Neighbors: Christians and Muslims
Building Community

by
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Synopsis

Named one of the Top 10 Books of the Year in 2020 by the Academy of Parish Clergy
For a long time, American Christians have been hearing a story about Islam. It’s a story about conflict and hostility, about foreigners and strangers. At the heart of this story is a fundamental incompatibility between the two religions going all the way back to their original encounters. According to that story, the only valid Christian response to Islam is resistance. But it’s time to tell a different—and truer—story. Christians and Muslims have not always fought or lived in fear of each other. Christian communities in majority-Muslim countries have coexisted with their Muslim neighbors for centuries. More importantly, Muslims have been part of the American story from its beginning. And like their Christian neighbors, Muslims want to make the community in which they live a better place for all citizens. In Neighbors, Deanna Ferree Womack lays the groundwork for members of the two religions to understand, converse, and cooperate with each other. With models for cultivating empathy and interfaith awareness, Christians can move from neighborly intention to real dialogue and common action with Muslims in the United States. Ideal for individual or group study, the book includes discussion guide for group study with links to video clips, a timeline of the first Muslim communities, and a glossary of Arabic terms related to Islam.
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, Talal 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 (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. 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. 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...
We 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. 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." I use these two concepts interchangeably to describe what happens when people of different religious backgrounds encounter one another. 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. 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. 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, 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).

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.

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 1

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,
• 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. 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, and3. 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 nonees 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
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. 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. 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. 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.” 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. 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. 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. 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.

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.

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 a 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:  

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\(^{2}\)God Calls Us to Engage with Our Muslim Neighbors

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 would you describe what it means to you to be Christian? How does being Christian change the way you live in the world? How does it affect the way you treat people who are different from you or who are marginalized in society?

2. Where do you see religious diversity (in your family, neighborhood, city, state, nation, etc.)?

3. How do you understand the relationship with God experienced by someone of another faith tradition? How do people in your congregation or faith community tend to think about this issue?
Regardless of why so few American Christians pursue meaningful interfaith dialogue as a regular part of their lives, I propose that we ought to understand active interreligious engagement as essential to who we are as followers of Christ. When it comes to Christian-Muslim relations, we need to believe that positive interaction with Muslims is necessary, we need to make a commitment to do so, and then we need to act. This is about personal conviction. Because self-awareness is key to building stronger relationships, this work must start close to home. We must begin by reflecting on our own faith. With this in mind, this chapter examines three reasons why interfaith engagement and Christian-Muslim dialogue are specifically Christian callings for us in the twenty-first-century United States. These three themes—Christian witness, casting out fear, and peacemaking—can be applied in communities where many people of other faiths live, or where only a few do. The idea of hospitality also matters here, and we will talk about it more in the final chapter. However, we American Christians ought to stop thinking of ourselves as the hosts and everyone else as the guests. Even such a worthy goal as welcoming the outsider rests on the assumption that we are the ones who truly belong here. We must stop thinking of Americans of other faiths as outsiders in our community or nation. A commitment to welcoming outsiders implies our own power and belonging. Instead, we need to realize that God is the host in whose house we are all equally guests.

BEING CHRIST'S WITNESS

The concept of Christian witness helps convey how interreligious engagement relates to modern Christian notions of mission and evangelism. It can bridge some of the distance between Christians who tend to think about Jesus and salvation in one of the following ways:

- Exclusivism, which recognizes Jesus Christ as the only way to know God or attain salvation;
- Inclusivism, which acknowledges Christ as the way to God and also recognizes truth or sees God working in non-Christian traditions; and
- Pluralism, which sees in Christ one of many ways to God or salvation.

A biblical understanding of witness challenges Christians with these viewpoints and all those in between to consider more carefully what it means to follow Christ in a multifaith society.

