

part III

PROGRESSIVE MUSLIMS
AND PLURALISM

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MUSLIMS, PLURALISM, AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

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Truly, there was a party of My servants who said: “Our Lord! We believe, therefore forgive us and have mercy on us for You are the best of all who show mercy.”

(Qur’an 23:109)

In this essay, I explore some of the relationships that modern North American Muslims have had with people of various other religious traditions. As this essay is intended for non-specialists in the study of Islam or religion, I refrain from using jargon or situating my work in complex theoretical matrices. I will begin with a discussion of inter-religious relationships during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, move to a broad historical survey, and then focus on interfaith dialogue in contemporary North America. Along with other contributors to this volume, I locate myself as someone who is both a Muslim (from a working class background) and an academic who studies contemporary Muslim communities. I have been involved with interfaith dialogue at local, national, and international levels for over a dozen years.

WHAT IS PLURALISM?

It is hard to talk in public about religion these days, and that certainly goes for pluralism. When some people hear the term “pluralism,” they think of an “anything goes” moral relativism that seeks to mix all religions into one. My own perception of pluralism is shaped more by scholars such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Diana Eck, who have championed the necessity of thinking deeply about religious pluralism. In her book *A New Religious*

America, Diana Eck comes back to identify three important themes about pluralism:

1. Pluralism is not simply the same thing as diversity. One may have people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds present in one place, but unless they are involved in an active engagement with one another, there is no pluralism. In other words, pluralism is not and cannot be a non-participant sport.
2. The goal of pluralism is not simply “tolerance” of the other, but rather an active attempt to arrive at an understanding. The very language of tolerance in fact keeps us from the type of engagement we are speaking of here. One can tolerate a neighbor about whom one remains thoroughly ignorant. That stance, while no doubt preferable to outright conflict, is still far from genuine pluralism.
3. Pluralism is not the same thing as relativism. Far from simply ignoring the profound differences among religious traditions, a genuine pluralistic perspective would be committed to engaging the very differences that we have, to gain a deeper sense of each other’s commitments.²

PLURALISM AND MUSLIMS: THE GENESIS OF ISLAM IN A PLURALISTIC SETTING

Issues of pluralism and interfaith dialogue are of crucial importance to Muslims, particularly to those of us who live in countries where Islam is a minority religious tradition. Islam is already (or will become very soon) the second largest religious tradition in a number of European and North American countries.³ Muslims living in these countries have to articulate their understanding and practice of Islam in the midst of a plurality of belief systems. It is the responsibility of Muslims to help non-Muslims to understand how it is that we, as Muslims, live out our lives. Those of us who see ourselves as progressive Muslims understand that there is a need for all people to work together on our common problems. As Muslims, we can help in the construction of a world in which it is safe to be human.

Historical Islam began as a minority tradition in a non-Muslim setting. When the Prophet Muhammad received his first revelations in Mecca in 610 CE, the people around him were largely tribal and polytheistic. Even though the people of Mecca knew of Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and other religious traditions, large concentrations of Christians or Jews were only to be found in other cities in Arabia.

As with any new religious tradition, Islam would not have developed had it not been for interfaith dialogue. After Muhammad received his revelations, he began to speak about them publicly, first to his own family and then to other people. Slowly, people began to convert from other faiths to the religion of the

one true God that Muhammad was preaching. Muhammad, then, from the beginning of his first revelations to the end of his life was actively engaged in interfaith dialogue.

The Qur'an, as the revelations to Muhammad from God came to be called, assumed that the first hearers of the revelation were familiar with the stories of Judaism and Christianity. For example, a verse in the Qur'an (5:27) begins, "Recite to them in truth the story of the two sons of Adam." The implication is that the hearers are already familiar with aspects of the story, but that the Qur'an affirms and represents, and at times modifies, the previous versions of narratives. Another example is the mention of Gabriel and Michael in the context of angels and prophets (2:98). The verse does not specify that Gabriel and Michael are angels and not prophets, but assumes that the hearers are familiar with the Jewish and Christian traditions around them. A third example is found in chapter 12 of the Qur'an, entitled "Joseph." This chapter, which is referred to as "the most beautiful of stories" in verse 3 – and is the longest sustained narrative in the Qur'an – tells the story of Joseph who is sold into slavery. It does not go into details about the family background of Joseph, but does speak of Joseph and his brother being sold into slavery by their other brothers out of jealousy (12:8). Presumably, the first hearers of this revelation were familiar with the story in the book of Genesis about Joseph and Benjamin, who are sons of Jacob and his wife Rachel, while the other brothers have different mothers. A fourth example is found in a verse about Jesus (3:55): "And God said: 'O Jesus, I am gathering you and causing you to ascend unto Me and cleansing you of those who disbelieve and making those who follow you above those who disbelieve to the day of resurrection. Then to Me shall be your return, and I will decide between you concerning that in which you differed.'" Presumably, the early Muslim community who heard these verses for the first time had some idea that, besides the Qur'anic presentation of Jesus, there was a range of interpretations in previous Christian communities about the life and nature of Christ. The Qur'an was revealed in a world that knew about various other religions.

Many people are aware of the emigration of Muhammad and his earliest followers from Mecca to Medina in the year 622. However, there was an earlier emigration to Abyssinia which underscored the value of interfaith dialogue to Muhammad. The earliest biographer of Prophet Muhammad, Ibn Ishaq (d. 767), and the famed Muslim historian Tabari (d. 923) discuss this migration.⁴ As people began to accept Islam they met with opposition from others in Mecca. This opposition turned to physical persecution against certain members of the early Muslim community. Muhammad gathered a group of those most vulnerable, and instructed them to go across the Red Sea to Abyssinia, a Christian country ruled by a Christian king. There, the emigrants were welcomed and accepted. Indeed, the Christian king protected the Muslims against demands of extradition by the polytheists of Mecca. The emigrants stayed in Abyssinia until they rejoined the larger Muslim community in Medina.

