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Who Is My Neighbor? Islamophobia and American Exclusivist Christianity

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WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR? ISLAMOPHOBIA AND AMERICAN EXCLUSIVIST CHRISTIANITY

By

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AMERICAN EXCLUSIVIST CHRISTIANITY

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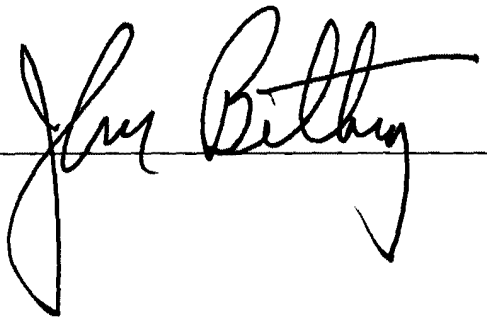
First Reader 

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the evening news broadcast, on the covers of newspapers, flooded through tweets and Facebook status updates, and as a topic of heated debate both in universities and family gatherings, Islam seems to have created a substantial stir in the lives of American citizens. Islamic references can be found in every form of media experienced by the American audience. Comedy shows use controversial issues surrounding the religion to poke fun at political and religious leaders. Movies portray Islam as an exotic, albeit solely Arabian, phenomenon that gives the viewer a sense of mystery and danger surrounding anyone hailing from the Middles East. A way of life that has existed for nearly 1400 years has received a generous amount of America's attention, especially after two planes operated by a handful of terrorists acting under the banner of an extremist Islamic group crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001. Today, nearly a decade after those events, a debate rages across the United States regarding the potential plans for a new building to be constructed near Ground Zero, the site where the World Trade Center once stood. American Muslims in the city of New York, American citizens with no connection to the attacks on 9/11, wish to erect an Islamic community center a few blocks from where the twin towers fell. These plans have been called everything from hateful to harmless, from offensive to promoting peace, as American citizens from different religious, social, and political backgrounds seem to

be taking sides in whether or not it is appropriate for the Islamic Center to be established near the site of a catastrophic event.

In a Time article commenting on the topic, Georgetown University professor of Religion and International Affairs, John L. Esposito says, "Why should Muslims who are building a center be any more suspect than Jews who build a synagogue or center or Christians who build a church or conference center?"[1] He is joined by New York City Major, Michael Bloomberg who said, "If somebody wants to build a religious house of worship, they should do it and we shouldn't be in the business of picking which religions can and which religions can't. I think it's fair to say if somebody was going to try to on that piece of property build a church or a synagogue, nobody would be yelling and screaming. And the fact of the matter is that Muslims have a right to do it, too." [2]

These two figures are merely examples of one side of the argument. The other side finds the plans to build the Islamic Community Center inappropriate and offensive. Franklin Graham, a leader in the Billy Graham Evangelical Association, is known for his extreme views on the subject and had the following to say:

> "It's hypocrisy. It's mockery. It's mocking the 3,000 Americans who died just around the corner, who were killed by Islamists in the name of Islam. There was not one Islamic cleric who oversees outside the

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[1] John L. Esposito. "Islamophobia and the Muslim Center at Ground Zero" *CNN*, July 19, 2010 http://www.cnn.com/2010/OPINION/07/19/esposito.muslim.center/index.html?hpt=Mid (accessed July 23, 2010).

[2] Ibid.

> U.S. who condemned [the 9/11 attacks]. If this had been a Catholic saying his Hail Mary's flying into the World Trade Center, the Pope would have been on television that night denouncing it. The lack of universal condemnation by the Islamic world, their silence, shows their support of this. President Bush and President Obama made great mistakes when they said that Islam is a peaceful religion. It is not. There is no evidence in its history. It's a religion of hatred. It's a religion of war."[3]

No one can deny that the building of an Islamic Community Center 600 feet away from the site of intense violent acts committed by people who refer to themselves as followers of the Islamic religious tradition strikes a few chords within the general American public. However, the heart of the issue lies in the overall perception of Islam, not the Muslims responsible for the attacks on September 11, 2001. Franklin Graham is not the only person to refer to Islam in negative terms, and the Islamic Community Center controversy is not the first issue to arise in the United States in which Islam has been viewed with suspicion. The irrational fear of Islam, its adherents, and its symbols is experienced by a large number of Americans.

Despite the nation's melting pot of culture from its birth to present, difference has not always been tolerated in the United States. Women could not vote until the 20th century, long after the nation was founded under a pretense of equality. African Americans were forced to live under separate circumstances until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Asian Americans were suspected of

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[3] Elizabeth Dias. "Many Religious Leaders (Except for Franklin Graham) Support Mosque," *Time,* Wednesday, August 18, 2010, http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2011614-7,00.html (accessed August 25, 2010).

espionage during World War II. Native Americans and their way of life have been pushed to the fringes of society. Anyone who dared to consider the idea of Communism as a viable economic system and form of government was locked up for treason during the Red Scare.

United States citizens have not always actualized the idea of equality proposed by the nation's founding fathers. Following the example of Franklin Graham noted above, many Christian congregations share his view of Islam. Collectively, these congregations are often referred to as the "Religious Right" in American society. These groups claim to promote the teachings of Jesus including fostering peace and love in their wider community. However, this hospitality does not seem to extend to those outside of the Christian faith, particularly Muslims ever since the events of 9/11. Many parables and stories in the Bible seem to be overlooked in the case of the Religious Right's view of the religious other. For example: Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. Along the way, he met a lawyer who asked him, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answered the question with one of his own, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" The lawyer recited, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and Love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus affirmed, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live." The lawyer, however, was not satisfied and wanted to push Jesus further. He asked, "And who is my

neighbor?"[4] It is with this question that the story of the Good Samaritan is introduced into the Gospel of Luke in the New Testament. The Good Samaritan is a cultural icon in Western culture, one that holds a high standard of ethical behavior and hospitality in Western society, a character that, for many, if not all, American Christians embodies a Christ-like understanding of those who are different.

Xenophobia is the irrational fear of another person who is culturally, ethnically, or in any way different than an accepted norm. The history of the United States, like the history of other nations and cultures, is not always created by ideal myths with heroic characters that epitomize the ethics of a society. Not all Christians living in the United States, despite an emphasis on equality found in both the Constitution and the Bible are innocent of the violence caused by an extreme fear of the other.

On September 11, 2001, xenophobia took on a more specific name: Islamophobia. The fear of anything having to do with Islam spread through the nation like a plague. The effects of this fear can be seen in the way people of Middle Eastern descent are treated while passing through airport security stations, the use of religious terminology, aka "crusade", to describe the campaign to stop terrorism, and the comments made by many a few Christian leaders who call the United States their home. Muslims in the United States have received hostile words and harsh treatment by those outside of the Islamic tradition. These activities are caused by a

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[4] Leander E. Keck. *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX.* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 226.

fear of the unknown that has evolved into a hatred of the unknown. The negative attitude of some citizens of the United States has caused traumatic experiences among Muslims in that they are hated for something that is at the core of their very being: their faith.

