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Evangelical Perspectives on Islam: The Effects of Influential Evangelical Leaders and Organizations on Christian-Muslim Relations

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**Introduction**

After two-years of interviewing over 45 Muslim college students in North Carolina (2018 - 2020), my data was saturated with stories of discrimination, isolation, and inability to fit into mainstream culture. This research project sought to examine how young Muslim-Americans have navigated Islamophobia in the U.S. It wasn’t their own values or religious orientations that forced them incompatible with U.S. culture, but it was persistent voices of those telling them that they “did not belong,” “would be better off dead,” and “they were inherently not wanted in this country.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Often these anecdotes would come from people in passing, and the person could not be identified nor could their ideology be traced. During this time I found myself within a conservative Christian circle. One evening I was asked about my work, and the floodgates of Islamophobic sentiments were opened. In those moments I heard, verbatim, what some of my students had reported to me as some of the scariest moments of their lives. In building the connection between these conservative evangelical perspectives and my interviewees, it became imperative to explore what these organizations were saying about Islam and how they could propagate enough animosity that lay people would be inspired to commit acts of hate. In focusing on a few evangelical organizations and prominent leaders, this paper answers the lingering questions; where do the roots of anti-Muslim sentiments stem from?, Who are the groups and/or individuals producing Islamophobic propaganda?, and What impact do these groups and people have on American-Muslims as a whole?

This paper argues that the attitudes of prominent evangelical leaders influence the view and treatment of Muslims in the U.S. Through their public facing materials, their shared rhetoric of fear and violence, and their resistance to interfaith coexistence, many evangelical organizations have limited their followers in how they should talk about and to Muslims. The relationship between the two religions is essential in understanding how evangelical leaders have developed and disseminated their view on Islam. Their power has grown beyond their own circles and into the larger public sphere with the rise of politicians who support and boast their views of thwarting Islamic influences in the West. The words and actions of these groups have caused Muslims to be apprehensive of their place within U.S. society while also questioning their safety. This paper takes these sentiments of fear as the basis of concern and seeks to shed light on the way public hate directed towards Muslims has become normalized and accepted amongst many evangelical communities.

Whereas most literature on Christian-Muslim relations focuses on history, this paper builds a foundation of historical context, presents the narratives of Muslim youth in America, then presents the ways American evangelical leaders have articulated their views of Islam. In recognizing the wide range of opinions even among evangelicals, its evident there is not a monolithic approach to Muslim and evangelical Christian relations nor is there a monolithic practice of Islam or Christianity. I will present an overview of the history of Muslim-Christian relations in the U.S., the current status of Islamophobia in America, and the attitudes some influential evangelical groups and leaders hold towards their Muslim neighbors. I focus on influential evangelical leaders like James Dobson and Shahram Hadian and their media messages—all of which have a wide following. I will be noting that negative messaging can influence anti-Muslim beliefs and actions, even if the evangelical leaders don’t intend to incite violent acts. The catalyst of this paper is my own ethnographic study of certain communities within the conservative evangelical community. My methods for this ethnographic study are conversations with Focus on the Family staff members, analyses of two Focus on the Family documents, dissection of multiple sermons and talks from Shahram Hadian, Jerry Falwell, and John Piper and an interpretation of a six-question survey sent out to those attending an anti-Muslim event.

**The History of Muslim-Christian Relations in the U.S.**

Christianity and Islam share similar geographical and historical roots in the Middle East, and later expanded into different territories— Christianity to Europe and the Americas and Islam to Africa and Asia.[[2]](#footnote-2) Through a long and tumultuous history, the political “balance of power” between the two traditions has swung from one community to the other.[[3]](#footnote-3) Much of their shared history has included a peaceful coexistence, particularly in the increasing globalization of commerce and information.[[4]](#footnote-4) Conversely, the interchange and encounter between Christians and Muslims has resulted in social, religious, and political conflict. In recent years this conflict has been seen in the 1990s in Eastern European countries, in the 1960s in the Philippines, and in 2013 in Sudan, just to name a few. While there is undeniable tension globally between many Christians and Muslims, there is a long and complex history of Christian-Muslim encounters on U.S. soil. Restricted immigration, discrimination in the workplace, in health care, and in schools, and lessened government protection frame the experiences Muslims have had in the U.S.

While the first memory many contemporary Americans hold surrounding Islam is the devastation of September 11, 2001, the first large scale movement of Muslims to the U.S. occurred when slave traders forcibly carried Africans from Senegal, Mali, and other parts of West African to the U.S.[[5]](#footnote-5) Although this period brought thousands of enslaved Africans, most free white observers failed to recognize their religion and had little impact on the way elite Anglo-American colonists viewed Islam.[[6]](#footnote-6) It was not until the eighteenth century that American theologians began to speak about Islam. The standard view of American Christians treated Islam, along with Roman Catholicism, as one of the “two greatest kingdoms, which the devil erected in opposition to the kingdom of Christ.”[[7]](#footnote-7) These words came from American Theologian Jonathan Edwards, who also was known to refer to Mohammad as a “crafty” man who promised his ignorant followers “a sensual paradise” that they would enter through martyrdom in *jihad.*[[8]](#footnote-8)Edwards continued to criticize Islam, taking particular interest in its place in eschatology, its supposed inferiority to Christianity, and its role in the ongoing debates with Diests.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Edwards taught that the major opponents of true Christianity would be defeated either through conversion or warfare. In the late 1740s, Edward began to keep track of Muslim conversions to Christianity, building a case that converting Muslims to Christianity would bring the end of time. He worked to create a public image of Islam as a religion that is “debased, debauched, and corrupted the minds of those who received it.”[[10]](#footnote-10) He contrasted this with the Christian approach to faith that “flourished” in the intellectually advanced Jewish, Greek, and Roman cultures, and sought to represent Islam as a change from “light to darkness.” In building this parallel, Edwards agued that Christianity was propagated by reason while Islam grew by the sword.

In *Neighbors: Christians and Muslims Building Community*, Deanna Womack writes that during the 19th century,“[Missionaries] considered Islam an evil force and a rival to be defeated.”[[11]](#footnote-11) A “public relations campaign” to deface Islam and equate its presence with the Middle East (despite the fact that most Muslims live elsewhere) would forever negatively impact Muslim-Christian relations in the U.S.[[12]](#footnote-12) This type of missionary influence was especially important in the 19th century and led to American-Muslim encounters outside of the U.S. Those traveling to the Middle East regularly sent back information about the “Mahommedans” who were followers of the “artful imposter.”[[13]](#footnote-13) This spread of information was met with an increase in American literature about Muslims. Novels such as William Thomson’s *The Land and the Book* further convinced American Christians of their cultural and religious superiority while also assuring them that their missionary efforts were not in vain.[[14]](#footnote-14) In this text Thomson portrayed Arabs and other Palestinians as unwelcomed interlopers in the “scenes and scenery of the Bible,”[[15]](#footnote-15) and wrote that the “sword of Mahomet and the Coran are the most fatal enemies of civilization, liberty, and truth which the world has yet known.”[[16]](#footnote-16) During the late 19th and early 20th century, the Nation of Islam began to immerge in the U.S. as a response to the dominate white Christian society while smaller scale Muslim Arabs immigrated to seek better economic opportunities, freedom, and equality, and in some cases, escape oppressive Ottoman rule.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Former Presbyterian (re)named Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb took the stage at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago and presented Islam’s cure for the country’s desperate inequalities.[[18]](#footnote-18) In his brotherhood of Muslims, there would be an alternative to racially divided Christian and Western culture. Throughout the 1900s Islam’s public presence grew and American Christians continued to view Islam as its chief global missionary competitor. This view increasingly developed as American Muslims highlighted the race and class divisions within American society, pointing to Islam as the solution. By the 1930s, African-American advocated of Islam (or the Nation of Islam) harped on Islam’s race blindness to criticize white Christianity. The 1960s saw a rise in African American and Arab Muslim immigrants, raising Christian anxieties about American Muslims aggressive evangelism efforts, lack of assimilation, or possible association with terrorist plots. After immigration reforms changed in 1965, many more Muslims began arriving from overseas. Christian observers soon began to view the new wave of non-Christians as an opportunity to evangelize from their churches, school, and universities.[[19]](#footnote-19) With the new wave of Muslim immigrants and converts, domestic Islam (particularly the Nation of Islam) appeared to many as a regrettable social mirror, to others, it seemed like a dangerous cult and a possible vanguard of the global terrorist threat.[[20]](#footnote-20) While American Christians were beginning to have their own encounters with Muslims on their home soil, the reputation of Islam deteriorated with the media’s representation of Islam abroad.