Muhammad's act represents the first time that Muslims, as Muslims, dealt with Christians as a community. There was no sense of enmity against the Christians of Abyssinia; instead, they were seen as a people that would protect members of the nascent Muslim community. Clearly, this is a very early example in Islam of the importance of pluralism and interfaith dialogue, and the debt that we Muslims owe to Christians.

As mentioned earlier, Islam arose in an environment where the first converts were persecuted by polytheists for their beliefs. Later, there were tensions among Muslims and Jews, as well as tensions between Muslims and Christians. Not surprisingly, there are passages in the Qur'an that say positive things about other traditions as well as passages that are critical of them. One of the challenges faced by Muslims in an honest interfaith dialogue is to come to terms with the full range of verses that address the issue of relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Given that the Qur'an was revealed over a period of twenty-three years under a number of different historical settings, it is not surprising that there are different sets of guidance given to the young Muslim community. For example, there are passages in the Qur'an, such as 5:51 or 60:1, which advise against taking "non-believers" as protectors. There is also 5:82, which reads, "You will find among the people the Jews and the Polytheists to be the strongest in enmity to the Believers." On face value, those passages seem quite different from other verses, such as the rest of the same verse 5:82, which continues, "nearest among them in love to the Believers will you find those who say 'We are Christians.'" While it is perhaps some consolation to recognize that the Qur'an never sanctions the killing of Jews and Christians, it is also important for Muslims to be aware of how the various strands in the Qur'an can be used both as a bridge-building tool and to justify mutual exclusivism. Admittedly, the situation is different for the case of polytheists, as exemplified by 9:5: "But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Polytheists wherever you find them."⁵ But there are also passages that are critical of Muslims who show disregard for others. Chapter 107, "The Small Kindness," is succinct:

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring
Do you see him who calls the reckoning a lie?
He is the one who casts the orphan away
who fails to urge the feeding of one in need.
Cursed are those who perform the prayer
unmindful of how they pray
who make of themselves a display
but hold back the small kindness.⁶

It is crucial for contemporary Muslim and non-Muslim readers of the Qur'an to know something of the contexts of the original revelations to Muhammad.

In a remarkable passage, the Qur'an does speak about the creation of humanity, and which people are better than others: "O humanity! Truly We

created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you might know each other. Truly the most honoured of you in the sight of God is the most God-conscious of you. Truly God is Knowing, Aware” (49:13). There are four key points in this verse. First, the passage is addressed to all of humanity, and not specifically limited to Muslims. Second, the passage mentions that the creation of humanity into distinct groupings comes from God and is a positive value. Third, it encourages people to transcend their differences and learn from each other. Finally, the passage does not say that Muslims are better than other people, but that the best people are those who are aware of God.

PLURALISM IN EARLY ISLAMIC HISTORY

Islam remained a minority tradition until two years before the death of Muhammad. From the time that Muhammad received his first revelations in 610 to the year 622, Islam was a persecuted minority religion in Mecca. In the year 622, Muhammad emigrated with his community to the city of Medina. In Medina, Islam was also a minority tradition. However, in Medina, free from the persecution of the Meccans, the Muslim community could exist openly as a community. The number of Muslims greatly increased in Medina. Through conversion, the majority of the citizens of Medina became Muslim. In 630, Muhammad was able to return to Mecca in triumph, and much of the Arabian peninsula was converted to Islam by the time of Muhammad’s death in 632.

Islam is, to be sure, a missionary religion. The three largest religious traditions in the world, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, are all religions that encourage and engage in conversion. All three believe that there is a proper way to live in the world, and that it is incumbent upon believers to spread information about this proper way. This conviction gives rise to mutually exclusive truth claims: only Jesus’s death saves us from sin; only Muhammad is the final Prophet of God; only the Buddha teaches us how we can attain enlightenment. All three of these religious traditions have, tragically, gone through phases where the “other” was converted to the truth through force and violence.

The Qur’an is clear about not forcing people to convert: “There is no compulsion in religion: the Truth stands clear from the Wrong” (2:256). When Muhammad returned to Mecca in the year 630 as the conquering ruler, he gave Muslims a clear example to follow. The psychological tensions in Muhammad’s consciousness must have been extraordinary when one remembers just what was about to occur. Muhammad was born in Mecca in a branch of the noblest family in that city. He established a reputation for himself as a trustworthy and honest businessman, had a loving wife and four daughters. Then at the age of forty he began to receive revelations from God, revelations that challenged the *status quo*. Muhammad was at first tolerated for his public preaching, and then persecuted. Little more than a decade after receiving his revelations, he had to leave the city of his birth and migrate with his followers to another city. Eight years later,

Muhammad was able to return to Mecca as the conquering ruler. He literally had the power of life and death over those who years earlier had tormented and persecuted him and had killed several of his followers. By pre-Islamic Arab custom, he had the power to seek revenge, even massacre his enemies. Instead, in this most triumphant of earthly moments, Muhammad chose to display the utmost mercy, and declared total amnesty. In this extraordinary act, he came to those who had persecuted him, and recited to them the words from the Qur'an that Joseph had first spoken to his brothers when they came to him in Egypt, humbled after having sold him earlier into slavery: "This day let no reproach be upon you. May God forgive you, and God is the most merciful of those who show mercy" (12:92). There would be no forced conversion or slaughter of the Meccans.

