

windows

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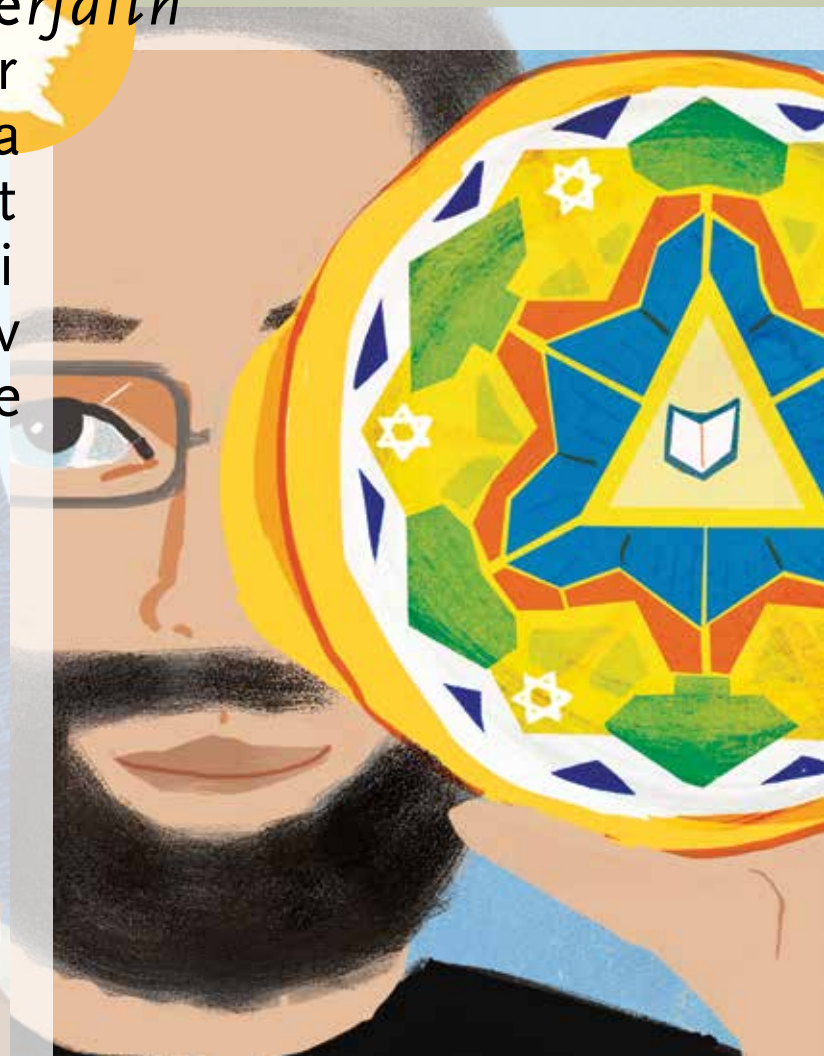
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The Interfaith



By Whitney Bodman

It is dark—early on Christmas Eve. I come across an article about Steve Kerr, the coach of the Golden State Warriors. It is not about basketball but about him and his father, Malcolm Kerr, president of the American University of Beirut (AUB), assassinated in 1984. My parents knew him. I went to nursery school at AUB. For reasons I cannot fathom, I dissolve into tears.

Aleppo. 1999. My father, my son, and I stay at the venerable Baron Hotel, where Agatha Christie wrote *Murder on the Orient Express*, and where Dad spent weeks doing research for his dissertation. We sit in the bar with beers listening to him reminisce and then wander through the souk, the bazaar. I buy a tablecloth which graces our dining table in Austin. Aleppo, however, now lies in ruins. I don't imagine the bar is serving anything today.

Early January. 2017. An article by Robin Wright, also a family friend, about the chaos in the Middle East. She describes an Arab world devoid of leaders, in the turmoil of violently competing tyrannies; death and destruction

have been unleashed and no one has the power and authority to bring it under control. A bit overstated. It is like the Europe of a century ago, if one cares to remember. Tears again, unexpected.

This is personal, this mess, this unholy violence, spewing forth refugees by the millions and murderers

by the hundreds. No explanation is adequate, but silence is indefensible. So when I teach about Islam, which I do weekly at churches and elsewhere, it is more than conveying understanding and perspective. It is grief therapy.

