

Neighbors

*Christians and Muslims
Building Community*

Deanna Ferree Womack

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Preface

Imagine the year 2050. In that year, researchers say, the global Muslim population will grow to equal the global Christian population. By 2050 the American Muslim community will have doubled its size since the early twenty-first century. Researchers also predict that American Muslims will still be a tiny 2.5 percent of the US population. While that can mean twice as many opportunities for us Christians to build friendships with our Muslim neighbors, it can also mean twice as many chances for us to turn away, to give in to fear, to spread hate.

What will our children say about us three decades from now? What will they say about our current era, in which differences divide Americans at every turn? What will they say about 9/11 and its impact on Christian views of Islam? What will they say about the multimillion-dollar Islamophobia industry that makes money off our fears? Or about the anti-Muslim hate crimes that skyrocketed after 9/11 and spiked again in recent years? Will our children say that we stood by in silence or that we lived out our Christian faith?

This book is an invitation to fellow US Christians to imagine a better future for Christian-Muslim relations in our nation. It calls us to imagine something better and to work together to make it a reality. We can't wait thirty more years. Now is the time to change. It is time to be the neighbors Christ called us to be. It is time to start building Christian-Muslim community.

This is a book for American Christians of all backgrounds who want to know more about their American Muslim neighbors. I could not have written it without the help of Christian pastors, Muslim dialogue partners, and many other friends and colleagues. They read early drafts, offered suggestions, and kindly corrected my mistakes. For this I am especially grateful to Roshan Iqbal, Younus Mirza, Kemal Budak, Rahimjon Abdugafurov, Shlomo Pill, Susan Reynolds, Terra Winston, Anne Fyffe, Kristin Willett, Jessica Ferree, Tala AlRaheb, Helen Hines, Salmoon Bashir, and my ever-supportive husband, Mike. Others from whom I have learned much about Islam and Christian-Muslim relations in Atlanta include Khalil Abdullah, Farida Nurani, Fairyal Halim, Mansa Bilal Mark King, Abbas Barzegar, and Isam Vaid. Roshan Iqbal, who so graciously agreed to write the afterword, deserves a second word of thanks. It was a delight to share this writing process with Roshan. Her contribution draws us deeper into interfaith reflection and spurs us on to more meaningful dialogue. Lastly, I mention with gratitude my editor and writing coach Ulrike Guthrie, and Bob Ratcliff at Westminster John Knox Press, who made this publication possible.

I dedicate this book to my father, Greg Ferree—who gave feedback on the entire manuscript—in honor of his retirement after four decades of Christian ministry.

June 16, 2019
Atlanta, Georgia

Introduction

We Christians and Muslims in the United States find ourselves at a turning point. We can either talk to and learn from one another, or we can slide into yet more fear, distrust, and division. Positive things have come from the increasing diversity of our country, things like conversation about what we share as worshipers of the God of Abraham. Yet that same diversity gives rise to fear and resentment. Too often that fear focuses on Muslims. Too often politicians and religious leaders fuel that fear in order to boost their own power.

This culture of suspicion and fear has led to acts of violence against American Muslims, seen especially in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Such irrational attacks have targeted people for how they dress or what they look like. The first person killed in apparent revenge for 9/11 was Balbir Singh Sodhi, a member of the Sikh religion. His assailant wrongly thought that Sodhi's turban (common among Sikh males) meant that he was Muslim. In the same way, Muslim women wearing the headscarf known as a **hijab**¹ (pronounced *hee-jab*) have been harassed and physically assaulted.

Other violent attempts have been coordinated by hate groups, some with Christian affiliations. Three white militia men calling themselves “the Crusaders” were convicted in 2018 for plotting to bomb an apartment building in which Somali Muslims were known to reside in Garden City, Kansas.² That is just one instance of the pervasive anti-Muslim violence in the United States. In March and May of

2019, someone set fire to mosques in New Haven, Connecticut, and in Escondido, California. Law enforcement officers have investigated both incidents of arson as potential hate crimes.³ While finishing this book, I learned about shots fired into a Muslim family's home in Ohio, about an Indian American teen in California being intentionally struck by a motorist, and about a Muslim man being verbally attacked and physically assaulted on a New Jersey train.

