Journal of the Council for Research on Religion

Interfaith Engagement and the Public Square A Self-Critical Review and Suggestions for the Way Forward (Keynote Address)

Ingrid Mattson

Citer cet article

Résumé de l'article

A personal and critical essay written by a Muslim religious leader and scholar about the changes they have experienced and witnessed in the ways interfaith dialogue intersects with the public square. The author draws upon twenty-five years of experience, highlighting specific examples affecting the Muslim community, mostly in the United States. The author argues that interfaith dialogue can create space for engagement on issues of public policy and common concern, but that no encounter is ever naïve, and since digital and social media have facilitated the spread of misinformation, such encounters are more complex than before. Further, research on the disproportionate attention negative displays of emotion attract puts minority groups, typically stereotyped as angry and irrational, in a difficult position to express themselves authentically as they try to defend their rights and dignity. Principled interfaith engagement can achieve effective policy results and provide vital moral support to a beleaguered faith community and may create a principled foundation for engagement on other issues. However, this is not always the case, and various parties might express disappointment, even betrayal when "the other side" does not show up for their cause. Nevertheless, continued engagement that allows politically misaligned interfaith partners to express their views according to terms they consider authentic helps avoid greater polarization that is corrosive to social cohesion. At the same time, conveners of interfaith dialogue should be attentive to the structures of power embedded in the programs they create to avoid reinforcing patterns of hierarchy and exclusion.

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

https://www.erudit.org/fr/

ERRATUM STATEMENT

Journal of the Council for Research on Religion volume 4, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2023)

In Ingrid Mattson's article, "Interfaith Engagement and the Public Square: A Self-Critical Review and Suggestions for the Way Forward," https://doi.org/10.26443/jcreor.v4i2.88, there was one typographical error that has been amended:

On page 50, the block quotation that begins on the first line ("After the U.S. Embassy in Tehran…") was incorrectly rendered. This has been corrected to indicate that the quotation ends with the sentence "Neighbours and co-workers are being pulled in for questioning, and some have been arrested."

The editors deeply regret these errors.

Interfaith Engagement and the Public Square: A Self-Critical Review and Suggestions for the Way Forward

Ingrid Mattson, *Huron University College at the University of Western Ontario*

Abstract: A personal and critical essay written by a Muslim religious leader and scholar about the changes they have experienced and witnessed in the ways interfaith dialogue intersects with the public square. The author draws upon twenty-five years of experience, highlighting specific examples affecting the Muslim community, mostly in the United States. The author argues that interfaith dialogue can create space for engagement on issues of public policy and common concern, but that no encounter is ever naïve, and since digital and social media have facilitated the spread of misinformation, such encounters are more complex than before. Further, research on the disproportionate attention negative displays of emotion attract puts minority groups, typically stereotyped as angry and irrational, in a difficult position to express themselves authentically as they try to defend their rights and dignity. Principled interfaith engagement can achieve effective policy results and provide vital moral support to a beleaguered faith community and may create a principled foundation for engagement on other issues. However, this is not always the case, and various parties might express disappointment, even betrayal when "the other side" does not show up for their cause. Nevertheless, continued engagement that allows politically misaligned interfaith partners to express their views according to terms they consider authentic helps avoid greater polarization that is corrosive to social cohesion. At the same time, conveners of interfaith dialogue should be attentive to the structures of power embedded in the programs they create to avoid reinforcing patterns of hierarchy and exclusion.

Key Words: Self-critical reflection, interfaith engagement, power structures, public sphere

My understanding of the relationship between interfaith engagement and the public square is rooted in almost three decades of engaging in this dialogue primarily with communities in North America, and at times, in Europe and internationally. I have acquired a basic understanding of the history and dynamics of the public sphere and how these are theorized by critical scholars, but primarily what I have learned comes from my experience of being a religious leader in the crucible of political crises. As an academic scholar of Islamic theology and ethics, a practitioner of Islam, and someone who has served in positions of public leadership for Muslim organizations, my primary concern, and what I have wrestled with for many years, is how to approach the intersection of interfaith dialogue and the public square ethically and with integrity; in this paper, I share some of these concerns and learnings.

While I hesitate to anchor my reflections in the terrorist attacks of 9/11, as if history began on that day, I will nevertheless do so in this paper primarily because this gives me two decades of engagement to reflect upon. In addition, as I will describe below, major shifts in the information landscape which occurred around the same time (notably, internet search engines and social media) made a significant impact on the way people learn about others – including religious others – and still need to be taken into account for effective and ethical engagement.

I begin my story in late August 2001, when I was elected Vice-President of the Islamic Society of North America (SNA), an umbrella organization for Muslim organizations and individuals. I was the first woman elected as an executive of ISNA's governing board. This was a volunteer position; my full-time job was as a professor at the Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut.

Traditionally, the Islamic Society of North America holds its annual convention over Labor Day weekend. In 2001, the convention was held in Chicago. Almost 40,000 people attended that year's convention. Over a hundred panels, workshops and lectures addressed the challenges facing Muslims in America, interfaith alliances and issues of social justice. We all celebrated the release by the U.S. Post Office of a stamp commemorating the Islamic holiday of Eid. This was a symbol of our integration into America. We left that convention full of optimism, confident that American Muslims were finding creative and effective ways to contribute positively to the public life of the country while preserving our distinct identity.

A week later, the terrorist attack of 9/11 occurred. I was sickened by the apparent use of my religion as justification for such a massive crime. At the same time, I became fearful for my community and my family. I began hearing of Muslims, Arabs, Sikhs and other brown-skinned people being attacked. What should I do about my 12-year-old daughter who had just decided a year ago to wear a head scarf as a symbol of modesty and piety? What about my husband, who was away for the week on business, and whose Middle Eastern features were obvious? I was afraid and felt guilty that I had to worry about potential threats to my family and friends when all I should be doing was grieving for those who had died. I felt a deep sense of loneliness.

Then the phone started to ring. Men and women whose churches I had spoken at over the last few years were asking if my family and I were safe. Christian ministry students, who had taken courses with me at Hartford Seminary, expressed concern about prejudice being shown to their fellow Muslim students. Religious leaders from diverse faiths, with whom I had worked on a variety of social justice issues, from food insecurity to access to health care, checked in. Years of interfaith partnerships and engagement had gifted us what I like to call an "extended family" of faith, and the family showed up when we needed them. It was not only me, however, but the nation, who would need their conscience and their courage over the next decade, and beyond.

