

22 Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Here I comment on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I do not pay attention to subgroups within them. I do not assess weirdoes and terrorists. I assess along my standard lines: the message of Jesus mixed with practicality and Western values. All three religions have to respect the message of Jesus as much as their core tenets. I see no hard problems for any, in theory. Modern believers in all three religions already have adopted much of Jesus' message and Western values. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have more problems getting along with each other than with assimilating the message of Jesus. Because of current problems between the West and Islam, most of the chapter is about Islam. I write for moderate reasonable people who do not force ideas on anybody. Much of what I say about one religion applies to the other two. I don't usually point that out.

Not Jews, Christians, Muslims, or any subgroup in them, literally follows all the words in the basic text of their religion (Torah, rest of Tanakh, New Testament, or Koran). Every group selects passages to support its current ideas and skips passages that make problems. No group has a direct line to God and knows exactly the one-and-only Word-and-Will of God about everything important. No group knows the Word of God to the exclusion of others. Even when groups cite passages that seem clear, we should not take their view at face value. The Tanakh, New Testament, and Koran are self-contradictory and contradict each other. God does not insure that any passage in any book is correct for all times in all places just because (1) the passage supports your ideas, (2) God would not lie to your group, and (3) God watches over your group. We must read the texts to make up our own minds, find the best truth, avoid bad people in each religion, and be clear about principles. These points are so important that I repeat them.

PART 1: Similar Problems.

Following Jesus' Message; Jesus as God.

Keep in mind my disagreement with Orthodox Christianity. In Orthodox Christianity, Jesus is important because he is God and he saves people directly through his Birth, Death, and Resurrection. His life and teachings help his mission. To me, his message is more important than mere facts of his Birth, Death, and Resurrection even if he is God and was resurrected. Christians should accept Jesus' message along with his identity as God but they don't always do that. They substitute difficult doctrines and odd acts of worship for following Jesus' message. Read Wayne Meeks for a view that is accessible, orthodox, and scholarly. Read from the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church, or from the Heidelberg Confession for Protestants.

The content of Jesus' message is not a problem for Judaism and Islam to accept. How enthusiastic they have to be is not a topic I go into much. They have to take it as seriously as anything anybody ever said in their religion, including Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Elijah, Paul, and Mohammad.

The major doctrinal problem in Judaism and Islam with adopting the message of Jesus is Jesus as God. Judaism and Islam cannot accept Jesus as God. Because the message of Jesus does not depend on

him as God, I see no reason why Judaism and Islam can't accept the message. People should stop getting stuck on Jesus as God and instead should consider his message. Jesus is not only a Christian prophet; Jesus is a prophet of God for all people.

Jesus' message was basically Jewish, modified to include others. Although not apparent now, Jews and Muslims share much background. The shared background of Judaism and Islam accords with Jesus' message. Political relations with Christians led Jews and Muslims to reject the message not due to its content but because it is part of Christianity. I hope Jews and Muslims can ignore the issue of Jesus as God, and then assess the message correctly apart from any ties to Christianity's claim that Jesus is God. If so, they might give a more objective useful assessment of how to apply the message in modern times than Christians have done so far.

Jews and Muslims don't have to solve their disputes before they consider the message of Jesus. Jews might have to accept Jesus as a Jewish prophet, which they can do easily enough if they do not have to worry about Jesus as God. Muslims already accept Jesus as a prophet, so I do not see any conflict with Muslim traditions as long as Muslims do not dismiss Jesus as "only a Christian thing".

Following the message of Jesus does not require that you give up all the practices, beliefs, and markers of your own native religion. I would be sad if people did that. I would be sad if Jews gave up yarmulkes, Muslims gave up praying several times a day, and Christians gave up pseudo-Christian holidays such as Christmas. I love Christmas and many non-Christians love Christmas.

Whether Jew, Christian, or Muslim, rather than worry about your identity, get your principles and priorities straight. Think about what you see clearly and what blinds you. Think about how to live in the modern world so you keep religious integrity but also so you are a helpful citizen. Think about how you might best use your time and energy. Get rid of what is misleading and bad. Decide what is important. Then do it. Think seriously about the message of Jesus and the core tenets of your religion. If they are compatible, as I think they are, then think how to merge them and how to live accordingly. After you give a can of food to the community food bank, if you want to light a candle to Mary, say a prayer of thanks to Allah, or thank Yahweh you were allowed to do a good act, then go ahead. Most Jews, Christians, and Muslims already do this.

Not All About You; Not About Going to Heaven (A).

This section and the next raise problems in exegesis that I have avoided throughout the book. The basic point here is simple: The world is not all about you. Stop thinking the world is all about you. In particular, stop thinking the world is all about how you get to heaven. Instead, think about how to be a good, decent, useful person. If you need to think the world is about something, it is about the Kingdom of God.

The relevant passages are Matthew 22:37-40 from the New Testament. Jesus references Deuteronomy 6:15 and Leviticus 19:18. The first reference that begins "You shall love the Lord your God" is a famous powerful key statement in Judaism, and Jews often repeat it. The ideas are clearly stated in the Koran. I doubt Jesus said everything in the New Testament that is attributed to him but I am sure he said all this below.

“You shall love the Lord your God
With all our heart,
And with all your soul,
And with all your mind.’ (from Deuteronomy)
This is the greatest and first commandment.

And a second is like it:
‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ (from Leviticus)

On these two commandments hang
All the law and the prophets.”

I left out Jesus’ statement about loving your neighbor as yourself from my list of points from Jesus in the first chapter of this book because it leads to the confusions listed below. I don’t explain it much here, and I don’t explain why it is hard to follow. Use common sense. It is an ideal toward which we work. It guides and inspires us. Evolution made sure we cannot follow it fully. God does not expect us to follow it fully. God is happy when we try hard.

To love your neighbor as yourself is to see people as persons; follow the Golden Rule; follow the idea that rules apply equally to you, kin, friends, enemies, “them”, and everybody; and follow the rule of law.

“Neighbor” means everyone, including non-Jews. Jesus likely did mean it inclusively to encompass even non-Jews but not as inclusively as later Christians taught. Jesus aimed at Jews and tolerated non-Jews happily. Later Christians aimed equally at Jews and non-Jews. Christians eventually aimed at non-Jews and excluded Jews. Hopefully modern Christians include everybody equally.

The advice that “love your neighbor, it is not all about you” raises problems.

First, it is hard to understand and impossible to follow. Evolution made sure that we don’t entertain ideas like this very often or very much and that we don’t act on them except rarely. We can’t get a good feel for loving our fellow as much as ourselves. I don’t explain much more.

Second, if we take “love your neighbor, it is not all about you” seriously as a realistic goal that we have to reach or else we are bad people, then we get flummoxed and paralyzed. We don’t do much good. If we want to get anything done, it is better to see this as an unreachable ideal than as a necessary goal.

Third, you are not part of a giant collective totalitarian state, theocracy, or bad version of the Kingdom of God. The fact that the world is not all about you does not mean it is all about the state, an ethnic group, a religion, a church, your socio-economic class, your family, the Caliphate, or the Communist collectivity. Do not lose yourself in a group or dogma. You individually are important. I have stated the importance of individual persons often. You have to find a correct balance between you as individual and the secular-religious-political-and-kin institutions that you are in.

Fourth, God still cares about you as an individual. God cares about all the individual sparrows and so he cares about you. You matter. To God, you, and all individuals, are what it is about. You can believe that God cares about you and still understand that the world is not all about you personally.

Fifth, the fact that the world is not all about you, and you should act in accord with what the world is all about, does not mean all you must force yourself to act like a sickly sweet do-gooder. You help the world when you are yourself, when you do what you are good at, even when you are a little irascible, and when you make the world more interesting. You love your neighbor when you give him what you are and what you are best capable of, and so give what you can give most of. You love your neighbor when you do the most good not necessarily when you do stereotyped good. If you devote yourself to others, and only help the world, that is great; but not everybody can do that or should. To love your neighbor as yourself is not to lose yourself in an ecstasy of warm feelings unless the feelings lead you to do good things following the Golden Rule and “applies equally”.

Sixth, the statement implies that, if you don't love yourself very much, you don't love your neighbor very much either. Lack of self-respect is lack of respect for others too. You are one of the people in the world; you are a neighbor to all other people; you are a neighbor. They should love you as much as they love themselves. You are as worthy of their love, just as they are as worthy of your love, because God loves us all. They won't succeed at loving you as they love themselves, no more than you do. You do still have to try to love them even if they don't fully love you or even if they hardly love you. To say this is not again to make you “first among equals” and selfish. To say this is not to deny good people who spend their life in service. It is the other way around. When you see that everyone is in the same boat, including you, you are more likely to be good to other people. If you have done bad things, or feel bad, I know how you can have little self-respect but still respect others. If you are depressed, then take care of yourself first until you are better, and don't worry. If you can, accept that God loves you and forgives you. Take seriously that you too are one of the neighbors too, and act accordingly.

If you see that you are one of the neighbors too, you still matter, you cannot fully succeed in loving your neighbor as yourself, but you can try, then you are more likely to do some good than if you try to reduce yourself to a bitter servant in a vain attempt to love your neighbor fully. The little bit of good that you really do is more important than the great good that you dream you could have done.

Seventh, to love God does not excuse doing any bad things to anybody. You do not love God and do not love your neighbor as yourself if you do any bad things to anybody. Zealotry is bad.

Not All About You; Not About Going to Heaven (B).

This section shows how we can stretch scripture to get what we want. I hope that I don't stretch it so far that the scripture breaks.

Eighth, to me, Jesus' statement makes clear that the world is not all about you and therefore not all about you going to heaven. Jesus did not worry much about heaven. Loving your neighbor, seeing that the world is not all about you, is a higher goal than going to heaven. Because the lower goal gets in the way of the higher goal, it is best to forget the lower goal. Focus on the higher goal, loving your neighbor. What I say here of heaven is as true of the goal of “getting saved”. If you worry about getting saved more

than about your neighbor and of following Jesus' message then you will fail at all. Think first about being a good person and about your neighbor; heaven and salvation will take care of themselves. What I say is also true of getting "enlightened" from Buddhism although I don't push the point.

Some Jews, most Christians, and most Muslims, think religion is all about believing something, and-or doing some things, so you go to heaven. Even without Jesus' statement above, taking "go to heaven" as your primary goal is a big mistake. Religions that teach "go to heaven" as the primary goal are wrong. To take "go to heaven" as the primary goal leads us to think of ourselves first, leads us not to follow Jesus' message, and so leads us not to love our neighbor as ourselves. To do good things to gain a benefit for ourselves is a mistake even though we do good things and even though what we want for ourselves is a good thing such as heaven. Even if we take heaven to mean "closer to God" it is still a mistake to take that as the first goal. Rather, just love God, love your neighbor, do good, be decent, and let heaven take care of itself.

Jesus clearly puts "love God" and "love your neighbor" before going to heaven. To put heaven above them is wrong. If you think you can declare some doctrine or perform some act and so get to heaven, then you think the world is all about you, you do not love God fully, you think first of yourself, and you do not love your neighbor as yourself. If you love your neighbor so you can go to heaven, you do not really love your neighbor as yourself. It is a contradiction to try to love your neighbor so you can go to heaven. You can't do it. This is the mistake of "Pascal's Wager" from the chapter in this book on codes. Worry about loving your neighbor first and then worry about heaven later. To say this is not to offer you another doctrine to declare; I offer you some observation and some advice.

I have said we meet God after we die, not that we go to heaven for sure if we follow a particular doctrine, do particular deeds, or go to a particular church. I have said we should act well for its own sake without worrying about our talk with God and without worrying about heaven. This is like the athlete or dancer doing the best he-she can right now without worrying about anything else.

It is natural to want to succeed, do well, avoid badness (hell), and get a reward (heaven). It is natural to want all that for family. When Jesus says to love your neighbor as yourself, then it is natural to try to love your neighbor as yourself so you can go to heaven - regardless of the contradiction. God does not burn with fierce anger toward people who mistakenly use "going to heaven" as the highest goal. Because it is so natural to seek heaven, hard to love our neighbor as ourselves, and natural to pursue the contradiction of loving our neighbor so you can go to heaven, then trying to go to heaven is not necessarily a horrible mistake. God understands. Unless the mistake of "going to heaven" leads you to act badly, act selfishly, or condemn others, it is not necessarily a horrible mistake. It can lead us to act well, and, in that way, it can be a good mistake. Sadly, many of us would not follow Jesus without the temptation of heaven. As with other natural mistakes, especially those mistakes that cause little damage, God is not too harsh with us about this one.

Don't worry about you personally going to heaven. Worry about doing what God and Jesus want.

If you really want to do well, without thinking you will go to heaven as a result, then practice thinking about doing well without thinking about heaven. Practice helps. Practice enacts good faith. Practice thinking the world is not all about you even though you still matter. Practice thinking other people matter as much

as you. Practice thinking “what should I do?” on the basis that other people matter as much as you do, on the basis of ideally loving everybody as you love yourself, and on the basis of knowing you are one of the neighbors too. You can’t fully succeed but such practice can clear your head and make you do better.

When people stop thinking the world is all about them, and stop thinking religion is all about how they can go to heaven, then they are much more likely to follow the message of Jesus.

If your religion does not teach you that the world is not all about you, if your religion does not teach you to love other people as yourself, if your religion does teach you the main goal is heaven, then your religion is wrong and misleading. If your religion does teach you those things, then it does not teach you to follow the message of Jesus, and you are not likely to follow it. My assessment applies to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and all religions.

Luckily, all major religions leave ample room to stop thinking it is all about you, stop thinking it is all about going to heaven, start loving your neighbor as yourself, and start following the message of Jesus. Try to see the teachings of your religion in that light. If you cannot see your religion in that light, then you need to change it or leave it.

Fallible Founders.

Hopefully I made clear I think Jesus was a man and Jesus made mistakes even about some important spiritual points such as the existence of the devil and the rapid coming of the Kingdom of God. Religions have no trouble seeing the key people of other religions as merely human and fallible, even when the other leaders were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Religions have no trouble even seeing the key people in other religions as false prophets or demons. Religions cannot see their own prophets as merely human and fallible. Religions insist not only that their founders were infallible in some situations when they were inspired by the Holy Spirit but infallible generally. Certainly Christians see Jesus that way, and, despite Mohammad being clear he was only a man and so fallible sometimes, Muslims see him as an infallible constant representative of God. Even Jews see their major prophets that way. It is inconceivable that anything attributed to Moses in the Torah or to a major prophet in the Tanakh might be merely human and not fully true all the time.

Of course, I think this attitude is entirely wrong. We have to accept that even the most important people in a religion are merely human and might have made mistakes. Even the most important people let their personal desires shape what they said in God’s name. We have to assess what prophets said against our best ideas of what God is, what the world is, and the best morality. We do not have to be slaves to some clever theology, or even to common sense, but we cannot be slaves to dogma either. Yes, I know this attitude opens the door to subjectivity and to conflicts but that is the price we have to pay for inching closer to the truth and for applying God’s ideas of “best life” to our times.

The idea of each religion that its own founders are utterly infallible and god-like is a major hurdle to each religion accepting the teachers of other religions and seeing the truths of other religions. Rather than look at the mainline teachings of another religion, religions attack the prophets of other religions and defend their own prophets. Only if religions first accept that their own prophets are fallible can they get beyond

this petty attack on persons and get on to messages. Only if religions accept the huge chunk of wood in their own eyes can they get over the tiny speck of dust in the eyes of other religions.