These examples show that lives are at stake. The time is now for Christians to respond. Most of us are not haters; most of us have not and would not engage in violence against Muslims or anyone else. But too many of us still view Muslims with suspicion and unease, if not fear. Too many of us have bought into the story that Christians have always been in conflict with Muslims and always will be. Too many of us have perpetuated such stories of violence ourselves, repeating the language we've heard in the media. Too few of us have looked for ways to live at peace with our Muslim neighbors.

How we think and speak about Islam in our homes, churches, and communities affects the ways we behave toward Muslims. How we react (or fail to react) to injustices against our Muslim neighbors sends a message about what it means to be Christian. Thus, our faith is also at stake. Our fellow American citizens represent just about every religious (and nonreligious) group on the planet. We Christians need to get along with all of them. But at the present moment, we need to reach out particularly to our Muslim neighbors. This book will help you, the reader, pursue that goal in three ways:

1. It will tell you the true story of how Christians and Muslims have related to one another, especially here in the United States.
2. It will help you build positive, lasting relationships with Muslims in your community.
3. It will help you take the first steps toward face-to-face conversation with Muslim partners.

This book is a guide for church members, pastors, and other Christians. Whether you are from a big city (like Atlanta, where I now live) or a rural area (like the small town where I grew up), it can help you understand the Muslim members in your local, national, or global community.

We Christians do not need to be experts in Islamic studies to build positive relations with our Muslim neighbors. But we may need some

guidance to navigate the messages about Islam that we encounter all around us. If you have a smartphone or computer, if you are plugged into social media, chances are good that you have run across negative pictures or stories about Islam. It is easy to believe the worst about people when we encounter them from the anonymity of a screen. By encouraging personal interactions, this book can help relieve the fear and anxiety that so many of us experience in thinking about the followers of Islam.

God is calling us to get to know our Muslim neighbors. They are children of God like everyone else. In fact, the Arabic word *muslim* simply means one who conscientiously surrenders to or makes peace with God.⁴ If we want to follow Jesus in this society of many religions, we have to welcome everyone just as he did. That means even—no, especially—our Muslim friends.

INTERFAITH, INTERRELIGIOUS, AND MULTIFAITH

Before we go much further, a word about terminology. Some people prefer the term “interfaith,” and others use “interreligious.”⁵ I use these two concepts interchangeably to describe what happens when people of different religious backgrounds encounter one another.⁶ Interfaith or interreligious *relations* are the positive or negative ways that people of different faiths interact. This book also speaks about interfaith or interreligious *dialogue*, meaning the practice of *positive* relations through face-to-face interaction. Such relations and interactions may occur in formal or informal settings of conversation and cooperation.

Christian-Muslim understanding depends on a commitment to dialogue, and dialogue can take many forms. The following list of possibilities, taken from a 1990s Vatican document, builds on decades of interfaith work:

- a) The *dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.
- b) The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.

- c) The *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages and to appreciate one another's spiritual values.
- d) The *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.⁷

Such dialogue is necessary because we belong to a *multifaith* society, a nation of many faiths. The United States is so religiously diverse today that interfaith contact is actually inevitable. Whether we Americans are religious or not, we practice some form of interreligious relations whenever we encounter people of other faiths. Yet *meaningful* interreligious engagement requires commitment and practice. It also requires tools and guidelines, like the ones provided in this book.

THINKING ABOUT ISLAM

We American Christians need to do more than simply live our lives in a multifaith society. God calls us to more intentional engagement with Muslims. The first step is to reconsider what we know and think about Islam. The Christians I meet in churches, schools, and on the soccer field sidelines usually wonder three things about Islam:

1. What do Muslims believe?
2. Is Islam a violent religion?
3. Is Islam oppressive to women?

The first question is often an attempt to compare Islamic and Christian beliefs and, sometimes, to prove that Islam falls short. Some Christians have the issue of salvation in mind. Others want to know how Muslims practice their beliefs. Such questions about Muslim religious life can helpfully take us beyond religious judgments to recognize Muslims as individuals who live out their faith in a variety of ways. We can then challenge the narrow views that have recurred in American Christian talk about Islam for centuries.