The Ideals and Realities of the Public Square

The dominant theory of the public square was articulated by Jürgen Habermas, who argued that the appearance in Europe of more open, public venues, including city streets, as well as coffee shops and salons, enabled the emergence of a "bourgeois public sphere" in a number of eighteenth-century societies.[1] In this sphere, state power could be monitored, discussed and critiqued in an open and accessible manner, and thus was important for the establishment and maintenance of democracy. The proliferation of newspapers and other print media, which accompanied the rise in general literacy, opened more space where issues of common concern could be freely discussed. Habermas argued that these vital public spheres, however, were damaged, even destroyed, over time when people's attention was largely diverted from issues of common concern and political power to material consumption through the influence of advertising. Along with consumerism, the expansion of capitalism created greater inequality

---

1. Eduardo Mendieta, "Public Sphere," in *The Cambridge Habermas Lexicon*, ed. Amy Allen and Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019): 356–363.

among the bourgeois, and the wealthy were able to seize significant control of public venues, making them less accessible to those with less wealth.[2]

Habermas has been criticized by some for presenting an unrealistic version of the bourgeois public sphere, namely because these spaces almost always excluded women and many other groups of people. Mary Anne Franks, writing in the *Yale Law Journal* says, "The public square has historically tended to reinforce legal and social hierarchies of race, gender, class, and ability rather than foster radically democratic and inclusive dialogue. In the United States in particular, the public square has frequently served as a site for the assertion of violent white male supremacy."[3]

Nevertheless, the dynamic Habermas described, whereby community members seek to create open, accessible spaces – in other words, public spaces – where they can share their concerns, discover common interests and critique state policies, only to have those spaces disrupted by those with greater wealth and power, is an ongoing reality. Community members are enticed away from prioritizing issues of common concern by relentless commercial appeals to their individual or private interests. Further, spaces are appropriated by those activated not by concern for the public good, but by a desire to justify and display their wealth and power.

Twenty years ago, many believed that the internet or digital spaces had great potential as new open and accessible public squares. Many are now convinced that the cycle of disruption and appropriation by commercial and authoritarian forces has spoiled that potential. Others point out that the internet never met the criteria for a public square. Franks says:

> It is certainly true that people also gather on social media, but beyond that, the analogy to the physical public square is strained. The dominant social-media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, are privately owned, operated for profit, and virtual. Despite marketing rhetoric that emphasizes inclusion, community, and communication, these platforms are designed to serve corporate, not public, interests.[4]

Like every "public square," social media spaces are *designed*, and if we do not want to continually be subject to oppressively designed or appropriated spaces, we first have to notice this reality about those spaces which already exist, and then develop, critically assess, and continually redesign those spaces we consider public. Further, Franks urges us to "move beyond the public square […so that…] we can imagine a multitude of spaces designed for reflection instead of performativity; accessibility instead of exclusion; and intellectual curiosity, humility, and empathy instead of ignorance, arrogance, and cruelty."[5]

Perhaps interfaith circles of dialogue can serve as some of those spaces for reflection, humility and empathy. Indeed, I believe that many interfaith spaces have done so, and continue to offer promise as non-commercialized, relatively inclusive spaces for reflection. But this is not true of every interfaith space or alliance which are susceptible, like every human creation, to cooptation, manipulation and corruption. My own experience of interfaith dialogue and its relationship to the public square is a journey from a state of relative naiveté to an understanding that one must continually assess the power dynamics underlying and activating these spaces.

---

2. Mendieta, "Public Sphere," 356–363.
3. Mary Anne Franks, "Beyond the Public Square: Imagining Digital Democracy," *The Yale Law Journal,* 131 (November 2021), https://www.yalelawjournal.org/forum/beyond-the-public-square-imagining-digital-democracy.
4. Franks, "Beyond the Public Square."
5. Franks, "Beyond the Public Square."

The Neighborly Experience of Interfaith Dialogue

Perhaps the favourite thing I own is a cast iron bird bath. It is very popular with birds; robins, especially, are notably vigorous in their ablutions. It has been with me wherever I have lived since the spring of 2001, when I bought it with the fifty dollars I was surprised to find in a "Thank You" card given to me by members of Avon Congregational Church after I had given a talk on Islam at their invitation, a general introduction to Islamic belief and practice. I spoke for thirty minutes or less, people listened politely, and some raised their hands to ask clarifying questions. I believe we shared some pastries and coffee in the church community space afterwards. The birdbath, which I bought at a garden store on my way home from the church, reminds me of a time when I could engage in a civil discussion about Islam with a non-Muslim congregation before the internet became the first place people search to learn about a topic or to research a person.

To be clear, even at that time, ordinary Americans who were not very aware of Muslims or concerned about them, still passively received negative characterizations of Muslims and Islamophobic images broadcast to the general public via, among others, news media, Hollywood, and American officials, especially when there were military operations in Muslim majority lands, or when violence was committed against American or its interests by Muslims who may or may not have claimed Islam as a justification for their actions.[6] And certainly, before 2001, there were organizations with an explicitly anti-Muslim political agenda (such as Campus Watch)[7] or religious agenda (such as the pamphleteering Chick Publications) who were committed to spreading misinformation about Islam and Muslims.[8]

Yet, in early 2001, information about Islam, accurate or inaccurate, balanced or biased, was less accessible to the average person than what became widely available on the internet a few years later. When the average person wanted to learn about Muslims, in particular, if they were troubled by something they had heard, they might look for a book in the library or they might ask for clarification from a friend or acquaintance whom they understood to be a Muslim. Ordinary Muslims often had to respond to stereotypes or misinformation about their faith in their places of work, when they or their children attended school, and when they engaged with public services or officials. Sometimes strangers would approach a person whom they believed to be Muslim, because of their hijab or kufi, to ask about their outfit or their beliefs, or even to explain why some notorious Muslim somewhere was behaving in such a violent fashion. Surely it was not fair or polite to ask a fellow shopper in the grocery store such questions, and certainly, many Muslims experienced such encounters as intrusive and what might now be characterized as "micro-aggressions."

---

6. For a critical analysis of historical and contemporary representations of Islam and Muslims before 2001, see: Mohja Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. Rev. and updated ed. (Northampton, Mass: Olive Branch Press: 2009).

7. Founded by Daniel Pipes, whom President G. W. Bush would appoint to the board of the U.S. Institute of Peace in 2003. See Louise Cainkar, "Special Registration: A Fervor for Muslims," *Social and Cultural Faculty Research and Publications* 8 (2002), 26. https://epublications.marquette.edu/socs_fac/8.

8. Until now, the Southern Poverty Law Center deems Chick Publications to be an active hate group (directing its hate at many groups, including Muslims). For more information see "Active Antigovernment and Hate Groups: In The United States in 2021," in *The Year in Hate & Extremism 2021* (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2022) 42–55, https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/splc-2021-year-in-hate-extremism-report.pdf.

At the same time, my anecdotal experience is that many Muslims used this opportunity to practice religiously exhorted teachings about practicing patience and took the opportunity to share their understanding of Islam. And if given the choice, I believe that many Muslims would prefer to return to those days of somewhat awkward public encounters than to have to face social media trolls and others who have been primed with internet-sourced misinformation about Islam, a topic to which I will return in this essay.

Of course, during these years, there were already more structured conversations about Islam between Muslims and others that were being held in American society before 2001. An illustrative example can be seen in the founding of an organization known as Islamic Networks Group (ING), founded in 1993 by an American Muslim marketing and business professional. Maha Elgenaidi aimed to address the "growing misconceptions about Islam and Muslims in the media and general public that increased as a result of political events and issues during and after the first Gulf War."[9]

With an initial focus on media presentations about Islam, ING expanded to create an "Islamic Speakers Bureau" to provide resources and training to parents of schoolchildren, employees and others who were seeking a fair representation of their faith or religious accommodation in public and private institutions. At this time, many of the "speakers" were ordinary community members who experienced the kind of awkward public encounters described above, and they were motivated to help shape public perceptions about Islam so they could have peaceful and friendly relationships with others in their community. Not surprisingly, those who participated in these trainings and then gave presentations to various groups were changed by the experience; for many, it was the first significant engagement they had in a civic organization or public institution. Further, it was through participation in such engagements, with ING and other similar organizations, that many Muslims were able to open a dialogue with people of other faiths about their experiences as religious people in American society, and they often found commonalities.

