherents to work for social justice even though many observable facts foretell that our world seems intractably destined to seethe as a brimming cauldron of nightmarish injustices.

The very idea of moral holiness — central within many spirituality traditions — anticipates that the pure lives of the faithful will have to be lived out in contexts of careening unsteadiness marked by ethical impurities. The apostle Peter called Christians a "holy nation" (1 Pet. 2:9) amidst a world abrim with evil; Christ commanded the faithful to go into the midst of all hurting cultures worldwide (Matt. 28:19–20) in order to serve others as a unique community of "salt and light" (Matt. 5:13–16). Anabaptist scholar David W. Shenk describes the Kingdom of God mission of Christ directly in terms of social justice:

Jesus was committed to justice. Wherever His kingdom comes there is hope for the poor and the oppressed. The church is called to be an extension in our communities and around the world of the Messiah's commitment to justice and peace. . . . Broken bread and crushed grapes are the signs of the covenant established by Jesus, a covenant of repentance, of being crushed in sacrificial love for one another and for our enemies and of self-giving service.⁷

In this all-consuming work of nurturing social justice within our world, there can be little room — or time — for efforts dedicated to attacking people of other faiths or focusing on the many historic failures of some within those traditions. The teachings of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad never asserted that those outside their folds were somehow morally deficient or inevitably beyond the scope of God's redeeming grace. Each believer has ample opportunity to find fault in others, or to work with others for improvements within our shared societies. There is

nothing constructive in focusing on what others lack or how others fail. Instead, each of us can focus on how we can live out the full implications of our own convictions, including in our relationships with people of other faiths. This basic principle was expressed with clarity when Christ warned against harboring a dismissive spirit and judgmental attitude when he told his followers to look at the “mote in their own eye before pointing out the speck in their brothers’ eye” (Matt. 7:3–5).

Before non-Muslims portray Islam simplistically as a religion of intolerance and injustice — based on pervasive media caricatures — they should carefully examine both the teachings of Islam and at their own community’s culpability in a host of contexts in which injustice thrives worldwide. A sobering sense of spiritual self-examination will probably remove any remaining vestiges of arrogant self-assertion and condescending dismissal from the inter-religious equation. For a number of reasons, the long march of history shows that individuals and communities tend to view their own traditions in a charitable light, while highlighting the abundant weaknesses within their neighbors’ traditions. Shabbir Akthar (b. 1960) warns that Christians who are quick to cast the first stones over the extent of Islamic intolerance should keep in mind that “Christianity’s own moral record in such matters as pluralism, toleration, and coercion, judged by modern, internal Christian standards is, as some church-men now concede, utterly deplorable.”⁸ When we criticize individuals of other faiths we invariably invite the same standards of judgment to ourselves and our own faith communities.

Media Portrayals

Contemporary media portrayals often fail to emphasize that Muslims see Islam as, first and foremost, a faith that vitally promotes social justice. For many non-Muslims, reductive ignorance, based on fear, has joined pervasive media bias to foster a deeply rooted host of negative views about Muslims (and particularly Arab Muslims).⁹ Lawrence Davidson (b. 1945) warns that there is a “consistent tendency among Americans to portray the peoples of the region [Arabs] as primitive and aggressive”.¹⁰ In one odd incident during the 2008 Presidential electoral campaign one woman during a John McCain rally even expressed that she did not trust Obama because he was “an Arab”. Instead of clarifying this misconception in terms of ethnicity, McCain chose to clarify it in terms of moral values: “No, ma’am, no ma’am, he is a decent family man, [a] citizen that I just happen to disagree with.”¹¹

The “Ground Zero Mosque” debate in the United States illustrated the harsh realities of media bias against almost everything related to Islam and Muslims. In 2009, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf (b. 1948) launched an initiative to locate a Muslim community center at the 13-story Park

51 Manhattan property; a few blocks away from the World Trade Center. In response, Fox News invited 47 different guests to attack the center over a 3-month period (May–August 2012) with rhetoric such as that expressed by the American talk show host, author and political commentator, Laura Ingraham: “I say the terrorists have won the way this has gone down. Six hundred feet from where thousands of our fellow Americans were incinerated in the name of political Islam and we’re supposed to be considered intolerant if we are not cheering for this?”¹² Media portrayals are alarmist and often warn of Islam as a faith dedicated to “domination and injustice”.¹³ Terms such as “militant”, “radical”, “extremist”, join with frequent mentions of “jihad” and “shariah” to portray Islam as a violent and threatening religion. One Fox News guest, Mike Gallagher, even suggested an “all Muslim checkpoint line at American airports”.¹⁴