While Muslim immigrants were making the U.S. their new home, the 1980s brought on harsh media reports of the Middle Eastern conflicts, including the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis, the Lebanese civil war, and the on-going Israel-Palestine conflict. These geopolitical events, which were not religious in nature, were framed by the U.S. media as an issue of ‘Islam.’[[21]](#footnote-21) These events led American Christians to believe that Islam itself was actually America’s enemy, failing to distinguish between Islam as a faith and the actions of Muslim majority countries or political leaders. In describing this time in U.S. history, Womack writes, “Viewing the entire Islamic tradition as homogeneous and unchanging, in the last decades of the twentieth century American Christians tended to paint all Muslims with the same brush as dangerous foes.”[[22]](#footnote-22) By the 1990s, many Americans held the beliefs that Islam was directly opposed to Christianity, inherently dangerous, oppressive to women, and incompatible with modern democracy and values. This essentialist view of Islam has limited the way other Americans tend to view Muslim-Americans. The media and public sphere’s focus on conflicts in the Islamic world or Muslim acts of terrorism overshadowed the actual lives and actions of most Muslims in America.

The attacks on September 11, 2001 undoubtedly traumatized the U.S. It is easy to draw a parallel between these attacks and the anti-Muslim actions that filled the public sphere in the years to follow. While the majority of the literature takes 9/11 as its point of departure in examining Christian views of Islam, I was more compelled to examine the spike in hate crimes targeting Muslims in 2016, which surpassed the levels immediately following 9/11. This intensified public hate towards Muslims is different than present day hostility that has been normalized and used as political platforms amongst groups of left-leaning individuals. As President Donald Trump began to grow in popularity among conservative Americans, so too did his coarse attitude and actions towards Muslims. Following 9/11, President George Bush experienced a significant rift between him and some of his conservative Christian supporters, who viewed him as a naive, politically correct dupe who “failed to appreciate the true nature of Islam” because they felt like he did not take a strict stance against Islam.[[23]](#footnote-23) Trump, on the other hand, saw an increase in his approval rating as he intensified his anti-Muslim rhetoric, polities, and actions.[[24]](#footnote-24) While anti-Muslim actions often loomed in the background of the public sphere, the Trump campaign and presidency normalized, and in some cases, encouraged an outright Islamophobic norm. From 2018 – 2020 I interviewed over 45 Muslim-identifying college students in order to see how the Trump presidency had impacted their sense of self and place in American society. While the majority of these students had experienced Islamophobia in some way in their early lives, it was evident that there has been a change in how they view their safety, belonging, and sense of self in the U.S. since 2016.

For many of my interviewees, the Chapel Hill shootings, where three Muslim students were murdered in their North Carolina apartment, brought the idea of violence much closer to home. Sana,[[25]](#footnote-25) a student from UNC, shared with me her feelings about that day: **“**I knew the victims personally, but had never experienced Islamophobia myself. That day changed everything and it is still hard for me to comprehend.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Similarly, in March 2019 the New Zealand attacks, where 51 people from two mosques were murdered, left these students recognizing, for one of the first times, that they might be in danger due to their religious orientation.[[27]](#footnote-27) In the attacker’s manifesto, he praised Trump for being a “symbol of renewed white identity and common purpose.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Although these attacks cannot be directly traced back to one individual, all 45 of these students agreed that the Trump presidency created a visceral shift in how people were treating them, particularly if they were visibly Muslim.[[29]](#footnote-29)[[30]](#footnote-30)

In 2020 Researchers Karsten Muller and Carlo Schwarz compared the number of Trump's tweets in a given week that used keywords related to Islam and the number of anti-Muslim hate crimes that followed.[[31]](#footnote-31) The data showed a rise in anti-Muslim crimes depending on how often Trump used Twitter to discuss the religion and how regularly that tweet was circulated and reported on the news. This data reveals the impact influential leaders’ online platforms have in motivating their followers into action. In addition to public hate speech, political acts such as Trump’s Executive Order 5680, which banned all travel and refugees from eight predominantly Muslim countries, have given the public comfort to blatantly discriminate Muslims in America. Anti-Muslim campaign rhetoric, Muslim bans, and professional Islamophobia networks now dominate the public sphere.[[32]](#footnote-32) Today attitudes surrounding Islam are less likely to be created by memories of 9/11 than by political rhetoric. Since the Trump presidency has ended, the overt taunts and acts of Islamophobia do not make weekly headline news and the Biden administration is actively seeking to uphold the U.S.’s legacy of religious freedom and expression. Despite these changes, the essence of xenophobia still persists throughout the public sphere.

Since Trump left office in 2020, Executive order 13769 has been revoked and the Biden administration is activity seeking to provide religious liberties and protection to Muslim-Americans. On his first day in office, Biden released a proclamation that the Muslim Ban was a “stain on our national conscience” and “inconsistent with our long history of welcoming people of all faiths and no faith at all.”[[33]](#footnote-33) In taking this action on day one, Biden made a point to highlight religious freedom as a top priority for his administration. The emphasis on religious tolerance is also seen in the decrease in hate crimes targeting Muslims from 2020 – 2021. In a report released by the FBI, 110 anti-Muslim incidents were reported, which is a 38 percent decrease from the previous year.[[34]](#footnote-34) As President Biden builds trust and peace across religious groups and non religious groups, we are all left to question where the influence of Muslim hatred comes from and how those voices are impacting the public and private lives of Muslims in the U.S. today.

**A Source of Hate**

“Not all Muslims are terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslim.” These were the words said to me by two staff members of Focus on the Family, a conservative, evangelical group based out of Colorado Springs, Colorado.[[35]](#footnote-35) Their Trump flag hung in the backyard as jokes about bombs and Allah filled the room. In this moment, I wondered how their ministry could allow them to speak hatred so openly and without any repercussions? Where do the roots of anti-Muslim sentiments stem? Who are the groups and/or individuals producing Islamophobic propaganda? and What impact do these groups and people have on American-Muslims as a whole? In this section I will highlight conversations with Focus on the Family staff members, analyze two Focus on the Family public documents, highlight of multiple sermons and talks from Shahram Hadian, Jerry Falwell, and John Piper and interpret a six-question survey.

James Dobson has been the leader of Focus on the Family since 1977. Since then, his franchise has surpassed an income of one billion dollars and has a consistent following of over 1.5 million people.[[36]](#footnote-36) Dobson is known for his far right politics and has often referred to Muslims as “dangerous.” In an interview with the Chicago *Tribune* in 2018, Dobson stated that even if the percentage of Muslims who want to harm non-Muslims is only 4 percent, it is still 48 million violent people. The crowd cheered as he stated, “We’re in a war, and it’s time that we recognize that.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Dobson expressed that he did not want his words to be manipulated—he was not saying *all* Muslims are violent, killers, or terrorists, but it *was* time we recognized that there is an issue with the religion. Rather than provide tools for his audience to understand how to determine if someone is violent or not, however, he evoked a fear of a war against Christians. This type of discrete framing of Islam as inherently dangerous to Christianity is also seen in media produced by Focus on the Family from 2006 – 2020.