My anecdotal observation is that during this time, many American Muslims shifted from using dichotomous language about religious identity in their communities, that is, Muslim/non-Muslim, to more complex and inclusive language, referring to themselves as part of a "community of faith," "religious diversity," or the narrower, "Abrahamic religions." While advocacy for their own religious accommodation and countering bias continued, many American Muslims embraced this additional identity of "a person of faith" and some developed a principled interest in contributing to a culture of acceptance and understanding for people of faiths in general.

In 2007, ING created an "Interfaith Speakers Bureau" whose goal is to "encourage an understanding and appreciation of our commonalities as well as our differences."[10] By this time, of course, the terror attacks of 9/11 had occurred, the U.S.-led Global War on Terror (GWOT) was in full force,[11] and interfaith solidarity had never been more important to the American Muslim community.

---

9. "About," Islamic Networks Group, accessed July 17, 2023, https://ing.org/about/about/.
10. "ING's Inception and Early History," Islamic Networks Group, accessed July 17, 2023, https://ing.org/about/about/.
11. The "Global War on Terror" (GWOT) is often referred to as the "War on Terror" (WOT) when referring to the international military campaign that ensued after US-led action had begun. A historical overview of both can be found in Chapter 4 of Susan S.M. Edwards's book, *The Political Appropriation of the Muslim Body: Islamophobia, Counter-Terrorism Law and Gender* (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2021), 111–150.

Facebook had been open to the public for a year;[12] interfaith relations, information-seeking, and the locus of the public sphere were utterly changed, as I shall now discuss.

GWOT and its Sequelae

Soon after the terror attacks of 9/11, I received a call from Reverend Don Larsen, a neighborhood Christian pastor, whose children attended the local public school with mine. Don's teenage son had died in a car crash only three weeks earlier. He was concerned about my well-being, and was upset by anti-Muslim, anti-Arab comments he had heard on television that morning. He invited me to read from the Qur'an and say a few words at the prayer service that evening at Grace Lutheran Church in Hartford. I was overwhelmed by the kindness and empathy of this man who was dealing with a tremendous personal loss.

Reverend Larsen's generous actions were replicated by countless neighbours who reached out to individual Muslims and communities. National faith-based organizations also mobilized. The National Council of Churches funded the production of a new edition of Rev. Dr. Marston Speight's book *God is One: The Way of Islam,* first published in 1989 when Speight was president of the NCC.[13] In their press release, the NCC said that the re-publication of *God is One* "responds to a surge of interest in what Muslims really believe and how Christians can relate to their Muslim neighbors – interest that has resulted, ironically, from acts carried out Sept. 11 in the name of Islam."[14] The book "calls on Christians to confront their prejudices and inform themselves about Islam. It challenges Christians to develop an understanding of Islam and to recognize Muslims as their neighbors."[15]

In early October 2001, the *Hartford Courant* published an op-ed by Professor Mark Silk, then Director of the Leonard E. Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College in Hartford. Silk wrote:

> Since Sept. 11, the American news media have been at great pains to differentiate the faith and patriotism of American Muslims from the apparent religious convictions of the airplane hijackers.
> In the days immediately following the attacks, newspapers large and small published local Muslims' condemnations of terrorism and did stories on their fears of verbal abuse and physical violence. Cases of such abuse and violence have been widely reported and universally condemned in editorials stressing the importance of tolerance and understanding. This journalism has been of a piece with religious leaders' inclusion of Muslim clerics in ecumenical memorial services and has underscored repeated statements by politicians from the president on down that the war on terrorism is not a war against Islam or Muslim people in general.[16]

Silk then discussed US policy towards the Japanese after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and the shift from a discourse of not blaming all Japanese for the actions of the Empire of Japan, to a policy of internment. He moved on to state:

---

12. M. Hall, "Facebook," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed July 17, 2023, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Facebook.
13. R. Marston Speight, *God is One: The Way of Islam* (New York: Friendship Press, 1989); second edition with afterword and study guide, published by Friendship Press in 2002.
14. "NCC Friendship Press Offers Book on Islam," National Council of Churches, December 12, 2001, https://archive.wfn.org/2001/12/msg00089.html.
15. "NCC Friendship Press Offers Book on Islam."
16. Mark Silk, "War Has Tested Tolerance Before," *Hartford Courant*, October 8, 2001.

After the U.S. Embassy in Tehran was taken over by Iranian radicals in 1979, there was much fevered talk and writing about Muslim "fundamentalism" in the Middle East. Since then, we have come a long way toward accepting Islam as a normal and wholesome part of the American religious scene. Newspapers now annually report on Ramadan the way they do on Christmas and Passover. American interfaith groups make sure to have Muslim representatives on board. Imams deliver prayers along with rabbis and Christian ministers in Congress and at national political conventions. Nor was President Bush the first president to tell the American people that the United States is not on the warpath against Islam. President Clinton did the same in announcing U.S. air strikes against supposed terrorist targets in Sudan and Afghanistan after American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were bombed in 1998. Nevertheless, the war on terrorism poses a real test for a society that has mostly learned to distinguish "good" American Muslims from the "bad" ones overseas. The federal government has begun cracking down on Islamic organizations believed to be supporting terrorist activities. Neighbours and co-workers are being pulled in for questioning, and some have been arrested.[17]

Less than two weeks after the publication of Silk's op-ed, the USA PATRIOT Act ("Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism") became the law of the land. For the next twenty years, the Act permitted deeply invasive surveillance, counter-terrorism tactics and unequal treatment of Muslims in America.

In 2002, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) began requiring males above sixteen years of age from a number of Muslim-majority countries who were living in the U.S., but were not citizens, to come into federal offices for a program of "special registration." Eventually, the program that became known as the "National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) was expanded to twenty-five countries, all of which were Muslim majority, except for North Korea. According to the Center for Constitutional Rights:

More than 90,000 Muslims were registered under NSEERS, and thousands were detained, interrogated, and deported for failure to comply with special registration requirements. As a result, families were torn apart and a deep fear settled in Muslim, Arab, and South Asian communities.[18] NSEERS did not produce a single terrorism prosecution. The program was implemented from 2002 to 2011, when it was suspended for lack of efficiency.[19]

As researcher Louise Cainkar reported soon after its initiation, "The program has struck fear among Arab as well as Asian and North Africa Muslim communities, who are wondering, 'what's next?'"[20]

More horrors unfolded over the following years: the 2002 opening of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp for men deemed "enemy combatants" who were deprived of the protections of the Geneva

---

17. Silk, "War Has Tested Tolerance Before."

18. Detailed stories about individuals and communities affected can be found, among other places in: A. Malek, and Karen Korematsu, *Patriot Acts: Narratives of post-9/11 injustice* (San Francisco: McSweeneys Books, 2011); Irum Shiekh, *Detained Without Cause: Muslims' Stories of Detention and Deportation in America After 9/11* (New York: Palgrave, 2011).

19. "National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Request," Center for Constitutional Rights, accessed July 17, 2023, https://ccrjustice.org/home/what-we-do/our-cases/national-security-entry-exit-registration-system-nseers-freedom#:~:text=Created%20in%202002%20on%20the,fingerprinting%2C%20photographing%2C%20and%20interrogation.

