Truth over Fear

Combating the Lies about Islam

CHARLES KIMBALL

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> The world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.
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Confusion and Fear of Islam Rises at the End of the Twentieth Century

Christians and Muslims have traveled a long, often circuitous and bumpy road together for more than fourteen centuries. In the latter half of the twentieth century, several unsettling and confusing developments served to heighten fear and confusion about Muslims and Islam among non-Muslims in the West. A brief overview helps us comprehend why the anti-Islamic pronouncements by political, religious, and media figures have found such a receptive audience.

The 1979 Iranian revolution and subsequent 444-day hostage crisis was a major turning point. This unexpected revolution sent jarring shock waves throughout the Middle East and around the world. On December 31, 1977, President Jimmy Carter boldly declared Iran to be "an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world." He then praised the Shah of Iran "for your leadership and the great respect, admiration, and love which your people give to you."[1] Less than a year later, over 90 percent

of the Iranian people rose up to oust the Shah. Iran, geographically situated in the soft underbelly of the former Soviet Union, was so intimately connected to the U.S. that former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger famously called the Shah "the rarest of leaders, an unconditional ally."[2] If a leader fully backed by a superpower, a man with phenomenal wealth, a state-of-the art military, and a brutal secret police could be toppled by a popular, nonviolent revolution where millions took to the streets and their rooftops to declare "*Allahu akbar!*" (God is most great!), how secure could any other dictatorial or hereditary leader be? Their fear that the Iranian revolution might spread led leaders in Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and other countries to support Iraq and its brutal dictator, Saddam Hussein, throughout the decade-long Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. While many groups combined in opposition to the Shah, the Ayatollah Khomeini became the public face of the revolution, and his faction won out in the subsequent struggle for power in the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran. The massive influence of Ayatollah Khomeini led *Time* magazine to name him "Man of the Year" for 1979. The image of Khomeini on the cover of *Time* on January 7, 1980, looks somewhat demonic. He was becoming the face of a religion to be feared.

Ironically, the United States' position on Muslim revolutionaries in Iran's neighboring country, Afghanistan, was quite different. There the principle that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" guided the policy and rhetoric. The *mujahidin* (revolutionary Islamic fighters) in Afghanistan were opposing the then-Soviet-backed regime while Soviet troops occupied the country. In a broadcast seen around the world, President Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, was shown holding up a rifle as he stood in rugged terrain among the Afghan "freedom fighters," declaring that theirs was a just cause and God was on their side. Usama bin Ladin was one of the leaders who had traveled to Afghanistan to join in this fight against Soviet forces. Years later, of course, the same people whom the U.S. supported in their revolutionary struggle against the Soviets became the leaders of the Taliban and al-Qaida.

The Iran hostage crisis launched a new era of intensive media coverage. In the pre-cable television era, the traditional thirty-minute evening news programs on ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS strained to cover the intense drama of the hostage crisis. ABC News then launched a new nightly program on November 8, 1979, just four days after the U.S. embassy in Tehran was taken over by student militants. Initially called "The Iran Crisis: America Held Hostage," the Monday through Friday nightly program drew large audiences. The program was subsequently renamed *Nightline*. After the hostages were released, *Nightline* remained in the 11:30 p.m. EST time slot. Since I was involved directly in the Iranian hostage drama, I followed events very closely. I vividly recall when executives at ABC announced that they would continue the *Nightline* program when the hostage crisis was over. When asked about the decision, two key points were cited. *Nightline* was the first ABC program to compete effectively for viewers at the 11:30 p.m. EST time slot where Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* dominated. A second rationale was the conviction that there would be a crisis somewhere in the world that will require in-depth reporting. A new era was dawning as short local and national news programs were being supplemented by extended coverage of whatever was most dramatic and sensational on a given day. Today, the explosion of media outlets with multiple 24/7 news channels and social media enabled by the Internet has changed the situation in ways that were unimaginable forty years ago. One mantra still dictates priorities: "If it bleeds, it leads."