Focus on the Family houses over 60 articles on its website pertaining to Islam. The earliest of these articles was posted in 2006 and titled, “Christian Compassion and the Muslim.”[[38]](#footnote-38) This article describes the need for Christians to preach their messaging of peace in “the region that poses the greatest threat to America and Western Civilization, the 1040 window.” The 1040 window is a term used to describe the regions of the eastern hemisphere, plus some parts of Europe and Africa, located between 10 and 40 degrees north of the equator. The author, a staff member at FotF, continues to detail his epiphany that “The very parts of this planet where people have never had the opportunity to hear the Good News and have the slightest idea of who Jesus Christ is, also happens to be where the terrorism and hatred that spawned 9-11 were birthed.” The author characterizes on efforts made to denounce terrorist attacks as “un-islamic” as false and seemingly blasphemous. He writes, “the perpetrators of the countless attacks we’ve seen in recent years have all carried out their deeds with one thing in common, they did it for Allah. In fact, many of their last words were, ‘Allah Akhbar,’ meaning ‘God is Great’”[[39]](#footnote-39) He continues on for ten more paragraphs explaining why Islam is a threat to the Western world because Muslims have never heard the “good news of Jesus.” In his conclusion, he challenges his audience to “look past the horrific occurrences in the Islamic world” and view it as “an opportunity to share the love of Jesus Christ.” The author’s motivation for this article is clear: Muslims are inherently dangerous and Christians must do something about it.

The most recent article posted on FocusontheFamily.org about Islam was in October 2020. “Islam and Christianity: Are They the Same?”, discusses the “slander” of Muslims since 9/11. The post highlights a question submitted by a community member that asks why people see Islam as wrong? He mentions his pleasant Muslim neighbors and his positive experiences with Muslims at his work. The author, a staff writer, starts by commending the friendship he has with his Muslim neighbor before offering a warning. He continues to write how distinct Muslims and Christians are and the history of distrust and dislike Muslims hold towards Christians. He highlights how Muslims view Christians as idolaters and condemn their recognition of Jesus as the Son of God. Before he concludes, he makes a point to condemn those who jump to the conclusion that their Muslim neighbors are “bomb-toting fanatics,” and encourages his readers to view them in light of their duty to preach the gospel. Similar to the article published in 2006, both authors make a point to highlight not *all* Muslims are terrorists, but nonetheless characterizing their religion and traditions as a threat to Christianity and Western society. When paired with sentiments of caution against the threats of Islam and the need for Christians to act quickly, the warnings against stereotypes and sweeping claims about the violence of Islam are not enough. In comparing these two articles written 14 years apart, it is clear that the teachings around Islam within Focus on the Family have not evolved and continue to paint a polarizing and politically charged view of Islam in the U.S.

Between 2006 and 2020, when these two articles were published, there were 176 reported instances of hate crime targeting Muslims in the U.S.[[40]](#footnote-40) While most instances go unreported, there were still 2,288 instances of anti-Muslims actions between the time the two articles mentioned above were published. Focus on the Family’s archives do not offer any mention or condemnation of these events even though they infringe on a person’s ability to practice their religion peacefully and freely, a value their organization cherishes for their own expression of religion. In three instructive interviews I conducted with employees at Focus on the Family, I found that their perception of their role within Muslim-Christian relations was clear: love them in order to convert them. Elizabeth, a retired accountant for the organization, explained that it was the job of the Christian to show them love, particularly to the women. “We see all the time how the Muslim faith treats their women,” she explained to me. “There’s a freedom in Christ that doesn’t make them cover themselves or be afraid for their lives.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Her sentiments regarding veiling reflect her own limited knowledge and understanding of the tradition while also belittling the practices of their religion. Her husband, a traveling spokesperson for the organization agreed. “I think there are some nice Muslim folks,” he said. “But, that doesn’t mean we can ignore the violence and hate their religion calls them to.”[[42]](#footnote-42) When asked if they felt like Focus on the Family has helped instruct their thinking towards Muslims they both said ‘yes,’ and referenced the resources their organization provided them with, including information from outside leaders.

Dobson makes a point to include other evangelical voices when discussing Islam in the West, including John Piper, an influential figure, Baptist pastor, and author who identifies as an evangelical. American Evangelical Christians come from a varied background socially, politically, theologically, and racially, making it even more notable when they are singularly united around issues such as this. In 2008 Piper wrote a blog post for Focus on the Family and marked his attitudes towards Christian-Muslim relations. He wrote, “They do not believe in the God we believe in. To talk in vague terms as though the love of God is a common standing place is to deceive, to be unclear at best. Jesus was clear; if you reject me you reject the one who sent me.”[[43]](#footnote-43) While it is impossible to measure the weight of his words on the larger evangelical community, Paper normalizes anti-Muslim rhetoric when speaking without consequence. In using the circular language that rules out the possibility of similarity or peaceful coexistence, Piper encourages his followers to avoid viewing Islam as a valid spiritual path. Piper’s critical religious rhetoric directly rejects any sort of interfaith dialogue. Although Piper’s words discourage the acceptance and tolerance of Islam, he does not incite hatred towards Muslims. Like Dobson, Piper’s words about Islam are not as politicized as the rhetoric of some other evangelical leaders. In contrast, American evangelical pastor Shahram Hadian, a Muslim convert to evangelical Christianity, has utilized his Muslim background to spread misinformation about Islam and capture the imagination of his growing evangelical followers.

In 2012 Hadian ran for governor in the state of Washington on a platform of “the rule of law” with regard to anything threatening “American values.”[[44]](#footnote-44) It became increasingly clear that the “threat to American values,” in his view, was Islam. He lost the election, but received 3% of the vote, which were almost 50,000 people. He has collected followers in his own ministry, Truth in Love (TIL), where his main focus is to share “the threats of Islam and the oppressive Shari‘ah law.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Hadian is rapidly increasing in popularity amongst the evangelical community and is currently on an U.S. tour. Hadian provides a window into the antagonistic attitudes some evangelicals are developing and spreading about Islam today.

Hadian’s organization and ministry group has published books, videos, and conferences designed to “educate” people on national security, supporting the nation of Israel, and protecting the U.S. constitution and the rule of law from application of foreign law (meaning sharia). His website claims that TIL’s “simple mission” is to speak the “Truth in Love” on critical issues affecting Washington state and the nation. Born in Iran to a Muslim family, Hadian now identifies as an evangelical American. He appeals to his audiences as someone who was “lost in the darkness of Islam”, who “saw the evil in the religion”, and who is now a preacher of “light and life.”[[46]](#footnote-46) He claims that his Muslim upbringing uniquely positions him as an expert for the thousands of followers who attend his conferences, webinars, and sermons. Because evangelicals seek to proselytize, the voice of a convert is highly valued and viewed as an essential element of their ministry. In a pre-Covid 19-world, Hadain traveled globally to deliver talks about the threat Islam posed on modern society. For many evangelical Christians, the notion of discussing other religions is looked down upon and potentially blasphemous, while the idea of spreading the Christian faith is glorified. Hadian reiterates the dangers of engaging with people of other religions, particularly Islam. In his talk, “Exposing the lie of Chrislam,” Hadian seeks to dismantle the uses of interfaith initiatives in the U.S., claiming that any type of interreligious discussions will cause Christians to distort their own faith and create distance from God. While Hadian presents the idea that interfaith initiatives are detrimental to the Christian faith, others argue that it is essential for mankind.