The second question above signals one such common Christian notion about Islam. So does the related question about Muslim

women. Usually the tone of such questions presumes a set answer: *Isn't Islam violent and oppressive to women?* Or, suggesting the opposite view, someone may ask: *Isn't Islam actually a religion of peace?* While this question is more positive, both are simplistic. We know that all religions can be oppressive and people of any faith may choose violence instead of following what their religion teaches them about peace (for examples in Christianity one need look no further than the Crusades or the KKK). With 1.8 billion members worldwide, Islam is no exception.⁸ Yet acknowledging this fact brings us only a bit closer to positive relationships between Christians and Muslims in America.

Those three questions above about violence, oppression of women, and Muslim beliefs can take us only so far too. You will know enough about Islam to formulate thoughtful answers to all three questions by the end of this book. *Building interfaith friendships, however, isn't about answering Christian questions about Islam. Instead, building Christian-Muslim community requires the proper attitude.*

This may be why Christian-Muslim misunderstandings persist despite the mountains of knowledge in our libraries on Islamic beliefs and practices. For years we have relied on a “book-centered” approach to understanding Islam and other religions of the world. Scholars (usually male religious leaders and academics in Europe and America) studied books (usually scriptures) and then wrote more books about them. While we now know that this is only one way of learning about religions,⁹ we still seek book-knowledge about Islam when the news stream makes us suspicious and fearful about Muslims in general, and US Muslims in particular.

Book knowledge is a worthy goal. But as I noted earlier, Christians in the United States do not need to become specialists in Islam to be good neighbors to Muslims. I suggest a more holistic way of learning about Islam and contemporary Christian-Muslim relations. Learning about religion ought to activate the *mind* (cognitive knowledge) along with the *heart* (emotions and feelings) and the *hands* (kinesthetic learning, attained by doing).¹⁰ This approach to learning fits well with the guidelines for interfaith engagement that I recommend in my classes:

1. *Change your thinking.* Religions are *living* faiths. So think about people of different faiths—not abstract principles or homogenous, unchanging groups.

2. *Consider your attitude.* Be self-evaluative, reflective, and open to learning from people of other faiths.
3. *Take action.* Build interfaith friendships. Find concrete ways to support your Muslim neighbors.

By encouraging hands-on interactions with Muslims, this threefold approach can help us understand our Muslim neighbors far better than book-knowledge alone. It can help us gain more nuanced knowledge of Islam through collaboration and conversation with Muslims in our communities. Through practical work alongside our Muslim neighbors, we can gain such essential skills as learning mosque etiquette and facilitating dialogue between groups of Christians and Muslims. But the *heart* is what moves us from knowledge to action. That means that American Christians must now act before we fall into more fear and distrust. And we need the motivation, conviction, and open attitude to make that action possible.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Each chapter of this book opens with a set of questions that will prepare you to connect the chapter with your own life. This is essential because respectful interreligious dialogue must begin at home, so to speak. We do not need to be experts on Islam, but we do need to know where we come from as Christians and what God calls us to believe, to be, and to do. Nevertheless, if you want to understand the basics of Muslim religious life before moving further, then you may find the sketch of Islamic beliefs and practices in the introduction to part 2 helpful (see pages 47–48). At the back of the book you will find a discussion guide for group study, a timeline, and a glossary of Arabic terms related to Islam (these terms are in boldface the first time they appear in the book). Changes may occur over time if you read this book introspectively and look for opportunities to engage with your non-Christian neighbors along the way. Indeed, the book's goal of facilitating stronger Christian-Muslim relationships in America will not come to fruition without your movement from thoughtful conviction to concrete action.