The irrational fear of Islam, its adherents, and its symbols is experienced by a large number of Americans. What this thesis aims to address is the fear of Islam as it is experienced by Christians in the United States under a particular exclusivist theological framework and the steps that should be taken in order to both alleviate the fear and promote peaceful exchanges between Muslims and said Christians. By examining the foundations of American society, the core teachings of Islam, the facts surrounding the events that took place on September 11th, 2001, and Christian teachings of hospitality and peace, American Christians who perceive Islam as an inherent threat to Christianity and American society might be able to, as the saying goes, walk a mile in someone else's shoes and realize that understanding allows a more fruitful path to peace and cooperation, a path towards the melting pot ideal on which the United States were founded and a path towards the kingdom of heaven on earth which Jesus often preached.

CHAPTER TWO

AMERICAN HISTORY

Religion, Tolerance, And Diversity

Born on July 4th, 1778, the United States of America prides itself in the value of individual freedom. American citizens have the freedom to pursue the career path of their choice, to raise their children according to their own standards, and to believe in the set of religious or philosophical doctrines that best fits their own personality and lifestyle. The people who fought for the independence of the original thirteen American colonies believed in freedom so much that they created the motto "Don't Tread On Me" in order to send a clear message to a British king they believed to be a tyrant. Over two centuries later, this motto is still celebrated in the Western American culture of individualism and especially during American Holidays such as Veteran's Day, Memorial Day, and Independence Day. Despite its fervor for individual freedom, the United States has a history that creates an unfortunate ironic spin for its founding ideals.

Religious tolerance is both a founding ideal of some of the first communities that set foot on what would become United States soil and it is simultaneously something lacking in the nation's history and modern affairs. The events that transpired on September 11th, 2001 exacerbated the problems of religious tolerance in the United States. More will be said later about this tragic day in recent history, but first, an overview of religious tolerance in American history, for better or for

worse, will help in developing a picture of how American citizens have handled this vital concept in the development of American ideals.

Every year, Columbus Day is celebrated in the United States on the second Monday in October. Americans celebrate this day because on October 12, 1492, Christopher Columbus landed on an island in the Caribbean and is credited with discovering the North and South American continents. Despite the purpose of the celebration, some American citizens choose to refer to the holiday as "Indigenous People's Day" in order to remember the Native Americans who were forced from their land and their cultural heritage because of the rush and eventual expansion of Europeans to what was called the New World. While the Age of Exploration was underway, Europe was experiencing the Protestant Reformation. New Churches and religious movements began to appear across the continent. After the discovery of the New World by European explorers, many new religious communities in Europe saw the New World as the chance to escape persecution from the traditional religious authorities of their home countries (in some situations, these communities were forced by their governments and/or religious officials to leave). When the settlers met the native people of the New World, one of their first reactions was to ensure that their new neighbors were exposed to the teachings of Christianity. The traditional religious way of the Native Americans were often viewed as barbaric, uncivilized, and dangerous. Granted, some European settlers had some unfortunate encounters with some of the more violent Native American tribes that resulted in

white European scalps dangling from belts as trophies. Nonetheless, the desire to convert these newly discovered people was not without a sense of one religion being more true or better than the other. Furthermore, some of the groups who settled in the "New World" wanted to form communities with a single set of pure religious views because these settlers perceived the religious flavor of Europe to be corrupt. With a determination to start a new religious community with an exclusive theological position, it is not surprising that the religious differences among the Native Americans were the first things the Europeans noticed about their new neighbors. In other words, these religious differences were seen as a threat to the religious practices and ideals of the Europeans. The result is that those escaping religious intolerance created a new society in which they fostered religious intolerance. Thus, the irony of America's proud history of religious freedom began with a few short-sighted pilgrims.

During the American Revolution, while the United States was forming as a nation, the founders agreed to stress the freedom to choose one's religion. Despite these altruistic intentions, the Native Americans were continually pushed off their land and separated from their beliefs as the United States boundaries expanded over the next one hundred and fifty years to include the central plains and west coast of North America. This would not be the first and only form of religious discrimination to befall the people of the recently formed nation. What follows is a

list of individuals and religious groups involved in religious discrimination in United States history.

In 1654, Peter Stuyvesant, leader of the New Netherland colony, attempted to have Jews expelled from the community because he believed they would "infect" the colony. In 1732, founders of the Georgia colony, which was seen as a religious haven, explicitly banned Catholicism. In 1844, Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon faith, was murdered by a lynch mob in an Illinois prison for his religious proclamations. Between 1854 and 1856, the Know-Nothing Party was formed which proposed strict limitations on immigrants from Catholic countries. In 1866, Reconstruction causes riots in the South and African American Churches in Memphis and New Orleans are burned. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in California that suspended immigration of Chinese laborers. In 1883, the Department of the Interior declared many Native American rituals to be "offensive" and punishable by up to thirty years in prison. In 1915, the Ku Klux Klan re-emerged to recruit four million members while spreading anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism, a group that was formed within the legal bounds of the United States. On November 20th, 1938, Father Charles Coughlin gave a radio address that defended Nazi violence against Jews. In 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an Executive Order led to the placement of approximately 120,000 Japanese

Americans into Internment camps.[1] The people of the United States have progressed in many ways since the establishment of their nation, but the intolerant nature of these events provides evidence to the contrary.

This unfortunate trend continues today as Muslims appear on the long list of victims suffering from religious intolerance. In the past several years, new issues have persistently arisen that threaten the American Muslim's constitutional right to practice her or his faith. The same Time article cited above tells the tale of an American citizen named Dr. Mansoor Mirza. Dr. Mirza had been working in a hospital in the small town of Wilson, Wisconsin for five years when he asked to speak during a town meeting. When called upon, he walked up to the podium and gazed at the audience of friends and acquaintances that had frequented his office and sought his medical expertise since he and his family had moved to the quiet town of Wilson. He began to speak with confidence for he was among men and women of whom he regarded as kind, open, and generous, respected neighbors and familiar faces... or so he thought. Dr. Mirza had asked to speak at the town meeting that day in order to ask the permission of his peers to build a Mosque in the nearby village of Oostburg. After making his proposal, the floor opened to discussion and the humble doctor was shocked at what followed.