Dr. Ruhul Amin is a Muslim writer of religion with a predominately Christian audience and considers interfaith dialogue imperative to build peace and understanding in today’s ever-shrinking world.[[47]](#footnote-47) Amin explains interfaith work as an exercise of learning about other faiths that are different than your own—not making changes to either side, but rather developing a respectful coexistence between the two. In Hadian’s talk, ““Exposing the lie of Chrislam,” he warnshis online followers about the interfaith movement and the individuals who “blend or mix” faiths. He argues that the interfaith movement wants to join the Christian and Muslim traditions together, creating “Chrislam.” For many of his evangelical followers this will be the first time they have encountered any sort of information about interfaith dialogue. By blatantly misrepresenting the interfaith movement, which focuses on relations “between different religions or members of different religions,”[[48]](#footnote-48) Hadian builds an unsupported sense of fear and hatred of interfaith work. Perhaps the most destructive tool Hadian uses is the repetitive threat of Hell on his followers who may be in support of the interfaith movement. He states, “Anyone who says they are in support of interfaith… they can believe that, but they are not Christians.” He explains how these Christians should be “called out as what they are: heretics and liars.” At this point, even if his audience did disagree with his perspective of the interfaith movement, he has condemned their pursuit of knowledge as a direct dismissal of the Bible. Hadian uses fear, misinformation, and bullying to convince his evangelical audiences that seeking common ground with Muslims is “communicating with anti-Christs.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

Hadian typically speaks in vague language in his lessons on interfaith, but in his talk, “Exposing the Lie of Chrislam,” he blatantly demonizes the movement[[50]](#footnote-50) He claims that these groups try to “merge” Islam and Christianity by focusing on the similarities of the two. He proceeds to point at the camera and yell that “Allah” is not the Christian God and that even Arab Christians should not call God Allah (even though the Arabic translation of God is Allah). Hadian speaks about “Hub Communities,” which were created to help recognize community leaders and efficiently distribute medicine to those in the community, effectively enabling hundreds of communities in Mozambique to combat malaria. As of 2019 there are over 500 Hub Communities, now called Compassionate Communities that serve internationally in schools, healthcare centers, and homes.[[51]](#footnote-51) Hadian recognized the acts of many Christians in interfaith movements and simply stated that they had “gone astray.” He finished his talk with one final analogy. Matter-of-factly he states, “A bridge won’t work if one side is grounded on sinking sand or the pit of hell.”[[52]](#footnote-52)

Hadian’s talks are an example of the ways certain evangelical leaders spread misinformation about Islam for a variety of reasons. In hyperbolizing the dangers of Islam, Hadian and other evangelical leaders stabilize their own claim that Christianity is the only “Truth.” Beyond expanding anti-Islamic sentiments, they are arguing for a pro-Christian conversation that will benefit their communities and their own success and well-being. In speaking in exclusivist claims, Hadian has build a following that feels comforted by their membership and encouraged to grow their presence in the U.S. The effects of Hadian’s language can be seen in the actions of his followers, like Donald McKay, the pastor of a Michigan Baptist Church who proudly labels himself as an “Islamophobe.”

His church, Bloomfield Hills Baptist Church, has over 3,000 members and regularly hosts speakers about Islam. In September of 2020, McKay began publicizing an event titled: “9/11 Forgotten? Is Michigan Surrendering to Islam?” (See Appendix A). Hadian was the headlining speaker at the event. Although the Pastor eventually canceled this event, the organizing party, Detroit Coalition for Freedom, took to Facebook to get their messages across. Most of these posts have been removed, but an image of one reads, “Letting Muslims deceive you means you let hatred and danger into your homes. This is not American. This is not Christianity.”[[53]](#footnote-53) This post received over 3,000 likes. Although this is a small number typically found on a post of this type of rhetoric, the data is important in relation to the size of the town in which the event was being hosted. When compared with the population of the town, 53 percent of the populating liked this message, revealing just how wide spread this message had become. To better understand the scale in which these individuals support anti-Muslim rhetoric and actions, I conducted a six-question survey sent out to those who liked this Facebook event. While over 3,000 individuals liked this message on Facebook, only 37 responded to my survey.

Is Islam a threat to our country? How should Christian’s interact with Islam? Do you know a Muslim? These are a few of the questions asked in my survey for those following the Bloomfield Hills Baptist Church event. Out of the 37 participants, 25 responded that Muslims are a threat to our country while 26 out of the 37 responded that using “any means necessary” was the solution to ending the rise of Islam globally. When asked if they knew a Muslim, five selected “not very well,” while all the others participants selected “never met one.” While only 37 people completed my survey, this still represents three-dozen people who feel comfortable expressing their distrust and contempt with Islam to an anonymous source. The distance from the individual paired with a hatred of the religion drives people to either condone or resist their rejections of public hate. While this public hate may seem harmless in the vain of free speech, these words normalize violence and further marginalize Muslims to a point where they do not seem worthy of defending or protecting. The misinformation presented by Hadian and his supporting churches and organizations prevents people from acting against hate crimes.

Elfenbein writes that public hate may not lead people to say or do terrible things themselves, but it will prevent them from speaking up when they hear or see something that goes against ideals they would otherwise consider important.[[54]](#footnote-54) The issue we face between Muslim and evangelicals is not solely disagreement, but also the uncertainty of physical safety for Muslims who have become wide scale targets of one of the largest religious groups in the U.S. Elfenbein identifies this type of public hate as today’s greatest threat to American public life because it makes it difficult, if not impossible, for certain minority communities, like Muslims, to participate in our life together.[[55]](#footnote-55) In a research study involving 40 evangelical church members, Researcher Amit A. Bhatia, found that most American evangelicals lumped all Muslims and Islam into a broad category of “evil.”[[56]](#footnote-56) Although they knew some of the principles of the religion, such as the fact that Islam is monotheistic and practices prayer, most of the respondents reported feelings of mistrust, fear, and suspicion of Muslims. Of the 40 sampled, 15 of them agreed that “Muslims have an agenda against America,” “they are scary,” and “they want to convert the whole world to Islam or kill them.”[[57]](#footnote-57) As demonstrated in this study of Focus on the Family, Piper, and Hadian, these responses reflect the attitudes many evangelical leaders hold towards Muslims, which are either explicitly preached to their congregations, or portrayed through subtle messaging. In the case of Hadian, his messaging is clear to his followers: Islam is evil and all citizens should actively fight to eradicate the tradition. In the case of Dobson or Piper, their messaging is less violent, but still categorized Islam as inherently dangerous and incompatible with Christianity. While influential evangelical leaders have the potential to strengthen anti-Muslim beliefs, they still have followers who do not feel motivated or inclined to speak out against Islam, and lean towards apathy, while still some seek to build better connections across religions.

While the majority of my evangelical participants disclosed their suspicion of Islam, some of my interviewees from Focus on the Family discussed their indifference towards the religion. One woman explained, “I never heard anything about Islam while doing Focus on the Family Bible studies and courses. It might have been there, but it was never a part of my family’s discussions or focus.”[[58]](#footnote-58) Her perspective provides a relevant and important counter voice of my study: not all evangelicals taking part in these ministries hold anti-Muslims perspectives and some evangelicals are working toward building better relations with their Muslim neighbors. Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, for example, has developed an online journal titled *Voices of Interfaith Dialogue*[[59]](#footnote-59)where evangelical leaders, educators, and practitioners can discuss their experiences with interfaith dialogue in their communities. Calvin University, a private evangelical school in Grand Rapids, Michigan, followed suit in developing a series of articles in 2019 titled “Listening to New Voices.” These articles detail Muslims on their campus and in their community.[[60]](#footnote-60) The organization Neighborly Faith (NF) is another example of evangelical efforts in creating interfaith dialogue. With the aim of bringing evangelical Christian and Muslim students together, NF hosts a podcast, campus ministry opportunities, and conferences.[[61]](#footnote-61) In recognizing the efforts of some on-the-ground evangelicals, it is evident that not all evangelical Christians subscribe to Islamophobia.