PART I

When Our Neighbors Have a Different Religion

Learning about another religious tradition must start close to home, with our own sense of identity as Christians and as Americans. This means reflecting on our faith and also reflecting on the churches, American values, and western cultural contexts that shape us. This is especially important if we want better Christian-Muslim *relationships*. Real friendships require us to understand ourselves and the other person. We Christians need to consider

- how we feel about interreligious dialogue,
- how much we really know about Islam—or other non-Christian traditions, and
- our gut reactions when we see Muslims in the grocery store or hear about them on the news.

It is also important to understand the ways that other Christians in America and in the western world tend to approach people of other faiths. Those approaches influence us too.

Our focus in this first part of the book is the United States and the western Christian culture we have inherited. I don't like the language of "East and West" because it suggests that European heritage is completely different from and superior to the cultures of the Middle East and Asia. Our world is much too interconnected for us to believe in such a split. To challenge such assumed divisions, this book does not capitalize *east* or *west* when referring, for example, to western Europe

or eastern Christianity. I hope this will diminish the lingering power of such terms. When I speak of western Christianity, I mean Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Protestant and Catholic traditions and western European cultural thought patterns influence how most Christians in the United States approach Islam, even if our family origins are not western European.

Religious Diversity Starts at Home

Readers are invited to consider each question before reading the chapter and write their initial responses in the space provided.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1. How much do you know about religions other than Christianity?**
- 2. Where does this knowledge come from? Does it come from**
 - academic study, books, or other scholarly material?
 - news, social media, blogs, podcasts, YouTube videos, or online searches?
 - personal encounters, including relationships, travel, and interfaith events?
- 3. Now or in the past, have you interacted regularly with people of other faiths?**

- 4. How do you feel about religious diversity in the United States? Perhaps you grew up in a place where religious differences were common, or maybe you've never known a Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, or Hindu. Or perhaps you feel uncertain about the growing diversity in your community. What word or phrase would you use to describe your views about religious diversity?**



A growing number of people in the United States identify with religions other than Christianity, including Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. In a 2015 attention-grabbing study, the Pew Research Center projected that this multireligious growth would continue in the coming decades. Over the same period, the report said, the Christian percentage of the US population would steadily decline. In 2017, Public Religion Research International (PRRI) reported similar findings and emphasized the ethnic dimensions of such religious changes. Only 43 percent of Americans identified as white Christians and only 30 percent were white and Protestant. The title of PRRI founder Robert P. Jones's book aptly summed up this reality: *The End of White Christian America*.¹ *What should American Christians think about these shifting religious and racial demographics? How should we respond to diversity, to religious differences, and especially to the growth of Islam in*

America? The first question is the focus of this chapter, and we address the second in the next chapter.

Such statistics can unsettle Americans who think of the United States as a Protestant nation or as a Christian nation. These statistics can also be jarring for white Americans who take for granted their majority status. For most US Christians, and not just those who are white, interfaith engagement involves encounters across ethnic and cultural differences. And Americans of all backgrounds have often characterized Islam as a “nonwhite” religion. When applied negatively, this view has made immigration and citizenship more difficult for Muslims. It has also contributed to the recent rise in anti-Muslim hate crimes in the United States.

We see presumptions about race and religion also in anti-Semitic acts, which constitute the majority of religiously-targeted hate crimes reported to American law enforcement today. Whether against Jews, Muslims, or others, many acts of religious bias combine racist rhetoric with Christian symbolism. For example, vandals desecrated a synagogue in Carmel, Indiana, in 2018 with Nazi flags and iron crosses. The iron cross was a Third Reich military medal modeled after the crosses of a German religious order of Crusaders.² Recall also the hate group (mentioned in the introduction) that called itself “The Crusaders” and planned to attack Somali Muslims in Kansas.

Other books deal more comprehensively with issues of American Christianity and racism, and I shall return to the topic of race in American Christian-Muslim relations in part 2.³ For now, I simply note that anxieties about changing religious demographics in this country are often racially charged. In light of violent reactions to religious diversity, as well as passive feelings of unease, it may be helpful for Christians to consider three things:

1. the proper interpretation of demographic statistics,
2. the long-standing multifaith character of the United States, and
3. the affirmation of pluralism that drives the American promise of “liberty and justice for all.”