Declarations against Islam began to fill the room. Islam was called a religion of hate. It was said that Muslims intended to wipe out Christianity. One person

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[1] "Is America Islamophobic? What the Anti-Mosque Uproar Tells Us About How the U.S. Regards Muslims," *Time Magazine,* 30 August, 2010.

proclaimed that Muslims murder their children. Another said "Christian kids have enough problems with drugs, alcohol, and pornography and should not have to worry about Islam, too."[2] To be fair, the meeting minutes obtained by Time Magazine's reporters indicated that some were reasonable enough to defend Islam by saying things like, "I don't think we should be making broad, sweeping generalizations."[3] Unfortunately, it was not enough to sway the crowd. After the meeting, Dr. Mirza's lawyer took him to a café in order to calm him down. Mirza is reported as saying, " I never expected that the same people who came to me at the hospital and treated me with respect would treat me like this."[4] Some of Dr. Mirza's Muslim friends in the area thought he was a bit naïve to expect a warm welcome. Of the one hundred or so Muslims in Wilson, the majority are Bosnians and Albanians who moved to the United States in order to escape the persecution by Serbs after the collapse of Yugoslavia. It seems that they may have fled one form of persecution only to encounter another.

The events of September 11, 2001 seem to have taken an already present discomfort of the religious other and turned it into a strong fear that pairs anything Islamic with imminent danger. An unexpected attack on American soil after decades of relative safety from the outside is no small matter. However, one of the unfortunate outcomes of that day seems to be the hatred of a prominent religious

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[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

faith associated with those responsible. A closer examination of that day and what transpired after the chaos faded may help to shed some light on the views and experiences of American citizens regarding Islam.

9/11

A wise American pop culture icon once said, "Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering." These words could not ring truer in the context of the post 9/11 United States. Perhaps tracing these words from hate to anger and from anger to fear will provide a better understanding of Islamophobia in the context of the current trend in American society.

The traffic in New York City was at a standstill on the morning of September 11th, 2001. People were engaged in the daily morning rush of arriving to work. The sight of cars packed into lanes like sardines, horns blaring into an angry chorus on a weekday morning would have been a normal experience for any New Yorker if it had not been for the pillars of smoke rising from the World Trade Center. To the astonishment of everyone present to bear witness to this tragedy, two planes had flown low over the city and crashed head first into the Two Towers that once represented the strength of Western Capitalism. At 8:46AM, the North Tower was struck by American Airlines flight 11. Everyone on board including some people

inside the tower was killed instantly.[5] An account of a survivor who had been present inside the building when the first plane crashed reads,

> "The tower actually moved to my right, and then recoiled to the left before steadying. For a fleeting second I had the distinct feeling it was going to fall over. The explosion moved furniture and file cabinets, and rolled people sideways who were sitting in their chair. It was a major explosion. I ran back to my office and looked out of my window, which was facing to the North. Paper and pieces of the building were falling from the sky like confetti; the kind of confetti that fell during those parades up Broadway after the Yankees or Mets won a World Series." [6]

Debris immediately began to fall to the street below causing obstructive roadblocks and harming anyone unable to dodge gravity's effect. 911 was dialed countless times, but fire trucks and ambulances found it difficult to arrive on the scene due to the crowded New York streets and pieces of a once monumental building blocking the way. At 9:03AM, United Airlines flight 175 crashed into the South Tower of the World Trade Center, a mere 17 minutes after the first plane had struck. Like those on board American Airlines flight 11, everyone on board was killed instantly including some present in the South Tower.[7] In the moments immediately following the attack on the North Tower, Ken Greene was leading his coworkers down several flights of stairs to safety. He later recalls, "Fortunately, those of us in the stairwell

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[5] Lee H. Hamilton and Thomas H. Kean. *The 9/11 Report: The Complete Investigation.* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), 11.

[6] Ken Greene. *When the Walls Came Down: a 9/11 Survivor's View of Life in America.* (New York, NY: Passion Profit Company, 2004), 24-25.

[7] Hamilton, 13.

had no idea that the other tower had been struck... It never occurred to me that we could have been under attack and that war had been declared on our country."[8] Eventually, the towers fell, crashing into the city streets below killing hundreds of people instantly and trapping many more in the rubble. Not all of those trapped would live to later tell the tale of that infamous day.

As the rescue efforts persisted in New York, another plane crashed into the Pentagon in Washington D.C at 9:37AM. American Airlines flight 77 struck the government building at a speed of 530 miles per hour instantly killing everyone on board and some civilians and military personnel present in the building.[9] The realization that the United States had been attacked, and might still be under attack pending any more flight related surprises, slowly swept across the nation. As the news of the third crash reached the American public, a fourth plain, United Airlines flight 93, went down in an empty field in Shanksville, PA at 10:01AM, a mere twenty minutes flying time from Washing D.C. The objective of the hijackers on board United Airlines flight 93 was to crash the aircraft into a symbol of the American Republic, the Capitol, or the White House. The passengers on board had learned of the terrorist plot and had resolved to stop the attack, even if it meant their lives. During the last seconds of United Airlines flight 93's plunge into American soil, a

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[8] Greene, 32.
[9] Hamilton, 15-16.

singe phrase could be heard over the radio: "Allah is the greatest. Allah is the greatest."[10]

During the September 11th attacks, more lives were lost than in the attack on Pearl Harbor that ignited the United States' entry into World War II. It is no wonder that people all over the country were shocked, terrified, and panic stricken over the thought of loved ones being involved in another military draft or war on top of the people that had already been lost. Once the first plane crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center, the authorities immediately began to investigate the possible causes of the downed planes. Within a short amount of time, the hijackers who had given their lives for the mass destruction of American buildings, symbols, and lives had been identified, and a search for the people behind this horrific event began to unfold. After the smoke had cleared and the dead had been mourned, Americans received information that an Islamic extremist group had been behind the acts of terrorism. The official report on 9/11, released by the United States government in 2004, indicates that a man named Osama bin Laden had been planning these attacks for years and had issued an official *fatwa* in 1998, a command to kill the proclaimed enemies of God and His Prophet. In the context of the above events, the United States, its citizens, and every capitalistic value and secular pleasure experienced within had been deemed as the enemies of Islam by

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[10] Ibid., 22.

one person among millions of Muslims that exist around the world. It was with this information that Islamophobia spread throughout the United States.

The events of 9/11 sparked a widespread fear of Islam and Arabic society. This fear unfortunately tended to overshadow the people, both Muslims and non-Muslims, who tried to portray Islam in a peaceful light despite the constant misconceptions put forward by the media. One of the strongest arguments for the peace of Islam is Charles Kimball's book *When Religion Becomes Evil.* In this work, Kimball presents five warning signs that often represent groups who are taking a religious concept, belief, or institution and bending it towards ambitions that do not coincide with the doctrine or general worldview of that religious tradition's teachings. These five warning signs are 1) absolute truth claims that deny any dissenting voice, 2) blind obedience to a leader or doctrine without considering the consequences, 3) establishing the "ideal time" or a time when it is believed that one group may triumph over another often involving signs such as the rebuilding of sacred monuments or the end of a millennium, 4) believing that the end result justifies any means, including violence, and 5) declaring holy war against another group because a belief exists that God is on one's side.