20. Cainkar, "Special Registration," 13.

Convention. Across the world, Muslim men were seized and without due process were sent to be imprisoned and tortured by oppressive regimes; the case of Canadian Maher Arar is well known. In 2003, the U.S. invaded Iraq, and the occupying American form committed to "de-Bathification" and disbanded the national army, stripping hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Sunnis of work and favouring Iraqi Shi'ites; this resulted in a massive sectarian mobilization against the occupying force and their provisional appointees. In 2004, it was revealed that the U.S. used their knowledge of Islamic customs and practices to inflict bespoke physical and sexualized abuse and torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. The U.S. perpetrated spectacular abuses and violations of rights that would continue for many years.

It is impossible to overemphasize how important interfaith allies were for Muslims during this period. They stood beside American Muslims to denounce violations of their rights, facilitated connections with civil rights groups, and denounced prisoner abuse and torture as violations of their own religious beliefs about human dignity. Interfaith allies' denunciations of rights violations rather than feel-good affirmations of shared commonalities and humanity were particularly important, as we shall now discuss.

From Simple to Complex Ignorance

When I arrived in 1998 to teach at Hartford Seminary, it had already moved, three decades earlier, from a Christian mission and misinformation approach to Islam to one of shared learning and mutual respect; there were Muslim faculty on staff, as well as on the governing board.[21] Because this seminary was particularly focused on practical theology and the preparation of students for congregational and pastoral leadership, learning how to engage in interfaith dialogue with respect and integrity was an important aspect of the curriculum. Further, because this seminary had a strong social justice focus, learning how to strengthen those interfaith relationships through allyship for justice, and visa-versa, was emphasized and put into practice.[22]

This outlook and pedagogical focus at my institution was not unique but was part of a cultural shift in liberally-minded American institutions, or in some of their departments, as well as in pastoral care training programs. This allowed Muslim Americans to begin acquiring the academic degrees and pastoral skills held by religious professionals from other faith communities. Fair or not, interfaith higher co-education served as well as a means of vetting Muslims for serving in public and service institutions. Chaplaincy heads in the military and corrections departments, where religious practices were being accommodated in places with proximity to violence, were explicit about this. Muslims were not

---

21. Tim Winter has noted that this transition is a manifestation of embracing the Biblical command to reject bearing "false witness" about the religious other. Tim Winter, "Jesus and Muḥammad: new convergences," *The Muslim World,* 99, no. 1 (2009), 21, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.2009.01251.x.

22. For a history of interfaith engagement at Hartford Seminary, see Feryal Salem, "One Hundred and Twenty-Five Years of Islamic Studies at Hartford Seminary," *The Muslim World* 108, no. 2, (2018): 254–288, https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12243. Other sources on the recent history of interfaith engagement in North America include Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Wadi Zaidan Haddad, eds., *Christian-Muslim Encounters* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1995); Ian Markham, *Engaging with Beduizzaman Said Nursi: A Model for Interfaith Dialogue* (Surry: Ashgate Publishing Limited 2009); Waleed El-Ansary and David K. Linnan, eds., *Muslim and Christian Understanding: Theory and Application of "A Common Word"* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Yazid Said and Lejla Demiri, eds., *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue: Muslim-Christian Encounters through A Common Word* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

particularly trusted to vet their own chaplains and chaplains educated in Muslim circles were vulnerable to ideological attacks; two incidents serve as examples of this reality.

In 2003, James "Yusuf" Yee, a Chinese-American convert to Islam, who had studied to be an Islamic scholar in Syria, obtained a letter from an American Islamic graduate school that his education was equivalent to a U.S.-based theological education. Yee was accepted into the U.S. Army chaplaincy and had been working in that capacity at the Guantanamo Bay prison complex for ten months when he was arrested for sedition, espionage and other offences. After spending months in solitary confinement and being subject to harsh interrogation, all charges were dropped and he was later given an honorable discharge.[23] In the same year that Yee was arrested, a U.S. Senate Committee held a hearing on "Terrorism: Radical Islamic Influence of Chaplaincy of the U.S. Military and Prisons." Muslim endorser organizations were accused of planting radical Muslim chaplains in federal prisons. The vigorous defence of these chaplains and endorsers by then serving Chief of Chaplains, Roman Catholic Dominican sister Susan van Baalen, was critical for keeping Muslim chaplains present in the institutions and the endorsing agencies were cleared of any wrongdoing.[24]

The rise in Islamophobia over the decade following 9/11 was not caused by any one factor. Obviously, the attack itself was a major factor, yet many people observed a greater increase in anti-Muslim sentiment after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, likely due to the great numbers of U.S. military members killed in a relatively short period.[25] In addition, attempted and successful terrorist attacks by Muslims in the U.S. and Europe, such as the 7/7 attack in London, served the objectives of terrorists by keeping populations on edge and willing to accept extraordinary means presented as necessary for their safety. While objective researchers pointed out that terrorists targeted and killed many more Muslim civilians than non-Muslims,[26] ideologues did not stop characterizing such attacks as caused by the Islamic faith, or at least, by "radical Islam." Other anti-Muslim tropes began spreading like memes to devastating effect.[27]

Ordinary Muslims, Muslim leaders, and Muslim-led governments regularly issue press releases, condemnations of the terrorists, and clarifications about the distinction between terrorism and lawfully conducted war,[28] but these assurances often fall on deaf ears. I and many of my colleagues who had years of experience giving public presentations noticed a drastic change among the people who came to our programs. Inevitably the first question asked was "Why don't Muslims denounce terrorism?" Even though such denunciations were everywhere, the message was not getting through to the American public.

---

23. Yee wrote a book about his experience, see James Yee, *For God and Country: Faith and Patriotism under Fire* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005).

24. SpearIt, "9/11 Impacts on Muslims in Prison," *Michigan Journal of Race and Law* 27, no. 1 (2021), https://doi.org/10.36643/mjrl.27.1.impacts.

25. Almost twice as many U.S. military service members died in Iraq than in Afghanistan, even though the latter occupation lasted longer. "Human Cost of Post-9/11 Wars: Direct War Deaths in Major War Zones, Afghanistan & Pakistan (Oct. 2001 – Aug. 2021); Iraq (March 2003 – March 2023); Syria (Sept. 2014 – March 2023); Yemen (Oct. 2002 – Aug. 2021) and other Post-9/11 War Zones," Watson Institute, Costs of War project, accessed July 17, 2023, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/WarDeathToll.

26. "National Counterterrorism Center: 2011 Report on Terrorism," Office of the Director of National Intelligence National Counterterrorism Center, March 12, 2012, 14, https://irp.fas.org/threat/nctc2011.pdf.

27. Bridge Initiative Team, "Factsheet: Common Anti-Muslim Tropes," Bridge: A Georgetown University Initiative, December 4, 2018, https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-common-anti-muslim-tropes-2/.

28. Many organizations such as The American Muslim (TAM), collected and published these statements. See Sheila Musaji, "Muslim Voices Against Extremism and Terrorism," *The American Muslim*, June 1, 2007, http://theamericanmuslim.org/tam.php/features/articles/muslim_voices_against_extremism_and_terrorism_2/.