**Conclusion**

For many Muslims in the U.S., their lives have been framed by the fear of violence, hate speech, and discrimination due to their religious orientation. While the prevalence of crimes committed by Muslims is on the decline, instances of anti-Muslim violence are at an all time high. Platforms such as Focus on the Family and Truth in Love have captivated their audiences with misinformation surrounding Islam and the threat it poses to American society. Hadian’s books, sermons, and speaking tours reveal the way this type of public hatred is accepted and growing within many evangelical churches. His work has led to direct action from his followers, as evident with Donald McKay’s anti-Muslim speaker series. Conversely, Focus on the Family has influenced the perceptions of Muslims that might not lead to anti-Muslim action, but do influence people’s politics, social engagement, and overall willingness to step in if they see violence targeting Muslims. After witnessing the impacts of evangelical ministries on the attitudes and everyday lives of Focus on the Family employees, it is more evident to me how dangerous these leaders can be in cultivating environments of distrust and prejudice towards Muslims.

My 45 in-depth interviews with college-aged Muslims in the U.S. helped uncover the attitudes Muslims hold towards the roots of Islamophobia in the U.S., while my conversations with Focus on the Family staff members and my survey sent to Hadian’s followers provided a window into the views evangelical Christians hold towards Islam. It was evident from these methods and the texts from Focus of the Family and the talks by Hadian that there is a clear danger of Islamophobic misinformation being spread by influential evangelical leaders*.* Although some evangelical Christians were motivated to start their own anti-Muslim movements, there was a variety of ways evangelicals have engaged (or not) with Islam. This study revealed the over-arching themes of presumed superiority of Christianity and the threat of Islam to Western values, which jeopardized the development of long-term Christian-Muslim relations. These values have striking parallels to the preaching of early American theologians Jonathan Edwards and John Leland who continually defamed Mohammad as a means to strengthen their case for Christianity and whose teachings paved the way for contemporary American evangelicalism. While this work sheds light on the dangers of evangelical perspectives of Islam and its impact on interfaith efforts, it is important to analyze the limitations and mention needed next steps.

A wider scope of evangelical groups and perspectives needs to be considered in order to better understand and combat anti-Muslim sentiments. Additional information on the motivations for religious hate crimes targeting Muslims is also essential in decreasing their occurrences in the U.S, because these cannot all easily be traced back to evangelical rhetoric. Finally, it is essential for evangelical Christians to continue to educate themselves on the history of Muslim-Christian relations, the traditions of Islam, and the impact their communities are having on this people group. For further reading on Christian-Muslims relations, please visit my annotated bibliography at marjoriefoster.org.

**Appendix A**

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Examining Muslim-Christian Relations in the U.S. Past and Present

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Literature Review

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**Introduction**

With over 310 religious traditions, many Americans’ social, spiritual, and cultural lives are extremely distant from their neighbors.[[62]](#footnote-62) In many cases, the notion of getting to know your neighbor of a different faith has been looked down upon, particularly in evangelical Christian communities. Because there is a central value of proselytizing within the evangelical community, interfaith relationships are often seen as unproductive and compromising to their own belief system. This view of interfaith encounters is particularly evident in regards to Christian views of Islam because the two seek to spread their message and grow their following. In his book, *Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity & The Myth of the American Promise,* Author Eboo Patel writes, “Religious pluralism is neither mere coexistence nor forced consensus.” He continues, “It is a form of proactive cooperation that affirms the identity of the constituent communities while emphasizing that the well being of each and all depends on the health of the whole. … It is the belief that the common good is best served when each community has a chance to make its unique contribution.”[[63]](#footnote-63) Patel highlights the essential nature of interfaith coordination in the development of healthy communities, a goal that has been threatened with the rise in hate crimes targeting Muslims and those perceived as Muslim in the U.S.

Interfaith cooperation can create an environment where differences are seen as strength, and not as threats, where people who belong to minority groups are not afraid to be active contributors to society, and where anger, hatred, and fear will be replaced with understanding, patience, and empathy. The current literature focused particularly on Muslim-Christian relations is essential in understanding the ways educators, authors, religious figures, and lay people successfully create and sustain interfaith movements that build peaceful coexistence between religions. Literature on the history of Muslim-Christian relations is imperative in providing a historical lens on the two traditions, revealing the deeply rooted and complex relationship they share. The texts reviewed in this paper provide hope and a positive perspective where the dominant narratives are often defeating and hopeless. I will first review books on the history of the two Abrahamic religions, then discuss the literature surrounding the experiences of Muslims in the United States, and finally highlight the texts focusing on successful interfaith initiatives. My aim in this literature review is to note the scholarly contributions and gaps in the field of interfaith studies while also assessing how helpful the existing literature is for readers who want to engage more actively in Christian-Muslim relations, and interfaith work in general.

**Muslim-Christian History**

The relationship between Islam and Christianity began in the Middle East in the 7th century. Having now existed in every corner of the globe, these two traditions have shifted their balance of power and have started wars, while also having lived peacefully and successfully amongst one another. In the section below, I consider how the work of Hugh Goddard, Thomas Kidd, and Kristin Kobes du Mez provide a timeline of events of Muslims-Christian relation from their earliest encounters to their modern day interactions. The history of these traditions informs present day Christian-Muslims relations. In recognizing their complex histories, the path to harmony and acceptance becomes more informed, creating sustainability for their peaceful coexistence.

Hugh Goddard’s *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* guides readers through a longstanding relationship between Christianity and Islam.[[64]](#footnote-64) Goddard’s monograph takes a historical approach in arguing that the balance of power between Muslims and Christians has shifted throughout history, prompting a variety of responses and reactions of each side. This chronological account of Christian- Muslim interactions serves as an introduction for Western readers from a Western perspective. From the first Muslim-Christian interactions in the medieval period to contemporary Muslim-Christian relations, Goddard depicts the ebbs and flows of power and control. This nine-part book chronologically marks the coming of Islam into the “Christian world,” the Prophet Muhammad’s encounters with Christians, and the most significant periods of Muslim-Christian relations. While examining the medieval period, the late fifteenth century, and finally the 19th-21st centuries, Goddard paints a detailed picture of the deeply intertwined history of Muslims and Christians around the globe. This book strives to reveal how the historic landscape of Muslim-Christian relations impacts the shift of culture, trade, and religious control as the pendulum of power shifted between the two traditions throughout history and around the world.

The author achieves this goal in his account of the historical encounters of the traditions and how they move into political, economic and personal lives. Goddard concludes his book focusing on modern confrontational approaches between the two traditions. He complicates the relationship Muslims and the rest of the world hold, particularly due to fear. His work is unique in the way he provides an adamantly historical outlook and strong relationship to scholars on both side. While some texts provide sources only from a Christian or Muslim perspective, Goddard provides representation from both in every chapter. While Goddard provided the needed historical points, he lacked any consideration of theological difference between the religions. In adding this insight, the reader would have gained a thicker description of Christian-Muslim conflicts. Thomas S. Kidd, on the other hand, takes a more focused approach to the history of Muslim-Christian relations by examining evangelical culture and Muslims in the U.S. from the colonial period to the “age of terrorism” (Post 9/11).[[65]](#footnote-65)

Kidd presents a long and tumultuous history of evangelical Christians viewing Muslims as potential converts and global threats.[[66]](#footnote-66) His work of intellectual history considers American Christian writings about Islam and Muslims from the late seventeenth century to the years following the attacks of September 11th. Although 9/11 brought national attention to the conflict between Muslims and Christians in the West, Kidd argues that anti-Muslim sentiments have been present since the nation’s founding. He features figures such as Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, Billy Graham, and Pat Robinson, as well as a host of others in between. Kidd’s central argument is that although Americans’ interest in Islam has intensified since 2001, the views and interpretations of Islam are not substantially new. He highlights American theologian Jonathan Edwards and his sentiments that Islam and Roman Catholicism, were “two great kingdoms which the devil erected in opposition to the kingdom of Christ.”[[67]](#footnote-67) In surveying a spectrum of American Christian and evangelical perspectives of Islam across three centuries, Kidd successfully presents perspectives evangelical Christians have held towards Islam. Kidd’s training in American religious history provides the reader with a well-rounded view of how modern-day American Christians hold the views they do surrounding Islam.