In the case of 9/11, claims of absolute truth were held by a group of people who gave blind obedience to Osama bin Laden who believed that it was right to declare a holy war against the United States that allowed for any means necessary to achieve the desired result. Kimball's book allows the reader to see the

disconnection between Islam, a religion that values peace among peoples of different backgrounds, and the terrorists responsible for the attacks that occurred on September 11th, 2001[11]. While this information does not dismiss the fact that the people responsible for the attacks in September 11th, 2001 were self-proclaimed Muslims and, therefore, cannot fully exclude Islam from the conversation, it does show that anyone can use religion to justify violent actions.

Let there be no doubt that the events surrounding 9/11 were horrific, unethical, and absurdly violent. The people behind those attacks considered themselves to be followers of Islam, but no matter what the extent of their religiosity is or how it is measured, Islam is not an evil institution bent on destroying lives culturally or religiously different than those of its adherents. Islam teaches one to live in peace with people of differing cultures or beliefs just as Christianity teaches one to love one's neighbor and to turn the other cheek. In fact, the Qur'an states: "Say: O unbelievers! I do not serve that which you serve, Nor do you serve Him Whom I serve; Nor am I going to serve that which you serve, Nor are you going to serve Him Whom I serve; You shall have your religion and I shall have my religion."[12] Islamic scriptures also state: "Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the

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[11] For a more detailed explanation of this author's views on 9/11, see Charles Kiimball's *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs.* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002).

[12] Qur'an, Sutra 109:1-6

Last day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve."[13] These verses are but a couple of several that support peace between Islam and other religious communities.

Islamic values of peace and prosperity between different cultures are quite prevalent in the religion and its followers. Realistically, Islam and its history is not without its mistakes and immoral decisions. However, if one is to understand the other, one must, as the expression goes, walk a mile in the other's shoes. This metaphor suggests an intimate knowledge of Islam's history, rituals, and cosmological views in order to avoid negative stereotypes and foster a xenophobia-free society. The next chapter will provide a brief overview of Islam and the various factors that shaped the tradition into what it is today. With luck, it may also provide insight into the many negative questions and assumptions that surround the faith.

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[13] Qur'an, Sutra 2:62

CHAPTER THREE

ISLAM

Origins, History, and Conflict

Islam, like many other religious traditions, began as a struggle for the right to exist as a religious minority. In its early years, Christianity struggled against the Roman Empire's accusations of cannibalism and political treason. Buddhism argued against thousands of years of Vedic philosophy in order to break free of the common religious mold in what is now known as India. Likewise, Islam faced a significant time of struggle as a religious minority before being established as a legitimate faith tradition with a solid following.

Islam teaches that revelations from God were given to the prophet Muhammad. These revelations now exist in two main bodies of literature: The Qur'an and the Hadith (traditionally believed to be the collected sayings of the prophet). The submission to one God is a practice Muslims believe they share with Judaism and Christianity. However, Muslims view Christian and Jewish scriptures as having been corrupted over time whereas the revelations given to the prophet Muhammad are considered to be the final revelations from God to humanity. Muslims believe Jesus was a prophet in a long line of prophets that ended with Muhammad, the final messenger of God. Muhammad was a prophet in every sense that defined the Biblical prophets. Aside from receiving revelations from God, he

was a social, economic, and political reformer[1]. The following gives a brief glance at the origins of Islam and the person who would later be known by Muslims as the last prophet of God.

During Islam's conception, Muhammad found himself at odds with the local religious customs when he tried to spread his newly received revelations to the people in the surrounding area. He first attempted to deliver his message to Mecca, a significant center of Arabian society at the time. He was met with opposition by the Quraysh, the ruling tribe of Meccan society.

The Arabic world during the time of Muhammad consisted of a tribal society. Clans were formed from families into loose feudal factions. One obeyed one's tribal leader or suffered the consequences. Muhammad's message of monotheism was seen as a threat to the ruling authorities. He preached of the existence of one God and humanity's submission to God as an alternative to the existing status quo. As Karabell puts it, "Tribal authority was absolute— until Muhammad announced that it was not."[2]

The loose federation of tribes that ruled over Mecca had acquired most of their authority through monetary means. Before Mecca had become a bustling center of trade, Bedouin tribes roamed the area in a constant struggle for survival.

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[1] Caesar E. Farah. *Islam: Beliefs and Observances.* (New York: Barron's Publishing, 2000), 35.

[2] Zachary Karabell. *Peace Be Upon You: The Story of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish Coexistence.* (New York: Random House Inc., 2007), 12.

When Mecca was established as a trade center that connected roads going in various directions, an early form of unjust capitalism evolved in Meccan society. Instead of doing what was best for the clan, people acted in competitive self-interest. Instead of helping the poor, people used their money for greed. The tribes with the most wealth gained the most power and influence. This caused resentment among the clans and families with less wealth and, consequently, less power. Mecca may have been a commercial paradise, but its splendor had been purchased by greed and the consequences of such a high price were slowly causing the city to crumble. Armstrong writes, "Muhammad was convinced that unless the Quraysh learned to put another transcendent value at the center of their lives and overcome their egotism and greed, his trine would tear itself apart morally and politically in internecine strife."[3]

Muhammad could not remain silent and soon began to speak out against the corrupt leaders of Mecca, according to Islamic tradition, using the revelations he had received from God through the angel Gabriel. Consequently, the Quraysh persecuted Muhammad and any who followed him. Eventually, Muhammad left Mecca and traveled to the neighboring city of Medina in order to gain support for his movement. The Quraysh became furious at Muhammad for his activities in Medina. In the pre-Islamic Arabic world, betraying one's tribe was a horrible crime

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[3] Karen Armstrong. *A History of God: The 4,000 Year Old Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 133.

punishable by death. Although the Quraysh persecuted Muhammad and his followers, they did so only to persuade them to abandon their monotheistic ideals. Muhammad's move to Medina was seen as a betrayal, and a betrayal to one's tribe while encouraging others to do the same meant war.

The result of this conflict is a battle that was won by Muhammad and his followers who were greatly outnumbered by the opposing forces from Mecca. In January of 624, the Quraysh led a large army to Medina with the intention of stamping out Islam before it was able to mature. The Muslims drew together what defenses they could and, although outnumbered three to one, succeeded in defeating the army of the Quraysh. Later known as the Battle of Badr, this skirmish turned the tides for the budding Islamic faith[4]. What followed the Battle of Badr was the establishment of the Qur'an as the sacred revelations given to Muhammad from God, the establishment of the caliphate, the succeeding line of Islamic leaders after the death of the prophet, and the spread of Islam throughout the Middle East, North Africa, Persia, and even Southwestern parts of Europe.