For many converts, it is a message of justice that brings them to Islam. There is an emphasis on social justice in the Qur'an, and on siding with the poor, the orphaned, and the oppressed. The ethical monotheism of the Qur'an requires that obligations be fulfilled, whether they are due to God or to other people. For example, Farid Esack, a brilliant Muslim scholar and theologian, has written about the role of Muslims in the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa.⁷ Unfortunately, there is a stereotype of Muslims forcibly converting people to Islam. Images persist of Arab warriors on horseback with the Qur'an in one hand and a sword in the other, chopping off the heads of those who refused to convert.⁸ The reality is very different. For example, the first place that Islam spread to outside of Arabia was Iran. The dominant religious tradition in Iran before Islam was Zoroastrianism. It took approximately two hundred years for Iran to transform from a country where there were almost no Muslims to a country where the majority were Muslim.⁹ Often, it was the Sufis, the mystics of Islam, who spread Islam by living among the people and providing them with an example of how to live their lives as Muslims. In this way, they were no different from those Christians who lived out their lives as faithful witnesses, not active instigators of the conversion process. There have, certainly, been episodes in which Muslims abused the power that they had when they were able to dictate the discourse. But the dialogues of power corrupt any noble idea, whether it be Islam, Christianity, freedom, or democracy.

I have pointed to a few incidents in the life of Muhammad because that life (*Sunnah*) is considered exemplary for Muslims. In Islamic history, a number of people sought to live out the model of tolerance that Muhammad lived. Another early example is that of the Caliph 'Umar, the second successor (in Arabic, the word *khalifa* [English: Caliph] literally means "successor") to Muhammad. 'Umar ruled the Muslim community from 634 to 644 CE. In 638 Muslims arrived at Jerusalem. Far from him being a ruthless imperial conqueror, the traditional stories tell that 'Umar walked into Jerusalem because it was his servant's turn to ride the mount that they shared. While in the city, 'Umar was given a tour of the existing religious sites by the Christian Patriarch of Jerusalem. As the time

approached for prayer, ‘Umar asked for a place where he might offer his prayers. Through translators, the Patriarch offered ‘Umar the opportunity to pray where he stood, in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, one of the most important of Christian sites. ‘Umar refused, saying that wherever he, the first Muslim ruler in Jerusalem, was to offer his prayers, his followers would build a place of prayer (a *masjid*, or mosque). He would not let that place be inside a spot that was of crucial importance to Christians. Instead, he prayed outside of the church on what was then the porch of the martyrs. Sure enough, if one goes to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre today, across the street is the small Mosque of ‘Umar, commemorating his prayers. Clearly for ‘Umar, respect was due to Christians and their places of worship.

There have been times in various Muslim civilizations where there were good relations between Muslims, Christians, and Jews when Jews and Christians were the minority. One thinks for example of the city of Baghdad in the eighth and ninth centuries.¹⁰ Baghdad was built on the banks of the Tigris River as the capital city for the Abbasid Empire (750 to 1258) by the Caliph Al-Mansur, who ruled from 754 to 775 CE. Baghdad truly was a metropolis with links to Persia, India, China, Byzantium, and the Latin West. One sees this cosmopolitan nature in the great literary classic to emerge from Baghdad, *The Thousand and One Nights*, with its mix of diverse characters and stories from various locations. Baghdad was also home to the House of Wisdom (*Bayt al-hikma*), built by the Caliph Al-Ma'mun (ruled 813–833 CE) as a center of learning and translation for scholars from around the world. A Christian, Hunayn ibn Ishaq, was appointed as the director of the translation academy. This research institute was at the center of the movement to bring the philosophical heritage of the Greeks, Persians, and Indians within the fold of the Islamic quest for wisdom.

It is important here to emphasize that Islam has long existed in Western culture, first in Europe and later in North America. The pluralism that we see in the modern Western world has ancient roots. From the eighth to the fifteenth centuries, much of Spain was Muslim, and Al-Andalus (the Arabic term for Muslim Spain, Andalucía) was a high point of Islamic civilization.¹¹ In the ninth and tenth centuries, Cordoba in Muslim Spain became one of the most important cities in the history of the world. Christians and Jews were involved in the Royal Court and in the intellectual life of the city. Historically, there was also an Islamic presence in Southern France, Italy, and Sicily, with Arabic being a language known to the highly educated. And of course, under Ottoman rule, there was a profound Muslim presence in Turkey, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe. The Mughal Empire was also known for its pluralism.

The Arabic language (especially via Spanish and French) has contributed to the vocabulary of English. Common English words such as “coffee,” “sofa,” “genie,” and “alcohol,” technical words such as “algebra,” or “alkaline,” and even archaic words such as “lute” and “alchemy” all have their roots in Arabic. Arabic words such as *hajj*, “jihad,” or *hijab* have become commonplace enough as not to

require translation. There is a history of Muslims, Jews, Christians, and members of other religious traditions living together in a pluralistic society. Muslims influenced and were influenced by the people with whom they lived.