To attack the prophets of other religions while insisting on the absolute god-like infallibility of your own prophets is a version of "us versus them". It is idolatry in the service of group conflict. Get over it by accepting the fallibility of your own prophets and looking for the best message everywhere.

Religions defend the infallibility of their founders as a way to defend the whole religion. Take our religion as a whole or leave it. This attitude makes sense in the light of human evolution and the importance of religion in group life but we can no longer afford this luxury. If you want to take what is good from another religion while leaving what is bad, you have to see that good and bad are mixed in that religion. If you see that, you have to see that the prophets of a religion are fallible, are not infallible. If you can see a mix of good and bad, truth and mistakes, in other religions, you can see it in your own. Only if you can see it in your own can you see it in other religions. If you want other religions to take what is good from your religion, you have to allow that not all of your religion is perfect. If you allow that not all of your religion is perfect, then you have to allow that your prophets were not totally infallible and god-like. You have to allow that they were human speakers. Only in that way can the good truths of your religion go to other people and the good truths of other people come to your religion.

Jesus, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Mohammad, the Buddha, Confucius, and Chuang Tzu were all fallible and made mistakes. Get used to it. Get on to better things.

If you really just can't let go of the idea that "your guy(s)" was infallible and god-like, if letting go makes your stomach hurt, then you have a hard job. You have to see through a thick hedge to get glimpses of truth on the other side. You have to try harder. God (Dharma, Tao, or Heaven) wants you to see the truth no matter what religion it is in. You have to try hard about this issue because God wants you to try hard.

Special Relation to God.

Most religions start within particular ethnic groups, and ethnic groups often think of themselves as having a special relation with the deity, for example Yahweh, or with the supreme principle, such as Dharma. The special relation is only between their group and God (Dharma), so that no other group can have this relation or can have a similar relation that is just as good. Europeans and White Americans think only they can be true Christians, American Blacks think only they can be true Baptist Christians, Indians think only they can be true Hindus who know the full Dharma, Arabs think only they can be true Muslims, Chinese think only they can be true Taoists, and the Thai think only they, the Ceylonese, and maybe the Japanese can be true Buddhists. In theory, the close relation can grow outside the original ethnic group by conversion. In fact, people in a religion still tend to be of one ethnicity or nationality and they still have trouble believing anybody of another ethnicity or nationality can be a true follower.

Judaism is more stringent than other religions in its exclusivity because, from the start, Judaism always openly stressed a close relation between God (Yahweh) and a particular ethnic group. People could convert to Judaism, and would be accepted as a true believer in Yahweh. Eventually they would become Jews too. But only as Jews that people could have a close relation with Yahweh and be a true believer.

Nowadays, Jews do see that Christians and Muslims try to have a close relation with Yahweh, but their own history has told them that this is a tricky situation. Historically speaking, at best, non-Jews can only have a derivative second-rate relation with Yahweh, and they only follow a lesser version of the Law that reflects their secondary status. This is one thing that Jews, and all religions, have to change. Jews can change this idea of strong exclusivity without giving up on the idea that once-upon-a-time they did have one kind of unique relation with God and while accepting that now they have another unique relation with God. The present unique relation of Jews with God does not prevent other people from having their own fully satisfying relation with the one-and-only same God.

First Christianity, then Islam, took up the Jewish attitude of ethnic exclusivity, and turned it against their rivals. For Christians, only Christians can have a true full relation with Yahweh, and it has to be through Jesus. Jews lost their close relation with Yahweh when they rejected Jesus as God. For Muslims, only Muslims can have a close relation with Allah (God), and it has to be through Mohammad. Jews and Christians lost their relation when they rejected Mohammad as the last and greatest prophet. Muslims resent the Jewish and Christian attitude that Muslims cannot have a close relation with Allah. Muslims see the Jewish and Christian attitude as selfish idolatry that tries to usurp God for the idolaters, and that places a wall between God and most of his creation. You don't have to be a Jew or Christian to have a relation with God (Allah). I disagree with the Christian and Muslim interpretations. They are not unique and special, other groups are not bad, and other groups are not barred from a close relation with God. When Christians and Muslims put themselves in a special place, they practice the same kind of idolatry of which Muslims accuse Christians. I agree with the Muslim interpretation when it seeks links between God and all his creation.

The badness of unique exclusivity gets worse when combined with the idea of ethnic group as nation. As with most peoples of the world, Jews (Hebrews) were not only an ethnic group, they were also a political military nation. Jews (Hebrews) had a relation with Yahweh not just as an ethnic group but also as a political nation that had policies and fought wars. Yahweh made not only Jews (Hebrews) prevail but also made the state of Israel (including Judah) prevail. When Christianity and Islam took up a unique relation with God, they took up nationalism too. At various times after Israel, various nations in their turn claimed status as the "New Israel". One nation claimed to be the favorite of God, the instrument of God, and to represent God on Earth. Sometimes this nation was France, Britain, Germany, Spain, the United States, Iraq (Babylon), Egypt, Iran, or as I wrote, ISIS. Other ethnic groups and nations make this claim too in their own way as when India thinks of itself as the one nation that has a true relation with the Dharma and represents the Dharma on Earth.

This is all wrong now. No ethnic group, nation, or religion has a special relation with God. God cannot be reserved for one ethnic group, religion, or nation. What matters are your ideas, your relation with God, and your acts. You have to build a good relation with God. If you have good ideas about God, then you likely have a good relation. If your group has good ideas about God, then people in it likely have good relations. If you have bad ideas as part of your religion, ethnic group, or nation, then you will have trouble with God. You cannot think you have a close relation with God just because you are a Jew (religious), Christian, Muslim, Jew (ethnic), Israeli (nation), European, Arab, Turk, Persian, Malay-Indonesian, or American. Believing you have a special relation with God because of your ethnicity, religion, or nation is a bad idea that blocks a good relation with God.

The Jewish attitude about a special relation with God played a big part in history and in the development of good ideas about God. It played a key role in Jewish survival. Unfortunately, I cannot tell that good story here. Christian and Muslim take-over of the attitude also played big parts in history. Sometimes in this chapter I return to the attitude of having a close relation with God.

If a special relation of Jews with God remains, and I hope it does, it consists of Jews serving as moral and political examples to the world. I go into this topic more below.

Religion in the Modern World.

The biggest impediment for Jews and Muslims to following the message of Jesus in the modern world is not theology, it is the modern world. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all were built in a pre-modern pre-industrial world of kings, soldiers, peasants, merchants, crafts people, priests, thieves, bandits, distinct class society, magic, superstition, spiritual heroes, divine mediators, demons, no science, no modern scientific engineering, and no capitalism. The ideas of the major religions fitted life then. To adopt Jesus' message for the modern world means to give up ideas that sustained Judaism, Christianity, and Islam for many hundreds of years. That is hard. Some Jews and Muslims reject Jesus' message as a way to reject the modern world and the West without necessarily rejecting Jesus as a prophet. Some Jews and Muslims reject Jesus as prophet so as to cling to old ways, not because of anything intrinsically in Jesus' message.

Conservative Christians have the same problem but inverted. They want to accept some of the modern world such as their place among the wealthy and secure, but they refuse to accept other parts such as the problems of capitalism, decay of nature, and "handwriting on the wall" of biology and machines. They cling to a past in which they were the center of society, and use Christian dogma to do so.

Some confused believers have a similar but more sympathetic problem. They do not in principle reject the modern world, but the modern world is confusing, indecent, and often painful. They yearn for better and simpler times, and for order. They yearn for the decency that is so hard to find now. They turn to what seemed to work in the past even if they know now is not the past. They turn to what seems like solid basic principles even if those don't work now. It is hard to fault them. We all do something similar when we watch reruns of "Andy Griffith", "Seinfeld", or "Friends" on TV.

To the overly Conservative Jews, Christians, and Muslims, I don't know what to say other than "get over it". I say the same thing to the confused Christians but with less nastiness. In the end, you must accept the modern world or else your DNA and your culture will be kept in tiny bottles in museums. When you do get around to dealing with the modern world, you must deal with its institutions including the ideas of Jesus and the West. That task is much easier if you accept the large background that you already share with Jesus as a Jew and with the West as a close neighbor. It is much easier to accept the modern world if you see you can add to it. Christians have not come up with all the good ideas already and have not solved all the problems already. The modern world needs your help. The modern world needs your help to make pluralistic democracy work, regulate capitalism, save nature, figure out gender, and to control biotechnology and artificial intelligence as they expand.

A Few Words on Terrorists.

Some Christians and Muslims act much harsher. I am not sure about Jews because I don't know Jewish subgroups well enough. If what I say applies to some Jews, then think about it. The old order supported some groups more than others, such as men over women, wealthy stay-at-home women over women who had to go to the fields or shops, rich over poor, old over young, owners over workers, owners over people with an education, and clans over small working families. People who stand to lose, and people who fear they might lose, sometimes violently resist change and they use religious ideology to support their violence.

These are the terrorists. Terrorists recruit from among people who fear the new world, are victims, and are deeply confused. The losers don't even have to be outright poor; they only have to be comparative losers to other people around them or in media fantasy life. Terrorists recruit from among the people who have some education but can't find a job, or from among able bodied fairly smart people who don't see why they can't make a living. It doesn't matter if some Christians are the ones who make life hard for other Christians, or some Muslims are the ones who make life hard for other Muslims. Terrorists recruit from among people who fear and who have a hard time; terrorists recruit by blaming it not on their fellows of the victims who hurt the victims but by blaming the "others". White Christians blame Muslims, Jews, Blacks, and Hispanics; Blacks blame Whites, Hispanics, and Asians; and Muslims blame Christians and the West. It doesn't matter that some terrorists use modern media, they still live in an idealized past. They still think that stories of a good godly affluent world where everybody had land or a job, everybody respected God, and everybody was modest, are true. The best antidote to the mistakes is honesty about both the good and the bad, and facing up to real problems.

Some terrorists might not personally stand to lose from the new order and might even stand to gain, such as well-educated and professional people who become terrorists. Apart from Osama Bin Laden, the Bin Laden family owns a large construction firm and they are successful good peaceful Muslims. Osama was not a victim of the modern world; he simply wanted to remake it in his idealized image. I do not here go into the motives of the terrorists who might have been able to make it in the modern world but chose terror instead. They enjoy using other people and they are adept at the media and ideology. They gain by manipulating ideologies of a great past and of an ungodly present. Again, the best antidote is the full truth and facing up to problems.

Western Institutions.

For nearly 2000 years, the West carried the message of Jesus and the seeds of key institutions but did not fully develop the institutions, such as full rule of law, public education, democracy, citizenship, and science. The West did have important institutions such as partial rule of law, charities, and education through churches. So it is possible to carry the message of Jesus without fully developing the good institutions that are its flowering. Even so, the important institutions could not have developed without the message of Jesus, and I see them as a natural extension of his message. I use them as standards for the good realization of a good religious message. I do so although I have serious misgivings about the success of populist democracy. If you hear the best message from God, then you will work to develop and sustain these institutions in the modern world, with allowances for your culture, society, and history; if you do that, then you have heard the best message from God for our times even if you do not know that it

came from God; if you do not do that, then you have missed the best message from God, or you do not take it seriously. It is selfish to use the institutions of my civilization to assess others but that is what I do, and I can only be honest about it.

Doing Good; No Religious Pyramid Schemes.

In other drafts of this chapter, the material in this section quickly ballooned, so I mention only the key points. I will take up the topic elsewhere.

I devalue religions if they are little but pyramid schemes. Religion should have a message other than “we are good guys; they are bad guys; join us good guys”, “God loves us more than anybody else”, or “we will win because God loves us more than anybody else, so you should join us”. It is not even enough to say “If you join us, you will feel great joy in the love of God, especially if you go out and get other people to join and feel great joy, and so on”. Every religion says that, and they can’t all be right. Also, that is what people say when they want others to take drugs or join a cult. An example of a pyramid scheme you can see on TV is: “Giving to us is the same as giving to God, and, if you do that, you will get rich, so give to us first”. You should never do bad things to show that you are more than just ecstatic and that you have a positive agenda from God.

Only in hard times, when religion is a tool to keep a group alive, can you rest with “this is what we believe because we are who we are”. Jews had to do this to survive, and it was good then. Sometimes groups of all faiths have had to do it. Even then, you should not use religion to do bad things.

If you join the good guys, if you are part of the one true religion of the one true God, you should do good things and avoid bad things. Being a good guy has to have a point. You have to act, not just to sustain your own group but to do good things. If you cannot act, or are not sure what to do, at the least, you can change your character. The message of Jesus, combined with realistic practicality and Western values, is a clear statement of good things to do. Your religion does not have to adopt Jesus as its leader but your religion should offer a program along the lines of his ideas.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims in most of the world now do not need religion merely to survive. They are secure enough. So all three religions need to offer a positive message of what their religion is all about; they have to offer a positive agenda for how believers can make the world better. Jews, Christians, and Muslims have to assess to the message of their religions about what good to do in the world other than to convert others to their religion. If their religion does not offer a positive constructive message of what good to do, then they have to change their religion, or, if their religion will not change, they have to leave. Luckily, mainstream Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all (tacitly) accept a message along the lines of Jesus’ ideas, and they can promote a positive program along the lines of Jesus’ message. That is how I evaluate them.

I do not deal with Bad Subgroups here.

Some bad subgroups within the major religions do not offer any real message, or offer a bad message. “If you really know God like we do, you should hurt the other people who don’t hold us to be the only true representatives of God.” “The act that confirms your belief is forcing your belief on others, and so on”. It

is up to good members of a religion to suppress bad groups. If they don't fight bad groups, they are at fault equally. See the movie "Judgment at Nuremberg". That is all I need to say.

God's Will versus Principles.

I said what follows in the chapter on Legalism but I don't mind repeating it here.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims all claim to know God's Will. They cite passages from the Tanakh, New Testament, or Koran to support their claim. Passages within the books, and between the books, do not all agree, and so major religions disagree on God's Will. This alone is enough to show that they do not automatically know God's Will. We have to evaluate what they claim as God's Will not only on the basis of passages from their holy books but on other standards. Even when all the religions agree on their idea of God's Will, cite passages in support, and cite similar passages, we should not simply accept their claim to know God's Will. We still should apply other standards.

The other standards are the best moral ideas, especially the ideas of Jesus combined with practicality and Western values. Those standards prevail over any claims about God's Will. If any group claims to know God's Will but its idea of God's Will does not go along with the best moral standards, then we can reject its idea as the basis for personal action, for policies of the state, and as God's Will. If Jews, Christians, or Muslims say it is God's Will that modern democracy extend voting rights to everybody who is mentally competent regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, and religion, then we can believe them, tempered by practicality. If Christians say it is God's Will that women, gays, and people of European descent may not vote now because they did not have rights to participate in the old Temple at Jerusalem, then we should not believe them. If Christians or Muslims say Jews do not have the right to vote because Jews have lost their special relation to God and only Christians and Muslims now have that relation, we should not believe them. If Jews say only they know the Will of God, and only they have the rights of full citizenship, because only they had a special relation with God, and only with them has that relation go on to the present day just as it was in the time of King Solomon, we should not believe them.

Just because the religions all agree on God's Will, and their idea of God's Will goes along with the best moral principles, does not mean we have to accept a particular policy in a modern state on the basis that it is God's Will. If all three religions agree it is God's Will that we can take slaves, then we should not believe them. We offer particular policies because they go along with the best moral principles. God's Will did not necessarily originate the policy and does not necessarily have anything to do with it. If we also want to think that God is behind good policies that are based on the best moral principles, that is a naturally human way to think and I have no problem with it.