Another example is an article for London’s *Sunday Express* by Robert Kilroy-Silk (b. 1942) which suggested that all Muslims were latent “suicide bombers, limb-amputators”, and “women repressors”.¹⁵ For Kilroy-Silk it would seem that even the most noble of Muslims was only waiting to shed such virtues to take on inherently dark cloaks of hateful vituperation. Edward Said (1935–2003) thought that many “Western” media views presented Islam as a “resurgent atavism”, which sought to plunge the entire world back into the primeval grip of the Middle Ages.¹⁶ Stark black-and-white paradigms promote the questionable notion that the secular and Judeo-Christian West are the sole luminous forces of progressive modernity, while the vast and swarthy hordes that make up huge and uneducated Muslim societies are armed with obedient religious slaves who are blinded by evil religious leaders intent upon harshly oppressing women (and all non-Muslims) along their unwavering march towards world domination.

Jack Shaheen observes four basic myths that the media seems to reaffirm about Arab Muslims. They are “fabulously wealthy”, “barbaric and uncultured”; “sex maniacs”, who “revel in acts of terrorism”.¹⁷ Hollywood images reinforce these stark notions, abundant as they are absurd. Elvis Presley, for example, starred in a comedy entitled *Harum Scarum* (1965), in which he was captured by fez and sunglass-wearing Arab assassins who sported black “goatee” beards and screeched in guttural and nonsensical commands. These trends continue into our modern era: Children can watch a gaggle of Saturday-morning cartoon caricatures, in which the “bad guys” display the stock set of “cultural traits generally considered being those of Muslims”.¹⁸ One North American toy company even created an action figure named “Nomad” who wore a headdress with Arabic script and was described (on the packaging) as “unreliable as the sand, as cold as the nights, and as dangerous as the deadly scorpions from where he lives.” Nomad’s

obviously Arab family is a gang of assassins and wandering thieves. They are, in the words of the toy's promotion: "Men without honor . . . using their knowledge of the desert to attack innocent villages."¹⁹ One could cite other lamentable examples *ad infinitum* across the spectrum of North American and European popular culture.

The Primacy of Social Justice

In contrast to media renderings, social justice (*al-'adala al-ijtima 'iyyah*) is central to the practice of Islam; it is at the heart of all Islamic moral and ethical teachings. According to Islamic scriptures, righteousness is not only belief in God; it is also to help orphans and widows, the poor, and travelers, and to liberate the enslaved (Q. 2:177). One's *iman* (in the sense of one's commitment to Allah) is based on one's beliefs as well as one's actions (*'amal*). The *ummah* exists not only for its own benefit but also has a God-given responsibility (Q. 17:15) to be a generous blessing to all other nations (Q. 3:110). The *da'wah* (invitation) of God's *ummah* is that individuals should embrace Islam as a faith for the down-trodden, because advocacy for social justice is at the heart of God's divine revelation as received through the Prophet.

Qur'an chapter three describes Allah as creating Adam and Eve for a life of harmony in the gardens of the Edenic paradise; it is only after the first two humans are deceived by the wiles of Satan (*Iblis*) that God sends out humanity to populate the earth and serve as God's faithful representatives (*khalifa* or caliph) among the created order. God alone holds all worldly authority (Q. 2:115; 5:40); the divine plan is to return humanity to an inevitable, eternal destiny of Edenic blessing and the harmonies of paradise through the clear revelatory guidance of Islam. There is no other refuge for humanity besides the generous mercy of Allah (Q. 94:1) and divine guidance (Q. 17:9). This earthly life is only a fleeting test that humanity experiences before returning to Allah. The Qur'an promises that God will help us to pass every test in this world through the blessings that will flow to those who obey the divinely-inspired messengers.