The Crusades radically altered the way that Muslims, Christians, and Jews understood each other. Before the Crusades, Muslims were relatively unknown to the European public. After the Crusades, with the making of enemy images on both sides, there was a great deal of polemic in European texts about Muslims. Norman Daniel has written the classic study of this time, his magisterial *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*.¹² The ordinary European might come into contact with Muslims as merchants, traders, seafarers, or pirates. However, the educated classes read works of Islamic philosophy, as well as classics of Greek philosophy (such as Aristotle) translated into Arabic and then into Latin. Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish philosopher, wrote *The Guide of the Perplexed* in Arabic. Muslim physicians were among the best of their day, and Muslim scientists and mathematicians (in collaboration with non-Muslims) made great advances in the sciences. Anybody familiar with Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* has felt the hovering presence of medieval Muslim scholars. This powerful presence has been beautifully represented by the great Renaissance painter, Raphael, who included Ibn Rushd (Averroes) in his painting *School of Athens*.¹³

MUSLIMS AND PLURALISM IN THE MODERN WORLD

The Qur'an set forth perennial principles of humane interfaith behaviour. For example, Qur'an 5:48 ends with the following words: "for every one of you did We appoint a law and a way, and if God had pleased God would have made you a single people, but that God might try you in what God gave you, therefore strive with one another to hasten to virtuous deeds; to God you will all return, so God will let you know that in which you differed." The Prophet Muhammad and other early leaders left Muslims with edifying examples of cooperative relations with religions other than Islam. Throughout history, Muslims have existed in dialogue with others. Whether the relationships have been productive or disastrous, Muslims have defined themselves in dialogue. They have always understood – and constructed – their "Islams" in a context of pluralism.¹⁴ This interfaith consciousness is particularly vital in contemporary North America.

There have been modern attempts at dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Canada going back at least to the visit to Canada by Maulana Muhammad 'Abdul 'Aleem Siddiqui, also known as al-Qadiri.¹⁵ Siddiqui was an Indian Sufi, born in 1892, who traveled extensively and made a trip to Canada in 1939.¹⁶ On his trip to Canada, Siddiqui spoke at the al-Rashid Mosque in Edmonton, the first mosque built in Canada, which had been opened in 1938. After speaking in Edmonton, Siddiqui travelled to Toronto, where he spoke "to a largely non-Muslim gathering."¹⁷

Some Canadian Muslim communities were dependent on support from Christians for early meeting facilities. For example, the first public prayer service in Ottawa (1963) was held in the basement of a Christian church.¹⁸ According to a former President of the Ottawa Muslim Association, “we have to acknowledge the help we got from Christians, especially the United Church.”¹⁹ Since 1980, the National Christian Muslim Liaison Committee has existed as an official vehicle of dialogue. Under the leadership of the largest Protestant denomination in Canada, the United Church of Canada, there have been a number of conferences and workshops on interfaith dialogue. Several useful resources have been produced as a result of these workshops.²⁰ This interfaith work also involves the attendance of non-Muslims at Muslim rituals and celebrations and the attendance of Muslims at non-Muslim religious ceremonies. The result is “Islams” that influence and in turn are influenced by the other traditions with which they come into contact.²¹ And as members of a minority religious tradition, Muslims in North America are aware of the dominant religious tradition, Christianity. While the majority tradition has not always had to be aware of the minority traditions in its midst (even that situation no doubt is changing because of our shrinking world), the minorities must always understand the majority culture in order to survive.

Muslim leaders in North America have made a number of comparisons between their communities and the Jewish communities. They appreciate the fact that the Jewish communities in North America have been able to build not just synagogues, but educational facilities and medical centers. Many Muslims want to match the success of the Jewish communities in North America with regard to creating public institutions as well as public support for their religious tradition.

Comparisons have also been made between Muslim and Catholic communities in North America. Catholics needed to survive as a minority in Protestant North America and to create their own educational, cultural, and medical facilities. Their success is seen as another model for Muslims to follow. Catholic-Muslim dialogue has received official support since the Second Vatican Council, and Muslims and Catholics have often spoken out in solidarity with each other at conferences around the world. Currently, Georgetown University in Washington, DC, a Catholic (Jesuit) institution, supports the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding.

Hartford Seminary in Connecticut is home to the Duncan Black Macdonald Center for Christian-Muslim Relations, and also publishes the academic journal *The Muslim World*. In June of 1990, the seminary organized an international conference entitled “Christian-Muslim Encounter: The Heritage of the Past and Present Intellectual Trends.” A very useful resource volume, *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, was produced as a result of that conference.²²

Because of the interfaith dialogue in Canadian cities such as Toronto, many non-Muslims are aware of some of the basic elements of Islam. By contrast,

American cities such as Los Angeles do not have the same level of interfaith dialogue. Having participated in interfaith dialogue in both cities, I find that in Los Angeles people ask me basic questions about Islam. By contrast, in Toronto, people have a basic knowledge and instead are interested in deeper questions.

There is also the issue of what some of the underlying assumptions of religious pluralism mean for Islamic theology in North America. Are we teaching things that are old news to our students or things that our students are not prepared to hear? As an example, when I say, "I have said Friday prayers in the Al-Aqsa Mosque and in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, and I have prayed in the sweat lodge in Manitoba with my Cree elders, and I do not think that Allah distinguishes between these prayers," I get some very interesting student reactions. Some want to hear more about each of these occasions. Some are genuinely interested in connections between Islam and the religious traditions of First Nations. Others are horrified that I have prayed with non-Muslims or that I have linked the lodge with the mosque.

Unfortunately, there are Muslims in North America and around the world who have no interest in pluralism. They see Islam as the only true religion, and often see their particular way of being Muslim as the only way to be Muslim. As a teacher, I often have Muslim students who are such zealous defenders of Islam. In hearing their rhetoric of intolerance, I think back to one of my own beloved teachers, Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith, one of the greatest North American scholars of Islam in the past century.