Relying on good moral principles can take "God's Will" out of the picture. If action is based on moral principles regardless of God's Will, then we don't need God's Will. Logically, strictly speaking, that might be true. But, in practice, we need a source of good ideas about how to live, and the great religious texts are the best source. It is important for people to think they act not only in accord with logic and morality but also with God's Will. Logic alone cannot provide us with all the morality that we need, and logic alone cannot settle problems in morality. For the full base of our morality, we go back to the major traditions that gave us our morality to begin with. To settle issues, we also go back to them, and we try to get the different traditions to agree. When morality and God's Will agree, and receive support from the Tanakh,

New Testament, and Koran, then I am happy to think I go along with God's Will when I go along with moral principles. Maybe that is how God expresses his Will these days. I have no trouble with invoking God's Will sometimes as long as it is invoked properly.

We need nudges in particular directions sometimes. We do not want to stone all adulterers and thieves. We need to know what to forgive how much. If the holy books of different religions all agree, then great. If they disagree, then we have to think hard and refer back to basic best moral principles often. Hopefully, when we reach agreement, believers can think they follow God's Will through the process by which God revealed it to them in such cases.

You are not doing God's Will if you follow every commandment about prayer, food, fasting, the Sabbath, clothing, marriage, sex, and cleanliness, or if you get angry at enemies, and you do not follow the ideals behind Jesus' teachings. You are not doing God's Will if you are a silly legalist, or use God's Will to vent your hatred, and so do not follow Jesus' teachings.

God's Will can serve as the basis for a system that eats the world, and it does so in Christianity, Islam, and some types of Judaism. I originally wrote this chapter with a part on that topic but then I took it out because of the length. I put those comments on the Web separately.

External Worship; Old Warnings are Still True.

To do what God taught is far more important than to worship externally. Even self-validating experience such as ecstasy in the glory of God or participating in the sacraments is merely external worship, and, if that is all you do, that is not useful and that displeases God. External worship of God can get in the way of the message by letting us focus on acts that have little to do with the message so we can feel good about ourselves without doing much real good. We feel good about formal external worship but overlook true worship (sin of omission due to misguided worship).

Going to church, synagogue, or mosque every week, or every day, is not enough. Keeping the holidays is not enough. Praying daily, or five times daily, is not enough. Venerating great prophets, Jesus, or Mohammad is not enough. Venerating priests, rabbis, or imams, is not enough. Keeping the day of a special saint is not enough. Keeping all the commandments is not enough if that is all you do, you do it from duty alone, or you do it from fear of hell. Having a personal relation with God is not enough if you don't also make yourself useful. Making the pilgrimage to Mecca is not enough if it doesn't change you and lead you to be useful. If you light a million candles to Jesus, Mary, or a Saint, but never give a can of food to the food bank, then you have wasted your time and resources. If you put on a funny hat or sing a throbbing song, that devotion does not necessarily make you right with God. God does allow for limitations and mixed motives.

Worship of God can get in the way of the message by getting us to act not in accord with the message, or even act against it, but still feel good about ourselves (sin of commission due to misguided worship). If you defeat religious foes at the muzzle of a gun, or with legislative conniving, and then install tyranny, you have defeated God and goodness. If you act on zealotry instead of helping people, God will judge you harshly. If you waste time harassing people who do little harm so you can feel self-righteous, such as by harassing gay people, God will harass you and do you little good. If you crusade for social programs but

don't understand the real impact of the programs, you have wasted your time and hurt people. If you blow up a school bus in the name of God then God will condemn you when you die. You would be better off starting a school for children of any faith.

Our minds, and science, are a gift from God just as much as any scripture is a gift. If you refuse science because you worship dead scripture instead of the living God and his works, if you deny evolution and climate change, then you have refused God, the prophets, Jesus, and Mohammad.

When you worship externally, you worship an idol, and you worship badly, even if the idol is beautiful. Bad worship stands in the way of good worship. Idol worship blocks the way to God. Good worship is following the message of God and accepting his gifts of heart, mind, and spirit.

I cannot say what is enough. You have to work that out with God. We learn what God wants us to do from his prophets. Prophets disagree. We have to pick the ones that we consider most important. Our pick should be guided by widespread standards, such as by social justice, the need for social order, and by the objective morality of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" and "applies equally to everybody". We can reject parts of a prophet's message that we do not like while still keeping other parts that we do like if we do so in accord with deep principles and if we act sincerely. This is what I have done explicitly in this book. I ask believers in other religions to do the same, and to be sure they are explicit about what they do.

Focus on What is Important.

I know external signals, such as hats, beads, and prayer poses, can be key for believers, and external signals can teach ideas such as the relation of people to God. I know believers judge on the basis of external signals, and keep aloof or come together according to external signals. I don't care about that. I care about ideas of self, world, God, prophets, relation to God, justice, the message of Jesus, general attitude toward life, general attitude toward modern life, and the typical character of believers. In belief about God, the three religions are nearly identical except for the question of Jesus as God. I think the three religions can overlook that difference. The three religions differ in some features of personality and attitude. External signs of worship are much more about personality and attitudes, and about ethnic-religious affiliation, than they are about real points of belief.

Overall Right.

Jesus was not right about everything. No prophet in any religion was always right about everything. The Buddha was wrong sometimes. Mohammad was petty and spiteful sometimes. To see what God wants, you have to get over the idea that a particular prophet was always right. You have to read as much from all the prophets as you can, then make up your own mind about the core message. After you have read them all, you have to go back again and sort through them again so you can assess each prophet in the context of all and in the context of what you think is the core message. You have to be willing to let other people know what you are doing, and take the consequences if they disagree with your search or your conclusions. You cannot let people stand in the way finding out what God had on his mind. If you hold narrowly to any one prophet, you put a human being before God. God doesn't like that. You don't have to be a rebellious "bad boy" or "bad girl" to do this. You don't have to deliberately break rules to get free.

You just have to use your mind. When other people use their minds, don't stand in their way. Don't try to force them to believe that your prophet was the one and only prophet who was always right and who was always right because he-she spoke for God.

PART 2: Judaism.

Jews in the West already have accepted Western values and the ideas of Jesus without accepting that Jesus is God. They have accepted the ideas with little problem, and have been leaders in spreading the ideas around the world. Jews have lived the ideas. Jews are outstanding community leaders, citizens, and professionals. When Jon Stewart of the Daily Show came back from spending the summer of 2013 making a movie in the Middle East, despite stressing how much he loved the experience, he also made a point of how much he is a Westerner and shares Western values.

Jews are prominent in the entertainment industry. I do not argue here about the extent of their presence and whether it is good or bad; for this book, I don't care (I don't care that Italians dominate wine making or Germans beer making). As artists, directors, producers, and critics, Jews have promoted the best values of Western culture and have promoted the values of Jesus. A glance at credits for the best movies and TV shows indicates how Jews have contributed to spreading good Western values including the message of Jesus. Movies such as "White Christmas" owe a debt to Jews; Irving Berlin wrote the title song, really believed in Christmas as a vehicle of good values, and was a good Jew. Adam Sandler's "Hanukah Song" is both a lot of fun and a true glimpse at what Jews have contributed. His movies promote the values of Jesus because they promote the best values of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; see "You Don't Mess with the Zohan". In 2013, in disgust over squabbles about saying "Merry Christmas", Jon Stewart said Christmas is the best holiday ever for everybody – everybody. If all this is how Jews accept the message of Jesus and act on it, then I am fine with it.

(Just to salvage some PC: many ethnic groups now play a large part in Western media and in bringing good ideas to the world. My wife and I love Thai or Greek names in credits. Chinese kung fu movies promote good ideas such as individual freedom combined with patriotism, as in "Hero" with Jet Li. Hindu ideas imbue Star Trek and Star Wars, and Hindus contribute to the production of good movies. Hindu actors are fairly common. I don't have to dwell on the "Harold and Kumar" movies.)

I do not know much about divisions in Judaism and about groups in Judaism. If particular groups have ideas and acts that allow members to overlook the message of Jesus or get them to act badly, then other Jews have to re-evaluate those groups. Decent Jews within Judaism should chastise groups that act badly. If groups in Judaism do not act in accord with the message, do not act in accord with the spirit of the Law rather than its letter, and do not in accord with Western values, then I hope they change. I leave this to Jews in general as long as their minority groups do not harm greater society. I apply the same standards to all religions.

The prophet Isaiah said Israel (Jews) one day will lead the world morally, and will set the example for how to live with God, even if Israel does not dominate militarily or politically. If Jews lead the world by teaching God and the prophets, including Jesus, through the media, that is a wonderful fulfillment of the prophecy. I can think of few better ways to fulfill the prophecy.

Jewish history and theology as presented in the Tanakh is not literally the truth, and most educated Jews know this. In this respect, average Jews are ahead of average Christians. Jewish scholars lead the way in finding the facts of Jewish history and finding relations between the facts and the Tanakh. Christian scholars pioneered this effort, and many still are in the forefront, but it seems the average Christian has not caught up with scholarship as much as the average Jew has. Any scholarly version of the Tanakh from the Jewish Publication Society has essays and references that will lead an interested reader to know more. Jews have to interpret the historical facts, and what is written in the Tanakh, in light of the relation of Jews to God. As far as I can tell, Jews seem to embrace this task. I look forward to ideas from Jewish scholars on these issues.

Historical facts, and discrepancies between historical facts versus what is written in the Tanakh, concern not only Jews but also Christians and Muslims. Jewish history and Jewish ideas are the basis for those religions too. As facts come up and ideas change, Christians and Muslims have to listen to what Jews think, and they might have to change their own ideas. Christians and Muslims in general have not fully felt this issue about real history and have not fully felt their obligation to Jews, although some scholars do know. I hope all three religions can communicate on these issues and come to accords. Many Christian scholars have helped in this research. Some modern Muslim scholars are working toward finding facts but I am not familiar enough with their work to assess them or cite them.

Jews do not proselytize much. Other people come to Jews asking to convert. Jews do not look down much on people who do not seek them out and who do not convert. Judaism is not a religious pyramid scheme.

Most modern Jews accept that a person can follow the same God as Jews without becoming a Jew. I am not sure if some modern Jews reject this position. I don't think Jews who allow this position think a non-Jew follower of God is less in the eyes of God. If they do, they are wrong. I do not know how a non-Jew follower of God stands in the formal theology of particular Jewish groups. I don't think they worry about it too much. Jews usually do not condemn non-Jews, especially not to hell. Jews do sometimes look down on non-Jews but every religion looks down on others, and Jews are not worse in this regard than people in other religions; in my experience they are somewhat better. At least some Jews do think they are closer to God than people of other religions. I am not sure if this attitude is general in Judaism. Again, other religions, especially Christianity and Islam, feel this way, and Jews are no worse than them. Jews have an explicit basis in their history and theology for this feeling while Christians and Muslims do not have an explicit basis for their feeling of superiority. As far as I can tell, this feeling does not cause Jews to act much differently than believers in other religions, and so is not much of an issue. Jews do not expect to rule the world militarily. They do not expect to rule the world as a theocracy.

It would seem that being a Jew carries no special benefit and often carries a big burden. Then why go on as a Jew? The biggest reason is the same reason that people of all ethnic groups continue in their ethnic group. They are born into that group, have ties to the group, find their greatest success through their ties to their group, and enjoy life in the group. Maybe the closest comparison is with the British or Irish. The second reason is that Jewish identity and Judaism are a great benefit in themselves. However you see the idea of a "chosen people of God", Jews have a great history and have added greatly to humanity, truth, and morality. Jews continue to do so. For most Jews, it is satisfying to be a Jew regardless of the risks.

A fair assessment of any religion would require describing the contributions made by believers. I can't do that here. I do have to mention a few contributions by Jews even if I don't do so for other religions. From the Jews, we got ethical monotheism, the idea of a single God for whom moral conduct is important. Part of ethical monotheism is social justice. In addition to Greeks and Romans as a source for the idea of the rule of law, from Jews we got another important source. For Jews, the Law of God took precedence over any particular human ruler. Because of the firm grounding of this idea in one ethical God, among Jews, the idea held steady over centuries even when similar ideas broke down in other cultures such as among Greeks and Romans. Because of Jewish constancy, this idea became a big part of Western institutions, and then spread around the world. The constancy of the Jewish idea of rule of law, and the idea that law comes out of the deep nature of reality (God), contributed to Western science. Jews did not have science as we know it, and science can be credited primarily to the West, but I think science in the West could not have developed without Jewish ideas of God and law.

Although modern Jews seem to accept that a person can follow the Jewish God without becoming a Jew, I am not sure they can accept the idea that there were (are) prophets other than the standard prophets as given in the Tanakh. I am not sure how they assess John the Baptist. They cannot accept that Jesus was God. To deny that Jesus was God is not the same as denying he was a prophet. I think most Jews could accept that Jesus was a prophet, and Jews could contribute to assessing his message for our world, if Jews could do so without also implying Jesus was God. Even after 2000 years, Jews shy away from Jesus entirely because of the idea that he was God and because of his central role in Christianity. Jesus is Christian "property". Jews can act on the basic message of Jesus without saying much about Jesus the prophet, and so they just leave the issue alone and they do what is right. I wish Jews could explicitly assess the message, and comment on Jesus as a prophet, without worrying about the whole issue of Jesus as God. Some few Jews have done this.

I do not know how Jews assess Christian figures such as Paul, Francis of Assisi, or Martin Luther. Some Christians who were otherwise great thinkers were still anti-Jewish (anti-Semitic), such as Martin Luther, and I do not expect Jews to embrace them. Officially, Christians do not accord saints the same status as the Tanakh prophets, so it is unreasonable to ask Jews to accept Christian figures as full-blown prophets. Christians do accord prophet status to the writers of the New Testament, especially to Paul, but I see little point in arguing over whether we should see Paul as we see Isaiah or Elijah. Read the Christian greats, get what they have to say, and then assess their ideas rather than their status.

I do not know how modern Jews see the great figures of other religions. I doubt that officially Jews can accord them the same status as prophets in the Tanakh. I think most modern educated Jews still could assess their message, accept the good points, and reject the bad points. I have known Jews who have read the Buddha, have gotten a lot from him, and have not subverted their Jewish identity.

I accept Mohammad as a prophet. As far as I can tell, Jews either ignore his status as a prophet or deny that he was one. Despite the fact that Mohammad explicitly said he was only a human, Mohammad is a more difficult issue even than Jesus because, unlike Jesus, Mohammad was not Jewish, Mohammad did not come from Jews, and Jews like cannot accept the Muslims ideas that Mohammad was the greatest and last of all the prophets. Mohammad did accept Jewish ideas but that fact does not necessarily make him a prophet in Jewish eyes. I doubt Jews could accept Mohammad as a prophet soon because of the

current animosity between Jews and Muslims. Mohammad came after the classic Tanakh prophets. Thus Mohammad is disallowed the status of prophet in the same way that even great rabbis who came after the Tanakh are not called prophets. I am sorry a mere “side” issue, the animosity between Jews and Muslims, however otherwise important, can block Jews from assessing Mohammad on the basis of his relation to God alone.