The 1980s and 1990s saw a small, but growing number of revolutionary groups and militant extremists emerge in several countries; some periodically attacked U.S. embassies in Lebanon, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia and also the USS *Cole* off the coast of Yemen. During this time groups like Hizbullah (Party of God) in Lebanon and HAMAS (Islamic Resistance Movement) in Gaza received a great deal of attention in the Western press as the militant military branches of the unofficial governments within governments combined defiant proclamations with stepped-up attacks on Israeli forces occupying their lands. The terrifying

pictures in the aftermath of car bombs, suicide attackers, or explosives placed on buses or in crowded marketplaces—especially in Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, and years later in Iraq—understandably stoked already-existing fears and perceptions about forces at work within Muslim-majority countries.

In February of 1993, the context shifted to New York City when an extremist group headed by the blind Egyptian cleric Umar Abdul Rahman attempted to bomb the World Trade Center. While this assault was largely unsuccessful, the fact that it occurred in the U.S. set off a new alarm. Eight years later came the stunning terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

The high visibility of al-Qaida and the emergence of other extremist groups like ISIS (The Islamic State in Syria/Iraq; sometimes called ISIL, The Islamic State in the Levant), al-Shabab (meaning "The Youth," a group aligned with al-Qaida) in Somalia, and Boko Haram (meaning "Westernization is forbidden," a branch of ISIS) in Nigeria further served to connect extremism with Islam in the minds of many. People identified as representatives of these and other groups perpetrated deplorable acts both to call attention to their cause and to create fear and hysteria locally and beyond. While a few connections exist between these groups, each has been shaped by its own local context and history. Other despicable and gruesome images reported after attacks in European cities further reinforce the generic linking of Islam with violence: small groups of extremists placing bombs on London subways and buses; the mass murder of concertgoers in Paris and hapless passengers at the international airport in Brussels; and the horrifying attacks by so-called lone wolves who deliberately drive trucks or cars into crowds of unsuspecting civilians.

While these and other militant groups represent a small fraction on the fringes of self-identifying Muslims, their various deplorable actions consistently receive the massive media attention that terrorists and extremists always seek. Such groups cannot be ignored or dismissed. They are part of the larger picture and represent real and present dangers both to those who are

nearby and to the wider world community. No one knows with certainty how many violent extremists exist among the world's 1.7+ billion Muslims. Even if that number were 500,000 or one million, that is far less than 1 percent. And yet, as the nineteen people who hijacked four planes on 9/11 made clear, it doesn't take many people to do great harm.

The Muslim Brotherhood is a large organization with several branches, each possessing its own history and character. It emerged during the past century as a reformist group in Egypt, the Sudan, Jordan, and Syria. For many Americans, the Muslim Brotherhood has become shorthand for those who long to see Islam as the basis for government in their countries. While the Muslim Brotherhood neither explains nor accounts for many of the actions connected with the groups noted above, it has had profound influence, particularly through the writings of Sayyid Qutb (Quṭb),[3] one of the Brotherhood's key figures. Qutb's experiences in the U.S. produced a strong revulsion for Western decadence. This was combined with a deep disdain for the corrupt leaders in Egypt and other Muslim-majority countries and led him to develop a blueprint for reform, including the use of violence if necessary. The large majority of Muslim Brothers advocate gradual political change by working through existing systems. But some—from the leaders of al-Jihad, the group that assassinated Anwar Sadat, to Usama bin Ladin and his successor, the Egyptian physician Ayman al-Zawahiri—initially found their justification for violence in the work of Sayyid Qutb.

It is understandable how many otherwise well-intentioned non-Muslims have embraced simplistic, stereotypical images of Islam and Muslims. Inundated with images from the Iran hostage crisis and Hizbullah's war against Israel to the al-Qaida-led attacks on 9/11 and the gruesome decapitation of Western hostages by ISIS murderers on YouTube, many are susceptible to a view that lumps all of this together as though these are somehow one and the same thing. By 2010, growing generic fear of Islam in the U.S. prompted *Time* magazine to run a cover story posing this question: "Is America Islamophobic?" In broad terms, the answer to that question is clear: "Yes!"