My primary concerns here are not questions like: “Which religion is true?” or “Can non-Christians be saved?” The prolific and often contradictory writings of theologians and pastors on these questions have convinced me that even Christians within a single denomination will never come to a consensus about these questions. Nor do we need such a consensus to live faithfully in a multireligious context. The model for building interfaith sensitivity that I offer in chapter 8 is based on this diversity of beliefs within American Christianity. Whether our church leaders know for certain who will be saved or they think only God knows that, we must not allow internal Christian disagreements to distract us from interreligious engagement. A fuller understanding of Christian witness, in relation to traditional views about mission, can help move us into action.

Christianity, like Islam and Buddhism, is a missionary faith. Most Christians understand the teachings of Christ to be universal, to have meaning for all humanity, and to be adaptable to all times and places. We find this universal emphasis in each of the Gospels and in the book of Acts (the sequel to Luke’s Gospel). It is reflected in the words Jesus used when commissioning his disciples for what western Christians have usually termed
missionary work. More specifically, the following verses have led both Protestants and Catholics
during the past few centuries to emphasize evangelism (making known the good news, or the
gospel).

Mark 16:15–18: "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover."

Matthew 28:19–20a: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."

Luke 24:46–48: "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."

John 20:21–22: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Acts 1:8: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

From Early Missions to Christian Witness

The pioneers of American Protestant missions in the early 1800s took up the command in Mark 16:15 to proclaim the good news (or "preach the gospel" according to the King James Version, the English translation almost everyone used at the time). This passage was one reason why such missionaries defined evangelism as preaching and considered this their primary task. From the other passages above it should be clear that the gospel message can be demonstrated in other ways. Yet preaching has always been central to Protestantism, and the goal of the missionaries' preaching was conversion. The problem was that the early Protestant missionaries tended to highlight their own ability to convert people. When conversion is seen as a human task that missionaries and evangelists must achieve, then all manner of inducements may be fair game, including material incentives, physical abuse, and even colonial-military pressure. Although these are extreme examples, and we can find many instances of western missionaries doing good in the world, such practices have occurred in both Protestant and Catholic missionary contexts. Even today's interpretations of Matthew 28:19, the text that nineteenth-century missionaries dubbed the Great Commission, reinforce a concept of human power. Most English translations now render Christ's command as "make disciples of all nations." Theologians of mission, however, emphasize that missionaries do not possess the authority to make disciples, that conversion is an act of God through the Holy Spirit, and that even Christians need to repent and grow spiritually. Without discounting the passages from Mark and Matthew, such theologians point also to the words of commission in Luke, John, and Acts. These texts can help us think more holistically about what Jesus actually called his early disciples (and us) to do. They can help us think beyond narrowly defined concepts of evangelism and mission. A thorough investigation of Christian mission is beyond the scope of this book, but we will find in chapter 8 that an explicit sharing of one's faith
in Christ can be a respectful and important part of building interfaith relationships. In the same way, listening to and understanding the dialogue partner's testimony of faith is necessary. When it comes to such interfaith engagement, I propose adding the term witness to our vocabulary. In Luke 24:48 and in Acts 1:8, Jesus called his disciples “witnesses,” using a form of the Greek word martyria (this Greek noun, meaning testimony, was later applied to Christians who died as martyrs for their faith). Notably, Christ did not command the disciples to begin witnessing, but instead he recognized the act of witnessing as already essential to their nature as his followers. If being witnesses is part of our identity as disciples today, then all that we do or fail to do testifies to who we believe Christ is. This applies to what we do in the workplace, at church, in our families, at political gatherings, or in our own neighborhoods. Witnesses do not possess the truth but rather point to what they understand to be the truth. When reading the aforementioned passages from Luke and Acts alongside John 20:21–22, we can understand ourselves as sent out by Jesus to be witnesses in every moment of our daily lives.4

What Makes Christian Witness Difficult?