I see Mohammad as a prophet of God (Yahweh and Allah), and I see the great figures of other religions also as prophets of God. I can do this because I do not expect prophets to be completely right about all important issues. I expect prophets to have partial accuracy and partial truth. I have to assess the value of particular prophets, and I have to pick among prophets for particular issues. I can accept that task. I do not accept Mohammad as the last and greatest of prophets – I am not entirely sure what that title for him could mean. I tend not to think of great Christian thinkers and “saints” as prophets, with the possible exception of Saint Francis of Assisi. I am not sure why. I do not think of every adept thinker in other religions as a prophet. I do not think of Nagarjuna from Buddhism as a prophet. I don’t know about Mencius of China. I am not sure how to draw the lines between prophet, theologian, saintly person, good guy, philosopher, original thinker, and somebody who has good ideas about God without being special otherwise. It seems easier to focus on ideas and actions rather than on persons.

I do not follow Jewish Law such as the dietary rules. A person doesn’t have to follow all the Jewish Law to be a good follower of the Jewish God. Apart from the official declaration by Christianity at about 50 CE about freedom from the food laws, I am not sure when in history it became possible for a person to follow the Jewish God but not to uphold all points of the Law. Jesus would have insisted that I do follow all the Law or at least that I follow a modified version of the Law for non-Jews (“Noah” Law). The early Church changed Jesus’ position, exempting non-Jews from nearly all Jewish Law, to allow people like me to join; so by default I go along with the position of Christianity.

I insist on two differences. First, the Christian Church derives the change directly from Jesus, and this idea of the Church is false. The Church itself made the change so it could seek converts. The Church recognizes the roles of Peter and Paul in the change, and that is true enough. I am not sure I approve of the Church’s motives but I am glad it exempted followers of Jesus from some points of the Jewish Law such as the dietary rules. The Church did not exempt followers of Jesus from main points of the Law that exemplify the Spirit of the Law such as worshipping one God, telling the truth, helping, and being kind. In both ways, the Church did the right thing regardless of any side motives.

Second, in denying the Jewish Law, the Christian Church took on for itself the role of the New Israel, and said that Jews had lost their traditional relation with God. As far as I can tell, Muslims did the same later to Jews and Christians. I reject the idea of a New Israel and reject that Jews have lost their traditional relation to God. There always has been only one Israel, there is only one Israel, the one Israel has been represented by Jews, the one Israel always has been represented only by Jews, the one Israel is now represented only by Jews, and the one Israel will be represented only by Jews into the foreseeable future. Other groups based on nation, ethnicity, religion, gender, society, and politics, including Christians and Muslims, should stop pretending to be “the now New Israel”, the current chosen people of God.

Exactly what it means for the modern world that there is one Israel, and the one Israel is only Jews, I don’t know, and I don’t guess much. My best guess is that it is a burden of moral leadership on Jews.

Jews have to show us what it means to be a good person and good citizen in the modern world. The special relation of Jews and God does not mean I have to become Jewish to follow God. It does not mean I have to go along with all actions by the modern political state of Israel. It does not prevent other nations and other groups from guiding the world in moral, political, and ecological action for a time and over some issues. It does not prevent other groups from having a close relation with God, seeking God's guidance, and doing God's work. Jews are like Bach or The Beatles. They are the one talent that you have to listen to and come to grips with even if your own music is quite different. That is what Jesus is like too. Unlike Bach and the Beatles, the Jews are still making music, and we still do well to listen.

PART 3: Christianity

Adopting the Message of Jesus.

It might seem odd to weigh how much Christianity follows the message of Jesus but that is the issue with formal Christianity and zealous Christianity. Followers lapse into mere external worship or into using the idea of God's Will to assert their own will. People do not have to be horrible hypocrites to overlook the message in favor of external worship or self-service. Simple garden-variety hypocrisy does lead people to overlook the message, and people in formal Christianity and zealous Christianity too often are too hypocritical. Usually politics, wealth, and power get in the way, and people interpret the religion so they can pursue self-interest without worrying about the message. This result has been so often described and criticized that I don't go through it here. This problem is not limited to Christianity. Few religions follow the message of their leaders. The problem is sharpest with Christianity for me because I promote the message of Jesus.

People argue whether formal Christian dogma helps Christians overlook the message of Jesus and helps hypocrisy. Was Christian dogma built so as to help people avoid Jesus? The fact that Christians insist on worshipping Jesus as God makes it easier to overlook his message in favor of empty external worship. You can focus on the idea that his dying somehow mysterious saved you while not dealing with poverty or loneliness. I doubt theologians deliberately built dogma so as to allow people to overlook the message of Jesus. I think the early Church did not intend to allow loopholes for inaction except as it wanted to avoid open conflict with Rome. Rather, the doctrine accidentally allows a big evasion for Christians, and Christians have been eager to use the evasion. Many Christians do not use dogma to avoid the message of Jesus, and many Christians give time, money, bodies, and heartache to help other people and to make the world a better place. The hard work, and big hearts, by Christians in the South of America, often astonishes me.

Whether official Christians really follow Jesus largely will be a numbers game. Can enough Christians follow the message of Jesus to make Christianity a religion about the message of Jesus? Is it enough if one-quarter of Christians put the message first? What if one-quarter of Christians put Jesus' message first but another one-quarter dig in their heels about doctrinal issues and spend the energy of faith forcing other people to think as they do and to fight about issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and helping nature? As of 2014, I cannot say. I hope it turns out well.

Christianity as Devotion.

People in state societies need a personal god who is both human and divine, and who can serve as a bridge between the two worlds. They need a Nice Mother, Big Brother, Big Sister, Young Uncle, or Young Aunt, who can help them with God the Parent. Their attitude toward the god savior is devotion. They worship the god savior, and he-she intercedes on their behalf. People usually have only one chief god savior, or have one chief figure of each sex, but that does not stop them from having a lot of lesser intermediaries too. The obvious figures in formal Christianity are Jesus, Mary, the Saints, and the great thinkers in particular sects such as Luther, Calvin, and Wesley. I have already discussed this trend for Christianity in “Jesus for Most People”, and so I don’t go into it much here. The parallels in other religions are devotion to the bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism and devotion to Krishna or to other avatars and gods in Hinduism.

Just because a religion features this pattern does not mean the pattern is not true. The real question is whether the god savior in any particular religion is real and true. I think the god-savior pattern is false for all religions, not just because it is a common human pattern but because it is false. The answer is “no” for all religions, and so it is “no” in Christianity too. I don’t sift through the evidence here.

The next question is whether devotion to a god-savior gets in the way of being a better person or helps. Surprisingly, devotion often helps. It is one big way that people get in touch with the ideals of prophets such as Jesus, the ideals of institutions such as the Christian Church, or from literature such as in the Mahabharata. Devotion also helps keep people out of mischief. On the other hand, devotion can cause great damage, as when it limits the spiritual growth of individuals or leads them to do bad things such as bomb a church. I cannot guess at the overall balance of good and bad due to devotion.

Some people can never get beyond devotion. People who can get past mere devotion have to consider their response to people who can’t get past it. Harangue and “atheism for everybody” are not often good responses. Telling them that they are stupid and mired in superstition is usually just cruel, and often is not exactly true. Maybe the best responses are to make sure good ideas are easily available, and to help people who show promise of getting beyond mere devotion. In other words, the best response is calm freedom of thought.

Christian Pyramid Scheme.

Christians proselytize, and have since Jesus was alive. In part, proselytizing is how the Christian Church always has grown, and proselytizing is an explicit policy of the Church. Jesus wanted to make a new society in old Israel, he began a movement to do so, and he recruited Jews into his movement; so he supported some proselytizing. Proselytizing is not necessarily bad. It depends on if there is a point other than merely recruiting more members to have more self-validating experiences to recruit more members, and so on. If the Church has a good point other than self-validation and self-growth, then recruiting new Christians can be good. As long as the Church aims ultimately at the message of Jesus, and beyond mere self-validation, then it is good to seek new followers of Jesus. People benefit from the message of Jesus, and they benefit other people when they act on the message of Jesus.

Sadly, the Christian Church too often lapses into a self-validating pyramid scheme. The Church offers such self-validating experiences as love from God, justification, salvation, “getting right with God”, “having a personal relation with Jesus”, and “saving souls for God”, as rewards. Members seek more members

by offering them self-validating experiences. Some recruits have such experiences, and then recruit other people. Whether the experiences are real, valid, and make a person feel good, is beside the point. There is nothing wrong with seeking love from God; people feel good when they feel God loves them; and they should feel good. The point is that these experiences do not inherently lead people to follow the message of Jesus. When you feel that God loves you personally, you should do something good about it to the extent that you can. If people do not follow the message of Jesus as a result of strong experience, but only revel in a self-validating experience, and they seek to recruit other people to the good experience regardless of what people do afterwards, then something is wrong. This is what the Christian Church too often did. This is empty worship. This is a Christian pyramid scheme.

Before the reader gets upset, I repeat that you need only do something on the basis of Jesus' message if you are able to do something, and you need only act to the extent of your abilities and situation. If all you can do is revel in God's love because you are too sick, too depressed, or in prison, then revel in God's love. If you can't do more because it is just not in you, then don't agonize. If you can't do anything more because your society has no serious problems and other people don't want you meddling in their lives, then just take care of your own business. If you can do nothing for another person other than say God really does love that person, then do that for him-her. If all you can do for society is explain to individuals that God really does love them, then do that. If you can do more, then do more.

You cannot do anything bad in the name of God just to prove you have faith, and so to avoid the feeling that you have fallen into a pyramid scheme. You cannot become a zealot. You cannot start hating other people. You cannot even do something good if the only reason that you do it is to validate your faith, especially to avoid feeling you have fallen into a pyramid scheme. If you "find God" and then suddenly decide you personally are going to end all abortion, you need to slow down. If you "find God" and then decide you are going to burn all idols or expose the Roman Catholic Church as evil, then you need to slow down. Consider what you think is best and then do that.

These remarks apply equally to Islam, so please keep them in mind for that part of the chapter.

Avoiding Counter-Productive Over-Sensitivity.

Christians are funny about the balance between official dogma versus acting on the message of Jesus. As befits, Christians often are the most Jesus-like people in the world, and often act on his message. I cannot imagine the charities of the United States, and the good work Americans have done around the world, without Christianity. I am stunned by how much the average Christian will dip into his-her wallet to help disaster victims that he-she has never seen except on TV. As long as nobody raises the issue of Jesus as God, or raises points of dogma such as infant baptism or the Chair of Peter, Christians act on the message of Jesus without worrying about who they help or why they help. If somebody does raise issues of dogma, then suddenly Christians get upset and drop the ball. They act like PC zealots. They suddenly think points of dogma are far more important than following the commands of the man who is God. Where before they helped everybody, now they find reasons to help this person but not help that person. This attitude is contradictory and counter-productive, but it is what it is.

This is why I prefer to avoid points of dogma as long as good work is going on. If you have to discuss dogma, wait until the good work is done, and preferably wait until Christians raise the points themselves in the evening after work. If they ask in midstream, then tell the truth, but try not to be obnoxious.

Christians, Muslims, and Hindus are notorious for disputing about small points that seem silly to others. (In my personal experience, Buddhists and Taoists don't do this as much.) So, eventually, if we hang around them, we might get in a dispute over dogma, and the dispute might interfere with good action. What then? Do what you do whenever you meet feisty people with whom you have to work: Avoid fighting as much as possible and instead divert attention to the more important tasks at hand. Try to push argument off until later. If you promise to debate later, then really debate later so they don't try to bring up the arguments while you have to work. Make sure they understand there are more important tasks and that you won't be diverted.

PART 4: Islam.

Personal Plea.

I repeat parts of this plea below. I assume any reader knows enough about Islam so I don't have to go through all the basics right away; I cover some basics below. "Allah" is the same as the Jewish God and Christian God. Muslims accept the Jewish and Christian God although they often overlook that the Jews introduced him. Muslims accept the Jewish prophets. They accept that Jesus was a great prophet. They do not accept that Jesus was God. In the beginning, Muslims did not impose Islam on anybody except local Arabs. Once, Muslims led the world in science and good government. Because of all this, Muslims could be in a special position to do two tasks to help the world, if they put their minds to it.

Before explaining the two tasks, I give some background. Muslims have to assess what Islam is all about in the modern world. In the world of Mohammad, Islam was all about carrying the idea of one moral God to people who did not have that idea. Islam was all about converting Arab people from bad polytheism to moral monotheism. Islam was not about forcibly converting all non-Muslims. In the modern world, Islam cannot be about converting polytheists and ignorant people to one moral God because all people already know about the one moral God and everybody can make up his-her own mind. Islam has to be about more than saying set prayers five times a day, covering hair, making the modern world safe for traditional families, or shoving the world back into the past. As a good Muslim, you have to figure out what more Allah (God) wants of you, you have to be able to explain it to other people, and you have to do it.

If Islam is about making the world better, about leading modern people to live in the modern democratic capitalist world in a Godly way, then Islam has to come to grips with the message of Jesus and Western values. If Muslims wish to help people to live better in the modern world, they will lead people along paths similar to those pointed out by Jesus. This does not mean Islam will turn into formal Western Christianity. That would be sad. In following the correct path, Muslims should not worry about being absolutely distinct from all other religions and about being strongly Muslim. They should worry about the correct path even if it resembles the teachings of Jesus and even if Westerners also walk it. Whatever Muslims figure out as the positive message of Islam, they need to explain it to other people clearly, with as much rationality, and with as little magic, as possible.

After moderate Muslims have figured out what Islam is all about now, then I ask they turn their minds to two important tasks.

First, Muslims could assess the message of Jesus in light of human nature, practicality, the modern world, and modern values. They can look at God, Jesus, and the modern world, and can tell us what they see. They can do this because they are not automatically committed to the idea that Jesus is God but they are committed to many points of his message because Mohammad was committed to many points of Jesus' message. They can be more objective than can Christians. We need not accept every point Islam has to say on this topic, but it would be useful to hear an objective assessment by believers.

For reasons described below, Mohammad had to worry more about the relation of ideals to practicality than early Christians had to. Mohammad knew the message of Jesus, and Mohammad's version of blending ideals and practicality is an outstanding version of blending the ideals of Jesus with practicality - even if that was not Mohammad's primary intent. Mohammad's blending of ideals and practicality, and the blending of the Muslim leaders who followed him, was the basis for great Muslim states later. Then Islam fell away from Mohammad's blending of ideals and practicality. The blend that extreme Islam offers now is bad. Mainstream Islam can find another blend of ideals and practicality that is more suitable for the modern world than what we see in Islam now. As mainstream Islam does so, it will meet the ideals of Jesus and meet modern practicality. Islam again can comment on the ideals of Jesus and practicality. Doing so would be a great service to the world.

Second, from the order found in the world, Muslims can assess evidence for the existence of God. They can be scientists, do good science, and then they also can tell us what science might say about God or cannot say. They can make clear what God and belief tell us that science cannot. They can contribute to both science and theology. This is what Islam did in its great days.

To be clear about what Islam is all about now, to assess Jesus, and to assess relations between God (Allah) and science, Muslims have to accept science, evolved human nature, history, the modern world, and religious scholarship. They have to return to their original values as those values make sense in the modern world. They have to return to the ideals and spirit of Mohammad. They have to give up fake bad fundamentalism that is not really founded on Mohammad, and they have to give up any fundamentalism that goes against the realities of science as given to us by God. They have to give up fake bad ideas even if some zealot can find some basis in the Koran or Hadith (Sayings of Mohammad). They have to give up theocracy. They do not have to give up the idea that some nations can be Muslim nations as long as those nations also respect general ideas of freedom and allow full freedom of religion. I think decent Muslims really can do this.