PLURALISM EXEMPLIFIED: THE CASE OF WILFRED CANTWELL SMITH

Professor Smith was, for many of us who study religion, the epitome of critical scholarship. From his deep knowledge, he was able to offer critique when it was needed. Of Professor Smith's scholarship, John Hick wrote, "An outstanding feature of Wilfred's work is that it is on the highest level of technical historical scholarship and yet it is at the same time driven by involvement in and concern for the worldwide human community, with a keen sense of the threatening disasters and the amazing possibilities before us. This human involvement goes back to his work in India before Partition and has continued ever since, as a constant thread running through all his writings."²³

Professor Smith was a committed Christian, who was deeply concerned about the issues facing Muslims. He was not a Muslim. He was not an apologist for Islam. Yet his critique never did violence to what it meant for other people to be Muslim. In *Islam in Modern History* he wrote, "A true Muslim, however, is not a man who believes in Islam especially Islam in history; but one who believes in God and is committed to the revelation through His Prophet."²⁴ Those words were published in 1957. In his 1963 book *The Meaning and End of Religion*, he continued "the essential tragedy of the modern Islamic world is the degree to which Muslims, instead of giving their allegiance to God, have been giving it to

something called Islam.”²⁵ Those words could have been written yesterday with equal force and validity.

Professor Smith has served as a shining example of the loftiest ideals of humanity and scholarship for me and many others. Like others of his Muslim students, I often felt that he was a better *muslim* (one who submits to God) than I was, a fact that inspired me more than I can express. As alluded to earlier in the comments by John Hick, Professor Smith and his wife Muriel spent six years as missionaries in Lahore before the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan. When we first met, he commented that he had lived in Lahore, my birthplace, longer than I had lived there, six years to my four. But Professor and Mrs Smith were no ordinary missionaries. I don't know that they ever converted one person, but I am sure that they taught and influenced thousands. And they were splendid representatives of the kind of Christianity that I came to know and love in Canada. Years ago, on a television show in Canada, I had the honour of sitting on a panel with the Very Reverend Dr Bruce McLeod, a former Moderator of the United Church of Canada. Dr McLeod told me a story about Professor Smith. Someone once asked him, “Professor Smith, are you a Christian?” After his characteristic pause, Professor Smith repeated the question, “Am I a Christian?” Then he answered, “Well, maybe I was, last week, at lunch, for about an hour. But if you really want to know, ask my neighbour.” For many of us who see ourselves as progressive Muslims, Professor Smith's comment captures our own various Islams. We strive to be Muslim, meaning that we live out our submission to God in a way that can be seen by those with whom we are in contact. Not that we put on a pretence for the benefit of others, but our lives are lived as an integrated whole, with no easy teasing out of our individual Islam from the poetry of our ordinary lives.

INTOLERANCE IN THE WORLD TODAY

It is not just some Muslims who are intolerant towards non-Muslims, but also non-Muslims who show callous disregard and ignorance about Islam in North America. At the beginning of the new millennium there was a rise in anti-Muslim polemic from certain Christian groups.²⁶ Franklin Graham, the son of evangelist Billy Graham, spoke of Islam as a “very evil and wicked religion.” Jerry Vines, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, labelled Muhammad a “demon-obsessed pedophile” (an odd remark if one remembers that the Jesus of the Gospels was particularly concerned with casting out demons). David Benke, a minister in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, was suspended for participating in an interfaith event, and was charged by his church that, “Instead of keeping God's name sacred and separate from every other name, it was made common as it was dragged to the level of Allah.” Much of this rhetoric came in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001. Although every major Muslim group in North America

was quick to condemn the attacks, this was not widely reported in the news media in the days after the attacks. Many individual Muslims took the initiative after the attacks to do interfaith dialogue for the first time, and speak to their friends and neighbours about Islam. Academics who study Islam were in great demand to address groups, large or small, across North America.²⁷

While North Americans learned a great deal about Islam and Muslims in the months after the attacks, there were also a number of horrible sentiments that were expressed by media pundits who had overnight become “experts” on Islam and Muslim communities. One of the few groups in the United States to immediately stand in solidarity with Muslims were Japanese Americans, many of whom were Christian. Having experienced racism and discrimination during their internment in the Second World War, Japanese Americans wanted to make sure that the same fate did not befall American Muslims.

What was immensely troubling was the anti-Muslim rhetoric from a number of American Jewish leaders. Naively, I expected American Jews, with their history of having faced persecution, oppression, and discrimination, to stand with Japanese Americans alongside Muslims. Instead, some of them used the turmoil over the terrorist attacks to further their own political agendas. In October, 2001, two different Jewish groups released studies about their estimates of the American Muslim population, usually thought to be at least six million by most researchers.²⁸ A study conducted for the American Jewish Committee estimated a population of between 1.4 and 2.8 million. The other study by researchers at the City University of New York estimated a population of 1.1 million adults and 650,000 children. To anyone that knows anything about the Muslim population in America, these figures were absurd. A respected scholar of American Islam, Fred Denny, estimated the American Muslim population in 1994 to be around 4.5 million.²⁹ Yvonne Haddad and Jane I. Smith, two of the leading scholars who have studied the American Muslim population over the past twenty-five years, have put the number in the same time period at, conservatively, three to four million.³⁰ Every statistical study undertaken points to the drastic and ongoing rise in the number of Muslims in America, owing to continued immigration, conversion, and large family size. It is reasonable to expect that the number of Muslims in America would thus continue to grow from the mid 1990s figures reported above. Indeed, the most recent report, conducted by the Council on American–Islamic Relations, puts the total number of Muslims in America at six to seven million.³¹ All of this data, conducted both by Muslim advocacy groups and independent members of the scholarly community, point to the inaccuracy of the American Jewish Committee report. This had nothing to do with objective scholarship, and everything to do with the politics of representation. That the sponsors released these studies shortly after September 11, with heightened discrimination against Muslims, was particularly problematic.