Politicians and Preachers Reinforce Islamophobia

One of the most memorable ways Donald Trump grabbed the media spotlight in his campaign for the presidency occurred on December 7, 2015. Trump released a statement and then read it publicly. He called for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what the hell is going on." He went on to say, "We have no choice," and emphasized that "we must look at mosques" because "there is anger within them." The reaction to this pronouncement was swift and strong from many quarters, but it didn't dissuade Trump as he apparently believed his prescriptions were politically advantageous. The *New York Times* reported that his earlier calls for a database to track Muslims in America and his repeated citations of the discredited rumors that "thousands of Muslims in New Jersey celebrated on 9/11" had boosted his poll numbers.[4]

Within a week after taking the oath of office, President Trump issued an Executive Order titled "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States." This action prompted tens of thousands of protesters to take to the streets, gather at airports across the country, and demonstrate in front of the offices of Homeland Security.[5] The action was widely perceived, sharply criticized, and initially struck down in court as an intentional ban on Muslims. This set off a yearlong court battle including refinements and appeals designed to stay within the letter of the law on when the exercise of presidential authority and the constitutional mandates were at odds.

On November 27, 2017, Trump casually and impulsively disseminated an anti-Islamic communication that engendered immediate and sharply critical reactions on an international scale. On that day, he re-tweeted three anti-Muslim videos produced by Britain First, a well-known far-right hate group in England. At the time, Trump had some 44 million daily followers on Twitter. The first video claimed to show a Muslim migrant beating up a Dutch boy on crutches. The second was labeled "Muslim destroys a statue of the Virgin Mary." The third read, "Islamist

mob pushes teenage boy off roof and beats him to death." At the time of the tweet, all three videos had been proved to be either misleading or untruthful. Within twenty-four hours, British Prime Minister Theresa May issued a strong rebuke of Trump for having re-tweeted vile and false materials from a well-known hate group. The Archbishop of Canterbury also communicated his dismay at Trump's "deeply disturbing" decision to amplify the voices of far-right extremists and called on the president to make clear his opposition to racism and hatred in all forms. London's mayor, Sadiq Khan, also denounced Britain First as "a vile, hate-fueled organization whose views should be condemned, not amplified." Khan joined with several members of the government in calling on the prime minister to rescind the invitation for Trump to come to the UK in 2018.[6]

Other high-profile political figures like Mike Huckabee, the former Arkansas governor and two-time presidential candidate, and Newt Gingrich, the former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, have made uninformed and derogatory public pronouncements about Islam. On his national radio program in 2013, for instance, Huckabee prefaced inflammatory remarks by declaring, "[It is] politically incorrect to say anything unkind about Islam." Huckabee then said this:

> Can someone explain to me why it is that we tiptoe around a religion that promotes the most murderous mayhem on the planet in their so-called "holiest days"? . . . Muslims will go to the mosque, and they will have their day of prayer, and they come out of there like uncorked animals—throwing rocks and burning cars.[7]

In the aftermath of a terrorist attack that killed eighty-four people in Nice, France, Newt Gingrich proposed a "test" for every Muslim and then advocated deportation for all who believe in Sharia. Gingrich apparently had no idea what Sharia is or how observant Muslims naturally seek to follow Islamic law in their personal lives. No matter, his clarion call had the desired effect by painting Muslims with a broad brush.[8]

Employing Sharia as a buzzword is often in plain sight. On March 9, 2019, for example, prominent FOX News host Jeanine Pirro suggested adherence to Sharia is antithetical to the U.S. Constitution. Her tirade focused on the U.S. Representative from Minnesota, Ilhan Omar, one of the first two Muslim women elected to Congress. Pirro began her popular television program, *Justice with Judge Jeanine*, with these words:

> Omar wears a hijab, which, according to the Koran 33:59, tells women to cover so they won't get molested. Is her adherence to this Islamic doctrine indicative of her adherence to Sharia law, which in itself is antithetical to the United States Constitution?[9]

Think for a moment. Orthodox Jewish women wear a head covering. When I was growing up, Catholic nuns universally wore head coverings as part of their habit. Would anyone suggest that nuns or Orthodox Jewish women following their religious convictions with attire that included head covering were somehow automatically against the U.S. Constitution?