Allah commands, first and foremost, that believers live a life opposed to all forms of injustice (Q. 7:181). The rights of women, for example, are to be championed (Q. 9:71), even when many cultures choose to defy God's commands and embrace sexist and chauvinistic practices that harm women. Believers are called to follow the straight pathway of God's revelation, which eternally elevates and temporally blesses individuals on the basis of their piety expressed as righteousness (Q. 49:13). God blesses individuals because of their moral actions and not on the basis of their sex, race, language, status, or economic wealth. Islam emphatically forbids all forms of economic injustice and class-systems, which have given rise to poverty and malnutrition, and, concurrently, to bribery

and corruption. The wealthy cannot live in proud and dismissive vanity (Q. 4:29) but must share their resources with the poor and graciously forgive their debts (Q. 9:60). Muslims have always cherished the rule of law; one cannot call oneself a devout believer without being committed to the enactment of Islamic law as a social protection against any possible form of legalized injustice. While the arrogant may turn to weapons, or brute force; the righteous are duty-bound (Q. 5:1; 6:153) to rely upon the power of God's all-encompassing law. For example, those who "lend to Allah a godly loan" (Q. 11:245) by intervening against evils are promised to inherit an eternal reward (Q. 4:85). God promises to protect the weak; those who attack the weak will face divine wrath (Q. 4:75). Those who claim to be believers, yet support injustice will be judged on the Final Day as those who have betrayed Allah and disregarded the divine message of the rightly-guided Prophet (Q. 8:27).

This book is intended to help non-Muslims better appreciate the social justice emphasis that rings out through the many and varied historic expressions of the Islamic tradition (in contrast to the reductionistic idea of a trans-historic "Islamic civilization"). I am convinced that the theme of a shared commitment to social justice can serve as a constructive bridge for improved interaction between different faiths around the world. Usually a week does not pass without North American, British, and European newspapers lamenting the grim actions of Islamists; the articles carry the unstated assumption that such terrorists, in some way, represent the latent intentions of a billion Muslims throughout the entire house of Islam. These few extremists are, indeed, agents for social change, but do not represent anything that even remotely approaches a majority sentiment. Further, the greatest inroads that these non-orthodox extremists are making to advance their cause occur in the ranks of the battered poor and unheeded oppressed. It is those who are in the greatest need for justice who have most often responded to the shrill and assertive Islamist declarations that they alone have God-ordained solutions to the multivalent social, economic, and political problems of our time.

When media sources present the actions of extremists as representative of all Muslims they also compromise hopes for improved interfaith interactions. Sensationalist media portrayals reveal little of what is actually happening among Muslims worldwide, while, at the same time, resurrecting long-standing colonialist and orientalist assumptions about the inherently violent nature of Islam.²⁰ Media portrayals support those critics who selectively choose Qur'anic passages about war and take them out of context to attempt to prove that Islam is a violent religion. Many of these same critics, from Christian or Jewish perspectives, emphasize verses from the Bible that promote peace, as if to suggest that these three religions are unilaterally opposed. While some Islamists do take certain Qur'anic verses as a literal mandate to

wage war on all non-Muslims, the vast majority of Muslims are able to appreciate the specific and historic context of these references to understand that the major thrust of their faith is the mandate to bring peace and justice to all of humanity for Allah's greater glory.

This view is exemplified by the life of the Prophet Muhammad, the historical context of the modern Muslim *ummah*, and centuries of learned reflection on the meaning of oft-recited Qur'anic verses. Among Muslims, there are, of course, numerous views about many of these contentious issues. In this book, I will introduce a few of these viewpoints, drawing from the Qur'an, Hadith (or traditions), and the perspectives of Muslim intellectuals across the vast spectrum of over 1,400 years of Islamic history. Even a cursory survey of this history will expose as false the simplistic view that Islam is only a force of demonic evil.

I do not claim to represent the more than 2.2 billion people worldwide who call themselves Christians. Whatever I say about the broad categories of "Christianity", "Judaism", or "Islam" cannot possibly parallel the varied experiences of adherents from diverse places and distinct times. Any commentator on multifaith dynamics begins from a limited and specific point of orientation; I write as a Euro-American Christian of German-Catholic ancestry, who attends a predominantly African-American church. This research has presented a number of specific challenges, not the least of which has been the issue of transliterating and translating terms from Arabic, Persian, or Urdu into English. In this effort I have sought to both minimize confusion and be true to sources being cited.²¹ Further, the broad themes of social justice in Islam are amazingly multifaceted; I appreciate that understanding all of the nuances of any one of these subjects alone would require lifetimes of detailed analysis, and that any book on this topic will invariably fail to cover important issues and examples for consideration. Further, there is considerable room for amicable disagreement about the topics presented in these chapters. Because people of faith should work to improve our interactions, however, I offer this research as one perspective on a few of the major social justice issues that confront our changing world.