I address these points in the section below. Then in the final section I consider why American Christians are not more deeply involved in interreligious dialogue.

WHAT MORE SHOULD WE KNOW?

First, some media outlets mistakenly suggest that immigration and rising diversity threaten America's Christian majority. *In reality, Christians will make up the majority of the US population for the foreseeable future.* Moreover, the shift in the United States religious composition will be due mainly to the large number of Americans who identify as religiously unaffiliated. These so-called nones made up 22.8 percent of the US population in 2014. Nones include atheists, agnostics, and others who select the category "none" on surveys about religious identity. Their numbers may rise to 25.6 percent by the year 2050. The expected drop in the Christian population over the same period (from 70.6 percent to 66.4 percent) correlates in large part with the rise in this unaffiliated category (see figures 1.1 and 1.2). Nones will continue to outnumber the combined population of American Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus (which are, in descending order, the four largest non-Christian traditions in the United States). According to the most recent Pew Research Center studies, one out of every sixteen Americans practices a religion other than Christianity, and 1.1 percent of all Americans are Muslim (around 3.45 million). By 2050 the number of Americans who identify with a religion other than Christianity should increase slightly to one out of every twelve, and Muslims will make up 2.1 percent of the total US population.⁴

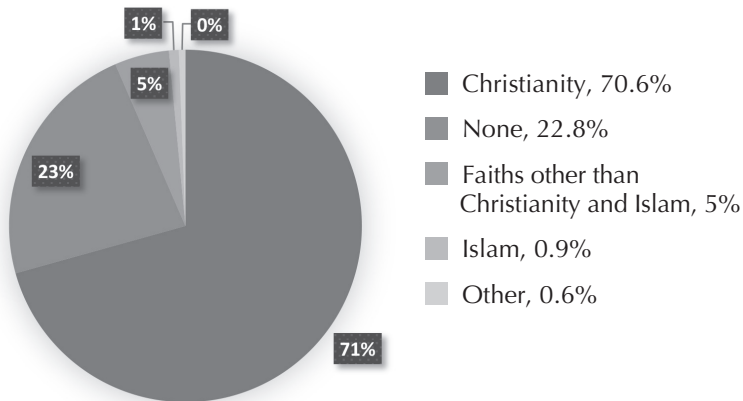


Figure 1.1: US Religious Affiliations in 2014

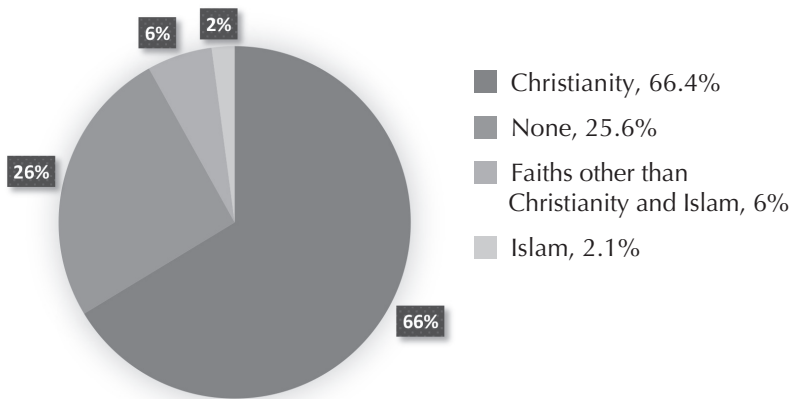


Figure 1.2: US Religious Affiliations in 2050

These numbers indicate that American Christians should expect more opportunities to meet people of other faiths in the coming years. Yet the challenge of the shifting US religious landscape is not, as some suggest, to stop another faith from triumphing over Christianity. Rather, the challenge is for the American Christian majority to learn how to live well alongside neighbors of other faiths or of no religious tradition at all. Indeed this would be our calling even if American Muslims or Hindus or Jews outnumbered American Christians! If we are going to be the neighbors God calls us to be, we will have to learn compassion and empathy for people of other faiths.