More troubling was the work of the Jewish Defence League, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), and the Middle East Forum, which sought to slander

American Muslim leaders. At the urging of the ADL, the *Washington Post* and Fox News both reported the following words from Dr Muzammil Siddiqi, the former President of the Islamic Society of North America, a year before the attacks: “America has to learn . . . Because if you remain on the side of injustice, the wrath of God will come.” Even allowing for the fact that the quotation was taken out of context, I could not see why these words were regarded as problematic, since American Christian leaders often refer to God’s judgment of nations and societies, including America itself. In context, the passage was even less offensive: “We want to reawaken the conscience of America. America has to learn that. Because if you remain on the side of injustice, the wrath of God will come. Please! Please all Americans, do you remember that Allah is watching everyone. If you continue doing injustice, and tolerating injustice, the wrath of God will come. But we want blessings for America. That’s why we want the conscience of America to be awakened and Americans to stand on the side of justice.”³²

Even sadder, a number of academics got into the act. In an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 8, 2002), Alan Wolfe wrote the following in a review of Diana Eck’s book *A New Religious America*: “Eck occasionally lapses into cheerleading; her chapter on Muslims, in particular, stresses the degree to which they ‘are increasingly engaged participants in the American pluralist experiment,’ giving scant attention along the way to those adherents to Islam who continue to believe that America is the Great Satan and who, even while living here, reject this country and its values.” Perhaps I am being biased here, for I consider Diana to be a colleague, and “cheerleading,” although a word held in high esteem by many Americans, is not one that I would use to describe her. But it is the second part of Wolfe’s sentence which is most troubling. First, I haven’t seen the U.S.A. referred to by North American Muslims as the “Great Satan” in years. Second he implies that there is an equivalency here, that as many Muslims reject America as embrace it. Certainly there are Muslims – as well as those of other religious traditions – in America who don’t see themselves as participants in pluralistic American society, but these represent a tiny percentage of American Muslims. Wolfe neglects to mention that a great many Muslims emigrated to America precisely because they wanted to live in a pluralistic and democratic society where they could succeed on their own merits. Abraham Verghese describes with his characteristic brilliance the situation of a young Indian intern seeking a visa to come to America. When asked by the visa officer the real reason why he wants to come to America, the intern speaks the words below, which could easily come from the mouths of countless American Muslims:

Vadivel, who had held on to his American dream for so long that he could speak with the passion of a visionary, said, “Sir, craving your indulgence, I want to train in a decent, ten-storey hospital where the lifts

are actually working. I want to pass board-certification exams by my own merit and not through pull or bribes. I want to become a wonderful doctor, practice real medicine, pay taxes, make a good living, drive a big car on decent roads, and eventually live in the Ansel Adams section of New Mexico and never come back to this wretched town, where doctors are as numerous as fleas and practice is cutthroat, and where the air outside is not even fit to breathe.” The consul gave him a visa.³³

It is important to remember that the vast majority of Muslims in North America are immigrants or the children of immigrants. They – we – came to North America precisely because of the opportunities that were available here and not available, for whatever reason, in the country of origin.

A month after the September 11 attacks, while watching television, I came across Pat Robertson on the Christian Broadcasting Network doing a segment on Christians in Pakistan. He too spoke about Islam as a “dangerous religion,” and re-visited his comments from some years earlier that there was something wrong with any American, particularly an African-American, who would convert from Christianity to Islam. He then went on to speak about the superiority of Christianity, especially with regard to what he saw as violence in Islam as contrasted with peace in Christianity.

Along with other Muslim and non-Muslim academics who teach Islam, I have received emails since September 2001 from colleagues who teach at institutions across the United States who have talked about the rise in anti-Muslim rhetoric from certain Christian groups. And I have seen glimpses of this during my talks. At one of the many churches at which I spoke, one of the audience members asked me why I thought I worshipped the same God that he worshipped. He mentioned to me that his minister had taught him that Muslims worshipped a different god than the One God worshipped by Jews and Christians. And having heard from his minister what Muslims believed, no argument from me, a believing Muslim, could persuade him otherwise.

After the attacks, there was a remarkable flow of magazine and newspaper articles, television and radio programs, websites, books, and lectures discussing Islam and Muslims. A tremendous number of opportunities were created for interfaith dialogue, particularly for those who had never participated. The question remains: what models of religious pluralism can we call upon today to guide us through these opportunities for dialogue?

THE WORLD TODAY, AND THE URGENT NEED FOR PLURALISM

In the United States and Canada, there have been tensions since 2001 between Jewish and Muslim communities, typically over Israeli–Palestinian relations. In cities such as Los Angeles, formal dialogue broke down between Muslim and Jewish groups, although individual Muslims and Jews continue to engage in

dialogue. Some Jewish groups have removed themselves from Christian–Jewish dialogue when that dialogue has become critical of Israeli colonization of Palestine. For example, in April 2002 the Canadian Jewish Congress withdrew as a partner in the Canadian Christian Jewish Consultation, which is composed of representatives of Canadian churches including the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, the United, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Lutheran Churches, and representatives of the Canadian Jewish Congress. With the typical concern for social justice that is a hallmark of the United Church of Canada, they wrote in response that “It is our conviction that there will be no peaceful solution that does not guarantee both peoples, Palestinians and Israelis, the right to exist in security and freedom in their own states. It is clear that no military solution can bring about peace. This means that any peaceful solution must be negotiated and built on the framework of international law. The resolution of the illegal occupation of Palestine by Israel must be addressed in any movement towards peace.”³⁴