The Prophet taught that Allah's ways are filled with beauty (*al-jamal*). Humanity lives in a resplendent world under God's overarching control. In this beautiful world, however, a loving God has chosen to test humanity with a host of injustices that need to be confronted and overcome. The revealed message of God should motivate the faithful to action on behalf of their sisters and brothers worldwide who are suffering. While pain and injustice assaults humanity, God Almighty calls people of faith not to remain idle but to work to usher in the divine will into situations of injustice. Believers are committed to justice (*al-adl*) because God, in very nature, is a righteous and loving God of justice.

The word for "justice" in Arabic is closely related to the word for

"equilibrium" (*al-Tawazun*), because without justice there can be no balance within our lives or within our societies. On the Final Day the "scales" of God will measure the weight of every soul in relation to their acts of justice (Q. 99:7; 101:5). This is underscored by the fact that the term for "injustice" is synonymous with the word "inequality" (*zulm*). Any form of injustice "disrupts" the work of God and will ultimately be rectified through the outworking of the divine will.

In Islam there is no such thing as justice that is not rooted in social action. A well-known Hadith states that "to know but not to act is not to know."²² Further, one cannot confuse the Muslim concept of justice with the "Western" ideal of individual rights founded on an emphasis on individual freedoms, which is free of any inter-relational responsibility. Islamic justice is rooted in an understanding of God's plan as clearly expressed in Islam. Justice is not a natural phenomenon, but one that must be established in the world by God's people. To carry out the divine purpose in the world, everyone is obligated to oppose any and all social injustices or transgressions (*zulm, fitna, fassad*).

Partnerships for Social Justice

Abraham Joshua Heschel postulates: "No religion is an island. We are all involved with one another. . . . The religions of the world are no more self-sufficient, nor more independent, and no more isolated than individuals or nations."²³ In the case of social justice, the adherents of most religions share with Muslims the conviction that any struggle to aid the oppressed takes place in an "ocean of unjust forces that are very difficult for the oppressor to understand".²⁴ Some religious commentators have struggled to prove that societal injustices are actually also related to historic religious tensions. Others have argued that the world is primarily divided by economic or political forces into those who are being oppressed and those who oppress others. Whatever the case, it is clear that injustice occurs irrespective of religious boundaries and people of all faiths equally face its pervasive wrath. The harsh edge of this shared experience offers a helpful foundation for meaningful interaction between people of faith who share a desire to confront social injustice in the advance of honoring God's glory.

Non-Muslims will benefit from an understanding of the many ways in which Muslim communities worldwide believe that God's revelation mandates that all believers should be active agents for social justice. This book introduces various social justice themes articulated in the Qur'an (and Hadith), but will also look at the practice of how these distinct social justice values are expressed in a host of specific localities. A number of questions will be explored: what does Islam teach about peace in this age of war? What guidance does Islam offer in confronting oppression

and various forms of injustice? How and why have injustices flourished in certain Muslim-majority social contexts? What specific resources in the texts (or in the tradition) have Muslim agents for social justice found particularly effective? What are some specific examples of situations in which Muslims and people of other faiths have worked together to advance social justice? How can such examples become more common or more widely effective?

These questions are important for a number of reasons: first, our ability to appreciate Muslim views about social justice has the capacity to anchor our interfaith conversations in something beyond a frustrating, and often circular focus on seemingly intractable theological and soteriological arguments. An interfaith interaction along the lines of social justice has the potential to deepen a sense of mutual appreciation at a relational level, which then can become increasingly beneficial as theological issues emerge during our interactions. People of all faiths can find common ground in shared affirmations that social justice work is at the heart of God's work in our world. It is hoped that this book might also be able to serve as a beneficial catalyst for meaningful multifaith partnerships, which can be developed into practical joint efforts to confront a broad range of specific social injustices. Substantial multifaith partnerships should be relational before they are theoretical; based on shared experiences and commitments instead of simply on ideological agreement or shared platitudes.