This leads to my second point, that *the religious diversity that has caught some Americans by surprise actually has very deep roots*. As Diana Eck reminds us, we should not overlook the “textured pluralism . . . present in the lifeways of the Native peoples” in America before European migrants came to these shores. Those settlers who brought their own diverse traditions to North America included Sephardic Jews, Quakers and Puritans from Great Britain, Reform Christians from the Netherlands, and Catholics from France, Spain, and England.⁵ Even in the colonial period, before any of our ancestors would lay claim to United States citizenship, interreligious engagement was already part of the North American reality.

Along with Protestant churches of multiple denominations, the first Jewish synagogues were founded in the American colonies in the eighteenth century. The late nineteenth century brought larger waves

of non-Christian communities to the United States, as well as Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and other non-Protestant Christians. Chinese Buddhists settled in the western United States in the 1840s and soon afterwards established the first American Buddhist temple. The Muslim presence in America dates to the colonial period, and in part to the slave trade. The first evidence of regular, communal Muslim prayer in the United States comes from early twentieth-century North Dakota, a gathering point for Syrian peddlers.⁶ Despite persistent Eurocentric imaginings of US history as a western Christian story, Americans have long had a multifaith heritage.

Third, and finally, although progress has not come without struggle, to be an American is to value diversity of belief and culture. Pluralism has long defined American political and social structures. Take, for example, the Immigration and Nationalization Act of 1965. It opened US borders to individuals of non-European descent and spurred further religious pluralization. Because of this change during the civil rights era, Eck noted that our so-called Christian country had become “the world’s most religiously diverse nation” by the 1990s.⁷

For Eck, as a committed Christian, this long-standing pluralism means that all Americans ought to reaffirm the free exercise of religion as mandated in the Constitution. The framers of the First Amendment might not have imagined how many religious communities would find a home in twenty-first-century America, Eck admits. “But,” she says, “the principles they articulated—the ‘nonestablishment’ of religion and the ‘free exercise’ of religion—have provided a sturdy rudder through the past two centuries as our religious diversity has expanded.”⁸ Considering how important religious liberty was to these “founding fathers” as far back as the 1700s, others have similarly argued for religious diversity as an American civic ideal based on our nation’s founding principles.⁹

Eboo Patel, head of Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago, writes that the promise of America rests on people of deep, if different, faiths working with one another. He says that the United States at its best is defined by the mixing of democracy and plurality. The challenge is for the current generation to carry this on. We must continue “welcoming religiously diverse people, nurturing positive relations among them, and facilitating their contributions to the nation.” For Patel, a committed Muslim, the participation of all citizens will enrich the whole.

Yet anti-Muslim sentiment poses a threat for America's potential to be one nation formed by people of many faiths.¹⁰

For many Christians in America, religious tolerance makes sense as a good civic value. Even those Christian leaders who are critical of organized interfaith initiatives usually affirm that all of us ought to get along with our neighbors. *But in reality very few Americans, and very few American Christians, experience meaningful interfaith dialogue with their neighbors on a regular basis.*

Today, more American Christians than ever before live and work alongside people of other faiths. We usually do so in peace, but a significant number of American Christians say they don't know even one person who practices a faith other than Christianity. Only 35 percent of Protestants and 31 percent of Catholics reported knowing at least one Muslim. The Pew Research Center study documenting these numbers linked personal familiarity with positive views of other faith groups.¹¹ This is a hopeful sign, but it would have greater bearing if more people took opportunities to form real friendships with people of different faiths—or to find out and show respect for the religious traditions of their colleagues and neighbors.¹²

We will learn more in the next chapter about the vocal minority in this country that responds with hostility to religious difference. Later we will also see examples of the growing interfaith movement in the United States. Yet the word that describes the way most of us respond to religious diversity is *inaction*. This includes lack of contact, avoidance of contact, and casual contact without relationship building. In places where we simply do not encounter that many non-Christians, this inaction includes the assumption that everyone else is a Christian just like us.¹³

WHY MEANINGFUL INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT ISN'T THE NORM IN THE UNITED STATES

So why is deep, meaningful interreligious engagement unusual for most American Christians? There are a number of reasons. The following list is not exhaustive, but I expect some of these points will resonate with you:

1. *Lack of opportunity.* Face-to-face dialogue may be a challenge in places where the population is (or appears to be) religiously homogenous.