Islam did not begin as legalistic ideology, fear, superstition, oppression, reaction, and guerrilla war. That is what Mohammad fought against. Islam did not develop as legalism. It did not use the letter of the law to replace the spirit of the law. Mohammad fought that too. Islam began as the religion which converted Arabs away from superstition, fear, bickering, jealousy, and oppression to greater understanding of God and to goodness. Mohammad made laws to promote the goodness of Allah, not to oppress believers, or to force believers to act as instruments of oppression. Mohammad always followed the spirit of the law. The law should serve people, not people serve the law. Mohammad would hate oppression of women, denial of science, denial of fellowship with all people, hyper-legalism, and hyper-Muslim fundamentalism.

Those trends return to old bad dark anti-Muslim superstition over the light of Mohammad. Mohammad would condemn people who pervert the enlightened Islam that he taught. Modern enlightened Muslims need to reclaim their own religion. In doing so, they do not need to wage open conflict against bad fundamentalists. They can reclaim Islam by teaching good Islam, with science and fellowship, to children and neighbors. They can reclaim Islam simply by explaining it to good non-Muslims who will listen. Most good Muslims already follow this path but are too afraid both of other nasty bad Muslims and of non-Muslims to say so.

Mohammad's Task.

It helps to understand more about Mohammad's task. Mohammad was an Arab born among Arabs in the area that is now Saudi Arabia. Christians and Jews also lived among the Arabs. The Arabs of his time and place did not worship a single God (Allah) but curried favor with many gods and spirits, some of which were similar to good nature spirits, some simply spirits, and some rather bad. The Western name for them now is "genies" or "Jinn" or "Djin". Different Arab groups, including large families, each had their particular spirits much as Christian villages and guilds had their patron saints. Groups were divided and at war. Banditry was common. Arabs were illiterate, did not know the Jewish Tanakh, Christian Bible, or Greek thinking, and did not value education. Groups used their allegiance to particular spirits to bolster allegiance to the group and to bolster group competition. Arabs were easy prey to outside powers that were united; see "Lawrence of Arabia". Arabs were superstitious backwater clannish warlike country folk who denied the value of then-modern life and resisted then-modern ideas.

Mohammad's task was to get Arabs to worship the one true moral God and to follow his ways, and to stop worshipping other spirits and following their ways. The one true moral God was the same one true moral God of the Jews and Christians although Arabs call him Allah. Mohammad denied that some spirits were real, he did accept the reality of demons, and he said Arabs should not worship spirits even if the spirits were real and somewhat powerful. When Arabs were united in worshipping the one true good God, they would also unite among themselves, stop killing each other, cooperate, foster economic development, and modernize. It is not clear that Mohammad wanted a single large Arab state but it is likely he would have approved it, and that did happen after he died. Mohammad did not "keep women in their place" but fought for rights for women, as much as he could get in the society of his time, including property rights, personal rights, and education. Women supported him and he them. Mohammad was a modernizer who brought modern ideas and values to the backwater Arabs.

Mohammad fought against ignorance, illiteracy, superstition, prejudice, squabbling, and division. He fought against the superstitious religion of the countryside and against the urban clan-gangs that kept Arabs apart. Mohammad promoted learning, knowledge, education, and discussion. He promoted a rational religion based on one true good God. He was a great man.

I believe many practices and beliefs that we see now among poorly educated Muslims and confused Muslims are the same mistakes that Mohammad fought. Some Muslims have gone backward and so betrayed Mohammad. Muslims who promote strife are like the polytheistic idolatrous anti-modernist Muslims that Mohammad conquered. Mohammad would condemn them now as he did in his time. He would fight against them now, and would fight for rational modern worship of the one true God as he did then. Mohammad would promote education for women and promote the modest presentation of women

in public life. He would promote the role of women in commerce and politics. He would call for public schools and hospitals. He would condemn people who denied education to any child including girls. He would condemn bad people who kill innocents.

It might help Buddhists to think of Mohammad's task as much like the task of the Buddha, to bring good ideals, reason, modest practicality, reason, peace, and the light of the Dharma to people in superstition, war, and darkness.

Partial Synopsis through Some Useful History.

I elaborate on the ideas above, and I repeat parts of this synopsis below as needed. Mohammad lived from about 570 to 632 CE (AD). He began his career in middle age. His name means "praiseworthy". Mohammad succeeded amazingly well at his task of teaching Arabs about the one true God, bringing them away from superstition, polytheism, and strife, and bringing them into the then-modern world. Mohammad could not read or write but he listened well and spoke well. Mohammad knew of the Jewish Tanakh and Christian New Testament, likely fairly well. He had Jewish and Christian kin and teachers. Mohammad got his idea of the one true moral God from Judaism and Christianity directly, and, likely, indirectly from Greek thinkers. That does not mean he was nothing in himself. He added ideas and he added the vigor that comes of a clear direct relation with God. He did not think his one true moral God differed from the one true moral God of Jews and Christians, or, maybe, differed from the one true moral God of philosophers. In Mohammad's view, the religion of God that he offered was another branch of the same underlying basic religion as Judaism and Christianity. I think he would see Judaism, Islam, and Christianity as less far apart than Roman Catholicism and Calvinism, perhaps only about as far apart as Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Lutherans.

Mohammad did not strongly dislike all yearnings of the human heart and did not dislike all other religions. Mohammad understood love, emotion, the need for family, desire for wealth, and desire for power. His belief was for normal people who felt as he did, and wished to seek normal human satisfactions within the approval of God.

Mohammad strongly disliked only polytheism, magic, superstition, squabbling, and banditry. He actively fought those and their supporters. Mohammad tolerated other religions as long as they did not fall into polytheism, magic, and superstition. Mohammad appreciated other religions that focused on one God, even if the one God was not exactly as Mohammad saw him. After him, Islam supported a great growth in philosophy and science, which confirms that Mohammad tolerated philosophy based in the idea of one God. Mohammad did not accept the Christian Trinity, and feared that this idea lapsed into polytheism; but that did not lead him to denounce Christianity or to see it as other than a sister religion of the same one true moral God. It is not clear how Mohammad might have seen the apparent polytheism of Hindus and Buddhists because Buddhist and Hindu adepts are not really polytheistic; they allow the mistaken idea of many gods out of kindness to the simpleminded masses; at heart they believe in one Mind behind the world. I think Mohammad would have encouraged Muslims to teach Hindus and Buddhists through argument, but not by the sword.

Early in his career, Mohammad and his followers had some trouble with some Jews but not with all Jews; I relate a few details below. That trouble did not make him think the Jewish God differed from Allah. It

did not blind him to the fact that ideas about the one true moral God originated with Jews. The trouble that Mohammad had with one group of Jews did not mean Islam and Judaism as wholes were at odds. It did not mean Muslims-as-a-whole and Jews-as-a-whole were angry at each other. The problem that one group of Jews had with Mohammad did not convince Jews-as-a-whole that Mohammad worshipped a different God or that Mohammad's students were bad people. Until about the middle 1800s, Christians were usually more of a threat to Jews than Muslims, and Christians hurt Jews more than Muslims did. When Spain was under Muslim rule until about 1490, Muslims usually treated Jews well; when Christians conquered Spain after 1490, sometimes they persecuted Jews. Most of the atrocities of World War Two were carried out by Christians or by people who recently had been Christians. Except for incidents, until the time of all the fighting over Israel, I cannot think of situations in which Jews-in-general and Muslims-in-general had to be enemies.

Early in his career, Mohammad was persecuted by other Arabs. Other Arabs tried to kill him several times, and they killed some of his followers. The trouble with some Jews came because some Jews helped the Arabs who tried to hurt him. To support himself and his followers, Mohammad briefly raided some caravans (as far as I can tell, mostly caravans that did business with the people that tried to kill him). Mohammad was not a warlord or general bandit. In his raiding, Mohammad was less warlike than Joshua, the namesake of Jesus, or David, who overthrew Saul.

As a result of Mohammad's troubles, he learned to blend ideals and practicality. Mohammad's blend of ideals and practicality was not to put all ideals under practicality, and so kill off ideals; and it certainly was not to put everything in the light of "us versus them, and we must kill all of them". It was a blend of ideals and practicality that tried to preserve ideals and fellowship as much as possible in the real world. The leaders who followed Mohammad understood the need both for ideals and practicality, and continued to find a good blend of ideals and practicality.

Within a hundred years of Mohammad's death, Islam had taken over most of the Arab world including the Semitic non-Jewish (Arab) people outside present day Saudi Arabia, especially Babylon (Iraq) and Egypt. After about 900 CE (AD), Islam had spread into Iberia (Spain and Portugal) and came into conflict with Christianity. In a famous war, the Franks stopped Islam at the Pyrenees Mountains between Spain and France. Islam took some areas of southeast Europe such as Bosnia. When Christianity grew strong after 1100, it fought Islam, as in the Crusades. If Mohammad were alive then, I think he would not have seen this fighting in terms of Christianity and Islam as distinct religions fighting but in terms of regional politics subverting religion. Christianity and Islam still would be two branches of the same religion.

Both Christianity and Islam waxed and waned in power. Since about 1800, Christianity has dominated. Islam feels Christianity looks down on Islam both as a religion and civilization, much as people in the South of the United States feel that other people look down on them. Christianity does not treat Islam as a sister religion of the same one true moral God but as a deluded heterodox deviant from true culture and true religion. Muslims feel much like oppressed minorities do everywhere. This leads to a constant chip on the shoulder of some Muslims, and sometimes to fighting.

Beginning in the late 1800s, Christians and Jews began to ally sometimes, even if there still were horrible episodes of anti-Semitism such as the Holocaust. The alliance of Jews and Christians, combined with the

decline of Islam, made the Muslim position seem worse to Muslims. The rise of Israel in 1948 seemed to confirm their fears.

Muslims resisted what they saw as Jewish and Christian attempts to overwhelm them. They fought back both directly and by reshaping their societies. Muslims adopted an attitude that Jews and Christians often adopt too, an attitude rooted in the Tanakh. They tried to be “ultra-strict” so God would look favorably on them and would give them back power, wealth, autonomy, and leadership. They overdid it. For them, “fighting back” came to include strong intolerance of other religions; intolerance of ideas associated with non-Muslim cultures even if those ideas are correct, such as science; rigid worship; bizarrely strict rules based loosely on old customs; forced observance of worship and rules; oppression of their own people; and especially oppression of women; and violence toward other religions, other people, and Muslims who disobeyed. Mohammad would not approve. When Muslims found wealth in oil, some Muslims used the wealth to fight Jews, Christians, and the modern world with violence. Some Muslims took the wealth in oil as a sign from God that they were on the right track and should go on even more strictly.

The rational response for any beleaguered minority is to build its economic, legal, and education bases, as Jews did in the United States, and as China has done since adopting limited capitalism. In the modern world, over the long run, education and business are more powerful than bombs. Most Muslims know this, and have worked toward this end. In the West, we do not see these Muslims but see primarily the Muslims that cause trouble. Muslims that are working toward economic, legal, and education advances are hampered by other Muslims who are reactionaries.

The vast majority of Muslims are like the vast majority of people in all religions. They use their religion to give meaning and guidance in life. They get along with neighbors. They want nothing more than family success. To find family success in the modern world, they need education, jobs, fair business practices, good government, and useful ideas about gender. They are happy to let other people do the same as long as other people do not oppress them.

Islam is not a “sweet” religion as are idealized (but not real) Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Islam is “not sweet” in the same way that Christians in the American South are not sweet even though they are Christians. Islam blends ideals with practicality, and acts vigorously. As with Jewish prophets for many centuries, Mohammad was vigorous, energetic, and staunch when fighting polytheism, superstition, and magic. I don’t know if, after about 1800, the vigor that Islam had shown when fighting superstition and polytheism was turned against Christianity, Judaism, and the modern world. If so, that was not correct. If some Muslims turned the old fight against superstition into the modern fight against Christians, Jews, the West, and the modern world, that attitude does not infect Muslims in general. To turn the old fight against superstition into a fight against the modern world is to go back into the bad superstition against which Mohammad originally fought. If some Muslims have an “attitude problem” then most Muslims are working to change their bad attitude into something better.

Muslims have to decide what the message of modern Islam is. They have to compare the message of modern Islam to the message of Jesus and to modern values with roots in the West. The message of modern Islam cannot simply be “One God” or “God is Great” because nearly everybody in the world now knows that idea; and everybody has decided either for it or against it. Islam cannot be about controlling women and children, or about preserving honor. That message is not unique to Islam, and, in its strict old

sense, the reactionary message is now wrong. Islam cannot believably assert that “God loves Muslims best” or “Islam will rise again because God loves us best”. Islam needs to stress a positive message of good acts. Islam does not have to invent something new or radical. Islam can look to its past for ideas about science and good government. Islam can promote good modern values and promote its version of the ideas of Jesus without demeaning Islamic history or Mohammad. They need to do this not mostly for non-Muslims but more for their own young people and for the future of Islam.

For the hundred-plus years since the discovery of oil in the Middle East, Muslims nations have not used their wealth to govern well, institute working democracy, educate their people, develop economically, develop commerce, and promote science. If Muslims wish to show the superiority of Islam, rather than use their wealth for the police and the military, to keep their own people in line, and to glare at Israel, they need to build good nations. Especially they need to promote science, research, and development. They need to promote working democracy. That is what impresses the world. That is what will show the world that Islam clears people’s heads and gives them a good relation with God. If Muslims want to frost the cake, they can use their scientific knowledge to make high-quality goods that people want to buy instead of all the crap that floods world markets – they can become the 1980s Japan or 2000s Apple of modern capitalism. I think Mohammad would want Muslim nations to show the superiority of a good relation with God through the example of good government, good science, and good production. If Muslims cannot show they can live well by instituting workable democracy and promoting real science, then other people will take that as a sign that Islam is not the religion of God.

Despite the real differences that have developed over time, I still believe Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are sister religions of the same one moral God. I believe they were originally basically tolerant, especially of monotheism. I regret what happened to drive them apart and to divert them from the original tolerant vision of Mohammad. They could easily foster the tolerance needed for pluralistic democracy. They do not need to believe exactly the same dogmas to get along with each other well enough.

More Background.

Always when writing about Islam to Americans, you have to review some basic facts. This need arises not because all Americans are willfully ignorant (too many are) but because some Muslims are fighting the West, and some Americans resent all Islam; so it is best to be clear.

The word “Islam” means “submission”, specifically “submission to Allah-God”. A “Muslim” is a person who submits to God. “Allah” is the same God as for Jews and Christians. A “Muslim” is not just a follower of Mohammad but, more importantly, a person who submits to God. In terms familiar to modern Christians, a Muslim accepts God and has a personal relation with God. A Muslim not only accepts God but accepts all the prophets of God as well. Islam reveres prophets highly. A Muslim accepts the messages of all the prophets. To submit means not just to worship externally, blindly, and stupidly but to worship with your intelligence and courage too. Good Muslims follow not only the formal words of the prophets but also the direct gifts of God: intellect, imagination, and heart.

Islam accepts the Hebrew Torah (first five books of the Tanakh) and most of the Tanakh as the word of God. I do not know how much of the Tanakh that Islam accepts. Islam altered the Tankah a bit from the original Hebrew version. So did Christianity. I don’t go into details here. Islam accepts the basic story of

Jesus, and so accepts some of the New Testament. I don't know how much of the New Testament it accepts. Most Muslims know the story of Jesus and they accept him as a prophet, but I doubt they have read the New Testament, and they would not accept passages that refer to Jesus as God.