Teaching Islam: It's personal

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This past spring I developed a Sunday school series on Islam in an effort to produce a concise and relevant introduction to the tradition, addressing the questions I know people have. This is what I do:

In the first of three classes we explore the Qur'an, the life of Muhammad, and a bit on Islamic law. We compare the Qur'an to our Bible. It is different in many ways. It is, to Muslims, the perfect, exact replication of God's dictation to Muhammad in the early 7th century. Hence it is an oral scripture, of which the written book is but a transcription, a libretto. Its parallel in Christianity is not the Bible but the wholly divine, perfect, Son of God. Qur'anic recitation is intended to mimic the original revelation. In some ways this is comparable to the Eucharist in which the original sacrifice of Jesus is re-presented to Christians.

An important difference between the Qur'an and the Bible is that the Bible is essentially a history and the Qur'an is more like a set of homilies and prayers. Everyone wants to talk about violence, so we do. Though both texts contain episodes of violence, there is no narrative in either scripture as ferocious as the complete destruction of Jericho during Joshua's conquest of Canaan. This is a holocaust. But these stories are told in retrospect; one knows what follows, that never again do such massacres occur in the Bible. The violence in the Qur'an, however, is usually told in the present tense, with no context, no subsequent narrative, and no further exposition. You cannot understand the lessons Muslims take from these passages without recourse to biographies, commentaries, and histories. As most Muslims understand them, the

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violent episodes are directed at specific groups for specific reasons that are explained in these other texts. The history of Muslim violence is quite comparable to the history of Christian violence. The ethics and laws of warfare are in line with Jewish *Halakhic* law and Christian Just War tradition.

Christians reading only the Qur'an will get it wrong.

We move on to Islamic law—*shari'a*—very much like Jewish law. Most of it has to do with ritual—prayer, fasting, charity and so forth, and family law of inheritance, marriage, and divorce. Some have come across *The Reliance of the Traveler*, a thick compendium of law translated into English, and they believe they have the text of Islamic law. They don't. They have one 14th-century jurist's opinions about a variety of legal topics. Islamic law, unlike American law, is not codified. Ritual law is fairly settled. There are maxims that are well established, such as the principle that one obeys the laws of the country in which one resides. *Shari'a* is adaptable.

Shari'a includes rules of procedure and evidence, and variations according to context. On many issues there is a wide variety of opinion ranging from the compassionate progressive to the punishingly brutal, (thankfully rare, but unfortunately highly publicized) leaving much to in-

dividual choice. It is organic, constantly in motion, yet rooted in the fundamental principles of the innate value and protection of life, religion, property, intellect, and family. Little of this can be understood from the Qur'an, just as little of the dynamic of Jewish law can be understood from reading Leviticus. It is complicated. Law usually is.

All this in forty-five minutes. Vastly oversimplified.

On to modern Islam.

The Islamic world is vast. Half of Muslims live *east* of Pakistan. We seldom hear about them, especially those 200 million quiet Indonesian Muslims. Instead we hear about the Arabs, 20% of the Islamic world, and the Shia, 10% of the Islamic world, some of whom are Arabs and especially those Saudis, 0.1%. Saudi "Wahhabi" Islam is a fundamentalist extreme, but is commonly and absurdly presented as the norm.

Perhaps 30 percent of Muslims could be called "cultural Muslims." They don't pray. They don't fast. They drink alcohol and eat ham—both against Islamic law. We know Christians like that: secular Christians, Christmas and Easter Christians—the "hatch, match, and dispatch" Christians. Perhaps a similar percentage are "traditional Muslims," praying with varying degrees of regularity, showing up for the Friday service at the mosque—usually, fasting during Ramadan—pretty much. We know Christians like that as well.

And there are those Muslims with a more rigorous piety, who never miss a prayer, know significant portions of the Qur'an by heart, who are deeply faithful. Like the cultural and traditional Muslims, they are butchers and bakers and candlestick makers, loving husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, not violent, not particularly political, fairly ordinary.

All of these together constitute most of the Muslim world. They are the ones you never hear about. They are not very interesting.