*American Christianity and Islam* uniquely focuses on the history of Islam and Christianity in the West, while the majority of historical texts provide a history of the Middle East. This focus on Western histories is particularly helpful in understanding the relationship of Islam and Christianity in the U.S. today. Where Goddard uses a global landscape to describe the two traditions, Kidd takes a more nuanced look into how and why tension arises between the two in the west. While Goddard takes a non-bias approach to the topic, Kidd expresses some sympathy for American evangelical approaches to Muslims. It is evident that this text is not a product of secular Middle East and Islamic studies, but has a Christian-centered account. With this perspective Kidd successfully draws in a wide spectrum of American Christian and evangelical thoughts, allowing the reader to gain a wider perspective of Christian thinking towards Muslims. In working with majority Christian audiences, this text would allow readers to see themselves in the study, making Christian-Muslim engagement more appealing and less foreign. Where Goddard provides a detailed historical map of the two traditions, Kidd sets the stage for contemporary practices and approaches to interfaith work. Kristin Kobes Du Mez’s *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* builds off of Kidd’s introduction of Western Christina-Muslim relations with a detailed account of the political and social legacy of conservative evangelical Christianity on Christian-Muslim relations.

*Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* focuses entirely on Christian evangelicals and how they have utilized fear to perpetrate false images and ideas surrounding Islam in the U.S.[[68]](#footnote-68) Du Mez takes a critical look at how white evangelicals have redefined the principals of Christianity with the characteristics of masculine power. She writes how the “moral majority”[[69]](#footnote-69) have shifted their focus on patriarchy, authoritarian rule, aggressive foreign policy, fear of Islam, ambivalence toward #MeToo, and the opposition of black Lives Matter and the LGBTQ+ community.[[70]](#footnote-70) Du Mez continues on with Kidd’s history of evangelical attitudes toward Islam through a modern lens. She provides a detailed look into how evangelical leaders impact U.S. politics; depicting how anti-Muslim policies and laws have been able to pass with limited push back from the American public. Her book reveals a new wave of militant Christianity and how it has impacted the country, the election of Donald Trump, and the growing xenophobia in the U.S. In explaining this new appeal to evangelicals, Du Mez successfully presents the tactics used to target and discriminate against Muslims in the U.S. In bringing in the voices of present day evangelical leaders such as Jack Hyles, Jerry Falwell, and Mark Discoll, *Jesus and John Wayne* provides a present-day approach to how evangelical leaders have shifted the politics of the U.S. to embody Islamophobic sentiments. Because most other texts address the wider histories of Christian-Muslim interaction, her work fills a gap in the understanding of how public views of Islam have continued to be negative today and how that is often accepted in the American public sphere.

**Muslim Experiences in the U.S.**

The lives of older generations of Muslims in the U.S. were drastically altered after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. In post-9/11 America, the rhetoric surrounding Islam has been polarizing and fear inducing with media, scholars, and political leaders calling Islam “inherently terroristic” and “violent and supremacist.”[[71]](#footnote-71) Being Muslim in the early 2000s meant constant tracking, targeting, and, sometimes, unlawful arrests.[[72]](#footnote-72) For many, the so-called “War on Terror” felt like a war on all of Islam. Following the 2016 presidential campaign certain forms of Islamophobia—as evidenced by increased hate speech, anti-immigration policies, and hate crimes against Muslims—have intensified.[[73]](#footnote-73) Events like these have become more visible and seemingly even publicly acceptable since the election of Trump, who, in his first week in office, enacted Executive Order 5680, which banned all travel and refugees from eight predominantly Muslim countries. For many Muslims, this was the moment they realized that this presidency would have a dramatic impact on their lives. Authors Moustafa Bayoumi, Muna Ali, Shabana Mir, Caleb Elfenbein, and Todd Green have crafted personal stories and heavily researched texts that acknowledge the impact Islamophia has had on unique populations in the U.S. These texts, examined below, allow their readers to build empathy and shed light on the unnecessary hardships Muslims face due to their religious orientation.

In his book, *How Does It Feel To Be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America,[[74]](#footnote-74)* Moustafa Bayoumi creates a work that embodies the experiences of Muslim immigrants in the U.S. In this collection of vignettes, Bayoumi moves beyond the clichés that follow Arab communities to shedding light on often unseen struggles such as workplace discrimination, increased government surveillance, generational divides within families, bullying in schools, the pressures to succeed, and the strengthening of an immigrant community in the face of hardship. In utilizing his own Arab and Muslim decent, Bayoumi poignantly portrays young people coming of age at time when “informants and spies are regular topics of conversation… friendships are tested, trust disappears.”[[75]](#footnote-75) In one story, a student wrote about her family being incarcerated after being reported for “suspicious activity.”[[76]](#footnote-76) While previous suspects could only be detained for 24 hours, this process shifted after 9/11 such that once a tip was reported, suspects could be held until the case was closed, which could be months. In this individual case, this family was held for 3 months, with no idea of when they would be released. Eventually, this family was found innocent. In utilizing these first-hand accounts of maltreatment, Bayoumi shows not just how Muslims felt, but also the actual mechanics of legal and systemic discrimination against them. Bayoumi successfully creates a platform where Arab immigrants of all ages are able to illuminate their status in the U.S. While his book provided insight into some experiences of Arabs in the U.S., Bayoumi offers a limited perspective of what it looks and feels like to be Muslim in the U.S. In limiting his study to solely Arab Muslims, he is limiting the multilayer and multiracial realities of being Muslim in the U.S. In expanding the voices present in the book, the audience would receive a more encompassing view of life in the U.S. as a Muslim immigrant.

Similar to Bayoumi’s first hand accounts; Muslim American ethnographer Muna Ali provides a look into the lives of Muslim youth. *Young Muslim America: Faith, Community and Belonging* is an informed, current account of the lives of Muslim youth in the U.S. Ali begins by presenting a detailed account of the divergent origins and converging histories surrounding Muslims in the U.S., then examines three major narratives important to Muslim youth. The concept of the “identity crisis” from balancing home life and societal influences, the need to recover “pure/true” Islam from cultural contamination, and saving America from cultural takeover by Islam and Muslims has framed the experiences of Ali’s interviewees.[[77]](#footnote-77) Ali discusses what it would look to craft an American Muslim society and the internal conflict that Muslims must overcome before they can claim their space and continue to contribute to greater society. It was evident that Ali was close to the ground and prioritized attention to detail and gathering a wide range of views and opinions. *Young Muslim America: Faith, Community and Belonging* is a great source for current and relevant information on the struggles and success younger Muslims face in the U.S. Ali successfully balances political perspective, social life, cultural implications and religious traditions.

Shabana Mir’s *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity[[78]](#footnote-78)* continues the theme of examining the personal lives of Muslim youth in the U.S. Her powerful ethnographic study of women in Washington, D.C., reveals the double scrutiny Muslim women face—from the Muslim community as well as from the non-Muslim majority. These conversations show the scrutiny Muslim women face from their American influences and their Muslim communities. This scrutiny seeps into every aspect of their lives from dress, food, social, and romantic relationships. Mir’s focus on everyday tensions helps deepen the connections between the reader and the women in her book, letting the personality of each interviewee come alive. Mir highlights the areas where these women struggle with fitting in, finding their space, and resisting total assimilation as a result of minimal community or university support. In her closing, Mir exposes the barriers that still exist in universities for religious minority communities and the growing such institutions must do in order to support religious diversity on college campuses. While her book provides a comprehensive view of some Muslim women’s experiences in college, her research leaves out those who might be culturally Muslim, but are not active participants in the tradition on their college campuses. Because being classified as Muslim can have social or physical dangers, many students do not attend Muslim student groups or communal prayer, but their perspectives and opinions are still crucial to include in order to better understand this people group.