Islam grew from a small minority religion to a dominant force that spread throughout much of the known world. During the birth and spread of Islam, Muslims did not live in a vacuum. Judaism and Christianity had been monotheistic influences long before Muhammad began his mission to reform the society of Mecca.

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[4] Farah, p. 49.

The interaction between the Abrahamic faith traditions has been one similar to three siblings growing up together in a small house. There is much conflict and strife between them as each learns to exist with the other two, but there are also moments of solidarity and peace despite their differences.

Islam, as a community, encountered the other Abrahamic traditions when it made its move from Mecca to Medina. Christians were spread out over the known world during the time of Muhammad. Christianity in the Middle East had largely been disenchanted with the official view of the Trinity and consisted of Monophysites, Nestorians, and other heretical groups, those in disagreement with the official doctrine of the Church. Nonetheless, Muhammad and his followers would have most likely been knowledgeable of Christianity and its Trinitarian views on God and Christ. Judaism had been around for well over two thousand years before Muhammad was born. In dress and adaptation to the harsh climate of Arabia, Jews were indistinguishable from any other groups of wandering nomads. They even traded with the Quraysh in Mecca. They were culturally distinct due only to their view of God, diet, marriage, and law. Because of their similarity, Muhammad hoped he would have success in persuading them to join his fold as he moved to Medina.

Upon arriving in Medina, Muhammad found that not all Jewish tribes desired to follow his teachings. However, an agreement was established between the

different religious sects known as the Constitution of Medina. It is unknown if this agreement was verbal or written, but it stated that Jews and Muslims are to live together peacefully and help each other in times of need.[5] This would be the first of many instances in which Muslims lived peacefully with people of other faith traditions.

Islam spread throughout the Middle East, Northern Africa, and even to parts of Europe. The spread of the new religion was made possible by the vehicle of conquest. A few theories exist on why Muslims decided to militarily conquer the surrounding lands. The negative ones include misguided portrayals of Islam as a violent religion and Muhammad as a conquering tyrant. The more positive ones more or less explain that Islam originated in a society in which tribes often made raids against each other for survival. In Islam, everyone who is part of that faith is part of that community no matter where they are. Once Mecca and the surrounding area generally began to follow the teachings of Muhammad, the cultural desire to raid was focused on those outside of the immediate area. The conquests that took place were also a means to reward the faithful in that the caliphs who succeeded Muhammad often provided believers with material possessions for their loyalty,

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[5] Karabell p. 14-15.

another aspect of Arabian culture.[6] One cannot excuse the conquering of land and people by Muslims anymore than one can excuse the same actions by Christians as the Holy Roman Empire spread throughout Europe or the Israelites as they conquered the land of Canaan or the early American settlers who drove the Native Americans from their homes and nearly extinguished their way of life. Islam spread through conquest like many other religious traditions, but to use this historical fact as fuel to argue that Islam is a violent tradition or that Muhammad was a conquering tyrant is to dilute facts with personal bias. After all, Muhammad had been dead for quite some time when Islam began to spread to various corners of the world.

Islam spread as far as the Iberian Peninsula, what is now Spain. It is there that Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived together in relative peace. Theological disagreements existed and one had to be careful what was said to a ruling authority of a different religious background, but all were allowed to live according to their culture. Ovey N. Mohammed states, "Islam spread rapidly not only because the official Christianity of the seventh century was oppressive, but also because of the way the Arabs dealt with people in the newly conquered territories. The Arabs did not attempt to impose their culture on the newly subjugated population but accepted the cultural diversity within the empire."[7] Although Muslims attempted to live with diversity in relative peace, the Crusades of the Middles Ages brought an

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[6] Ibid., p. 23.

[7] Ovey N. Mohammed. *Muslim-Christian Relations Past, Present, and Future.* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 30.

enmity between Christianity and Islam that would produce bloodshed unlike the world had ever seen.

The Crusades were instigated by the Holy Roman Empire to take back the Holy Land from Muslim control. They were military campaigns that lasted nearly two hundred years, from 1095-1291 CE. The violence and death that occurred during this bloody struggle are often glorified by Hollywood. For example, the film *Kingdom of Heaven* involves Christian knights as main characters in a bloody conflict to defend Jerusalem from a Muslim army. Within the dialogue there is a subtle plea for peace between the two cultures. However, the graphic amount of limbs being dismembered, heads severed, and cries of agony mute the point trying to be made to a modern audience who seems to be mostly entertained by the martial action. The Crusades were portrayed as an entrance into heaven for those who died fighting in the name of their religion. This was used by religious leaders of the time to draw attention away from the true horrors of war.

Physical violence was not the only form of attack used against Islam during the Middle Ages. Christian monks and leaders wrote pages upon pages of false accounts and descriptions of Islam in order to dissuade anyone from converting to the faith. Biblical scriptures were invented, supposedly dating to the time of the apostles, in order to condemn Muslims. One such writing describing Muslims reads as follows:

> "These barbarian rulers are not men, but sons of destruction, and they set their faces toward destruction. They are spoilers, and they are sent for desolation. They are ruination, and they have come forth for the ruin of everything, being abominable people who love abomination. At the time of their coming forth from the desert, they will tear open pregnant women; and they will take babies by force from their mothers' arms and dash them against the rocks like unclean animals. They will sacrifice the minister within the temple, and they will sleep with their wives and with the captive women inside the temple. They will make the sacred garments into clothing for themselves and their sons. They will tether their cattle in the shrines of the martyrs and in the burial places of the saints. They are insolent and murderous, shedders of blood and spoilers; they are a furnace of trial for all Christians."[8]

The absurd hatred towards those they did not fully understand, those who threatened the absolute authority of their faith, is seen here in the rantings of a misguided monk.

The People of the Book

Judaism dates back thousands of years to a single man, Abraham, who was promised a place where his offspring could flourish and call their own. Centuries later, Moses led the Hebrews out of their Egyptian bondage to the land of Canaan where they would establish Israel as God's chosen people. The establishment of Israel was one filled with violence, infighting, deception, betrayal, and tragedy. God's chosen people were exiled from their homeland and passed from one ruler to the next as empires conquered each other in a constant struggle for control of the fertile crescent, a thin strip of land lush with vegetation and opportunity. With the entrance of the Roman Empire and its self proclaimed Pax Romana, God's chosen in

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[8] John V. Tolan. *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination.* New York, Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 48.

Jerusalem and the surrounding areas found themselves under yet another tyrant authority that was not the God they served. With the Roman Emperor sometimes portraying himself as a god and the law requiring all subjects of Rome to pay taxes to the emperor, the Jews were left with the option of idolatry or death. During the first century CE, Judaism was going through many changes. Different sect arose with different ideas about God, ethics, and the role of Jews in their current political situation. In the midst of this plethora of emerging ideas, one would stand out among many and gain influence that would shape much of the Western World for the next two thousand year.