There are many multifaith pathways that one could pursue in reaching this stated objective. I have no interest in advocating a generic overarching Frankenstein-like dream that will wistfully promise to heal all the world's problems through *kumbayah* programs and discussions. Those who engage in such work are not to be dismissed, because, as one Irish proverb wisely reminds us: "there is plenty of sky for plenty of birds." Maybe it will be the case somehow that love and imagination will magically resolve all of the world's problems overnight. It is my hunch, however, that it is much more likely that concrete and concerted efforts will be required. Have you ever seen one of those mile-marker signposts with arrows pointing to dozens of different directions all at once: New York, Kampala, Cardiff, Sao Paulo, or Tokyo? In contrast to a wide-angle and scatter-shot approach, this book begins with one trajectory towards one key, specific interfaith point of reference: social justice.

Confronting Misconceptions

One objective in writing this book has been to address critics of Islam who disseminate the seeds of inaccurate misrepresentations of what the Qur'an says about a host of issues pertaining to social justice. Another has been to illustrate for non-Muslims how the Muslim world has tried

to carry out those mandates. For whatever reason, European and North American media sources, politicians, and religious leaders have often led the way in promoting a host of inaccurate portrayals about Islam and how Muslims view various peace and social justice issues. Muslim readers may well wonder what my underlying motive is; why someone like me would feel obligated to undertake this effort. The answer is simple: the tasks we face in our modern social morass are far too demanding for any one group of individuals to assert it as their own province. On the other side of the equation, Muslims should be challenged by adherents of other faiths to re-examine a host of compelling non-Muslim understandings of social justice concerns. As a Christian, my hope is that this task will assist fellow believers to appreciate better the ways that we, as both individuals and as communities, can best serve the God of Christ and the God of Moses in the context of meaningful interactions with our sincere and progressive Muslim neighbors.

John Esposito (b. 1940) rightly warns against non-Muslims “viewing the Muslim world and Islamic movements as a monolith”.²⁵ Any faith tradition is far more than set of solitary, descriptive categories; faiths are living, dynamic traditions that are practiced by millions of people across a wide range of cultural contexts. While George Bernard Shaw was right in warning that “to generalize is to be an idiot”, there are admittedly certain advantages to “intellectual shorthand” just as long as one keeps in mind that the individual trees of certain comments do not make up the entire forest of a given issue.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) reminds us about the power of a given term: “Islam, Islamic, Islamist — is the headscarf Islamic or Islamist?”²⁶ According to Bourdieu, the term “Islamism” is the quintessence of “all Oriental fanaticism, designed to give racist contempt the impeccable alibi of ethical and secular legitimacy.”²⁷ In this book, I will use the term “Islam” to refer to the normative and conservative Islamic heritage as understood by centuries of tradition and scholarship and use the widely contested and problematic term “Islamist” to refer to the recent reformist and authoritarian militant movements that are sometimes (inaccurately) labeled Islamic fundamentalism, Salafism, jihadism, Islamo-facism, or radical Islamic extremism. The term “fundamentalist” is problematic because it does not aptly express those Muslims (or “believers”) who have actually turned away from historic, fundamental revelations and practices even though they claim to have returned to such foundations. I hope to distinguish between the ancient religious tradition and a modernist re-casting of Islam, which has generated so many of the misconceptions about the faith as an intolerant, violent religion. As our multifaith conversations continue to mature, it is hoped that they will also become more constructive. When it comes to terminology, for example, there are a number of equally

acceptable ways to accentuate a basic distinction between Muslims who embrace a tolerant, traditional view of the world and those who are more militant and extreme. Khaled Abou El-Fadl (b. 1963), for example, does not use the term “Islamist” but speaks instead of “Islamic Puritanism” or “authoritarianism”, because he feels that it is vital to underline that Islamist movements are not fundamental to the faith. While I appreciate El-Fadl’s concern about the term “Islamist”; the use of the term in this book is intended to provide a clear contrast with normative “Islam”.

Extremism

Islamist groups share a common modern heritage; they are “bottom-feeders” in a lake of murky disenfranchisement and widespread marginalization. Islamists have only really existed since the end of the eighteenth century: early revisionists, in an era of colonial oppression, it should be emphasized, were initially driven by genuine motives and a commendable desire to improve the lot of oppressed Muslims worldwide. These revisionists believed Islam offered the best hope for humanity and explored what methods they had in order to realize their social vision that were often more pragmatic than historically “Islamic”.