*Fear in Our Hearts: What Islamophobia Tells Us About America* addresses what fear does to American Muslims and America as a whole.[[79]](#footnote-79) Caleb Elfenbein’s examines the established anti-Muslim hostility in American history and how it has become normalized in political, social, and educational settings. His background in history and religious studies position him as an expert in the field of Christian-Muslim relations in the U.S. Elfenbein presents the case that Islamophobia has grown in influence and significance over the past decades. He uses national survey data to describe how Islamophobia undermines the U.S.’s professed commitments to equality and tolerance and how that impacts individuals and Muslim communities. Elfenbein seeks to reveal the discrepancy between a general commitment to equality and tolerance and the persistent and growing anti-Muslim sentiments. He recognizes the natural response of fear when threatened, but makes a point to highlight the corrosive effects of how public hate has encouraged and exaggerated the *idea* of Islam. Elfenbein argues that although public hate may not lead people to say or do terrible things (although it certainly could), it does decrease the likelihood that someone will speak up when they hear something happening to a people group they would have, at one point, defended.[[80]](#footnote-80) While Elfenbein presents many examples of public hate and its impact on Muslims, he also makes a point to highlight the positive support Muslim Americans have received over the years. In using his quantitative data on Muslim targeted hate crimes, Elfenbein effectively shows the gulf between American ideals and reality, arguing that public hate makes it virtually impossible for marginalized groups to be active participants in public discourse or civic society. In taking his argument beyond 9/11 to a perceived fear of the other, Elfenbein illustrates the challenges to contemporary interfaith movements. *Fear in Our Hearts: What Islamophobia Tells Us About America* is a great book for those interested in the history of Islamophobia in the U.S., and those interested in minority communities in general. Where Elfenbein seeks to define public hate, Todd Green’s *Presumed Guilty* uses terrorism as his focal point in describing Christian-Muslim relations.

In *Presumed Guilty*, Green provides a definition of terrorism along with the motivations, which, he argues, are not just religiously motivated. [[81]](#footnote-81) He debunks misinformation surrounding Islam and its links to terrorism. His most notable statistic is that of all the suicide attacks that occurred between 1980 and 2003, 95 percent of them had one thing in common, and it was not Islam or even religion, but rather foreign military occupation. He successfully argues that many terrorists who claim Islam as their motivation rarely have a basic understanding of Islam and debunks the perceived link between Islam and terrorism. Green offers three compelling reasons why we should stop asking Muslims to condemn terrorism; it wrongly assumes Islam is the driving force behind terrorism, it ignores the many ways Muslims already condemn terrorism, and it diverts attention from unjust Western violence. Green’s work is a valuable asset in confronting stereotypes surrounding Islam and revealing the current misinformation held by a large portion of the public. It leads the reader to wonder how and if better relationships can be built across religious differences. Because Green prompts the reader into self-examination, this text is a crucial resource in building Christian-Muslim relationships from an individual-first perspective.

**Wider Interfaith Relations**

Deana Womack, Barbara Brown Taylor, and Eboo Patel are some of the many interfaith leaders in the U.S. These professors, authors, religious figures, and community leaders believe that the differences between people strengthen our country and our world. Their work encourages the building of bridges that allow us to share life together. A statement written by Interfaith Youth Core, a group founded by Eboo Patel, notes that interfaith work is the key to transforming our society into a more just, kind, and pluralistic nation.[[82]](#footnote-82) Although not all the books below focus entirely on Christian-Muslim relations, their ethos of compassion, care, and commitment to learning about those of differences are beneficial in the conversation surrounding Muslims and Christian engagement. Each of these authors commits to not only writing about interfaith work in the U.S., but also providing tools for others to become active contributors to the conversation. Their works are applicable and practical and allow their reader the opportunity to see inside successful interfaith initiatives.

Deanna Womack’s *Neighbors: Christians and Muslims Building Communit*y aims to build a better future for Christian-Muslim relations in the United States through educating American Christians about their Muslim neighbors.[[83]](#footnote-83) *Neighbors* directly address Christian congregations and individual Christians who seek to create fruitful engagement with people of other faith traditions. Womack pairs the history of the traditions with the everyday experiences to build a substantive and accessible resource for Christians and Muslims in America. Womack argues that, if American Muslims and Christians do not work towards mutual understanding, each side will continue to grow in fear, distrust, and division.[[84]](#footnote-84) With the help of Christian pastors, Muslim dialogue partners, and other friends and colleagues, Womack creates a manuscript that reflects the historical relationship between the two major religious groups—first in the Middle East, then in the United States—and demonstrates how to cultivate religiously diverse communities, interfaith awareness, and empathy towards Muslims. With the rise in hate crimes targeting Muslims and other visible religious people groups (i.e., Sikhs),[[85]](#footnote-85) Womack’s text is timely and serves as a critical guide in reconstructing the ways Christians view Islam. Womack successfully creates a case for why this work is essential by appealing to the Christian principals of compassion and empathy,[[86]](#footnote-86) the American ideal of plurality,[[87]](#footnote-87) and the threats American Muslims face with the rise in misinformation about Islam.[[88]](#footnote-88) She highlights the need for personal conviction to change Muslim-Christian relations. By starting each chapter with personal questions for the reader, Womack’s book moves beyond information to personal transformation. In an academic field that is inundated with information about Islamophobia and its impact on American Muslims, Womack contributes a work that prompts introspection and change within her readers.

*My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation* is an edited volume about the impact of interfaith dialogue, study, and action from the voices of religious educators, community leaders, and activists.[[89]](#footnote-89) *My Neighbor’s Faith* grew out of a national conference on interfaith education in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim seminaries in the U.S. in 2010. This collection of 53 essays reflects on moments of realization, appreciation, and acceptance of different religious traditions. These moments arose in backpacking trips, academic conferences, hospital chapels, and taxi rides. Broken into seven sections, the editors seek to present diverse interfaith encounters, shifting perspectives of personal traditions, and models of repairing our world. In a modern world filled with news of religious adherents fighting over land, culture, or truth claims, this book sheds a bright, hopeful light on the possibility of transformative interreligious encounters. By including narratives where people grapple with their own traditions, the authors provide a rich counter narrative to those who assert ultimate truth found exclusively in their religious tradition. As the audience reads about Christians converting to Hinduism and Muslims converting to Christianity, the authors complicate preconceived notions of their own traditions and the traditions of others. Jennifer Peace, Or N. Peace, and Gregory Mobley’s work is a valuable asset to those studying interfaith relations and the ways in which stereotypes are challenged, narratives are shifted, and mutual understanding is achieved. Although this book successfully presents the complexities of interfaith encounters, there is a limited perspective of interactions. Educated, religiously inclined individuals wrote most of the essays. An ethos of open-mindedness was likely already present in the lives of these authors, creating an unrealistic scenario of the establishment of peace between traditions. In a time where religious extremism, intolerance, and hate-crimes are forefront global concerns, I was surprised to not find any stories of how peace could be found where it is needed most.

*Holy Envy* describes Barbara Brown Taylor’s journey from Episcopalian priest to world religions professor. Originally designed to be a book about how her course would change the lives of students, Taylor discovers her own spiritual transformation. While examining her own tradition alongside other major traditions, Christianity begins to lose its appeal. In teaching the traditions of the world, Taylor recognizes the harm in her religion’s exclusivist claims for the first time, prompting her to reevaluate her commitment to the faith. In the first chapter of her book, she tries to convince her students *why* Christians should study world religions, a point she seeks to build on throughout her book. Her work is reflective and raw, allowing the reader to gain insight into the variety of perspectives Christian hold regarding world religions. Her words serve as a guide into the world of teaching world religions while wrestling with personal convictions and orientations around Christianity. In positing her narratives in a conservative Christian college, her anecdotes about students are relatable to Christian readers. In a field where interfaith work is often written about from an academic or systemic lens, her personal reflections and the reflections of her students allow her readers the opportunity to see the benefits of an ecumenical and interfaith education, which is a major step in building successful interfaith relationships and systems. Her work provides an unique and niche view of interfaith work and proves to be invaluable when examining Christian-Muslim relations.