Islam has two major scriptures of its own, both stemming from Mohammad: the Koran and the Hadith. Muslims consider the Koran to be the literal word of God, closely inspired (directly spoken) by the Archangel Gabriel to Mohammad. The Koran is about as long as the New Testament. The Hadith are sayings of Mohammad that are not in the Koran. Mohammad did not write anything. After hearing from Gabriel, Mohammad then recited the Koran to other people, who wrote it down.

Mohammad did not speak the Hadith the same way that he spoke the Koran, with the intent of having it written down. Other people wrote down from memory various bits of what they heard Mohammad say, and then those sayings were collected after his death. The Hadith is quite large, depending on what is included; Muslims in Thailand had a set of 10 volumes. Several selections have been made; please look on the Internet for the latest selections. The Koran is like the Torah while the Hadith is like the Mishnah or Talmud(s). The Koran is like the New Testament while the Hadith is like the collected works of the early Christians Fathers. Most of the Hadith probably was not spoken by Mohammad but was added by later people. It is hard to decide what was spoken by Mohammad and what was not. Muslims know this problem, and take it into account. For issues of practical life, Muslims more often refer to the Hadith than to the Koran. When a point is clear in the Koran, the Koran always has precedence over the Hadith. The Hadith serves as the basis for Muslim law. Muslims debate over the Hadith just as Jews do over the Mishnah, Talmud(s), and their commentaries. The Koran and Hadith serve as the basis for a life of study and for an occupation just as Christian and Jewish scriptures do. I have read the Koran and selections from the Hadith in English translations.

Besides the Koran and Hadith, Islam developed a long tradition of law, more like English common law than Jewish Holy Law or Roman Catholic Canon Law. Muslims try hard to base points of law in the Koran or the Hadith. Some of this legal tradition is called "Sharia". This legal tradition is more often the basis for practical action than the Koran. The Koran always dominates the Hadith, and the Koran and Hadith always dominate merely human legal tradition.

Muslims call Mohammad "The Prophet" to stress that he is the most important and the last in the line of prophets that began with Abraham. To Muslims, he is the most important prophet, and most important person, in world history. In practice, most Muslims consider him the only prophet and-or the only prophet they need to listen to. They are wrong. Mohammad was not the only prophet, the last prophet, or the only prophet that Muslims need listen to. Even if Mohammad was the greatest prophet, Muslims and all people still have to pay attention to the other prophets. Mohammad would not have looked at himself as "the one and only and greatest", any more than Jesus or Moses did. Mohammad respected other prophets. Educated Muslims know this. I don't know what Mohammad thought of great Christian saints; I think he respected the teachings of Paul from the New Testament. I don't know what Mohammad would think of prophets from outside the Jewish-Christian tradition, such as the Buddha and Chuang Tzu. People of nearly all religions make the same mistake with their founders as Muslims do with Mohammad: Christians look only to Paul, Buddhists look only to Siddhartha Gautama, and Confucians look only to Confucius or Mencius.

Christians are often surprised to hear that Muslims revere Jesus as in the same rank as Abraham and Moses, second only to Mohammad. Muslims do not accept that Jesus was God. Muslims accept that Jesus will judge all souls including theirs. Muslims understand the message of Jesus when they have heard it but not all Muslims have heard all of it or have heard it taught sympathetically. Muslims know of the accord between the ideas of Jesus and of Mohammad when they have heard both. They follow Jews, and Mohammad, in rejecting that any human could be God. Muslims also respect John the Baptist as a prophet. Muslims also revere Mary, much more than Protestants but maybe not as much as some Roman Catholics.

Muslims are sometimes surprised, and some will be offended, when I say the teachings of Mohammad are not really new, any more than were the teachings of Moses. As with Jesus, the difference was more in urgency and in how the teachings founded a way of life than in any new ideas. Mohammad would not be surprised to hear this; indeed, I think he would be happy that he “merely” continues the tradition of the one true moral God. Mohammad brought the ideas of the Jews and Christians to the Arabs. Mohammad was outstanding as a teacher, organizer, leader, and soldier. He was like Moses, David, or Martin Luther. Mohammad followed the Jewish prophets with the addition that he accepted an eternal afterlife, heaven, hell, and that Jesus would be the judge on the final day. Mohammad taught the ethical monotheism of the Jews: There is only one God; God is good; and God gave us rules to help us live well in accord with his ideas of living well. Muslims get their “kosher” (“halal”) food and the idea of the Sabbath from Jewish tradition. Muslim men are circumcised because Jews are (Jews got it from Egyptians). Muslims have internalized the idea that, if we follow the rules of God, we will live well, and our people will do well, even in competition with other people.

Christianity, Islam, and the Jewish Prophets.

The stories in the Jewish Tanakh, the Christian Bible, and the Muslim traditions about the prophets and about history after the prophets, are not literally true even if the stories have a basis in fact. Jewish interpretations have to take precedent. Christians and Muslims can differ from Jews but only if they explain clearly why and how, and give solid evidence for their differences.

Muslims and Christians differ from Jews in how they see some Jewish prophets and how they see Jewish history. Muslims and Christians both have distorted Jewish prophets and Jewish history to serve their ends. They sought a version of the prophets and of history that would bolster their ethnic-religion identity, in particular to show they had become favorites of God. Christians sought proof in the Jewish prophets that Jesus was God and that he was the foretold messiah. Muslims sought proof that their history was as long as the history of the Jews, and that they were as much a special people of God as were Jews or Christians. I do not give further details.

Muslims and Christians need to reverse this distortion even if to do so erodes their old claims. Muslims and Christians need to admit that the founding prophets were Jewish, and need to accept that Jewish ideas of Jewish prophets are the baseline for further understanding. This does not mean Muslims and Christians may not differ from Jews, but they need to be more honest about differences. Muslims and Christians need to admit ways in which they differ from Jewish interpretations of the prophets and Jewish history, and should return to the original Jewish prophets and history when possible. If they cannot return to the original Jewish prophets and history, they need to state clearly their own message, how it differs

from the message of the original prophets and history, and why they hold their version. They have to say why the original prophets were wrong. You cannot use a version of the prophets and of Jewish history to justify your need for a distinct identity and for ethnic-religious superiority. It is wrong to use the prophets and history to lie even in a good cause. You must take the prophets at face value regardless of what that implies for your particular religion, and then go from there. I do not follow the original prophets closely, yet I say so when I deviate from official doctrine, and I say why. For example, unlike standard Christian dogma, I do not believe the original prophets foretold Jesus and foretold that he was the Messiah that would save Israel and the world.

After Christians and Muslims are clear about their message in relation to the original Jewish prophets, then they need to assess their own message in the light of modern science and modern ideas about history. Reassessing in the light of modern science and ideas about history might cause Christians and Muslims to rethink their relation to the Jewish prophets and Jewish history. I know it is hard for Muslims and Christians to accept that Jews have precedence. Even so, accepting that Jews are the foundation is necessary as part of the truth of Islam and Jesus, and as part of truly submitting to God.

At the same time, Jews and Christians have to accept that Mohammad was a prophet of the same God that they worship, as important in his own way as Moses and Jesus. When Mohammad spoke of serving together as brothers and sisters under God, he spoke with the same authority as any prophet. This does not mean Jews and Christians have to accept the mistaken Muslim attitude that everything Mohammad ever said came directly from God and has the same authority as God. Mohammad erred as much as any prophet erred.

Ideas and Attitude.

In reading about Islam and in reading Muslim history, it is easy get a feeling for a distinct Muslim identity, attitude, and personality. All religions have both ideas and attitudes. I focused on ideas in this book. Here I have to switch over to attitudes, a topic at which I am inept. We need answers to the questions below. We can't get simple straight answers. I do some speculating and I call on enlightened Muslims for help. Critics of Islam, such as Christopher Hitchens, argue there is a general Muslim character, it is bad, it determined Muslim religion, it is not compatible with modern life, and Muslim character cannot be changed to make either the character or the religion compatible with modern life. The Muslim character is so nasty that any truths in Islam have been so distorted by the Muslim character as to be hopelessly lost. I think Hitchens is wrong, but the answers cannot come from me. If Muslims want a better image of Islam to prevail, they have to make one and explain it.

It helps to think of the same problem in Christian terms. Christianity in the different regions of the United States is not the same. Christianity in the "Bible Belt" is not the same as in the West, Mountains, or High Plains. Even in the "Bible Belt", Christianity differs between Midwesterners and Southerners. What is important in regional Christianity has more to do with regional history and culture than with dogma in the Bible or official pronouncements from churches such as Southern Baptists or Lutherans of the various synods. It is hard to separate the essence of Christianity from its particular regional versions. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are each regional versions of faith in the one true moral God.

We do not expect all versions of Christianity to foster one and only one kind of character, and we enjoy a little variation as long as the variation is not harmful and the variation is basically true to what most people see as the essence of Christianity. Irish Roman Catholics, French Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Amish, and Scottish Methodists are acceptable even though they foster different people and appeal to different passages of the Bible. If one version of Christianity developed that was fierce, and neglected the ideals of compassion in favor of anger, dominance, reaction, and oppression, we would likely call that version not true Christianity even if it cited reams of Bible passages. To people outside fundamentalism, that is what fundamentalism looks like. To people outside Islam, that is what Islam looks like, and has looked like for a long time. It seems as if a bad character overtook Islam early in its history and has shaped it ever since regardless of what Mohammad wished.

I think that assessment is wrong. Islam began much like Judaism in the times of Moses, David, and Solomon, when Israel was a local national “contender”, and Muslims nations originally were like Judah when it was resisting Roman power. Islam always will have that attitude as part of its character and its relation with God. But, like Judaism, Islam also had other sides such as we see in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micah, and the Minor Prophets. Those prophets stress good acts, justice with a good spirit, and compassion. The other sides usually are stronger. Which prevails depends on circumstances. Sometimes the fierce side of Islam prevails for a long time, as it has since about World War 2. If the fierce side prevails too long, and is too irrational, then it is not true Islam, any more than some fierce Christian sects are not true Christianity, such as White Power Christianity. It is up to Muslims to show non-Muslims all the sides of Islam, and it is up to Muslims to criticize the fierce side of Islam if it betrays the greater true Islam. It is up to us to listen to reasonable Muslims. If fierce irrational Muslims prevail, then it is reasonable for non-Muslims to fight them, just as the United States fights White Power racists and terrorists.

Ask these questions:

Is there a distinct Muslim character that was established at the start of Islam and that has remained fairly constant through Muslim history?

If not, how has Muslim character been shaped over history, and what is it now?

How have Muslim ideas affected Muslim character?

How has Muslim character affected Muslim ideas and the interpretation of Muslim ideas?

Are Muslim ideas and Muslim character sometimes at odds? Because Muslim ideas are largely true, if they are not sometimes compatible, that means Muslim character should change.

Is Muslim character compatible with modern institutions such as democracy and a secular state?

If not, can Muslim character change to be compatible?

Are Muslim ideas compatible with modern institutions?

Do Muslim ideas actually encourage modern institutions when rightly understood?

Can Muslim ideas help to find a Muslim character for modern times? If so, then this Muslim character would be in line both with the truth of Islam and with modern times.

Is Muslim character compatible with the message of Jesus?

Are Muslim ideas compatible with the message of Jesus?

Can Muslim ideas help mold Muslim character to make it compatible with the message of Jesus?

Mohammad as Not Inerrant.

Mohammad was clear that he was only a man. All men are fallible. Muslims should not take Mohammad as infallible, which means they should not take all the Koran as the transparently clear infallible Word of God. Of course, not only Muslims, but also Jews and Christians, do take their holy texts as transparent to themselves and as totally infallible. In theory, all the Koran was dictated to Mohammad by the archangel Gabriel. In one of the parts ("sura") of the Koran, Mohammad comments at length about inheritance of cattle. At the time, Mohammad was having trouble with some kin about the ownership and inheritance of cattle. Mohammad abused his authority as a prophet of God to settle the trouble in his favor. He might have actually heard a voice telling him what was later written in the Koran, but that does not mean I need to meekly accept that the whole Koran was the word of God and is infallible. Mohammad did what many inspired religious people do. This little episode does not invalidate the Koran as a whole. Most of the Koran is beautiful, and we still can take that as seriously as anything in any other religious texts. This little episode does mean that we need to use our God-given sense of judgment about the Koran and all religious texts. I do this with the Tanakh and New Testament as well.

In case Muslims think I am picking on Mohammad and the Koran only, the Tanakh Book of Joshua is a manual on how to commit genocide and torture. The historical books of the Tanakh often are no better. The Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament was not written by Paul, and it contains bad anti-Jewish (anti-Semitic) ideas that served as the basis for Christians hurting Jews. So do many of the stories in the New Testament although often the anti-Jewish sentiment is hidden. We can't take this material at face value as the inerrant Word of God. All the holy texts have passages that serve more as warnings of what not to do than as true words of God.

Jesus was a man. Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha and Mohammad both insisted they were not gods but only people. Yet Christians worship Jesus as God, and Buddhists and Muslims revere Siddhartha and Mohammad so much that they effectively worship Siddhartha and Mohammad as God. That is bad idolatry. Muslims do not avoid idolatry just because they do not make images of Mohammad. The best cure for this bad attitude is to take a long close hard look at everything the founders said, and then think what might not be true, or what might even be petty and vindictive. If we are to use our religions best, as God intended, to find full truth and face up to problems, then we have to begin with the fact that founders really were only people.

More Lessons from Mohammad's Trouble with the Enemies from Mecca.

Shortly after Mohammad fled Mecca for Medina, his enemies at Mecca tried to kill him, and they put a bounty on his head. They used contacts at Medina to try to kill him. As Mohammad had done with the cows, Mohammad heard from God that it was alright to fight his enemies and the enemies of Islam. (I have forgotten the exact passages in the Koran and so do not cite it here.)

Muslims since have interpreted this situation in two distinct ways. One, the situation validates the right of Muslims to protect themselves as persons against unjust aggression and validates the right of Muslims to protect Islam, other Muslims, and Muslim nations, against persecution. This interpretation is like the Christian and Buddhist idea of “just war”. Two, the situation teaches Muslims to strike non-Muslims, start aggression against non-Muslims, and forcibly convert non-Muslims. In effect, the situation urges Muslims to conquer as much of the world as they can, always in the name of Allah. This idea goes far beyond the Christian and Buddhist idea of a just war.

Just because Mohammad heard from God as a result of his trouble with enemies from Mecca does not invalidate the relevant passages in the Koran or necessarily invalidate either interpretation. We have to assess the situation, the resulting passages, and the interpretations, for their truth and their application regardless of where the passage came from.

I approve of interpretation One and condemn interpretation Two.

The problem is that the two interpretations can blend into each other in practice. It is easy to say that you are acting on the basis of One while in effect acting like Two. Claim self-defense to hide aggression. Not only Muslims do this, but people of all religions and nationalities claim they act only in self-defense even while they kill and persecute others. In these cases, we have to look behind the public interpretation to judge according to actions.

I don't know if Muslims are more prone than other groups to claiming One while acting Two. I don't know if Muslims are more prone than other groups to claiming Two outright. Critics of Islam say that Muslims claim Two, or claim One but act like Two, far more than other groups.

I don't know if the attitude of Two became a part of Muslim “culture” early on, has always been a big part of Muslim culture, and surfaces easily when Muslims get the chance. Critics of Islam claim this as well.