There are many more pronouncements by these and numerous other political leaders. In the 2018 special election for an open U.S. Senate seat in Alabama, for instance, Roy Moore, the Republican candidate and former Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, declared that Muslims should not be allowed to be seated in the U.S. Congress because they have to take the oath of office on a Christian Bible. In fact, no one has to take the oath on a Christian Bible. Four years earlier, Moore opined: "The Islamic faith rejects our God and believes that the state must mandate the worship of their own god, Allah." Again, both assertions are wildly incorrect.[10] Or consider an outspoken legislator in my home state of Oklahoma. Representative John Bennett from Sallisaw repeatedly grabbed local headlines with his frequent attacks on Islam. In 2014 his deplorable words drew national attention when he identified Islam as a "cancer that has to be cut out from our midst" and advocated closing all the mosques.[11] The list of local, state, and national politicians spouting anti-Islamic rhetoric

goes on and on, as any Internet search will quickly demonstrate. It remains a mystery how such hostility toward Islam and Muslims can be squared with the cherished values of religious freedom and the clear mandate in Article 6 of the U.S. Constitution: "No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States."

Scores of Christian leaders with television ministries or high visibility, such as Franklin Graham, the son of the late Billy Graham, the legendary evangelist, regularly denounce Islam. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Franklin Graham called Islam "wicked and evil." He decried the Qur'an for instructing Muslims to kill non-Muslims, adding, "I don't believe this is a wonderful, peaceful religion."[12] As Graham has traveled and spoken in Europe and Africa over many years, he has continually spurred controversy and opposition for his criticism of Islam.

The list of anti-Islamic preachers is long. The Rev. Jerry Vines, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and longtime pastor of First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida, is a prime example. In a widely publicized speech to several thousand gathered for the Pastors' Conference prior to the annual SBC Convention in St. Louis in 2002, Vines declared the following:

> Pluralists would have us to believe that Islam is just as good as Christianity, but I'm here to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that Islam is not just as good as Christianity. Islam was founded by Muhammad, a demon-possessed pedophile who had 12 wives. . . . And I will tell you Allah is not Jehovah either. Jehovah's not going to turn you into a terrorist that'll try to bomb people and take the lives of thousands and thousands of people.[13]

Jerry Vines is one of many Protestant leaders who identify as evangelicals and denounce Islam and Muslims harshly. The most prominent and influential clergy with national audiences include the Rev. Pat Robertson, Pastor John Hagee, the Rev. Robert Jeffress, and the Rev. Jerry Falwell Jr.[14] If one tunes in religious broadcasting on television or does an Internet search linking any

of these names with Islam, it won't take long before the vitriol directed at Islam and Muslims is manifest.

The Rev. Rod Parsley, senior pastor of the World Harvest Church in Columbus, Ohio, has a large weekly national television audience. He's well known for his diatribes against the media, the judiciary, and homosexuality. His written and verbal pronouncements related to Islam are as inaccurate as they are incendiary. In his book *Silent No More: Bringing Moral Clarity to America . . . While Freedom Still Rings*, Parsley includes a chapter titled "Islam: The Deception of Allah." Assuming the mantle of a knowledgeable teacher, he refers to this chapter as a course in Islam 101. Parsley repeatedly declares that Allah is a "demon spirit" and mocks the Five Pillars of Islam. He ridicules Muslims and asserts that the real goal Muslims seek is nothing less than world domination. While Parsley weaves a great deal of political advocacy into his sermons, his pronouncements related to Muslims and Islam—like those of many other Protestant evangelicals—appear to be driven by a narrow fundamentalist theology. He may be ignorant or uninformed, but he is never in doubt.[15]

A more curious but profoundly disturbing and influential critique of Muhammad and Islam came from Pope Benedict XVI not long after he was elevated to be the most visible representative of Christianity in the world. In a broadly disseminated prepared speech at the University of Regensburg in Germany in September 2006, the pontiff cited a fourteenth-century Byzantine emperor's disdainful comments about Muhammad: "Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."[16]

The way by which Pope Benedict XVI quoted this critique of Muhammad was widely interpreted as an endorsement of a dominant view espoused by Western European Christians for many centuries. The international response of Muslims and many Christians was swift and unambiguous. Rather than simply decry the bias and bigotry manifest in the kinds of pronouncements by politicians and preachers noted above, this time thoughtful Muslim leaders endeavored to use the controversy for a teachable moment.