In the Qur’an, Muslims are continually reminded of their relationship with the “People of the Book” (*ahl al-kitab*). The People of the Book are those who have received an earlier revelation from God; the term is understood by most Muslims to refer to Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. The Qur’an allows Muslims and the People of the Book to eat together and to intermarry:

This day the good things are allowed to you; and the food of those who have been given the Book is lawful for you and your food is lawful for them; and the chaste from among the believing women and the chaste from among those who have been given the Book before you; when you have given them their dowries, taking [them] in marriage, not fornicating nor taking them for secret concubines.

(Qur’an 5:5)

There is an understanding in the Qur’an of a peaceful co-existence that comes from a common revelation and a common God: “And argue not with the People of the Book unless it be in [a way] that is better, except with such of them as do wrong; and say: We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you; our God and your God is One, and to God do we surrender” (29:46).

Admittedly, there is a difference in dialogue and relationships with those other than Jews and Christians. As Islam is a strictly monotheistic religion, Muslims believe that the most grievous sin is polytheism, or associating others with God. And Muslims have often had strained or hostile relationships with polytheists and atheists. However, there has also been co-existence as well. The country with the most number of Muslims is Indonesia, where the dominant religious traditions before Islam were Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as indigenous traditions and Dutch Christianity. There was no wholesale slaughter of “pagans” by the Muslims who spread Islam in Indonesia. Another country that has a large number of Muslims is India. There are political tensions both

within India and between India and Pakistan. “Communalism” is the name that is given to the politics of sectarian hatred in India. However, much of the violence between Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians in India is an example of religion being used as a powerful political symbol and force. Much like in the “troubles” in Northern Ireland, demagogues and other power-hungry political figures use religion to incite people against each other. If one looks at the cultures of North India, one finds great similarities between Hindus and Muslims in terms of dance, music, food, movies, ritual, attachment to family, worship, and notions of a just civil life.

The Qur’an repeatedly uses the word *kufir*, which is often translated as “unbelief,” with *kafir* as the word for an unbeliever. While this term is often contrasted with belief in the Qur’an, it is also contrasted with the word *shukr*, or “thankfulness.” A *kafir*, then, is not simply one who does not believe, but also one who is not thankful to God. To be sure, some Muslims have often assumed the prerogative of God and presumed who is a *kafir* and who is not. But there is nothing uniquely “Islamic” in this: Christians, for example, have killed those who were considered “heretics” or “pagans.” However, the stereotype still persists of Christianity being a religion of peace and love, while Islam is seen as a religion of war and violence – as if the term “holy war” were not used by Christians for centuries.

In many ways, North American Muslims are in a position to influence what happens in the rest of the Muslim world. In countries where Muslims are in the majority, there are often restrictions and sometimes persecutions of other religious traditions. One thinks, for example, of the Baha’is in Iran or the Christians in Pakistan. It is North American Muslims who can show their co-religionists an example of the religious tolerance that occurs in North America. One can exist safely and securely as a Muslim, free to practice as a Muslim, without having to convert or torment one’s non-Muslim neighbors (or, for that matter, those Muslims who aren’t “Muslim enough” for the self-righteous). In order to properly do interfaith dialogue, one must have not only a deep understanding of one’s own faith, but an understanding and appreciation of the faith of the dialogue partner. This can be done only in a pluralistic context, where it is possible to have a deep knowledge of more than one faith. Accepting pluralism is a sign of firm faith and confidence, not a sign of doubt. We North American Muslims need to commit ourselves to pluralism, not because we have to but because we should. It is part of the vision imparted to us by the Qur’an and the example of the Prophet.

North American Muslims can also be an example to other Muslims by taking the lead in dialogue among various Muslim groups. All too often, this is a neglected aspect of religious dialogue. In Toronto, I as a Sunni had the profound privilege of performing the Friday afternoon prayer side by side with a Shi’i colleague, the prayers being led by a Bosnian imam, in a mosque built by Albanians. In other parts of the Muslim world, for example in Pakistan, there is

sometimes sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shi'is. North American Muslims can also take the lead in dialogue with Hindu or Jewish groups. In so doing, perhaps we can help toward resolving the conflicts in India and Pakistan and in Israel and Palestine.

It is important for progressive Muslims and Muslim communities in general to return to the pluralistic vision of the Qur'an, and establish cooperative relations with other religious communities, particularly at this time. There are a great many negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims, and it is only through dialogue that these will, slowly, be dismantled. And of course dialogue is also necessary for Muslims to learn about the beliefs of those around them. It is easy to be taught to hate Christians or Jews (as for example tragically occurs in Saudi Arabia) if there are few actual Christians or Jews in one's country. In the pluralistic context of North America, it is a very different matter. The stereotypes that one may have learned, for example that Christians worship three gods and are therefore polytheistic, fall away when one is invited to a Christian worship service and realizes that it is the same One God who is being praised and worshipped.

The Qur'an is clear that God could have created people with no differences among them, but that God chose not to do so: "If your Lord had so willed it, your Lord would have made humanity one people, but they will not cease to dispute" (11:118). God speaks to us in the Qur'an about God willing our differences and our disputes. Our differences (and ensuing disputes) are not to be feared, denied, or eradicated. God teaches us through our differences. It is through dialogue that we learn about ourselves, about others, and, in so doing, perhaps also about God:

We have made some of these messengers to excel the others; among them are they to whom God spoke, and some of them God exalted by rank. And We gave clear miracles to Jesus the son of Mary, and strengthened him with the holy spirit.