During the time of this cultural tension between Jerusalem and Rome, a baby was born in Bethlehem. His family being from the town of Nazareth, he was referred to in rumors as Jesus of Nazareth. To his Greek-speaking followers, he would later be called Christ. Christianity began with the teachings of a Jewish man who sought justice, peace, and equality for everyone he encountered. Although Judaism and Christianity are two separate religions today, Christianity began as a movement within Judaism. Conflict arose between the Jesus movement and the rest of Judaism as the followers of Jesus equated him with God. More conflict arose as the Roman authorities began to see the Jesus movement as a threat to the stability of the empire and the Roman way of life. For this reason, Christians were persecuted on multiple fronts for centuries after Jesus' death. When the Constantine came to power over the Roman Empire, he declared Christianity to be an authentic set of

ideals and ethical values. With his support, Christianity gained political influence and spread into the religious empire that it is today.

One of the major conflicts between Judaism and Christianity has been the belief some Christians have of supersessionism, a belief that the Christian community as a whole replaces Israel as the chose people of God. Much antisemitism has resulted from this belief. Ironically, Christianity has been met with the same confrontation it has caused Judaism. As Islam made its way onto the map as a strong and growing religious faction, Christianity began to feel the pressure it once imposed on Judaism. Seeing the Abrahamic faith traditions in this lengthy yet informative way allows one to begin to understand the sense of resentment among the three in terms of theology. What follows is a brief overview of the theological dialogue that has taken place between Christianity and Islam.

According to the teachings of Islam, the nature of God is beyond human comprehension. However, a central belief in Islam is that God is one, a unified mystery over all creation. There are ninety-nine names for God listed in the Qur'an, and each one indicates God's "transcendent majesty and unity."[9] God is the unified ultimate reality of the universe. Kateregga eloquently describes God in the following way: "He is the creator of the universe and everything found in it. He is the Compassionate and Merciful and His mercy is to all creatures. He is just. He is the

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[9] Badru D. Katerrega and David W. Shenk. *A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue*. (PA: Herald Press, 1997), 29.

Guide and Guardian of everything. He is preexistent and eternal. He is all-knowing and all-wise. He is loving and provident, and His mercy for his creatures knows no boundary. He is holy and cannot commit sins or do evil. He is independent and unique."[10] In the same book, Shenk gives a Christian response to this description of God in which he agrees with Kateregga with the exception of one thing: the way in which humanity knows God. In Islam, God is known through God's revelation to Muhammad and earlier prophets. In Christianity, God is known in various ways through God's revealing God's self to humanity instead of using only revealed words to specific people.[11]

In Christianity, Jesus Christ is the manifestation of God on Earth. In this way, God walks among humanity, feels what humanity feels, and suffers with humanity. The belief in Christ as God incarnate gave way to the Christian concept of the trinity consisting of God as Father, Son, and Spirit as one entity. However, in Islam God is a very separate entity from humanity. Jesus is mentioned several times in the Qur'an and he is often accompanied with the same stories found in the New Testament. He is born of a virgin named Mary. He abolishes certain laws in the Torah in order to make room for justice in society. He preaches peace to the people on behalf of God. The on crucial difference is that, along with Jesus' not being divine, he was also not actually crucified. The Qur'an states that God took Jesus into paradise with God and

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[10] Ibid., 34.

[11] Ibid., 35.

created an illusion of Jesus' death for the human witnesses. The major differences in the figure of Jesus in Christianity and Islam consist of divinity and death. Christians view Jesus as the incarnate God who died for humanity's sins. Muslims view Jesus as a prophet whom God raised up away from the impure non-believers who were trying to kill him.

This creates an opportunity for dialogue among Christians and Muslims. Neither party may agree on the exact nature of or circumstances surrounding Jesus, but dialogue is one step farther from violence and one step closer to peace. Kimball states: "In my experience, the combination of sustained academic inquiry and knowledge born of experience and personal encounter has been fruitful. The study of Islam is enhanced immeasurably when it includes personal interaction with Muslims. Joining Muslim neighbors in breaking the fast of Ramadan provides an angle of vision and a level of meaning that cannot be experienced by reading about the annual festivities."[12] Kimball is right in what he says regarding the children of Abraham. In the history of the relationship between Christianity and Islam, there has been much violence and few times of peaceful interaction. As seen with the portrayal of Islam by Christians in the Middle Ages, simply reading a book about the religious other does not fully allow for a peaceful relationship between members of two different religious traditions. For an authentic relationship to form between

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[12] Charles Kimball. *Striving Together: A Way Forward in Christian-Muslim Relations.* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 109.

two people, face to face interaction and discussion for the sake of understanding the other, for the sake of humanizing the other, is vital.

Muslims Speak

In December of 2009, the fifth Parliament of the World's Religions was held in Melbourne, Australia. Religious leaders from around the world gathered to listen to each other, learn from each other, and join in fellowship with one another. They came to discuss the issues taking hold of our planet such as poverty, social injustice, global warming, and war. They came to teach, to talk, and to triumph as a united front against these issues. Among the participants were Muslims who came, above all, to show the world that Islam is a religion of peace and to let their voices be heard about the hardships they've endured based on their religious identity. What follows is an account of what a few Muslims said regarding the problems they've faced with Islamophobia and the action needed globally to dissolve the irrational hatred caused by this lack of knowledge, lack of interest, and lack of empathy for the other.

The fear of Islam is commonly based on a false belief that terrorism is an inherent characteristic of Islam. A sad but true fact is that violent attacks of terrorism have happened in a wide variety of places, for a wide variety of reasons, and by a wide variety of people. Terrorists sometimes use religious or political ideologies to support whatever cause they are promoting through their violent methods, but this is merely a case of human beings using abstract concepts shared

with religious and political institutions in order to justify their actions. On September 11th, 2001, the attacks that took place on United States soil sparked a wildfire. Islamophobia spread through the Western World as images of planes crashing into the two towers were played over and over for weeks. Despite President George W. Bush's attempt to curb efforts to make Islam the scapegoat, the fear of Islam became a topic of conversation in the media that only served to promote Islamophobia. Commentators such as Anne Coulter have been leaders in portraying Islam as a negative entity that goes against Western vales. She used the September 11th attacks to fuel her negative rants on Islam creating racism and hatred among her viewers. On September 14, 2001, three days after the September 11 attacks, Coulter wrote in her column:

> "Airports scrupulously apply the same laughably ineffective airport harassment to Suzy Chapstick as to Muslim hijackers. It is preposterous to assume every passenger is a potential crazed homicidal maniac. We know who the homicidal maniacs are. They are the ones cheering and dancing right now. We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity. We weren't punctilious about locating and punishing only Hitler and his top officers. We carpet-bombed German cities; we killed civilians. That's war. And this is war." [13]

Responding to this comment, Ibrahim Hooper of the Council on American-Islamic Relations remarked in the *Chicago Sun Times* that before September 11, Coulter,

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[13] Ann Coulter. "This Is War". *National Review*. Recorded September 13, 2001. http://web.archive.org/web/20010914225811/http://www.nationalreview.com/coulter/coulter091301.shtml. (accessed December 12, 2009).