Constructive Religious and Pragmatic Responses to Islamophobia

Thirty-eight prominent Muslim leaders responded to Pope Benedict XVI's speech by cosigning a letter to him one month after the controversy erupted. Their initiative was much appreciated as a constructive act. It launched a hopeful movement. One year later, 138 Muslim leaders—well known Muftis (Islamic judges), academics, intellectuals, and government officials—released a statement in order to promote constructive relationships in the aftermath of the pope's speech. The letter, "A Common Word between Us and You," expressed these foundational convictions upon which Christian-Muslim relations should be built:

> Muslims and Christians together make up well over half the world's population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians. . . . The basis for this peace and understanding already exists. It is part of the very foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God, and love of the neighbor. These principles are found over and over again in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity. . . . With the terrible weaponry of the modern world, with Muslims and Christians intertwined everywhere as never before, no side can unilaterally win a conflict between more than half the world's inhabitants. Thus our common future is at stake. The very survival of the world itself is perhaps at stake.[17]

This effort effectively mirrored the inclusive vision exemplified by the pontiff's predecessor, Pope John Paul II. We will return to John Paul II and the positive interfaith initiatives in the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II in chapter 5 below. Following the release of "A Common Word," Christian leaders and scholars around the world publicly responded approvingly to the Muslim initiative. In the U.S., more than three hundred Christian leaders

visibly endorsed a letter published as a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* on November 18, 2007, with this title: "Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to a Common Word between You and Us." The open letter affirms vital ways Christians and Muslims contribute to world peace. It also confirms the love for God and love toward one's neighbors as foundational teachings at the heart of both religions. The statement concludes with a pledge to support Christian-Muslim dialogue at every level.

Both "A Common Word" and "Loving God and Neighbor Together" appeal to theological and pragmatic reasons for charting a better way forward into a precarious future. Whether or not one is personally religious, the future requires better understanding and cooperation between adherents of the world's two largest religions. As the declaration above puts it succinctly, "Our common future is at stake. The very survival of the world itself is perhaps at stake." This strong warning underscores the precarious context articulated above. In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, we are in uncharted territory. Danger lurks at every turn as even small numbers of people are capable of doing great harm, and numerous flashpoints are evident in our all too quarrelsome human family. To make matters much worse, influential, religious, and political zealots and opportunists continue to fan the flames of fear, mistrust, and antipathy.

The challenges we face today are local as well as national and global. In the United States today, every city of 100,000 or more is literally a microcosm of the world. You'll find every type of Christian, Jew, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Taoist, practitioner of Shinto, along with Native Americans, pagans, agnostics, atheists, and so on. Near the end of the semester in my classes on comparative religion, I have students go out in groups of three to find and interview people who self-identify as adherents within one of the religions (besides Christianity) we have studied. Some are puzzled as to where to look for Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, or others to interview. I tell them to figure it out, and they do. When they open their eyes, they find Buddhists running Chinese restaurants and students of various

backgrounds in their dorms, or they think to contact the mosque and ask to come to visit. Inevitably, several groups will be invited into the homes of a Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu family. When the groups come back to present 20–25-minute reports on what they've learned, similar things happen every semester. They discover the same mixes of believers—some devout, some marginal—as they know exist within their own religious communities. They discover human beings with families who have the same hopes, dreams, and concerns as most people. Many have more challenges because they are in minority religious communities in a society predisposed to accommodate Christian traditions predominately. Often the Muslims they interview share concerns about the hostility and mistreatment they and their friends sometimes experience in the otherwise mundane course of daily events. The whole process is eye-opening for the class as they discover that Norman, Oklahoma, is literally teeming with religious diversity. The whole world is right here. They begin to realize that religious pluralism will be the reality of their world whether they enter some form of business, pursue a medical career, get actively involved with the PTA, or take part in almost any type of community activity.