The fact that you don't hear about them should not be surprising. Here is an illustration: every morning on the radio I hear about collisions during the morning rush hour. Every single day. The TV shows crunched up cars, fire trucks, flashing lights. Clearly driving on the roads of Austin is very dangerous. One would be foolish to try. But we know this is a false impression. Our experience is that collisions are quite rare. Most of us may have one or two in our lifetimes, if that. The news we hear is qualified by our own experience.

When it comes to the Islamic world, we have news but no experience. Around 60 percent of Americans do

not personally know any Muslims. Just as we never hear of the drivers who make it safely to their destinations, we never hear of the Muslims who travel through life doing nothing more exciting than loving their families, doing their work, and drinking coffee. Relying solely on the news, it is logical to believe that Islam is a violent religion.

Those who do make the news are relatively few. Terrorism is, unfortunately, easy and cheap. Boko Haram is a savage militia in Nigeria of about 6,000. There are high schools in Texas larger than that. ISIS in Syria and Iraq normally numbers about 35,000—less now. Many join, and as many leave, mostly in shrouds. They are vicious, completely dedicated to their deadly cause, and it is their single-minded, total commitment that is the primary source of their success. Shock and awe. They believe that the culmination of history is near—their version of the Christian Rapture and Tribulation—which gives an urgency to their campaign. As in martial law, normal rules do not apply.

Some will say they are not Muslim. This is wrong. They are zealous Muslims, though it is their zealotry that most deforms their Islam. Some say that they reveal what true Islam looks like. This is equally wrong. Rather it is the vast majority of Muslims you never hear about that demonstrates true Islam. The news is not wrong; it is just a keyhole that we mistake for a panorama.

Some of what we see in the Middle East is a consequence of colonialism, though it would be wrong to blame everything on that. Some of it is rebellion against autocratic and often brutal leaders who rule with military backing and ensure that civil society is never strong enough to challenge the generals. Some of it is resistance to Western cultural, political, and military encroachment. As in many parts of the world, traditional societies stand in tension with modernizing forces and globalization (which often means Westernization). Most nations are less than 100 years old.

Their relationship with the West is complicated. In my many travels in the Middle East, I have been welcomed everywhere with warmth and hospitality. They admire our constitutional values (though many think we take some of our freedoms a bit too far, allowing too much crudity and too little clothing), but freedom and prosperity is their dream. At the same time they do not understand our actions in their part of the world, the way we support their dictators but yet claim to support democracy, invade their lands, and then do not interfere to save them from the violence in their society. Many think

that with all our power we can set things right. Generally we can't. But they see us as better at breaking things than fixing them.

Once I was standing at a bus stop in Damascus when several young men came up to me and tried to guess where I was from. When I told them I was American they welcomed me with open arms. Then one came close and asked with utter seriousness, "Tell me, why do Americans hate us?" The "us" could have been Syrians, Arabs, or Muslims, perhaps all of the above. The answer that popped out of my mouth was, "Because we do not know you." In retrospect I think that is about right. Then they paid my bus fare.

So that's the next 45 minutes. Again, oversimplified.

The final class is all question and answer with two Muslims I bring with me. I mostly stay quiet. The conversation almost inevitably turns to women's clothing, so I always bring a woman. Why this infatuation with women's clothing? The hijab has become symbolic of all that is Islamic.

And then come the emails. Some are complimentary—always nice to read. Some tell personal stories of encounters with Muslims—these are heart-warming. Some are thoughtfully critical—these are the most important. But some recycle the same worn arguments, copying long passages from blogs from people whose delight in excoriating Islam is only exceeded by their lack of knowledge of the tradition. Usually I try to respond in detail, reflecting the learning of the scholarly community of which I am a part. Scholars do not agree on everything, but we vigilantly hold each other accountable to standards of accuracy and truth. I wonder if my sometimes tedious replies are a waste of time, since commonly the sender shows no evidence of listening, but I am an educator. That is my responsibility.

Mostly I am a pilgrim searching for the best comparisons, the best images, the most efficient ways to distill the nature of a religion no less complex, divided, and confusing as Christianity. And I am a student, as every teacher is, constantly learning more and trying to understand better.

It is exciting and sometimes discouraging, a mission, a burden, and a charge. Almost every Sunday I am in some church unfolding this story, answering questions when I can, noting where I need further study when I can't. It could be your church some time.

But deep in the darkness of night, there are tears. ❖