During the long (and generally oppressive) march of colonialism some secular elitists — known by their critics as the *Munafiqs* — turned to embrace Western ideals such as socialism, nationalism, communism, and specifically Western constructs of democracy. Critics called these advocates “pseudo-Muslims” and suspected that they were under the blinding spell of what Iranian scholar Jalal Ahmad (1923–1969) called “West-struckness” (*harb-zadegi*).²⁸ Even in the present, certain Muslim communities have become increasingly polarized by a debate between those who have drawn stark lines between what they perceive to be two distinct polarities: the “West” and “Islam”. While the stated intent of many early Islamists was to preserve the health and welfare of their communities, in their efforts, they launched out on a new path that broke from centuries of hermeneutic and communitarian agreement.

Islamists, such as the first Wahhabist puritans (who use the term *Salafism* to describe their views) or nineteenth- and twentieth-century groups, such as Hamas, did not (and do not) employ traditional, normative Islamic legal methods in the advance of their arguments. Such movements have often gained traction in response to the many obvious evils of European colonialism and the many frustrations and difficulties that people face as they confront the complex demands of modernity. These movements are not traditional, as they would like to suggest, but actually modernist and revisionist in both character and origin. They challenge the authority of the *ummah* when they argue that the sacred boundaries of authority lie with the message of the Qur’an alone as an

eternal guide. Extremists disregard a historic posture of humility before the text as well as centuries of a rich and variegated Islamic intellectual heritage about the many possible meanings of the text in favor of their claim that their beliefs and actions alone are based on the Qur'an and are designed to return their specific view of the House of Islam, rooted in their own version of fundamentalist purity.

These questions are not theoretical or remote: as I write this section, the world is remembering the anniversary of the tragic massacres of 156 people in Mumbai, India at the hands of ten fanatics from the Pakistani extremist group *Lashkar e-Taiba*. The intention of this group was to kill and maim as many individuals as possible and to gain as much publicity for their sordid acts as possible. Such actions have no viable link to the core of an ancient and normative Islamic faith. Linking a group like *Lashkar e-Taiba* to Islam would be similar to linking the virulent actions of the Ku Klux Klan or Sinn Fein to the widely-accepted teachings of historic Christianity.

While militants are correct that any true believer should be willing to die for God at any moment (Q. 2:154), they are wrong in disregarding centuries of carefully crafted tradition to promote violent new strategies while claiming to serve God (see Q. 4:76). While extremists frequently evoke idyllic images of glorious centuries past, when Islam was the dominant force in the world — and call fellow Muslims to return to those glories by embracing their version of an “authentic Islam” — extremist ideologues are actually revisionists who are outside the vast mainstream of Islam’s rich intellectual traditions.

Orthodox Islamic social and religious institutions are deeply ingrained framing traditions, committed to preserving the order and balance of a given Muslim community. In contrast, extremists are working towards a fundamentally militant and rapid transformation of the *status quo* among fellow Muslims. They question, what Katherine Gittes calls, the “structural elasticity” of Islamic communities rooted in culturally sensitive adaptations in favor of a more categorical view of the world, which leaves little room for open-ended variance.²⁹ According to Asaf Hussein, the creative power of historic Islam is grounded in the power of the family (*usrah*), the school (*madrasah*) and the masjid.³⁰ In contrast, Islamists promote blind acceptance (*al-Qubul al-A'ma'*) of their bold assertions that are confined to their own emphatic interpretations (*ijtihad*); not in the centuries of careful scholarly consideration. They caricature any measure of doubt as a form of unbelief, and see doubt as “flirtation with the unknown” that is ultimately “destructive of social order”.³¹ Extremists promote aggressive versions of impatient fanaticism and non-Qur'anic intolerance. Their approach is ahistorical and disrespectful to centuries of studious Qur'anic interpretation and deeply rooted communitarian traditions.

Globalization and Multifaith Engagement

People around our world are interacting with each other as never before. The term “globalization” can be defined in many different ways and merits careful consideration in its use. Pierre Bourdieu argues the term is often used as a suffocating blanket to describe “the imposition on the entire world of the neoliberal tyranny of the market and the undisputed rule of the economy and of economic powers, within which the United States occupies a dominant position.”³² For Bourdieu, the world has become “commodified” by a dominating and generalized vision in which “globalization” is seen as an uncontested fact of a constructed and economically exploitative universalism.