When the Center for American Progress analyzed the rise of Islamophobia in America in the first decade after 9/11, they found that it could be attributed to "a tight network of anti-Muslim, anti-Islam foundations, misinformation experts, validators, grassroots organizations, religious right groups, and their allies in the media and in politics."[29] In other words, misinformation originated with a small, well-organized group of people who had an effective strategy: release and amplify inflammatory misinformation about Islam and Muslims and it would catch on, especially given the potency of internet virality by this point.

This helps explain why formerly general audiences who were mostly uninformed, or somewhat misinformed, were often closed to expert or even neighbourly explanations of mainstream Muslim beliefs; they were inoculated with misinformation. In the terminology of Islamic epistemology, they had moved from "simple ignorance" (*jahl basit*) to "complex ignorance" (*jahl murakkab*). As we have all learned recently since the COVID-19 pandemic, facts and expert opinion cannot necessarily counter misinformation; indeed, sometimes being confronted with a contrary view motivates people to search for information to support their beliefs.

The problem of misinformation is society is not simply about incorrect information or incorrect thinking if we separate "thinking" from "emotion." Researcher Chris Bail who would later analyze media from this period would conclude that the messages of anti-Muslim fringe groups and figures received disproportionate attention from the media because they displayed strong emotion, especially anger, and their outrageous statements made for exciting viewing. Because this kind of person with an extreme anti-Muslim message appeared so frequently in the media, they began to be understood by the general public as "mainstream." Bail says:

> The September 11th attacks created profound upheaval among the community of civil society organizations struggling to shape shared understandings of Islam in the American media. Though the vast majority of civil society organizations produced pro-Muslim messages, journalists were captivated by a small group of anti-Muslim fringe organizations. These organizations represented only a tiny fraction of all civil society organizations within the cultural environment, but accounted for nearly half of those that exerted any influence upon U.S. media representations of Islam between 2001 and 2003. This discovery calls for a critical reappraisal of the concept of resonance—or the notion that civil society organizations create cultural change by producing mainstream messages that are consistent with prevailing cultural themes. Instead, this chapter showed that social psychological processes interact with the cultural environment in the wake of major crises. Namely, displays of negative emotion enable fringe organizations to transcend their obscurity and humble resources by appealing to the media's legendary appetite for drama. But media amplification of emotional fringe organizations also creates a distorted representation of the cultural environment more broadly—put differently, the disproportionate influence of emotional fringe organizations creates the misperception that such groups are in fact mainstream.[30]

This dynamic put mainstream Muslims in an impossible situation. Displays of negative emotion attract far more media attention than projections of calm and reason. But for years Muslims had seen themselves displayed as angry, irrational people in the media, and certainly, the Muslims who were

---

29. Wajahat Ali et al., *Fear, Inc.: The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America* (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, 2011), 4, https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2011/08/pdf/islamophobia.pdf. See also: Nathan Lean, *The Islamophobia Industry: How the Right Manufactures Hatred of Muslims*, second edition (London: Pluto Press, 2017).
30. Chris Bail, *Terrified: How Anti-Muslim Fringe Organizations Became Mainstream* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), 52.

committing acts of terrorism were predominantly shown to display anger and other negative emotions,[31] so we tried to avoid such displays. I remember being screened by producers several times when requested to appear on news "discussion panels." Each time, the producer would ask me which "side" of a particular issue I was on or would frame a question in a provocative way such as, "Do you condemn" a particular person or issue. My professorial attempts to reframe such questions or nuance the issues drew only impatience from them as they insisted I respond whether I was "for" or "against" something.

For a number of months, a producer for Bill Maher's show "Politically Incorrect" contacted me repeatedly trying to persuade me to appear on the show; this was my chance, she said, to present my point of view. I finally replied that I had grown up in a large, opinionated family where shouting, name-calling and interruption were the dominant forms of communicating political views, and I had gone to graduate school to find an alternative mode of discussion. While I may have preserved a measure of dignity in my refusals, this was not necessarily the best decision if I wanted to convey the depth of my moral outrage over terrorism in the name of Islam. The reality is that only a handful of people would read my articles or listen to my interviews on public radio expressing such views; many more could have heard them if I (or another Muslim leader, perhaps more temperamentally suited) had appeared on that show. The failure of mainstream Muslim leaders to match Islamophobes in their *performance* of anger at terrorism committed by other Muslims was leveraged to suggest we were indifferent to the suffering of non-Muslims or worse, sympathetic to the terrorists.[32] Then when Muslim leaders did display anger criticizing the human rights violations of other Muslims, we were again seen as aligning with violent Muslims more closely than our non-Muslim fellow citizens.

At the end of his study, Bail concluded that there were no simple solutions to removing pervasive anti-Muslim sentiments in the public sphere:

> Though classic studies indicate civil society organizations succeed in shaping public attitudes by creating a critical mass of concerned citizens, this chapter suggests such influence may also occur in a top-down fashion. Public opinion surveys suggest that the surge of anti-Muslim fringe organizations within the mass media after the September 11th attacks was not the result of a groundswell of public anger about Islam. Instead, this chapter provided evidence that the rise of anti-Muslim organizations in the mass media and the policy process most likely shaped public anger about Islam instead. Since surveys indicate that most Muslims and non-Muslims in the United States do not engage in face-to-face contact—and because of the vast geographic gulfs that separate much of the world's Muslim and non-Muslim populations—it is likely that many Americans will continue to be influenced by pervasive anti-Muslim sentiment within the public sphere.[33]

---

31. Zara Zimbardo argues convincingly that comedy is one of the few, perhaps only, forms of discourse that can successfully address this dilemma. "The subversive power of humor encourages meaning to slip, as comic performance has the ability to bypass rigid barriers that reinforce xenophobic stereotypes and militaristic binaries, potentially transforming unreflective acceptance into conscious reflection. Directly addressing what people do seem to "know," comic subversions and inversions serve as a form of epistemological inquiry." Zara Zimbardo, "Cultural Politics of Humor in (De)Normalizing Islamophobic Stereotypes," *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 2, no. 1 (2014), 78, https://doi.org/10.13169/islastudj.2.1.0059.
32. Bail, *Terrified,* 62–67.
33. Bail, *Terrified,* 131.

The Circle, not the Square

In 2006, American theologian George Hunsinger invited a diverse group of theologians and religious leaders to Princeton Theological Seminary to articulate their faith or denominations' stance on torture. The National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) was founded and over the next two years, organized one of the most successful interfaith justice campaigns in U.S. history. The Islamic Society of North America, whose Vice-President I was at that time, was one of the founding members. NRCAT's campaign led to Barack Obama signing an executive order banning torture on his second day in office. [34] I do not believe that the condemnation of torture would have been heard by most of the American public without the leadership of Christian and Jewish leaders; they were trusted to articulate principled, universal values, but Muslims were not. Further, rather than focusing on the "rights of Muslims," NRCAT led members and participants to focus on their own particular and shared theological beliefs about the God-given dignity of humanity. NRCAT states that all members share "a conviction that all individuals are created in the image of God and are therefore endowed with basic dignity" and they share the ethical principle that "People of faith are called to compassion – to not only care when people are degraded or hurt but to take action: to stand for, and with, those who are abused, oppressed and among the most vulnerable."[35] NRCAT's methodology of eliciting faith-based statements of principle about human dignity from their members provided a firm foundation for further action that helped to extend their shaping of policy to the treatment of prisoners in the United States and ending "the torture of solitary confinement" in particular.