If God had pleased, those after them would not have fought one with another after clear arguments had come to them, but they disagreed; so there were some of them who believed and others who denied. And if God had pleased, they would not have fought one with another, but God brings about what God intends.

(Qur'an 2:253)

ENDNOTES

1. For Patrice Brodeur and Farid Esack, my brothers in submission and dialogue. And to the blessed memories of my wife, Shannon L. Hamm, and my teacher, Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who introduced me to interfaith dialogue in, respectively, my personal and professional life. Thanks to Michel Desjardins and Pat Nichelson for their comments

on various drafts of this chapter, and for their continued attempts to teach me the craft of writing. My thanks also to the United Church of Canada and its members for showing me the true meaning of ecumenical: “of the inhabited earth.”

2. The above is based on Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a Christian Country Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperSan-Francisco, 2001), 70–1.
3. For a recent assessment of the Muslim community in America, see Jane I. Smith, *Islam in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
4. For a traditional Muslim understanding of this emigration, see Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1983), 81–4. For an account of this story by a secular historian, see F.E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 173–6.
5. On this verse as it relates to the question of abrogation of verses from the Qur'an, see Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 254–9.
6. Translation from Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 2001), 124.
7. See his *Qur'an: Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997).
8. In a tongue-in-cheek comment, a historian friend has talked about the fallacy of this myth: owing to the Semitic notion of ritual purity, many Muslims do not hold the sacred scripture of the Qur'an with their left hand, since the left hand is reserved for cleansing oneself. If there were an army of Muslims with the Qur'an in one hand and a sword in the other, they would all have had the Qur'an in the right hand and the sword in the left. No doubt the vision of an entire left-handed army is enough to give the lie to that myth. Furthermore, manuscripts of the Qur'an were far too rare (owing to the low rate of literacy) for every soldier to have had his own copy of the sacred text.
9. See Richard W. Bulliet, *Islam: The View from the Edge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 39. For a more detailed account see Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), or Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi, eds, *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990).
10. For an excellent, succinct chapter on Baghdad as well as other key cities in Muslim civilization, see Kenneth Cragg and R. Marston Speight, *The House of Islam*, 3rd edn (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1988), 86–110.
11. For more on Al-Andalus, see María Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002).
12. Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1960; reprint, Oxford: Oneworld, 1997).
13. For an image of this painting, and a further discussion of the link between Thomas Aquinas and Ibn Rushd, see Majid Fakhry, “Philosophy and History,” in *The Genius of Arab Civilizations: Source of Renaissance*, 2nd edn (London: Eurabia, 1983), 55–76.
14. I use “Islams” in the plural rather than “Islam” in the singular as there are multiple ways of being Muslim in any given context.
15. Siddiq Osman Noormuhammad, “The Sufi Tradition in Toronto,” originally published in *Message International*, 19(6), 1995. This article was expanded and updated in 1999, and is available on the web at <http://muslim-canada.org/sufi/toronto.htm>
16. A short biography of him exists on the web at http://members.tripod.com/~wim_canada/aleem.html
17. <http://muslim-canada.org/sufi/toronto.htm>.
18. Zulf M. Khalfan, “Ottawa Muslims: Growing Pains,” *Islamic Horizons*, 24(3) 1995, 38.
19. *Ibid.*

20. For examples, see Susan L. Scott, ed., *Stories in my Neighbour's Faith: Narratives from World Religions in Canada* (Toronto: United Church, 1999); *Faith in My Neighbour. World Religions in Canada: An Introduction* (Toronto: United Church, 1994); and *Stories of Interfaith Families: A Resource for Families and Congregations* (Toronto: United Church, 1994).
21. For an example of this, see Amir Hussain, "Shannon's Song," in *Stories in my Neighbour's Faith*, 101–6. Another example in the same collection is Zohra Husaini's "The Tragedy of Karbala," where on page 31 she connects Imam Hussain with Jesus and Karbala with Calvary.
22. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Wadi Z. Haddad, eds, *Christian–Muslim Encounters* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995).
23. John Hick, "On Wilfred Cantwell Smith: His Place in the Study of Religion," in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 4 (1–2), 1992, 5.
24. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 146.
25. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1963; reprinted, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 126.
26. See the commentary by Nicholas Kristof, "Bigotry in Islam – and Here," *New York Times*, July 9, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/09/opinion/09KRIS.html>.
27. An excellent web resource was created by Omid Safi, available at <http://groups.colgate.edu/aarislam/response.htm>. All of us who teach Islam in North America are indebted to Omid for creating and maintaining this site.
28. For more information about these two studies and the controversy, see Teresa Watanabe, "Muslim Population Inflated, Studies Find," *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 2001, A23.
29. Frederick Denny, *An Introduction to Islam*, 2nd edn (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 364.
30. Yvonne Haddad and Jane I. Smith, "United States of America," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), vol. 4, 277.
31. Council on American–Islamic Relations, "The Mosque in America," http://www.cair-net.org/mosquereport/Masjid_Study_Project_2000_Report.pdf.
32. Quotes taken from Solomon Moore, "Fiery Words, Disputed Meaning," *Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 2001, B20.
33. Abraham Verghese, "The Cowpath to America," *New Yorker*, June 23–30, 1997, 74–7.
34. From the website of the United Church of Canada, at <http://www.united-church.ca/news/2002/0410.htm>.