"would have faced swift repudiation from her colleagues", but "now it's accepted as legitimate commentary."[14] It is clear by the acceptance of this remark made by Coulter that something changed in the public attitude of the American population after the events that transpired in September of 2001. Terrorism is not the cause of Islamophobia. Terrorist convictions and ideologies are caused by a perceived oppression by the other. When viewed from this perspective, terrorists are in the same camp as those who fear Islam. In both cases, the other is defined by the threat it poses. Also present in both cases are the two primary reasons why Islamophobia exists: ignorance and the media.

Ignorance is not a term meant to doubt the intelligence of anyone. It is a word used to indicate a lack of detailed and accurate knowledge about a particular topic. Regarding Islamophobia, people are ignorant when they take generalizations and stereotypes for hard facts. Fear of the unknown is a common human characteristic. The sight of two gigantic mechanical units of transportation fueled by flammable liquid and intentionally crashing into two towers that represent American capitalism was something unknown to Westerners until September 11, 2001. Unknown events, especially when they involve the loss of life on a grand scale, promote an escalated sense of fear about the security of the present and future. Once the media released that the attacks were implemented by terrorists who claimed Islam as their belief system and as their reason for attacking these

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[14] Jim Ritter, (September 4, 2006). "Muslims see a growing media bias". *Chicago Sun Times*.

targets, assumptions were made about Muslims living in America and about the way in which Muslims around the world lived and perceived Western civilization. In this context, ignorance is not bliss.

Ignorance did not act alone in persuading mobs of people to fear a religion. The media began a long career of oppressing Islam by consistently referring to Islamic terrorism and showing footage of the tragic events on September 11th, 2001 after they happened. Politicians have used this day to fuel their campaigns and to unify the nation. Religious scholars have used this day to discuss religious diversity and promote peace among different cultures. The media has used this day to gain ratings. Focusing on what the population wanted to see on the evening news at this time, journalists across the country set their eyes on New York. Unfortunately, the coverage of the attacks did not include a history of Islam, interviews with American Muslims, and careful wording that did not place Islam in the same box with Terrorism. In the case of September 11th, ignorance informed the media which then created more ignorance. In the wake of the events surrounding this infamous day in history, Muslims became the accused, the vast majority of them victims of a crime they did not commit. Amidst the plethora of false information that feeds Islamophobia, Muslim voices must be heard.

The 2009 Parliament of the World's Religions presented an ideal opportunity for Muslims to make their voices heard in a venue where representatives of multiple national, cultural, and religious backgrounds would hear their perspective as people

unjustly perceived because of their religious identity. The following testimonials and lectures come from Muslims claiming a variety of backgrounds. Their thoughts on the matter give the insight needed to humanize Muslims for those whose eyes are shut by Islamophobia.

The first is a musician who uses his songs as an instrument of praise to God. Zain Bhikha, born in Pretoria, South Africa, has become a famous performer of Nasheed songs, songs that are Islamic oriented. He has recorded with other artists, traveled around the world, and is one of the first musicians to sing in English rather than Arabic. He is considered a pioneer in Islamic music in the way that he has opened the door for other Muslim musicians to use their musical ability as a means of practicing their faith.[15] After giving a short performance and a presentation on the power of song and its contribution to bringing about social change, he responded to the challenge of Islamophobia. According to Bhikha, Muslims are partially responsible for the fear of Islam portrayed by Westerners. In his experience traveling through Europe, he noticed that the Muslim community isolated itself until the events of September 11th forced its members to interact with those outside of Islam or accept the labels imposed on them by the media and falsely informed Westerners. He views the Western reaction to the attacks as a positive thing because it presented a challenge and an opportunity for Muslims in the West

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[15] Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions. *Make a World of Difference: Healing each other, Healing the earth; Parliament of the World's Religions*. Official Program Melbourne, Australia. December 3-9, 2009.

to express their faith to others. He believes that the people responsible for terrorist attacks distort the teachings of Islam, and that the ostracization of Muslims in the West presents a better opportunity for Muslims to share the true teachings of Islam as opposed to Muslims living in the Middle East where adhering to Islam is assumed and rarely talked about. He admitted to being oppressed himself by people in Europe while he was traveling and performing. Despite this experience, he has remained positive and hopeful for the future of Islam and its relationship with the rest of the world.[16] During this interview, Bhikha presented an important reason why Muslims should not be feared: they wish to be in dialogue with people outside of the Islamic community and admit to having neglected to do so before the fear of Islam spread with September 11th. This alone is a clear statement desiring fellowship, not violence.

Another Muslim who presented and was interviewed at the Parliament is Ahmed Rehab. He is an American Muslim who works as an activist and writer for relations between Islam and the West. He serves on the boards of directors of the Illinois Coalition of Immigrant and Refugee Rights, the Immigration and Refugee Interfaith Ministries, The Chicago Human Relations Advocacy Committee, and the Egyptian American Society. A member of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs' Muslim Task Force, he has appeared on several television and radio news broadcasts, including Fox News, PBS, and Conservative Radio. After his

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[16] Zain Bhikha. Interviewed by author. 2009 Parliament of the World's Religions. Melbourne, Australia, 6 December 2009.

presentation, his response to the problem of Islamophobia brought new insights into how Muslims are perceived and recognized by those who fear Islam. He admitted that he had not felt the full force of Islamophobia because of his Western heritage. His appearance, demeanor, and accent are that of a typical working male in the United States. If strangers are unaware of his name, they most likely assume he is anything other than a Muslim. As for American prejudices in general, he made an observation that racism is a type of prejudice that people easily recognize immediately upon encountering someone of a particular race. A prejudice against Islam, however, is difficult to discover because American Muslims often dress in ways that do not present the stereotype of Muslim attire. This insight also means that Islamophobia in the United States is informed by false information given by the media. Without a source for this typed of misinformed education, the general public would not be able to recognize Muslims via stereotypes and, thus, would not have cause to point out individuals and treat them differently simply based on their appearance.[17] Here is a clear example of the media having a hand in fueling the irrational fear of Islam.