What about anti-Muslim hate and Islamophobia, did NRCAT make a difference? Chris Bail says that interfaith activism did little to affect public opinion after 9/11:

> The initial surge in positive opinion of Islam after the September 11th attacks coincided with a large interfaith campaign to prevent a public backlash against Muslim Americans. The Interfaith Council on Metropolitan Washington, the World Council of Churches, the Anti-Defamation League, and the World Jewish Congress partnered with the Council on American Islamic Relations, the Muslim Public Affairs Council, the Islamic Society of North America, and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee to conduct public outreach designed to promote a positive image of Islam. [Bail lists many more initiatives.] Yet public opinion data indicate these later campaigns exerted little influence upon public understandings of Islam.[36]

I do not know whether NRCAT's activities and Obama's executive orders influenced public views about Islam; perhaps this will be studied someday. In any case, that is not what they were intended to do, at least, not explicitly. NRCAT accomplished what it aimed to do: to change policy. This change was lifesaving to those who were subject to torture, and meaningful to all those who were afraid they could be subject to the apparent policy of no-limits the U.S. had adopted in their treatment of prisoners. I have no doubt that NRCAT's activism, as well as the allyship of other interfaith organizations at the very least, kept greater numbers of Muslims active and engaged in the public square, such as it was.

---

34. Barack Obama, "Ensuring Lawful Interrogations," Executive Order 13491, January 22, 2009, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/realitycheck/the-press-office/ensuring-lawful-interrogations#:~:text=Effective%20immediately%2C%20an%20individual%20in,not%20be%20subjected%20to%20any.
35. "Human Rights & National Security," National Religious Campaign Against Torture, https://nrcat.org/national-security.
36. Bail, *Terrified,* 112–113.

I would further argue that NRCAT is a "principled" and effective interfaith organization for several reasons. First, each faith community is invited to reflect on human dignity and its implications for policy from its own perspective and does not have to align with a narrow political or social identity. For example, NRCAT formed, and continues to act, countering oppressive policies of its own government, but has never adopted a general anti-government stance. Second, NRCAT welcomes all faith communities, not only those deemed Judeo-Christian, or even "Abrahamic", but Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and others. Third, NRCAT does not designate any one religious organization as "representative" of that faith but accepts members according to their own self-definition. Current Muslim organizations, for example, include the national political advocacy organization the Muslim Public Affairs Council and a local service organization Alnaafa Muslim Women's Cooperative & Development[37]; the religiously and socially conservative Islamic Circle of North America, which engages in outreach to ensure that "parents can "opt-out" of mandated student instruction in lessons and storybooks on LGBTQ themes,"[38] as well as Muslims for Progressive Values, an organization which, among other things, is "committed to ending discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity."[39] What this shows is that for NRCAT and perhaps other interfaith organizations, to be successful in interfaith dialogue and activism on one issue, albeit, an important issue, such organizations cannot succeed in rallying members on all issues. Further, broad inclusion means that some members might be disappointed and perhaps dissuaded from continuing their membership if others do not show up for a campaign on an issue of importance to them, such as LGBTQ rights. However, by embracing a broad diversity of organizations and viewpoints within any one faith community, members will likely find politically aligned interfaith partners on other issues. Finally, NRCAT does not restrict membership to congregationally-based or faith-based organizations, nor prioritize "clergy" as "leaders" or spokespersons for religious communities.

From my perspective, as a Muslim religious scholar and leader who is not a congregational leader, the latter point is especially important in Western Muslim communities. Religious leaders interested in interfaith dialogue or in engaging in activism often reach out to imams of mosques and Islamic centers and project upon them a "clerical" status that community members may or may not recognize.[40] In doing so, our interfaith partners might unknowingly reinforce hierarchies or exclusions within the Muslim community that many of us are working to counter. This brings to mind John Ralston Saul's comment about the way non-Indigenous Canadians can affect the internal power dynamics and community cohesion of the first people of the land:

> The indigenous idea of egalitarianism balanced by a tension between the individual and the group goes back to their idea of society as an inclusive circle that can be enlarged. And if such an adaptation is handled

---

37. National Religious Campaign Against Torture, "Human Rights."

38. "ICNA Promotes Family Values as Survey Shows Marriage Less Appealing to Gen Z," About Islam, May 30, 2023, https://aboutislam.net/muslim-issues/n-america/icna-promotes-family-values-as-survey-shows-marriage-less-appealing-to-gen-z/.

39. "LGBTQI Inclusion," Muslims for Progressive Values, https://www.mpvusa.org/mpv-principles.

40. In what might be considered both "negative" and "positive" stories, media headlines often refer to Muslim congregational leaders as "clerics" and provide countering points of view from secular or governments sources, rather than refer to these leaders as Muslim scholars or activists; for example see Associated Press, "Australian Muslim cleric blasted for remark on women and rape," CBC News, October 26, 2006, https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/australian-muslim-cleric-blasted-for-remark-on-women-and-rape-1.615969; Bill Graveland, "Muslim cleric offers checklist to warn of Islamic radicalization," Toronto Star, November 6, 2014, https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/muslim-cleric-offers-checklist-to-warn-of-islamic-radicalization/article_5e82d16e-aebd-5891-961d-a1790e3c3673.html.

right, all sides should be able to benefit. For example, Inuit women tended to testify to the royal commission that under the new system of Nunavut, they had far more power than under traditional culture. First Nations women, on the other hand, tended to protest that most negotiations for self-government were limited by the imported nineteenth-century assumptions of the Indian Act and so gave more power to men, while the traditional system had been much more balanced.[41]

Interestingly, the circle as a model of inclusion is important in Muslim societies as well. In his sweeping history of Islamic law and legal theory, Wael Hallaq discusses the importance of the *halaqa* – the teaching "circle," in the development of the Islamic discursive tradition.[42] A person knowledgeable about a religious topic, or a subject needed to understand the language of texts and revelation (such as Arabic), would have students sit in a circle around them. While teaching circles were sometimes convened in private homes, they were also convened in accessible spaces, such as mosques, where anyone could drop in. Some students were dedicated to full attendance and might develop into experts themselves, but everyone in the community had the opportunity to learn in the same space and even acquire much of the same knowledge, technical vocabulary and methodologies of religious tradition. The circle could expand as large as the space allowed. In most pre-modern Muslim societies, not only could women attend these sessions, but they could also (and did) lead them, even in "public" spaces – that is, spaces into which any person could enter without an invitation, such as a mosque or a spiritual teaching center (a *tekke* or *zawiyya*).[43]

By the eleventh century CE, *madrasas* - purpose-built colleges – became the locus of legal studies in particular and narrowed the separation of influence between rulers and scholars that exists, at least theoretically, in the informal *halaqa*. From one perspective, the *madrasa* was an equalizing force, since students were provided with a free education, room and board, and other basic necessities of life. Madrasas were typically built around a square courtyard, a common area where students could gather to study, converse and share ideas. But unlike the inclusive, expandable teaching circle, the college "commons" was a mostly closed square, inaccessible to most. Although anyone could establish an endowed *madrasa*, and men and women of varying means did, only the very wealthy and powerful could establish major endowments that gave their colleges lasting power, and they built the grandest and most awe-inspiring buildings.[44] Over time, the ruling elites and their administrators retained closer control of the hiring and firing of professors in these institutions, and it was the ruling elites who drew from the graduates of these colleges to make appointments for legal counsel, judges, and others. Hallaq says that these madrasas "became the chief means by which the legalists were coopted by the ruling elites."[45] Others disagree with Hallaq's negative assessment, which is based in part, on an overly romantic view of the halaqa as an equitable space, and an overly-cynical view of political power as always strategic and amoral, if not immoral.[46]

Even if the relationship between rulers and religious or legal scholars was too close and compromised in some cases, alternative learning circles have always been available. Informal as well as

---

41. John Ralston Saul, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada* (Toronto: Penguin Group, 2008), in Chapter 7, iPad.