2. *Fear and distrust of difference.* Fear causes people to avoid interfaith encounters or to engage with members of other faiths in negative ways.
3. *Polite social distance.* Some take the attitude of “live and let live.” This means respecting others’ rights to practice their faith and avoiding the topic of religion in polite conversation.
4. *Confusion about the meaning of “interfaith.”* Some people assume that interfaith dialogue is an activity for a certain segment of the population, like clergy or theologians.
5. *Sense of threat to one’s own faith.* Others are concerned that participation in interfaith initiatives will require watering down their faith. They may see such work as an attack on their deeply held religious convictions.
6. *A drive to convert others.* Finally, some Americans reject interfaith dialogue because it does not fit with their sense that Christians have a duty to evangelize and convert people of other faiths.

For these and other reasons, Americans of different religions avoid deep engagement with one another. For Christians, being in the majority makes it easy to ignore those who are not. Members of other religions find their own reasons to avoid serious conversations with the religious “other.”

The first two issues—lack of opportunity and fear—result from the reality that people who practice religions other than Christianity are still very much the minority in the United States. Regular interaction with neighbors, coworkers, or classmates of different faiths can prompt positive relationships and dismantle apprehensions. In contrast, lack of contact merely sustains fear and distrust. In such circumstances, people base their judgments on information from other sources like the news, social media, and what they hear from religious and political leaders. In these circumstances, we may become susceptible to Islamophobia, or “a *social* anxiety toward Islam and Muslim cultures.” Such anti-Muslim bias in the United States does not typically arise from traumatic personal experiences. Instead, Americans who do not know any Muslims personally often develop anxiety about Islam due to media images and stories about Muslims in distant places.¹⁴

The last two issues I identified—religious suspicion and the drive to convert—are also related to our country’s demographics. The historical Protestant majority in the United States has contributed to these trends in religious thinking. The first major contact between American Protestants and global religions came on the foreign mission field.

Until recently, most Protestants thought of non-Christians (and even many other Christian denominations) as religious rivals outside God's grace. For this reason, Protestants' first impulse toward those who believe and worship differently was often to seek their conversion. The same can be said of most American Catholics prior to the Second Vatican Council's more open attitude toward non-Catholics.¹⁵

Of course, feelings of religious rivalry are not exclusive to Christians. The point is that in America today we still find expressions of Protestant dominance that not so long ago were targeted at Catholic and Jewish immigrants.¹⁶ Even anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish sentiment is not a thing of the past. Yet as Eboo Patel points out, many Americans now speak positively about our nation's Judeo-Christian story. We American Christians need to include our Muslim neighbors in this common story too.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Regardless of why so few American Christians pursue meaningful interfaith dialogue as a regular part of their lives, the changing demographics of the United States are one reason why we must act. In the next chapter, we will find another reason: America's rising culture of religious bigotry and Islamophobia. When it comes to Christian-Muslim relations, we need

- to believe that positive interaction with Muslims is necessary,
- to commit ourselves to such positive interaction, and
- to act on this commitment.

Christian-Muslim dialogue is not a matter of book knowledge about Islam but of personal conviction. Because self-awareness is key to building relationships, this work begins with reflection on our own faith. Then we shall find that dialogue with Muslim neighbors is an urgent Christian calling.

To learn more . . .

Check out The Pluralism Project website of Harvard University. It explains what religious pluralism means and what it looks like in the United States: www.pluralism.org.

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