Eboo Patel’s *Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity & The American Promise* examines America’s attitudes towards partisanship, racism, and prejudice, with particular focus on the Muslim experience. Patel argues that interfaith is necessary for peace and it is written into the fabric of U.S. history. In focusing on Islam in America, Patel successfully provides a window into broader themes about America and religious diversity. In highlighting a vision of pluralism in the U.S. Patel successfully presents a system that guards against religious preference, advances everyday ethics, and encourages wide spread support of civic participation. Throughout his book he provides rich anecdotes to his own interfaith engagement, allowing the readers to see how this moment is possible and attainable. Patel’s text ends with incisive commentaries by John Inazu, Robert Jones, and Laurie Patton—all perspectives that challenge Patel’s ideas. These perspectives helped strengthen Patel’s argument because he demonstrates first hand how differing opinions are beneficial in creating common good. Where a majority of the texts reviewed where from a secular or Christian view, Patel’s work provides the needed viewpoint of a Muslim American.

**Conclusion**

The texts reviewed reveal that the history of Christian-Muslim relationships was steeped in fear, distrust, and tension between the two groups. The historical narratives provided by Goddard, Kidd, and Du Mez allow their readers to understand the roots Muslims and Christians hold, creating a sustainable foundation for present day encounters. The use of personal stories and quantitative data to express the experiences of Muslims in the U.S. today is essential to the field of interfaith studies. Authors such as Ali, Bayoumi, Mir, Elfenbein, and Todd collectively create an academic and interfaith network that provides a window into the lived experiences of Muslims in order to build understanding, empathy, and conviction to change. Without their perspectives, the incentive to initiate interfaith encounters would be stunted. Finally, the first hand encounters of interfaith engagement through the voices of Patel, Taylor, Peace et al., and Womack provide tangible examples of what this work looks like within society.

While many of the authors reviewed above describe the current status of tension and disconnect, only a few highlight the ways interfaith work helps re-shape inter-religious relationships. In order to build the type of religiously pluralistic society that Patel describes, it is essential for the field of Christian-Muslim relations to continue to provide more practical tools and assessment models for successful encounters and interactions between religious groups. With an increase in qualitative and quantities studies, the legitimacy of interfaith movements would be more widely accepted and appreciated. In strengthening the case for interfaith encounters, schools, work places, and spaces of worship would be encouraged to educate their community members and leaders. As the field of Christian-Muslim relations and interfaith studies continues to emerge in every sphere of society, the need to expand the narratives, experiences, and perspectives will become paramount to the success of its influence in American political and social lives.

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This link will take you to my public-facing annotated bibliography:

<https://www.marjoriefoster.org/public-theology-project>

Discovering the Path to Chaplaincy

Marjorie Anne Foster

Professional Development Reflection

March 30th, 2022

In Winnifred Fallers Sullivan’s book, *A Ministry of Presence*,[[90]](#footnote-90) he calls chaplaincy “religion stripped to the basics…. Without code, cult, or community. Religion for a state of uncertainty.”[[91]](#footnote-91) She continues to call it the “Ministry of Presence.” My perspective about chaplaincy has changed drastically over the course of the year, primarily through this realization: chaplaincy is about meeting people where they are. Sullivan’s words opened my eyes to the appeal of chaplaincy as a profession that takes a step away from traditional religion and into the spiritual practices that help individuals heal and grow. Having never known what the profession was, or what it was called, the course “Introduction to Chaplaincy” (CHP 501), my own personal studies, and a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) have revealed to me the ways chaplaincy addresses the human person in a “very basic, almost naively pre-cultural way.”[[92]](#footnote-92)

Kate Braestrup’s *Here if You Need Me[[93]](#footnote-93)* provided a detailed, personal look into the approaches of chaplaincy when she described her role as “showing up, shutting up, and being.”[[94]](#footnote-94) As she continues to detail her role as the minister on search and rescue missions in the woods of Maine, it becomes clear that Braestrup was following a theology of human care and kindness, becoming whatever the person in front of her needed her to be. In reading this personal narrative of chaplaincy, I was relieved and inspired to learn about the ways that chaplains serve people, not an organization, leaving more room for interpretation and unconditional care than I had originally imagined. This realization was strengthened during CHP 501 when we were able to learn about the history of the profession, speak with chaplains of all disciplines, and dive into texts such as Braestrup’s. The greatest take-away from that course was seeing how chaplains from all contexts—military, hospice, hospital, university, corporate and more—all were able to bring their own perspectives and gifts into their role. It became clear that chaplaincy as a profession was about how an individual can use their gifts and knowledge to help as many people in their context as they possibly could.

I had never seriously considered chaplaincy as a profession until I read a report by Gary Gunderson and Larry Pray about fulfilling spiritual connections and the reduced rate of early death.[[95]](#footnote-95) In their book *Leading Causes of Life,* Gunderson and Pray outline the importance of connection, coherence, action, blessings, and hope in creating and sustaining a healthy life. In a study involving over 300,000 interviewees, they revealed that those with fulfilling social connections had a 50% reduced risk of early death.[[96]](#footnote-96) The majority of these “fulfilling social connections” were found in religious spaces and settings. Although I had experienced the life-changing impact of chaplains, reading the data further validated to my desire to go into the field. Every speaker who came to CHP 501 spoke to the ways research provides chaplains with tangible evidence of their progress, further creating their own job security in system that might not often value their role. One speaker in particular, Reverend Johnson Michael Betz, spoke to the ways conducting research proves to outside employers and onlookers that chaplains are not just “expensive placebos.”[[97]](#footnote-97) I appreciated his honesty and his hands-on approaches to how to use our own interests to conduct academically sound research. The commitment to seeking spiritual cares resources for all people and the idea of sharing this information to all motivated me to undertake a unit of CPE during the Spring 2022 semester.

For my CPE unit I worked with the Training and Counseling Center (TACC) in downtown Atlanta. During this time I spent five days a week with Church of the Common Ground, a “church without walls” that seeks to support the spiritual needs of women, men, and youth who live on the margins of the city. Most of the congregants have or are currently experiencing homelessness. In meeting with congregants my heart would break as they told their life stories. Histories of loss, desperation, separation, and isolation filled the air between us. It was evident that they didn’t need answers or more religious rhetoric. I was convicted daily to help them discover, what I call, their “sparkle.” While processing a difficult week, my CPE advisor asked me how I believed God saw these people. I responded that God was probably sad about their situations and how their neighbors had seemingly forgot them. The air hung heavy as she asked me again, “but how do you think God sees *them?”* In that moment I realized God probably saw their individual beauty; the parts of themselves that made them stand out and made them uniquely sparkle in God’s love. Upon this realization the profession of chaplaincy clicked for me and felt like my own niche of ministry away from proselytizing and into helping people find, embrace, and radically love their God-given individuality.

While explaining his role in sports ministry, UNC Football Chaplain Mitch Mason explained his work as “meandering with intent.”[[98]](#footnote-98) This perfectly describes what I feel like is my own call to chaplaincy: to arrive in places where crisis is present and be a source of life, a listening ear, or a person to cry (or laugh) alongside. In taking CHP 501 I was able to learn from some of the most impressive chaplains in the field while learning alongside those who are the future of spiritual care in the U.S. In undertaking my own studies of the profession I have watched as God has slowly revealed the importance of this field and my own interest in caring for those on the margins of society. And finally, my time with the Church of the Common Ground has given me hands on experience caring for and tending to those who often go overlooked and ignored.

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