Both "A Common Word" and "Loving God and Neighbor Together" reflect the awareness of our common humanity that the celebrated scholar and churchman Wilfred Cantwell Smith envisioned well over half a century ago. Smith, a university professor at Harvard, was a prolific historian of religion with specialization in Islamic studies. He was also an ordained minister in the United Church of Canada. In a 1959 essay on methodology in the comparative study of religion, Smith foresaw the way honest educational efforts could and should merge with the priorities of churches in the decades ahead:

> The traditional form of Western scholarship . . . was that of an impersonal presentation of an "it." The first great innovation in recent times has been the personalization of the faiths observed, so that one finds a discussion of a "they." Presently, the observer becomes personally involved, so that

> the situation is one of a "we" talking about a "they." The next step is a dialogue, where "we" talk to "you." The culmination of the process is when "we all" are talking *with* each other about "us."[18]

Biblical Mandates to Guide Christians Engaging with Muslims

Shortly after I began doctoral study in comparative religion, I had the good fortune of developing a friendship with the dean of Harvard Divinity School, Krister Stendahl. He was a world-renowned New Testament scholar and an active leader in the Lutheran Church. Some years later, after he retired from his academic post, he returned to his native Sweden to serve as the Lutheran bishop in Stockholm. Stendahl was particularly pleased that I, as an ordained Baptist minister, was pursuing a doctorate in comparative religion with specialization in Islamic studies and Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations. I shared details about my paternal Jewish grandfather and the large portion of my extended family being Jewish. We talked about my academic and personal fascination with theological options to understand Christian particularity and religious pluralism. He strongly agreed with my conviction that the newly emerging Christian-Muslim dialogue initiatives in the Vatican and World Council of Churches could be increasingly important in coming years. Stendahl also expressed concern for how few Christians were serious students of Islam.

During my first year of doctoral work, Dean Stendahl gave me the great gift of affirmation both for my commitment to serious academic study of world religions and for my sense of Christian vocation focused on a teaching ministry. On one vividly memorable day, Stendahl articulated why he was so supportive and affirming. He said, "You are pursuing a path that more and more people of faith must pursue if Christians are going to be true to the biblical mandates we claim." When I asked for clarification, he provided a minilecture (or sermon, really) on the three biblical mandates to guide interfaith relationships (and all

other types of relationships, too). I share with you the simple, straightforward, and compelling biblical guidance he shared with me that day.

First, the ninth of the Ten Commandments states clearly, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). How, Stendahl asked, is it possible to avoid speaking unfairly, deceptively, unjustly, or in a harmful prejudicial way about one's neighbor when you don't know your neighbor or what she or he believes? We must always seek to know and understand our neighbors accurately and fairly, whether or not we agree with them on a given issue. Fair and honest study of Islam is a step in the right direction of not bearing false witness out of ignorance or prejudice.

Second, the Gospel of Matthew recounts a riveting encounter between Jesus and a lawyer who poses a question in order to test Jesus: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus responded, saying:

> "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." [Deuteronomy 6:5] This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." [Leviticus 19:18] On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:36–40)

The third foundational biblical mandate comes from the apostle Paul. Stendahl was an expert on Paul, having written a highly acclaimed book titled *Paul among the Jews and Gentiles*. He pointed me to the passage in Paul's Letter to the Romans where he articulates the marks of a true Christian:

> Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (Romans 12:16–18)

Do not bear false witness against your neighbor. Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. And, insofar as is possible with you, live peaceably with all. We begin to live out these mandates by learning more about what is most important for our Muslim neighbors and why the leaders who put forward "A Common Word" and "Loving God and Neighbor Together" could confidently acknowledge how these two world religions share strong foundational truths on which to build healthy and cooperative relationships in the twenty-first century.

Questions for Discussion

1. When and where have politicians and/or religious leaders in your area focused on threats posed by Islam? Have you witnessed someone question or challenge the leader's assertions? What results have you seen from situations where there is a passive response or where the assertions are questioned?
2. Why do you think Muslims and Christians, whose religions teach them to live at peace, fail so often to do so, especially in regard to one another?
3. The open letter from Muslim leaders titled "A Common Word between Us and You" refers to the foundation principles of "love of the One God, and love of the neighbor" preached by both Christianity and Islam. As a Christian, what do you consider your obligations to the Muslim neighbors in your community?
4. Have you heard someone bear false witness against or attack the Muslim neighbors in person or via email/social media where you live? What strategies for responding to this situation do you think Christians and others of goodwill should adopt?

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