The third Muslim voice to be heard in this work is one from an academic standpoint. Dr. Tariq Ramadan is well known for his work in interfaith dialogue in both the academic and grassroots levels. He is currently the Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies at Oxford University. He spoke extensively during a

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[17] Ahmed Rehab. Interviewed by author. 2009 Parliament of the World's Religions. Melbourne, Australia, 6 December 2009.

session focused on the concept of *jihad* in Islam. The common misguided perception of Islam is that the Prophet Muhammad spread the teachings of Islam via violent conquest and that Muslims today are trying to imitate that same method. *Jihad* is often misinterpreted to denote a holy war like the aforementioned conquest. Ramadan has a unique approach that moves away from holy war but maintains the text that is written in the Qur'an. In other words, he does not simply reduce *jihad* to an inner, spiritual dimension.

Ramadan calls *jihad* a struggle against the dark side of one's inner being as well as injustice and oppression that exists in society. In the context of the Qur'anic passages that mention *jihad*, he suggests that the early Muslim community was met with oppression by its neighbors, oppression that warranted making a stand in order to achieve justice for and within the community. Ramadan's stance on this term dissolves the fear of Islam as a conquering entity because communities across time and space have had similar situations in which they have faced oppression and have had to make their own stand for their particular beliefs and values.[18]

The final person involved in this brief look at Muslim voices regarding Islamophobia is that of Dr. Saleha Abedin, the chief editor of the Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs and co-chair of the Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious and

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[18] Tariq Ramadan. "War and Peace in Al-Islam: The Prophet's Struggle". (The Parliament of the World's Religions. Melbourne, Australia. 6 December 2009).

Spiritual Leaders. She is currently the Vice Dean of Institutional Advancement at Dar Al-Hekma College, a premier women's college in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

A common misconception that saturates Islamophobic views is the misguided belief that Islam oppresses women. Regarding the rights of women in Muslim societies in the Middle East, Abedin says, "We must look into areas other than religion to explain social behavior." In this statement, she is referring to the way Westerners often place their own values and norms onto people from another context before making an attempt to figure out the cultural standards of the other. As far as women's rights are concerned, Abedin explained that everything in Islam is constructed on the concepts of justice and equality. The head and face coverings worn by women, the most well known example of the misinformed view of Muslim women's oppression, are devices created for modesty for the sake of the community. Human rights are based on needs and Islam teaches that all needs are to be met for everyone in the community. There is no discrimination based on sex, something a Westerner can accept in her own context.[19]

Islamophobia is an irrational fear that has spread throughout entire populations. It is fueled by ignorance that the media takes and spreads in order to create more ignorance and more hate. What is needed is education and not the kind from textbooks giving academic facts about Islam. Interaction and communication

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[19] Saleha M. Abedin. *Women's Rights as Human Rights in Islam.* (The Parliament of the World's Religions. Melbourne, Australia, 7 December 2009).

with Muslims and those outside of the Islamic community is needed so that everyone may learn the true teachings of Islam, and perhaps more importantly, the human face that lies behind the mask of Islam. In this way, irrational fears can be overcome, bridges can be built, and wounds can be mended.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHRISTIAN CALL TO HOSPITALITY, RECONCILIATION, AND PEACE

What is the response of Christianity to a nation in which racism, xenophobia, prejudice, hate speech, and other harm is being done to a group of people who want nothing but to live peacefully with their neighbors? Some Christian responses have done nothing but exacerbate the problem. After the attacks on the World Trade Center and other United States locations that occurred on September 11th, 2001, a few Christian voices spoke out against Islam in a harsh tone that further promoted the fear that was sweeping the nation. Pat Robertson compared Muslims to Hitler's Nazi party in attempting to persuade American Jews of the violence inherent in Islam. Franklin Graham, son of the famous evangelist, Billy Graham, referred to Islam as a "very evil and wicked religion". Perhaps most offensive of all to Muslims, Jerry Falwell called the prophet Muhammad a terrorist.[1] These Christian voices have the potential to influence hundreds of thousands of United States citizens. Their harsh words pushed a budding fear into something that has persisted nine years later as Muslims continue to be scrutinized, harassed, and even persecuted for their religious background. Fortunately, not all Christian voices share the opinion of those above.

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[1] Thomas S. Kidd. *American Christians and Islam Evangelical Culture and Muslims from the Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism.* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 145.

In his book, *Hospitality and the Other*, Amos Yong presents a theology that emphasizes Christian hospitality towards those who are different, specifically those who are religiously different. In Yong's theology, Jesus acts as both guest in a strange land and the host providing hospitality to others in that land. This is paradoxically possible because of the divine and human nature in Christ. The Holy Spirit is the gift of divine abundance given by God. Because of the nature of Christ and the gift of the Spirit, Christians embody God's constant gift of hospitality in that an economy of plentiful giving and receiving exists in the Church. Finally, Yong contends that in a world where interreligious conflicts abound, Christians must imitate the hospitality manifest in God's gifts to the world and allow the Spirit to guide this hospitality towards reconciliation and peace.[2] In the same sense that Kimball enjoys breaking the fast of Ramadan with his Muslim neighbors, Christians should enjoy extending invitations to Muslims in their communities for fellowship and dialogue to take place amongst friends instead of enemies.

In the first chapter, a brief Biblical passage was given that contains the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. In this story, a person is beaten and left for dead after being robbed on the road traveling from one town to the next. A priest passes him and does nothing for fear that it is only a trap laid by people wanting to steal his coin purse. Later on, a Levite passes the same wounded person and also does nothing for the same fear. Finally, a Samaritan passes the person lying by the

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[2] Amos Yong. *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor*. (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 126-127.

side of the road and comes to the rescue. The Samaritan does everything in his power to see that the man is brought to safety and that his wounds are taken healed, even at the expense of his own finances. This parable is told to teach a specific lesson to the people who heard it in the days of Jesus. The Priest and Levite were figures of devout religious piety. The Samaritan was considered a social and religious outcast simply because of his heritage of being part Assyrian. The Samaritan turns out to be the hero, the one whom Jesus says is the neighbor who shows mercy to the wounded victim.[3]

In today's post-9/11 world, the Muslims are often treated as the Samaritans. People calling themselves Muslims attacked the United States and created horrible deaths for thousands of people. The Assyrian ancestors of the Samaritans were violently brutal to the Jews whom they took into captivity after conquering the Fertile Crescent hundreds of years before Muhammad led a group of people from Mecca to Medina. Both Muslims and Samaritans, each in the respective contexts of those who fear and despise them, are not expected to be capable of peaceful actions and dialogue towards and with people of different backgrounds. It is time for Christianity, every member no matter what denomination or sect, to extend a hand of hospitality to its neighbors, especially those who abide by the same American laws, who enjoy living in the same American society, and who are willing to fight

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[3] Keck, 229.

and die for the same American ideals. It is time for Christianity to authentically follow its central figure and love they neighbor.

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