42. Wael B. Hallaq, *Sharīʿa: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 135–158.

43. Mohammad Akram, *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam* (Oxford: Interface Publications, 2007), 76–84.

44. Hallaq, *Sharīʿa: Theory, Practice,* 146.

45. Hallaq, *Sharīʿa: Theory, Practice,* 135.

46. See Mohammad Fadel's critique of Hallaq's characterization in "A Tragedy of Politics or an Apolitical Tragedy?" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 131, no. 1 (2011): 109–127.

well-organized *halaqas* have continued to provide accessible learning to many members of Muslim communities. Religious scholars formed in these spaces may have as much moral and persuasive authority – sometimes even more – than those educated in large madrasas. Women have continued to master legal and religious knowledge and become known as scholars over the centuries primarily by engaging with and convening *halaqas*.[47]

The North American and European congregational model of religious life has shaped the way Muslims live their faith in these lands. Traditionally (i.e., in pre-modern times), and until today in Muslim-majority countries, the imam ("leader") of a mosque is a person who leads congregational prayers, but anyone who leads a group in prayer, whether that is in a mosque or a home, man, woman, or child, is the "imam" of that performance of prayer.[48] There is no ordination in any of the sects or schools of Islam.[49] In large mosques in traditional Muslim societies, the prayer leader was not always authorized to preach the Friday sermon, and in most contemporary Muslim-majority countries, preachers can only deliver sermons approved by the government. In contrast, in most Western minority Muslim communities today, multiple, additional responsibilities have been conferred upon imams appointed to lead congregations, including teaching and offering insight into policy matters. Lacking other sources of support and spiritual guidance, many Western minority Muslim communities expect imams of mosques to offer pastoral care, family counselling and more, making them more central to the community than before. But there are many Muslim scholars, teachers, chaplains, counsellors and spiritual guides, among others, who offer religious teaching, guidance and pastoral care to great numbers of Muslims. It should be kept in mind that the majority of Muslims in North America do not attend or consider themselves members of an Islamic congregation, even if they are members of other Muslim-identified organizations focused on religious education or service.

The belief that organizations and collectives can easily be divided according to "religious" and non-religious ("secular," "political," or "ethnic") categories is also a barrier to the full participation of faithful people in interfaith initiatives. Feminists, Queer Muslims, and Black Muslims, for example, are sometimes left out of interfaith programming as a result. Intersectional identities are a reality, and many faithful people can prioritize their safety and values, or express a fuller and more complex identity, in collectives that are not formed along traditional patterns of North American congregational life. University of Michigan professor and activist Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, for example, has discussed how the Movement for Black Lives has been a critical collective for many Black Muslims who sometimes have found themselves tokenized and fetishized in Muslim spaces.[50] In Canada, there are many Muslims whose

---

47. Over 9,300 women scholars of Hadith (the corpus of prophetic teachings that is the second most important source of Islamic norms after the Qur'an) are included in Muhammad Akram Nadwi's recently published 43-volume biographical dictionary of women scholars from the first century of Islam until today. See Muhammad Akram Nadwi, *Al-Wafāʾ bi'l-asmāʾ al-nisāʾ,* 43 volumes (Jeddah: Dār al-Minhāj, 2021).

48. For the history and various functions of imams in different times and places and how these differences affect opportunities for Muslim women's religious leadership, see: Ingrid Mattson, "Can a Woman be an Imam? Debating Form and Function in Muslim Women's Leadership," paper presented at *Sisters: Women, Religion and Leadership in Christianity and Islam Conference*, Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, March 2003, http://ingridmattson.org/article/can-a-woman-be-an-imam/.

49. Although Shiite communities have had, and some continue to have, hereditary "Imams" whose leadership is not congregationally focused, but who have a unique and elevated spiritual status.

50. Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States* (New York: New York University, 2016), pp. 227–229.

primary or sole engagement with a Muslim collective is with the Canadian Council of Muslim Women.[51] Activist and scholar Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons has written about the fact of ostracization for many Muslim feminists and progressives: "Just as African-Americans have had to wrest our true history from the lies and obfuscations of white racist American history, we feminist and progressive Muslims must learn and teach the history of Muslim women's struggle for justice against ignorance, tradition, and superstition to all Muslims, especially the young. We will face formidable opposition in our efforts. Most likely we will be driven from our mosques and our community centers when we try to teach this history. We will be shunned and ostracized. But we must persevere in spite of the forces that will be arrayed against us."[52]

Mosques are institutions that are probably most easily identified by interfaith partners as the place to find Muslims. Imams of mosques, who are primarily preachers, use a form of discourse most recognizable as "religious" to other religious leaders. Preachers are especially effective at displaying or eliciting emotion to capture the attention of a group. As Chris Bail has shown, such use of emotion, particularly negative emotion, is captivating and persuasive, but it also can drown out the majority, or at least, large groups of people, who might express different views. Interfaith dialogue, learning and engagement should not strengthen hierarchies and further marginalize people of faith who already struggle to be heard within their own communities and in society at large. Interfaith dialogue and activism that centers around the congregational imam misses out on the rich resources, knowledge, authority and influence of others in the Muslim community, such as scholars, teachers and pastoral caregivers of all genders, as well as faithful people whose intersectional identities lead them to make the reasonable and principled choice to form community in other kinds of organizations and movements.

Conclusion

In our time, it is difficult to definitively locate the "public square." Physical spaces that are open, accessible, and shared by diverse members of society are not often easily found. Digital spaces do not seem to have fulfilled their promise as open and inclusive spaces for conversation. Interfaith dialogue can facilitate peaceful and productive conversations, but they are not unaffected by negative social trends. I have argued that, while no interfaith encounter has ever been naïve, the initiation of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, coinciding with the wide availability of digital and social media, and its effective use by anti-Muslim extremist groups, has resulted in the public being negatively primed with misinformation. The challenge to open engagement is both cognitive, in that misinformation needs to be addressed, and performative, since research shows that displays of negative emotion are more effective in attracting attention and shaping opinion than reasonable and calm

---

51. CCMW states that it is "an organization dedicated to the empowerment, equality and equity of all Muslim women in Canada. Our mission is to affirm the identities of Canadian Muslim women and promote their lived experiences through community engagement, public policy, stakeholder engagement and amplified awareness of the social injustices that Muslim women and girls endure in Canada, while advocating for their diverse needs and equipping local CCMW chapters with the necessary resources to maximize national efforts and mobilize local communities to join the movement." See https://www.ccmw.com/our-story.

52. Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, "Are We Up to the Challenge? The Need For a Radical Reordering of the Islamic Discourse on Women," in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (London, UK: Oneworld, 2003), 235–248.

expressions of one's stance. The result is that any group that is already stereotyped as angry and irrational is in a difficult position in trying to defend their rights and dignity.