If we are to be faithful witnesses, then we must be certain that our actions are grounded in Christ and not in something else. Simply put, we must be conscious of the tendency to conform to worldly ideals. Compromise with culture has occurred wherever Christian communities are established. This happened when American missionaries imposed western cultural norms on new converts in the nineteenth century.5 Seeing—and repenting of—the ways we compromise with culture is the precondition of faithful witness. Without such discernment and repentance, it is possible to contradict Christ's teachings or to reduce the gospel “to make it serve another agenda than God's purposes.”6 We must resist the temptation of equating our own cultural perspectives and personal prejudices with the gospel.7 So we American Christians must take seriously the risk of failing as witnesses of Jesus Christ by internalizing the culture of fear and Islamophobia in our society. Anti-Muslim hate incidents skyrocketed after 9/11 and have also increased steeply since 2010. Incidents of assault against Muslims surpassed the 2001 level for the first time in 2017.8 If fear and uncertainty render us silent when American Muslims are subjected to emotional abuse, hate crimes, or unequal treatment, what does this say about our Christian witness? We might ask the same question with regard to hostile acts aimed at other religious groups. Isn't our failure to act, or even to notice, a reduction—if not a complete obliteration—of the gospel?

Further, with the large population of American Protestants in mind, what message is conveyed to onlookers when self-styled “white nationalists” advance white supremacy in the name of Christianity (often in the name of White Anglo-Saxon Protestantism)? They use Christian language to make bold (and inaccurate) claims about America's European heritage and to oppose Muslim immigration.9 Such notions are contrary both to American civic values and to Christian religious teachings. While those who uphold acts of hate in the name of a romanticized Protestant past may be few, it is not enough to dismiss the cultural ideology of White Anglo-Saxon Protestantism as a misappropriation of our faith. Such Eurocentrism feeds American Christian fears of religious “others” and jeopardizes our Christian witness. Indeed, our faith is at stake.
interfaith understanding is a critical Christian calling, for to stand idly by is to deny the message of Jesus Christ. I am not suggesting that we Christians should blame ourselves for all the injustices in our society, since guilt can be as paralyzing as fear. But our faith should compel us to act in ways appropriate to our contemporary contexts. In some rural communities where fewer opportunities exist for personal interfaith dialogue, for instance, Christians may be called to promote interfaith sensitivity through the way we speak about Islam in our congregations or through the questions we ask elected officials or those running for office. Because witnessing is part of our everyday lives, because we reflect our faith wherever we go, Christian witness is public in nature. Our actions send a message to others about what Christianity is and who Jesus is. But there is a more introspective reason why this calling is pressing for American Christians.

Next we shall see that fear of others can be a barrier for individuals and congregations seeking to grow deeper in relationship to God.

CASTING OUT FEAR

today's American culture of fear emerged, in part, from a deep sense of vulnerability after 9/11. The resulting suspicion of Islam and public hostility toward American Muslims has shaped a contemporary American society "saturated with fear, fear that is often out of proportion to the actual threats we face." When left unaddressed, fear breeds hatred and drives people to unthinkable violence. To a lesser extreme, fear compels self-protective measures that drain resources unnecessarily, that disrupt lives, and that may do more emotional harm than good for those who are afraid. Fear also has consequences for our lives of faith, so from a Christian perspective fear must be addressed as a matter of spiritual well-being. This last concern is my focus here.

Facing Our Fears

Interfaith dialogue can be an important response to the fears that Christians in this country have of other religious groups, especially of Muslims. For those who are willing and able to do so, participation in face-to-face dialogue can immediately break down irrational fears of an unknown "enemy." Recall the principle I recommended in the introduction of viewing religions as living faiths, not abstract entities. This principle takes on practical meaning when we learn that our perceptions of a particular group may not match the way individuals in that group act toward us. Yet when addressing fears of Islam, the fact that only 38 percent of Americans know a Muslim means it is doubtful that wide-scale Christian-Muslim dialogue will occur naturally. Those who are afraid are unlikely to take such a step without some preparation. Other Christians who already want to engage but don't know how may need further preparation too. Such preparation could include individual Christian reflection on the consequences of fear and efforts within churches to address feelings of uncertainty and insecurity.