I think Mohammad meant interpretation One and would dislike interpretation Two. Even when he pushed the idea of one moral God onto Arabs, he meant interpretation One. He did not mean interpretation Two. Mohammad did not convert people by sword. Mohammad did not look for trouble. He responded with force when he had to, and only then. Within a few decades after Mohammad, Muslims did conquer other Arabs, and so did slide into interpretation Two. Interpretation Two lingers in the background of Muslim culture, but it does not usually dominate. Interpretation Two comes out when Muslims feel pressed and insulted. Unfortunately, Muslims have felt pressed and insulted for over two hundred years. Even then, most Muslims know that interpretation One is better, and that interpretation Two is wrong and dangerous. Self-righteous belligerence is not more natural to Muslim culture than it is to Christian culture – and some self-righteous belligerence is natural to both. Once we know the story of Mohammad, his troubles, and his statements, then we can better understand Muslims and better talk to them.

If any religious group, including Muslims, persists in interpretation Two, that is, persists in self-righteous belligerence, then, like Mohammad, we have the right to oppose them. Some Muslims now think the West persists in self-righteous belligerence against all Muslims. It is up to Westerners and enlightened Muslims to get the truth across that this is not so.

(1) Muslim Character and Mohammad's Message.

The question of Muslim character and its relation to the message of Islam is important enough so that I comment more on it in this section and in the next few numbered sections. I repeat from above. If you get the idea already, you can skip these numbered sections.

Like Abraham and Moses, Mohammad's people were animists, and were divided into quarreling groups. Like Moses uniting the Jews, Mohammad united the Arabs and strongly guided them into accepting one good God. He did this in the face of fierce opposition, including episodes of treachery and attempts to murder him and his followers. If he were a Jew fighting Rome, Mohammad would have been revered as were the Macabbees. If Mohammad were a Christian leading a Church in the early Roman Empire, or an early missionary to heathens, he would have been revered by Christians as a great saint like Paul or Patrick. Because of Mohammad, the Arabs united in spirit and in body, and spread ethical monotheism around the world. Muslims spread ethical monotheism around the world first, faster, and farther than did Jews or Christians. Muslims spread the worship of Yahweh-God-Allah around the world first, faster, and farther.

The situation of a prophet always colors his-her message, and the way that followers understand his-her message. Sometimes this works out well, and sometimes not. Mohammad faced a different situation than Jesus and the early Christians. Mohammad faced a situation more like Joshua and the leaders of Israel (the Hebrews) as they conquered the "Promised Land". His story is more like Deuteronomy, Kings, and Chronicles than like Exodus or Matthew. He reminds me of David. He had severe practical problems of survival that he had to solve. He had to defend against enemies and had to fund his movement. When his people were in dire financial straits, he fell back on the time-honored trade of raiding caravans just as David turned to banditry when he was in need. Mohammad was an outstanding leader-administrator-politician and a good military leader as well. He learned to combine the ethical teachings of Judaism and Christianity with the practical needs of his time and place.

Mohammad died while Islam was still limited to the area of northern and western Arabia. Wherever his followers took his ideas, they faced violent attack from animists. They met force with force, and they were amazingly successful in battle and in winning over people. Just as a Jews or Christians did, they said their success came from God's help and from the hunger of people to know the one true God.

Contrary to widespread misunderstanding now, early relations of Muslims with Jews and with Christians were not bad. They recognized each other as "kindred spirits" of the same tradition ("people of the Book"), and often they lived and let live. Most of Mohammad's problems were with non-Jews and non-Christians, particularly animistic Arabs. Mohammad did have trouble with one group of Jews early on. Unfortunately, that set a bad precedent, and the precedent has been grossly over-magnified since the conflict over the modern state of Israel. Muslims and Christians did not have big conflicts until Muslims began to make inroads on Christian kingdoms, in particular in Spain, Southern France, and southeastern

Europe. Those problems were more properly about political power than religion. Conflicts between Christians and Muslims did not get bitter until the Christian Crusades after about 1150 CE. I do not tell about the early conflict with Jews, or later conflicts with Jews and Christians, and of how conflicts soured relations over time.

Mohammad certainly heard the message of Jesus and took it to heart. One of his key early teachers was an uncle-in-law who was a Christian monk (I am not sure of the details despite having tried to find out). It seems Mohammad tried to implement the message of Jesus in his early attempts to be friendly with rival families, merchants, ethnic groups, and religions, but was stymied by their bad behavior toward him. As a result, Mohammad had to modify the message of Jesus with what he learned of practical real life. In this, according to Muslim tradition, apparently the archangel Gabriel guided him.

Maybe due to its start, Islam is not a “sweet” religion like idealized unrealistic Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism. Islam knows of sweetness but insists on reality and vigor as well. It is more like the religion of the prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, who knew of sweetness but who also knew the need for commitment and vigor. When Islam had to struggle, it adopted a warrior stance easily without losing sight of social justice or of sweetness. The warrior stance persists in Islam, Muslims turn to it readily, and they use it intensely.

It is not clear if the warrior stance adopted by Islam is in line with the original vision of Mohammad or is a distortion of his vision. I believe it is an addition, a moderate distortion that seemed reasonable at the time. Later, it could become more a liability than an asset. More important than this question, Muslims need to consider if they can find a vision that is both in line with God’s intent and allows them to live in peace with other people in the modern world. If the original vision of Mohammad is not in line with God’s intent now, then Muslims have to change.

Throughout Muslim history, the vast majority of Muslims have not been crazed desert warriors bent on conquest and domination. Throughout Muslim history, the vast majority of Muslims have not carried a grudge against the West, anybody else, and everybody else. Even though militancy and commitment were big themes in the early days, they were never the only themes, and usually were not the dominant themes. Muslims always also stressed peace, compromise, reconciliation, reason, science, and seeing the heart of other people. In many places, in many times, the other themes dominated militarism. The other themes can dominate in Islam now as in the past. David was a usurper, murdered his king, might have arranged for the murder of his best friend Jonathan, murdered many other people, killed a man to get his wife, and had a horrible family life himself; but that beginning of Israel in David did not determine the tone of all Jewish life and religion. Mohammad was as upright as David; so a few militant events in the early life of Islam have not absolutely determined the character of Islam. The vast majority of Muslims have always been what the vast majority of all people in state societies have been: farmers, herders, fishers, house holders, merchants, officials, husbands, and wives. Muslims now are the same. The vast majority of Muslims that I have met in the West are business people seeking to make a better life for their families just like the vast majority of everybody else.

When the Jews conquered ethnic groups in the Promised Land, the conquered people either assimilated, or submitted totally, or the Jews killed them. When Muslims conquered, usually they did not force people to become Muslims, although they did sometimes. I don’t know if they did so more than Christians. Islam

never had anything like the Christian Inquisition. Muslims allowed conquered people to keep their own religion, with some provisions, the most obvious of which is that non-Muslims paid higher taxes. Most people in conquered nations converted to Islam so as to pay lower taxes, and then their children adopted the new religion of their parents and the dominant religion of the conquerors. Islam grew more through clever fiscal policy than through forced conversion.

When Americans think of Mohammad, they think of a crazed desert warrior. He was not. Mohammad began as a successful urban businessman, something like George Romney or Mitt Romney. He was not a bandit. He had an intense religious vision. At first, he did not want to publicize his vision. He was like many non-religious American business people who do well and then "find God". He was a businessman who also had an aptitude for religion, politics, and local warfare. He was more like Harry Truman or Dwight Eisenhower than like Genghis Khan. He was not a dictator like Hitler or like the Emperor on Star Wars. He was more like a good prince with religious convictions, such as the Buddhist Warrior King Asoka or Henry of France.

Within two hundred years of Islam conquering the Middle East, Islam had become one center of learning in the world with China and India. Islam was far ahead of Christianity. Without Islam, the West would have lost most of the work of Classical Greece and Rome, including most of Aristotle and much of Plato. We would have lost science, mathematics, and political science. "Algebra" is an Islamic term.

Most Muslims I have met seem like Americans who are good upstanding members of the Republican Party. Muslims are especially like Southern Republicans. Muslims go to Mosque regularly; work hard; are conservative in politics, dress, and family; work in skilled labor, business, or professions; want their children to marry well; want their children not to experiment too much in school; are not pacifists; accept the need for military solutions; support a strong military; and dislike programs that enable the poor. If American Republicans could accept that Jesus was not God, they would make good Muslims. If Muslims could accept that American Republicans mistakenly think Jesus was God but otherwise do no harm, they could accept American Republicans as Muslims in good standing. If Muslims became slightly more liberal on social issues, they would also make good members of the Democratic Party. Ironically, much the same can be said of conservative American Jews; the only major difference is the question of Israel.

(2) Muslim Belligerent Character.

Nothing is in Islam to prevent it from getting along with the modern world and with other religions and ideas. Nothing is in the start of Islam that forces it to take a stance against the whole rest of the world now. Islam could become a source of learning and science again. There have been events in recent history that have driven a wedge between Islam and the West. It helps to explain. I am not sure if the breach can be healed quickly enough. I hope so.

I stress again that the vast majority of Muslims do not have a grudge against the West, Western values, Jesus, his message, or even Jews. The vast majority are not belligerent. The vast majority of Muslims already have begun to adjust to the modern world, including the values of democracy and the message of Jesus. Most Muslims make excellent citizens and contribute to the economy. Problems lie with some groups of Muslims, in the gap between them and the modern world, just as it does with some Christians and with racial supremacists. Of course, it only takes a few rotten apples to spoil the whole barrel. So if

enough Muslims cause trouble, it could spoil the situation for all Muslims. This is possible. I hope it is not true. From what I have seen, it is not true. There are so many more good Muslims than bad Muslims that all of us should operate on the assumption that good Muslims vastly outnumber bad Muslims, just as good Christians outnumber bad Christians. Jesus, Mohammad, and most kind Jewish leaders of the past would want us to think that way.

The Islamic world has a serious case of “past glory blues”, much as do Greeks, Italians, French, Irish, the British, Chinese until recently, Indians, and Southern Americans. See the early movies of Bruce Lee to see how this blues plays out in a non-Western case or see the movie “Ip Man”. People who live in past glory learn about great kingdoms of the past, and think somehow it should be like that now. They are like America looking back to the 1950s and 1960s. They do not know that most past glory is imagined and unrealistic. They do not see past problems. People who live in past glory tend to be bitter about present life. They find someone else to blame for not having yesterday’s imagined glory. They blame whoever is in power regardless of facts, just as American Southerners blame Yankees and Liberals, and American Southerners never see their own disadvantage as arising out of their own culture. Muslims feel they do not get enough respect. The West, including Russia and the old Communist empire, is in power. So Muslims blame the West for the missing glory of Islam. They blame Western values for undermining the values that God gave to Muslims, and that would recover glory for Islam if only Muslims would live up to the values. They take whatever action they can to build up their own values and to knock down the power and values of the usurper enemies.

There is some basis for Islamic anger at the West but it is not enough to justify hatred. There is some basis for the feelings of American Southerners toward Yankees and Liberals but not enough to justify their hatred. For at least 200 years, Westerners have dominated Muslim nations and have taken the resources of Muslim nations without just compensation. Muslims control the greatest oil reserves in the world but the Muslim people have hardly benefitted from this wealth.

A big reason for lack of Muslim development is that, about 250 years ago, Muslims turned their backs on Western science (which once was Muslim science) and on capitalism despite good evidence that science and capitalism were the “wave of the future” and despite the fact that Muslim nations had the knowledge, people, and resources to have made the shift. By clinging to old ways of life then, Muslims doomed themselves to clinging to old ways of life now. China did the same thing for a while. After China got over its ideological indulgences, it recovered dramatically.

Another source of Muslim disadvantage is that, for 200 years, Muslims have been ruled by despots. Their despots have done what all despots do regardless of religion or culture. Rather than use their resources and power for the progress of their people, they invest in a strong military and they give their people something to hate as a way to channel outward the frustrations of the people. Despots hurt the people. Even before the rise of Israel in 1948, Muslims leaders indulged in Western comforts at the same time that they blamed the West for looting their countries. The degenerate leaders of Egypt before the rise of Israel are a clear example. After the rise of Israel, Muslim despots had a tailor-made scapegoat for the frustrations of the people and the stagnation of the country. Even given that Muslim nations have not gotten a fair price for their resources, there was more than enough wealth to build the country and to bring it to modernity if the wealth had been used for education, science, and commerce rather than for the military. Even when wealth was used for some education, as when students went to Western schools to

get degrees, there were no jobs on return because there was no capitalist and commercial infrastructure. The “Arab Spring” of 2011 and 2012 began when a man in Tunisia with a college degree had to sell oranges on a street corner to make a living, and a crooked police officer shook him down hard. Some Muslims with moderate power suppressed other Muslims with less power, and used them as tools in the ploy of using Israel as scapegoat; see the movie “Syriana”. As usual, the West supported despots when it served the short-term interests of the West, adding another valid reason to be angry at the West. Even now, there is great danger that Arab leaders will not use the new energy of freedom to lead their countries to progress but will return to militarism and using Israel as a safety valve.

As always during social changes, some groups benefit while other groups lose. Within Muslim nations, these groups stand to lose: men who have held power a long time; younger men who want to hold power someday; political despots; families who control resources; families who control power; young men with no jobs or resources and so no way to get a start in a new economy; and young men with little education and little hope of getting a job in a new economy. People think they can keep power if they can stop, slow, and limit changes. People think they can control power if they can control symbolic changes such as in movies, TV, and popular music. Too often, control of power becomes control of women, girls, young people, and schools. If power groups can make the nation look as it did a hundred years ago, they think they can keep out the modern world and can maintain power. They hurt people who change, in particular they hurt girls and women. This behavior has little to do with real Islam. This behavior is all about fear of change and fear of losing power. Conservatives of all religions, twist their religion to serve as the charter for the old ways and against the new ways. They twist their religion to serve as a charter for killing people who allow change. They twist their religion to serve as a charter for dominating women and schools. Not all Muslims are like this. The very large majority of Muslims want change if change is done at a pace they can deal with. People want hospitals and schools if they can also control drugs and promiscuity. But even the large majority of Muslims fear the violent aggressive minority, and so the violent aggressive minority makes all Muslims look that way.

Contrary to another Western misconception, not all ideas and values that come out of the West are all good. Even ideas that are good in the proper context in the West can be bad outside the proper context. Moral relativity and Romantic inversion can be useful in the West but bad if taken literally. The idea that a woman has a right to walk around naked without getting assaulted might be theoretically true, and might make sense as a discussion point in a Western college classroom, but it is nonsense in the real world and dangerous. Democracy makes sense when people have the right economic base to support it and the right relations with neighbors but democracy does not make sense where people are hungry, ignorant, and beset by enemies. If people adopt the wrong Western values, those values can hurt the country far more than help, as happened in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, in Burma (Myanmar), and in North Korea. People outside the West have to choose which values to accept and how to accept them. If given enough time and help, they usually make good choices, as in South Korea. In the short run, and without help, they get confused, as happened in Russia after the fall of Communism. When confused, they make bad choices such as falling prey to simplistic materialism and consumerism. When confused, and when bad choices backfire, people reject all Western values, all modernization, and all change. This rejection happened in only a small minority of Muslim nations but it happened enough to cause a problem, as in Egypt and Afghanistan.