Here, “globalization” refers to the wide-ranging process in which social institutions are forced (for a host of technological and political reasons) to respond to one world (a “global village”) and thus, to create globalized strategies in a context of inter-engagement, which is increasingly cross-referential, inter-aware, and interdependent. The concept of an increasingly globalized village mandates that individuals are called upon to interact with each other in ways that were unimaginable just a few decades ago. This globalizing, internationalizing, transcultural, and transnational process is continuing through communication and technological advances and through economic, political, and cultural forces. Cultural and geographic categories, such as “East” and “West”, are increasingly blurred by the realities of our shared experiences. It remains to be seen if globalization can ultimately become a source for peace and justice, or if it will simply remain a dynamic force for continued economic, military, and political oppression.

Given the forces of globalization, traditional religious leaders are less able than ever to “control” or “define” adherents of various faith traditions or to contain those within their community who are spreading their virulent ideas in God’s name. Social networking tools such as the internet (and other potentially democratizing forces) have set in motion powerfully new communication synergisms, which seemingly mutate into countless new forms by the minute. Travel, technology, and communication bridges are increasing all over the world faster than one can evaluate the implications of such changes. For example, Western television programs (such as *Baywatch*, 1989–1999) and industry giants such as Disney or Viacom spout forth glossy images on television screens around the world that become part of a globalized conversation of expectations and assumptions. A number of contemporary Muslim intellectuals (such as El-Fadl, Sardur, Esack, and Engineer) have talked about how traditional Islamic societies are facing a host of challenges due to these shifting forces.³³ Religious adaptation in the face of globalization will also mean that social, political, and economic pressures will continue to assault social norms, traditions, and beliefs.

Non-Muslims should promote views about contemporary Islam that are not simply confined to theoretical questions about broad-brush religious ideals (in the context of competing national interests). As stated earlier, multifaith interactions should be relational and local before they are theoretical and remote. There are, for example, between five and eight million Muslims living within North America today. Almost none of these Muslims, it should be emphasized, have any connections at all to the extremist views of Islamism. They are upstanding citizens who pay their taxes and participate in elections.³⁴ Islam is also growing at a steady pace in the UK and in almost every European country. In some countries such as France — even as a minority presence — Islam is the most visible, verbal expression of socially practiced religious conviction.

Globalizing forces are particularly visible on the metastage of political concerns. For many, the focus is on advancing a “human rights agenda” around the world and regardless of local considerations that might nuance, or even curtail, what others view as fundamentally God-given human rights. In frequently repeated political arguments, there is an assumption that liberal, tolerant democratic governments will protect personal freedoms, while also making economic resources more accessible to an ever-widening group of citizens. Liberal democracies (in their various incarnations) look askance at governments formed around religious authoritarianism (such as Iran) because it is assumed that such nations will be inherently discriminatory against other religions or competing views. Critics of such views see in globalizing forces a new (and more subtle) form of colonialism, which gains control through a hegemonic economic oppression. Some Muslims argue that a belief system is foundational to globalizing forces, which are decidedly un-Islamic because they reject any notion that Islam is a universal truth.

Focusing on competing ideologies, however interesting they are, may not be very constructive in the larger agenda of promoting the relational dynamics at the heart of contemporary multifaith and multicultural mutuality. In contrast, a multifaith discussion that centers on social justice themes is, at the same time, both theoretical in its scope as well as practical in its specific application. It is a hopeful focus that offers the prospect of moving away from some of the conversational and conceptual dead-end streets, which many non-Muslims find themselves trapped in as they try to deal with the differences that they perceive with their Muslim neighbors. Ironically, because historic and normative Islam, and even Islamist revisionist movements, both assert to promote social justice, the latitude that such a fulcrum provides is rich and varied. To state this another way, a multifaith conversation about social justice is capable not only of bringing in the normative expressions of modern Muslim communities, but also of engaging those who would be described as extremists; on the angry or assertive fringes of the larger Muslim *ummah*.