Islamophobia may not be the most pressing concern that church members raise on a regular basis. Yet studies show that many Americans identify terrorism and ISIS—associated in most minds with Islam—as greater threats than economic instability or incurable diseases or lack of health care. Those of us who are committed to Christian-Muslim dialogue need to recognize that fear can be real even when the reasons used to justify it are not. Fears of an outside threat (whether real or simply perceived) can lead to denigrating, dehumanizing words of judgment. Fear can make us forget our belief that all humans are made in the image of God and loved by God. And when left unaddressed at
the spiritual level, such fears can inhibit our relationship with God. This is why the Bible focuses so frequently on human fear and why the New Testament assures us that "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18a). Fear, resentment, and hate separate us from God. But love—for the neighbor, for the enemy, or for those falsely called enemies—brings us closer to God and to fellow humans. In the Sermon on the Mount, just a few verses before commanding his followers to love their enemies, Jesus warned against coming to the altar before reconciling with a wronged sister or brother (Matt. 5:23–24). The implication is that our relationship to God is tied to our personal relations with friends, neighbors, or even rivals. A right relationship with God depends on our willingness to make things right with others. This includes the fears that we have of those who seem so religiously or culturally different that we count them as enemies without ever meeting them.

Why Not Count Our Enemies? When we automatically label Muslims as enemies, such thinking can have ugly consequences, as happened in Newton County, Georgia, in 2016, when crowds gathered at the county courthouse to protest the construction of a mosque (or masjid) and Muslim cemetery. At one point an armed militia arrived carrying assault weapons. Many of the protestors were Christians, and as I learned from a local pastor, church members who did not join the protest still felt that the presence of a mosque in their community could threaten the safety of their families. "How do we know it's not an ISIS camp?" one woman asked local TV crews. Such questions, born out of fear, should not be dismissed, for Christians across the country will continue to voice similar anxieties until they are addressed through careful conversations within our churches and through respectful dialogue with Muslims in our communities.
NIANG, “Book Review. To be frank, if you ascribe to or follow the Christian faith, this book would be of utmost use for you. It is important that the Christian reader has already determined the need for interfaith engagements, however Neighbors: Christians and Muslims Building Community will encourage and continue to convince you to remain the change agent in your community. This book is worth reading if you are Christian and ready to engage with interfaith relationships. On the other hand, if you ascribe to or follow the Islamic faith, this book may not yield any new information. This book may very well be detailed accounts of some unpleasant experiences with non-Muslims, namely Christians. Neighbors: Christians and Muslims Building Community is a book focusing on building and sustaining healthy and productive relationships between Christians and Muslims. This book includes prompts and other workbook style questions in order to create an engaging experience between the reader and book. To this effect, the appropriate category for Neighbors is suspended between “self-help” and “religious” with elements of historical facts embedded in between. Womack's approach to conveying the importance of inter-faith communities is deeply rooted in her own Christian identity. Drawing from personal experiences or world facts, her writing styles is intimate, bold and proactive. It is important to note that the targeted reader is understood to be Christian, specifically those wanting to build interfaith relations within their own communities. Neighbors has two main objectives: to allay any myths, ignorance or violent misconceptions regarding the Muslim faith and followers of Islam; to empower followers of the Christian faith to initiate and sustain Christian-Muslim relationships within their own communities. Womack often reminds readers that merely understanding the importance of interfaith engagement is not enough, that this change must be a “threefold approach” from “changing your thinking” to “taking action” (p. 6). I believe this repeated prompt for action is a driving theme throughout this book, from start to finish. Deanna Womack currently serves as an assistant professor of History of Religions and Multifaith Relations at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University. Womack is proudly known for vocalising the importance of multifaith relations, within and outside of the academic classrooms. Womack published Neighbors: Christians and Muslims Building Community March of 2020, just shy of the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic. Given today's social and political climate from state of emergencies declared across all U.S. states and territories, to the recent acts of terrorism and law enforcement violence against Black American people, this book can cater to various audiences. However, it is primarily focused on people of the Christian faith to read and engage, hence why Neighbors: Christians and Muslims Building Community is interwoven with verses and scriptures that would speak most to those who follow the faith. As a 25-year-old Black African Muslim woman, I do not believe this book was for me, however it was about me. I believer other Black Muslims within similar age limits, will find similar sentiments. I believe those who follow the Christian faith, and are within the 35-44 age range, would benefit best from this book. Neighbors: Christians and Muslims Building Community emphasizes that religious
diversity begins at home (p. 11). To this effect, initiating conversations about religious diversity as a young person (such as a child) may present a different set of difficulties. I believe Christian parents, regardless of sex or gender, of young children who understand their world enough to recognize people that may be “different” from them, yet may not have the appropriate language to articulate, would yield most favourable results after reading this book.”