In a world of expanding capitalism and consumerism, ideas about a modern life often come far ahead of actual economic development; what used to be called “modernization without development”. People want cars, computers, electronic pads, smart phones, cameras, cable TV, air conditioning, lots of other toys, and a cushy job with security and benefits, before the economy has the infrastructure to give everybody a job in which they can earn those rewards. People want to live like the people in American movies and TV ads, and they get angry when they can’t. They think the West is withholding it from them and cheating them. In fact, they are partly correct, but only in small part. Mostly their bad leaders are cheating them out of it. Regardless of the cause, they get angry at Western culture, and they react by reinforcing their traditional values. They do this even when their traditional values could not possibly provide the base for an economy that can give them what they want.

Violence and hatred beget violence and hatred. Once begun on a path of violence and hatred, it is hard to stop. In the short run, violence and hatred provide a lot of satisfaction and make up for a lot of other needs. In the 1970s, several groups of Americans started down a path of violence and hatred, and many people in those groups still wander that path. I have heard hate in the sermons of Black preachers, the rants of Whites looking for better jobs, and the well-reasoned but false attacks of educated women on men. You can still hear ill-disguised racial hatred in sermons on TV. Black culture in America since the 1970s has been ruined by hatred and violence; the legions of dead and jailed Black youth can serve as my evidence. Many Irish can testify to the persistence of hatred and violence. Muslims started down a path of hatred and violence, and many Muslims remain on the path. The conflict with Israel has done a lot to keep them on the path but it did not alone create the path and it alone does not keep them on the path. Despite Islam’s militant beginning, hatred and violence are not endemic to Islam. I think they are against the spirit of Mohammad and the spirit of Islam. The vast majority of Muslims do not walk the path of hatred and violence. Yet hatred and violence persist.

Whether Muslims more than other people tend to oppose change with violence, and tend to form groups that oppose change with strong violence, I am not sure. The above points tend to lead a large proportion of Muslims to oppose change and to oppose change with violence. The real question is what enlightened Muslims and enlightened citizens of a greater world should do, and that question is beyond the scope of this book.

(3) More on Attitudes.

After the terrorist attacks of 9-11, Americans called on Muslim clerics to condemn hatred and terrorism. Americans condemned Muslims for tolerating hatred and for not condemning it. In fact, many Muslims, including many Muslim clerics, did condemn hatred and violence. They do not tolerate it. They stress being good citizens of their countries, including the United States, and they oppose Muslim extremists. I would guess that Muslim clerics in America have done a better job of opposing hatred and violence than the clerics of most other religions. I have heard racism in the sermons of White and Black American preachers, and Christian Americans do not condemn them enough. Americans don’t hear the sermons of Muslims who have adapted to the modern world and who condemn violence. I wish there was a way to broadcast the sermons of Muslims in the same way as of Christians and sometimes Jews. I hope the non-Muslim Americans who have Muslim friends and who know of the vast majority of good Muslims go out of their way to tell other Americans about good Muslims.

Muslims and non-Muslims have to compromise on mutual tolerance of some rude behavior. Westerners do not notice, but, when Muslims protest a slander on Mohammad, the Koran, or Islam, they rarely burn the New Testament, the Tanakh, or any religious text. They never burn Jesus in effigy. Muslims respect religion, religious people, and religious texts. Muslims do unto others as they would have others do unto them, and as they think all people should do unto each other. Muslims do burn symbols of political and economic power, and symbols of values with which they disagree, such as flags, secular effigies, banks, fast food restaurants, bars, and hotels in which guests shamelessly under-dress.

I condemn the terrorist attack of 9-11 but I need to point out: The attack was not meant to kill as many people as possible. If the terrorists had wanted merely mass death of Americans, they would have flown a jet into Michigan Stadium ("the Big House") on football game day with Ohio State. The attack was aimed at the key financial center of the world (World Trade Center), the key military center of the world (Pentagon), and the key political center of the world (White House). Muslims who fear modern life see those centers as the weapons of oppression not just against themselves but against non-Western non-capitalist non-Communist peoples.

Non-Muslims, especially Westerners, should see the Muslim point of view, about bad institutions that hurt people. Muslims believe it is wrong to make images of people, especially important people. It is a form of idolatry that can lead to wrong belief. It can divert attention away from God. Non-Muslims should respect this. Don't make an image of Mohammad. Don't desecrate Mohammad or the Koran. Give Muslims the same respect that they give us. Give them the same respect that you want, and you would like to prevail for everybody. That is what Jesus taught. When Westerners make fun of Mohammad or the Koran, they should expect vigorous legal peaceful protests.

At the same time, Muslims must understand that Muslim values do not prevail around the world. Part of Western democratic values is that people have a right to be stupid, and they often use that right. People have a right to make images of anything, to make fun of anything, and even to denigrate anything. Even when people in general disagree with somebody who makes fun of Islam, that foolish person still has the right to say and act. Muslims can enforce strong laws of religious respect in their own countries but they cannot enforce such laws outside their own countries, and they cannot take vengeance against anybody outside a Muslim country. They simply must endure. If Muslim residents in a non-Muslim country cannot endure, they must leave that country rather than break its laws. Sometimes real progress comes through letting fools do what they must so that better people always have the right to speak too. This fact is painful, but it is true, and must be endured. I hope Muslims take comfort in the fact that the large majority of non-Muslims in the West disagree with offending Mohammad and the Koran.

Part of modernization is the freedom of girls and women. It is not possible to run a modern economy without women participating in the workforce. When women work, they have their own incomes, and they have a big say, often the dominant say, in their sexual lives, reproductive lives, and family lives. It is not possible to allow women to work without also allowing them power, and it is not possible to deny women work. So, women will have some power. Women will have economic, political, and personal power. When women have power, women, like men, do foolish things. Women will have times of excessive sexuality and of promiscuity. Most adolescent women go through that as a short phase, and it is not too severe. Women then stop on their own because they find the right path for themselves. Women do not stop mostly because men force them to stop. Men cannot stop it by severely punishing girls who go to

school. Men cannot stop it by punishing women who flirt, wear skirts above their ankles or knees, wear make-up, go out socially, have boyfriends, or drink. It is not against the basic ideas of Islam to give women the same freedom as men. It does not destroy a woman's soul if she makes a mistake, and it does not destroy her family.

The best thing Muslim parents can do is the best thing parents all over the world already do: Set a good example. Teach by example. Enjoy life without hurting yourself and without hurting other people. Teach your children to enjoy their lives in the same way. Show your children see what happens when other children go to excess or when they act stupidly for too long. Don't worry that your children will pick up bad examples from what you show them. Try to make sure your children see a variety of successful children, including children who are successful in traditional ways and children who are successful through imagination and creativity without hurting themselves. Do not admire bad role models, such as profligate men or terrorists. Do admire good role models such as stay-at-home fathers. Make sure all your children get the best education for their ability. Do not smoke at all and, if you drink, drink only moderately. Just as some men are lost, some women will be lost. Accept the loss of some women as the price to pay for the great gains of women as a whole, including all of your daughters.

Islam should not be the religion of bitter men, clinging to an imaginary past in which they had glory and power, and oppressing women so as to make themselves feel better. Mohammad limited the power of men while expanding the power of women. Mohammad protected women against men. Mohammad respected the judgment, intellect, and business ability of women. For a man to protect a woman does not mean to own her. Now it means to encourage her in her responsible freedom. Mohammad did not make men the owners of women; he made men the friends of women. Women supported Mohammad. Mohammad listened to women. Mohammad recognized women in business. He gave women a sure share of inheritance, a large portion for the times. He limited the number of wives that powerful men could have; contrary to false Western ideas, he did not encourage men to take many wives and to use women. Mohammad understood the value of an education because he did not have one. Mohammad would want women in this world to be educated, take up professions, and contribute to modern life.

This paragraph will offend Muslims. I think Greeks and Roman Catholics worship Mary and some of the saints, and their worship amounts to idolatry. I suspect that some Jews worship the Torah, the Talmud, and other texts to the point of idolatry. I don't make a point of this because mostly I don't care and there is not much I can do about it. I spend my time on better things. In the same way, I think many Muslims respect Mohammad, the Koran, and even the Hadith, to the point of idolatry. They worship Mohammad, the Koran, and the Hadith. Some Muslims seem to respect great figures of Islam to the point of idolatry. They let worship get in the way of the message. I know all Muslims learn that Mohammad is not God and that it is a sin to worship him. Even so, too often, they do. They do the same to the Koran. Mohammad was only a man, and he was wrong about some things. The Koran is only a book, and it is wrong about some things. Mohammad put passages in the Koran about his wives and cattle that could not possibly be relevant to the glory of God; he put them in so that he could use the glory of God to support him in his family quarrels. Jews should accept the flaws in their prophets, and often do, but not always. Christians should accept the mistakes of Jesus, and almost never do. Muslims should really and deeply accept the humanity of Mohammad, including his faults. When Muslims accept this about Mohammad, they will become better Muslims in the way that Mohammad originally intended. When religions accept the

humanity of their founders, they are far less apt to quarrel, especially about trivial things such as bad cartoons and bad movies.

Bad Self-Validating Experiences.

Now we return to material that is not repeated and that you should not skip.

“Jihad” does not mean primarily “Holy War” or “War against unholy enemies”. “Jihad” means “strenuous focused effort toward an important goal or cause, hopefully with God’s help”. A person can conduct a jihad to cure cancer or poverty. A person can treat winning the World Cup for his-her country as a jihad. “Jihad” can be given as a name, given in hope that your child excels, just as “David” means “beloved of God” or “Richard” means “person of correct rule”. A jihad can be a self-validating experience.

The problem with Muslim attitudes against modern life is they support self-validating bad experiences and self-perpetuating bad religious pyramid schemes. This is a problem not only with Islam but with many modern religions which offer a strong self-validating experience with which believers can oppose the uncertainty of modern life. From the 1960s through the 1980s, American Christian groups that offered a big self-validating experience of justification, salvation, finding God, feeling God’s love, and having a personal relation with God, provided a safe haven for confused young people who could not deal with the freedom and insecurity of modern life. This is a big reason why ordinary people see Muslim fanatics and Christian Conservatives as much the same. Both use self-validating experiences as the basis for bad religious pyramid schemes.

When self-validating experiences lead to terrorism or bad government, as in both Islam and America, then they are bad and should be condemned.

Malcolm X.

“The Autobiography of Malcolm X” is the story of a Black Man in America in the 1940s through 1960s, mostly around Detroit. This book influenced me greatly. I strongly recommend it as giving excellent insight on all the issues of this chapter.

Malcolm starts as a petty crook and drug user. He grows embittered. He goes to prison. He discovers an American Islamic movement aimed at Black People, called “Black Muslims”. The Black Muslims are not orthodox Muslims, but they are close enough to the spirit of Mohammad and Islam so Malcolm learns a lot. He learns to get over bitterness, to fend for himself, to stop relying on White people as though he were still a slave, to look critically at how the economy and society works, and to work in the community to make a better community and better world. For a long time, he got energy by hating White people and by blaming them for Black problems. He blamed Blacks who were lax or collaborated with Whites. Malcolm mistakenly thought that problems of economy, society, and history were primarily race problems. All these ideas became self-validating experiences that fed the dark side of the Black Muslim movement.

Eventually Malcolm saw that Black problems depended on race conflict but were not at root race issues but problems of economics, society, politics, and history. Malcolm became unhappy with the image of both Black people and White people that was given by Black Muslims. Malcolm went on the pilgrimage to

Mecca ("Haj"). While there, he saw Muslims of all races and nationalities. He saw all kinds of people getting along under their submission to God. The experience transformed him. He saw the unity of all people under God. The experience clarified for him race relations and root problems in the economy and the greater society. Malcolm never gave up being a vigorous focused person. He exemplifies jihad. He remained a strong good Muslim. His pilgrimage became a different self-validating experience that undid the badness of earlier self-validating experiences, and turned them toward good. I think Mohammad foresaw that the pilgrimage would have this effect on people, and that is one reason why Mohammad instituted the pilgrimage.

When Malcolm returned to America, he did not stop scolding Whites and Blacks when he thought they deserved it. He did stop preaching racial conflict, and instead attacked problems at their root. He always insisted on the virtues that he had learned as a Black Muslim. He cooperated with White people when they worked to help Black Community self-reliance and really helped improve it.

His new stance alienated him from traditionalists within the Black Muslims. Shortly after he changed his approach, reactionaries in the movement murdered him.

As far as I am concerned, Malcolm exemplifies what Muslims can be. He was working his way toward a critical but successful life in a modern society. Instead of rejecting society, Malcolm worked to make it better. Malcolm discovered, on his own, the message of Jesus, and the accord between the message of Jesus and the teachings of Mohammad. He found the inevitable implications of the teachings of all the prophets. I don't care if Malcolm would have put it in those terms, and I don't care if he would have left out Jesus and the Jewish prophets. The substance of what Malcolm did and what he learned are in line with a practical application of the message of Jesus.

Repeat My Pleas.

Because Islam accepts Jesus as an important prophet but does not hold him as God, Islam is in a unique position to assess the message of Jesus for the modern world. Islam can assess how much practicality, and what practicality, we have to take into account. How do we blend ideals and practically? Islam can tell us how decent people can cope with indecent people. Islam can tell us what to do about the flaws of capitalism without making either poor people or corporations clients of the state. Islam can tell us how to run capitalism without allowing business to rule the state. It can tell us how to help the planet as much as it now can be helped.

Islam began as a champion of science and reasoning. I do not guess here how some groups in Islam fell into hating science and reason, and why they believe in dogma that is obviously false, such as against evolution. As an early champion of science and reasoning, Islam sought for signs of God's activity and his presence in the wonders of his creation, in the stars, the Earth, biology, mathematics, and reasoning. Islam can do that again. Smart Muslims have a chance to be world leaders in science, and they have a chance to be world leaders in seeing God through science. I don't mean they should irrationally see God in every star, galaxy, and sea urchin. That would be silly, and a disservice to God. They should find out what can be explained by natural law, and they should speculate on implications. They should consider if the evolution of sentient-moral-aesthetic beings implies God even if it does not prove God. How are natural laws set, and why they are they set as they are? As machines become smarter, how should we

relate to them? What happens when most people are conceived and gestated in bottles? What happens when we play with DNA? Islamic literature, religious and secular, is full of natural signs of God. Few of these signs would stand up to the scrutiny of a modern skeptic but some would stand up to the scrutiny of a modern seeker who accepts circumstantial evidence. Many would still inspire a modern believer and bring joy to modern believers. Muslims have a lot to contribute to modern science and philosophy if they allow themselves to step fully into the modern world.

PART 5: My Non-Conversion.

When I explain the role of the Jews in my belief, Christians and Muslims ask me why I don't convert to Judaism. When I explain my respect for Mohammad and Islam, Jews and Christians ask me why I don't convert to Islam. I have reasons. (I have had atheists yell at me for not converting to formal Christianity). First, Jesus remains the main giver of the message for me. Second, Jews, standard Christians, and Muslims do not find my beliefs acceptable. Third, I don't accept some of their ideas and attitudes, such as overlooking Jesus' message. Fourth, I don't want to follow some of their practices. It is fine if Jews and Muslims circumcise boys and eat "kosher" ("hallal") but I don't want that, any more than I want to follow all the standard Christian holidays and customs. Fifth, and this might be a fault on mine, I don't like formal institutions. I would chafe at their authority. Sixth, I love some aspects of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, and I want to feel free to continue. My beliefs are fine for me, I share them with many enlightened modern people, and I think I am a true follower of Jesus. As long as nobody fights to convert me, I am happy to let things stand.