Principled interfaith engagement, such as initiatives led by the National Religious Campaign against Torture can achieve effective policy results and provide vital moral support to a beleaguered community (such as Muslim minorities), keeping them engaged in policy discussions, even if public opinion generally remains negative. Such interfaith dialogue and activism can create a principled foundation for engagement on other issues, although this is not always the case, and various parties might express disappointment, and even betrayal when "the other side" does not show up for their cause. However, continued engagement that allows politically misaligned interfaith partners to express their views according to terms they consider authentic might help avoid further polarization that is corrosive to overall social cohesion. Unfortunately, advocacy is too often atomistic, focused on one particular issue or outcome while neglecting long-term or unintended consequences. What is the point of religious or faith-based advocates entering the public arena of political or social advocacy if not to add some value to the means and methods of communication? Interfaith partners should commit to avoid reinforcing hierarchy and exclusion among and within their community partners and aim to reinforce social cohesion in general. One way of doing this is for interfaith partners to avoid hierarchical forms of "representation," and instead adopt the model of an open and inclusive "circle" for those who wish to join. In the end, such discussions rooted in faith can habituate all participants to be better listeners, which is at a minimum necessary to convening discussions about public policy and our common lives.

Bibliography

Abdul Khabeer, Su'ad. *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States.* New York: New York University, 2016.

Ali, Wajahat et al. *Fear, Inc.: The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America.* Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, 2011. https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2011/08/pdf/islamophobia.pdf.

Bail, Chris. *Breaking the Social Media Prism: How to Make Our Platforms Less Polarizing.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691216508.

Bail, Christopher. *Terrified: How Anti-Muslim Fringe Organizations Became Mainstream.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015.

Bridge Initiative Team. "Factsheet: Common Anti-Muslim Tropes." Bridge: A Georgetown University Initiative. December 4, 2018. https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-common-anti-muslim-tropes-2/.

Cainkar, Louise. "Special Registration: A Fervor for Muslims." Marquette University *Social and Cultural Sciences Faculty Research and Publications* 8 (2002). https://epublications.marquette.edu/socs_fac/8.

Cainkar, Louise and Janan Najeeb. "Taking on Hate: Muslim Women Build a Community-Driven Hate Watch." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 15, no. 3 (November 2019): 402–408.

Edwards, Susan S.M. *The Political Appropriation of the Muslim Body: Islamophobia, Counter-Terrorism Law and Gender.* Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2021.

El-Ansary, Waleed and David K. Linnan, eds. *Muslim and Christian Understanding: Theory and Application of "A Common Word."* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Fadel, Mohammad. "A Tragedy of Politics or an Apolitical Tragedy?" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 131 no. 1 (2011): 109–127.

Franks, Mary Anne. "Beyond the Public Square: Imagining Digital Democracy." *The Yale Law Journal* 131 (November 2021). https://www.yalelawjournal.org/forum/beyond-the-public-square-imagining-digital-democracy.

Green, Todd. *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West.* Second Edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019.

Hall, M. "Facebook." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed July 17, 2023. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Facebook.

Hallaq, Wael B. *Sharīʿa: Theory, Practice, Transformations.* Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Kahf, Mohja. *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: from Termagant to Odalisque*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999.

Lean, Nathan. *The Islamophobia Industry: How the Right Manufactures Hatred of Muslims.* Second Edition. London: Pluto Press, 2017.

Malek, A. and Karen Korematsu. *Patriot Acts: Narratives of post-9/11 injustice*. San Francisco: McSweeneys Books, 2011.

Markham, Ian. *Engaging with Beduizzaman Said Nursi: A Model for Interfaith Dialogue*. Surry: Ashgate Publishing Limited 2009.

Mattson, Ingrid. "Can a Woman be an Imam? Debating Form and Function in Muslim Women's Leadership." Paper presented at *Sisters: Women, Religion and Leadership in Christianity and Islam Conference*. Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, March 2003. http://ingridmattson.org/article/can-a-woman-be-an-imam/.

Mendieta, Eduardo. "Public Sphere." In *The Cambridge Habermas Lexicon*. Edited by Amy Allen and Eduardo Mendieta, 356-363. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Nadwi, Mohammad Akram. *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam.* Oxford: Interface Publications, 2007.

———. *Al-Wafāʾ bi'l-asmāʾ al-nisāʾ.* 43 vols. Jeddah: Dār al-Minhāj, 2021.

National Council of Churches. "NCC Friendship Press Offers Book on Islam." December 12, 2001. https://archive.wfn.org/2001/12/msg00089.html.

Obama, Barack. "Ensuring Lawful Interrogations," Executive Order 13491, January 22, 2009. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/realitycheck/the-press-office/ensuring-lawful-interrogations#:~:text=Effective%20immediately%2C%20an%20individual%20in,not%20be%20subjected%20to%20any.

Office of the Director of National Counterterrorism Center, "National Counterterrorism Center: 2011 Report on Terrorism." March 12, 2012. https://irp.fas.org/threat/nctc2011.pdf.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

Salem, Feryal. "One Hundred and Twenty-Five Years of Islamic Studies at Hartford Seminary." *The Muslim World* 108, no. 2 (April 2018): 254–288.

Saul, John Ralston. *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada.* Toronto: Penguin Group, 2008.

Shaheen, Jack G. *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. Revised and updated edition. Northampton, Mass: Olive Branch Press: 2009.

Shiekh, Irum. *Detained Without Cause: Muslims' Stories of Detention and Deportation in America After 9/11*. New York: Palgrave, 2011.

Simmons, Gwendolyn Zoharah. "Are We Up to the Challenge? The Need For a Radical Reordering of the Islamic Discourse on Women." In *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism.* Edited by Omid Safi, 235–248. London, UK: Oneworld, 2003.

Southern Poverty Law Center. "Active Antigovernment and Hate Groups in The United States in 2021." In *The Year in Hate & Extremism 2021*, 42–55. Southern Poverty Law Center, 2022.

SpearIt. "9/11 Impacts on Muslims in Prison." *Michigan Journal of Race and Law* 27 (2021): 233–247.

Speight, Marston R. *God is One: The Way of Islam.* New York: Friendship Press, 1989.

Speight, Marston R. *God is One: The Way of Islam.* Second edition with afterword and study guide. New York: Friendship Press, 2002.

Said, Yazid and Lejla Demiri, eds. *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue: Muslim-Christian Encounters through A Common Word*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Watson Institute, Costs of War project. "Human Cost of Post-9/11 Wars: Direct War Deaths in Major War Zones, Afghanistan & Pakistan (Oct. 2001 – Aug. 2021); Iraq (March 2003 – March 2023); Syria (Sept. 2014 – March 2023); Yemen (Oct. 2002 – Aug. 2021) and other Post-9/11 War Zones." Accessed July 17, 2023. https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/WarDeathToll.

Winter, Tim. "Jesus and Muḥammad: New Convergences." *The Muslim World* 99 (Jan. 2009): 21–38.

Yee, James with Aimee Molloy. *For God and Country: Faith and Patriotism under Fire.* New York: PublicAffairs, 2005.

Yazbeck Haddad, Yvonne and Wadi Zaidan Haddad. Gainesville eds. *Christian-Muslim Encounters.* FL: University of Florida Press, 1995.

Zimbardo, Zara. "Cultural Politics of Humor in (De)Normalizing Islamophobic Stereotypes." *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 2, no. 1 (2014): 59–81.