Emmanuel Amponsah, “Dispelling Ignorances, hate, and fears of for our Muslim Neighbors. To speak of “the Christian vision concerning Muslims” in today’s context may seem provocative. Verily, faced with the hundreds of dead, thousands of refugees and wounded from the Middle East, there is a great temptation to ask the following questions: what is the use of interfaith dialogue, whom to talk to, and are religions, especially Islam, factors of violence or peace? All-too-often, these questions are born out of fear and lack of understanding; and this is a sentiment shared by a great many Christians (and non-Christians) living in Amerika and the Western world as a whole. But this shouldn't be so. Terrorism practiced in the name of Islam by deflected Muslims does little to foster mutual trust. Also, Islam is complex: it is at the same time a religion, society, and state, which does not distinguish the temporal from the spiritual; in this sense, many misunderstandings and hostilities emerge due to ignorance.Deana Womack, Assistant Professor of History of Religions and Multifaith Relations at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in her text, Neighbors: Christians and Muslims building community (2020), aims to dispel the previously stated ignorance's in this compelling text, as she advocates for mutual understanding, unity, and interreligious dialogue between Christian and Muslim neighbors in Amerika. Verily, in her words, … “Amerikan Christians need to do more than live [their] lives in a multifaith society[; because] God calls [them towards] more intentional engagement with Muslims. [Therefore,] the first step is to reconsider what [they] know and think [believe] about Islam.” With that being said, readers are warned – the text is not an easy read by any measure, and if you're not a fan historical analysis or cold hard facts and truths, then this is not the text for you: this text is first, for the seasoned scholar, seeking a better understanding to his/her vision of Islam, and secondly, for all who wish to learn more about their Muslim neighbor.From pointing out false assumptions that cause Amerikan fear, impressions of Islam and violence as being that which has resonated with the narrative that Amerikan Christians inherited from European Christendom, the deep sense of vulnerability and anxiety that emerged after 9 / 11, which lead to unsettled fears about the Middle East or Arab world, to truths that reveal Islam as being a religion that aspires to be of peace, the author paints a picture for her readers towards a vision of Islam which, in her words, represents a diversity that develops better Christian - Muslim relations in Amerika. In order to establish such relations, the author proposes that the Amerikan people should open their ears and seek the tales of our Muslim neighbors. These tales include examples such as, "Pakistani Amerikan teenagers in New Jersey, of immigrants from across the Islamic world, of converts, and of Muslim families who have lived in the United States for generations – i.e., immigrants, children of immigrants,
converts, and the descendants of converts."Verily, seeking to dispel the hate and fear within Christian and Muslim relations, near the end of the text, the statement that the author mentioned in the introduction of the text becomes self-evident – that, … "[as] Christians and Muslims in the United States find [themselves] at a turning point [, they] can either talk to and learn from one another, or [they] can slide into more fear, distrust, and division. [For the author] Positive things have [emerged] from the increasing diversity of [the] country, things like the conversation about what [Amerikans] share as worshipers of the God of Abraham.""