The Centrality of Justice

Any unchecked injustice will invariably lead to increased dehumanization and to swirling currents of chaos that drag individuals further away from all that a loving God intends for creation. The unambiguous message of the Qur'an is that Allah has shared a divine plan for humanity. Islam is intended to support a community that is committed to enacting that plan and to serve as the foundation for God's work — social justice activism — within the world. Those who faithfully follow the necessary mandates and relevant messages of the Qur'an will never be led into error. According to the Kurdish Turkish theologian and mystic "Bediuzzaman" Said Nursi (1878–1960), the worst enemies of the Qur'an are "ignorance, poverty, and disunion": the powerful message of the Qur'an, however, is "much stronger than the sword used in battle" to defeat such forces of injustice.³⁵

How does the revelation of the Qur'an explain and, then, address social injustice? The heart of the Qur'anic message calls individuals to integrate their beliefs into the challenging arena of their daily lives by works of ethical action. A traditional Islamic worldview emphasizes the synthesizing unity (*tawhid*) of everything within God's creation, while also guarding against the possible heresies of divisions (*shirk*), innovations (*bid'ah*), bifurcations, compartmentalization, and godless, secularizing influences. A comprehensive Islamic worldview, rooted in divine revelation, is beyond contestation. Allah commands that believers should practice a comprehensive faith in the midst of life's variegated challenges; what Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988) describes as a daily lived experience of an "integrated *tawhidi* existence".³⁶

God's revelation calls for complete allegiance from every believer. At the same time, this lofty path is not forbidding but provides followers with generous allocations of encouragement as they confront social injustices. The social justice work that the believer is called to do, it is promised, will be supported by a God of mercy who will bring to the faithful eternal rewards as well as earthly benefits. The concept of daily accountability lifts Islam from the realm of the theoretical into the lived realities of practical experience. Because the truths of Islam can only be known in the practice of daily life and cannot be embraced as remote conceptualities, there is little reward to be found in theoretical arguments, which can often degenerate into either ornate idealism or reductionistic platitudes. The God-pleasing life of genuine faith will be expressed at all times; in shadowy flecks of morning-prayer times before sunrise, as well as in the twilight; in the cold of night as well as the garish glare of a strong midday sun.

How does this focus on faithful practice relate to how believers worldwide are dealing with emerging tensions between orthodox

Muslim and extremist perspectives? Anyone who has been paying attention can appreciate that the House of Islam is presently engaged in what Farid Esack (b. 1959) calls a “path between dehumanizing fundamentalism and fossilized traditionalism”.³⁷ Esack calls for believers worldwide to embrace a “radical Islam committed to social justice, to individual liberties and the quest for the Transcendent who is beyond all institutional, religious and dogmatic constructions.”³⁸

Consistent with the orthodox heritage of the faith, Esack’s vision is rooted in the Qur’anic mandate to apply truth in the practice of a faithful life. From this foundation, believers can confront social injustices with the confidence that their faith is capable of providing a viable paradigm that addresses these challenges. An individual believer has a responsibility before Allah to be faithful: but the individual is also responsible to a corporate community and, as such, has a duty to uphold the cohesiveness of the *ummah*. This tension is as old as the Islam first lived by the Prophet Muhammad: the Prophet attained the highest of spiritual experiences in a glorious ascension (*mi’ra*) to paradise but was called by God to return to the messy challenges of humanity, in order to live out a divine call to fight injustice. The Prophet’s example calls believers to embrace both the lofty glories of God’s amazing greatness along with the pedestrian mandate to carry out the demanding work for social justice.

Orthodox Islamic devotion has always existed to undergird ethical action. Allah has revealed that true faith cannot exist independently of the actual conscious participation of the adherents (Q. 4:43). The Qur’an links devotion with moral action when it notes that “prayer prevents lewdness and evil” (Q. 29:45). The very pillars of the historic faith present clear ethical commands that infuse ideals with a corresponding commitment to a shared responsibility to glorify God by working for social justice. The centrality of this dynamic connection will be examined in further detail in Chapter One. In an academic context, in which it is probably true that “theological musings bleed into works that apparently claim to be critical and scholarly studies”, I make no claim to be without an agenda in this research.³⁹ It is my hope to both accurately relate what I have gleaned are Muslim perspectives on issues of social justice, and also to offer a few reflections as a Christian about how these explorations can advance multifaith interactions and partnerships for social justice in a constructive direction. Going forward, I welcome any corrections or helpful addenda that readers might offer about the various themes of this research.