MEETING *Islam*

A Guide for Christians

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Quotations from the Qur'an are translated by the author.

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Introduction

◆ Meeting Islam ◆

This book, like many introductions, is "about" Islam. That is, it seeks to impart basic information about Islam to an audience that is assumed to know little if anything about the subject. Or to put it another way: You will find many of the elements of what is sometimes referred to as "Islam 101" in *Meeting Islam: A Guide for Christians*.

But *Meeting Islam* is different in that it doesn't presume to be imparting this basic information in a neutral way (though I would argue that any claim to have a neutral view of anything is a chimera).

The book insists instead that this imparting of knowledge occurs in relationship, in a situation of reciprocity with the subject: hence the metaphor of "meeting." As if Islam and the reader were engaged in a human acquaintanceship, the reader testing Islam's boundaries, probing for areas of mutual agreement, hoping for but not forcing intimacy. And always open to surprise.

Yet because the title is *Meeting Islam: A Guide for Christians* rather than merely *Meeting Islam*, the imagined acquaintanceship receives an edge. *Meeting Islam* presumes a positive, but slightly distanced approach to Islam on the part of a generalized non-Muslim world. Certainly such an approach is necessary. But that is not what *Meeting Islam: A Guide for Christians* promises. *Meeting Islam* says that this acquaintanceship is being made by co-believers in the God of Abraham. So there are family connections, very warm ones. But there is also a long-standing family quarrel to reckon with. Some

would call it a war. How we Christians negotiate this volatile family dynamic is critical.

So critical, in fact, that guidance is required.

I intend that this book fill such a need, as its subtitle—*A Guide for Christians*—indicates. All books about Islam are guides in one way or another, but what is unique about this one is that my own meeting of Islam and of Muslims over a fourteen-year period is used to encourage a similar effort on the part of you, the Christian reader. I'm not asking you to follow in my exact footsteps: Every Christian's meeting of Islam will be, must be, different. I'm urging you throughout this book to discover what your own meeting of Islam will be. I hope the tools and suggestions I offer you along the way are helpful ones. I encourage you to use your own experience of meeting Islam to improve these tools and suggestions so that Christians in future generations can meet Islam and Muslims with increasing understanding and appreciation.

There are various metaphors to refine our understanding of what *meeting* Islam entails. "Passing over" is one of these metaphors. Passing over means moving beyond the limits of acquaintanceship, to an inner encounter taking place in one's own heart. Passing over goes further than tolerance, further even than friendly dialogue—proposing an actual crossing of the border into Islam. No shortcuts allowed! Passing over doesn't try to bypass the usual roadblocks of doctrinal differences and historical and present-day grievances. Instead, passing over tries to level the roadblocks or at least to find a path through them.

The scary thing about passing over is realizing that what will happen afterward—after the roadblocks are behind us—is a mystery. Or put more positively: Passing over involves adventure.

We pass over to the other religion in order to be changed by that religion—changed not in the sense of being converted, but in the sense of finding our own faith enhanced when we come back. So by calling "passing over" an adventure, I'm not proposing an escape from our faith but a return home to it. Yet we don't return with an attitude of superiority, as if the only purpose of passing over were to collect debating points for a more aggressive Christian apologetic. We return strengthened, more capable of "being what we are" (echoing Augustine's language for the Eucharist).

Notre Dame theologian John S. Dunne has inspired a rich contemporary reflection on passing over. Here's how he describes this unpredictable project:

> Trying to arrive at a sympathetic understanding of cultures other than one's own, lives other than one's own, religions other than one's own, are adventures of the mind which would probably not be undertaken for fear of unsettling one's confidence in one's own culture, one's own life, one's own religion. Or if one's confidence in these things were already shaken and these adventures were undertaken in order to find some new basis of certainty, they would probably be abandoned, for the divergence of the cultures and lives and religions would seem to indicate that no agreement could ever be reached on these matters. When one is no longer concerned about reaching agreement, however, and restoring confidence, but simply about attaining insight and understanding, then one can enter freely into other cultures, lives, and religions and come back to understand one's own in a new light.[i]

You are invited to "enter freely" with me into Islam under the proviso that what we are seeking is "insight and understanding" rather than "agreement and confidence." Not that agreement and confidence don't have their value. It is only that they do not have absolute value. There comes a time when, for the sake of insight and understanding, another need must be answered: The need of the mind—and of the heart and body as well—for "adventure," for a move beyond the familiar horizon of culture, self, and, in this case, religion, into the seemingly distant and even threatening region of the other. We make this adventurous move, this passing over, Dunne goes on to suggest, by "enter[ing] sympathetically into the feelings of another person, becom[ing] receptive to the images which give expression to his feelings, attain[ing] insight into those images, and then com[ing] back enriched by this insight to an understanding of one's own life which can guide one into the future."[ii]

Meeting Islam: A Guide for Christians introduces key elements of Islam into which you are invited to enter as if into the life of another person. Those elements include the language, teachings, history, and practices of the way of worship known as Islam. But more important than these elements are the people who constructed them. From this perspective, Islam is Muslims, some one billion three hundred million of them by many counts. Muslims are as varied a group as Christians are, with approximately the same proportion of saints to rogues. Like us, they too have been trying for centuries to serve the God of Abraham faithfully. Islam is the ongoing story of that service.

Yet Islam is fundamentally not a human product but a gift of God, a way of worship, given over the ages to all the communities of humankind, then cleansed and finalized in its Arabic version as handed down to the prophet Muhammad. This, at

least, is the way Muslims themselves see their religion. As Christians we also must see Islam as God's gift if we are to pass over to it with "insight and understanding."

Meeting Islam as Christians we discover two encounters, one with God (as Muslims understand and worship him) and the other with Muslims themselves. This is not a theoretical exercise. When we meet Islam we put our bodies, our hearts, and our faith on the line. We have to make our own forays to our own local Islamic Centers, we have to engage deeply and openly with the way of worship practiced there, and then we have to look back at our own Christian faith through the eyes of our brother and sister Muslims. What do we see when we look through those eyes? What new insights into our Christian faith are opened to us?

I've structured each chapter to mimic the rhythm of encounter outlined above. First I'll share a story of my personal engagement with Muslims that highlights a particular teaching or practice of Islam. Then I'll explore the deeper dimensions of the teaching or practice. Then I'll look at parallel Christian teachings and practices to see what those aspects of our faith look like, now that I begin to see them with fresh, Muslim eyes. By structuring each chapter this way, I hope to give you a feeling for how your own meetings with Islam might unfold.

I've arranged the individual chapters in five sections, in an order that I feel best answers the questions Christians like yourselves are likely to have as you begin your inter-faith adventure. Part One, "Into the Heart of it," explores the fundamentals, Islam itself and the Qur'an, the Holy Book of the Muslims. Part Two, "Being a Muslim," looks at the dimensions of Muslim prayer and practice, both in their public and private dimensions, and at the Muslim in whom those dimensions

were most perfectly embodied, the prophet Muhammad himself. Part Three, "Celebrations," brings us into the great Muslim gatherings, at homes and at mosques during the month of Ramadan, and at Mecca during the Hajj. Fortified by the previous chapters' positive emphasis, we'll tackle Part Four, "Conflicts," which addresses the areas where Christian and Muslim misunderstandings and differences are most painful—first Jihad, then our disagreements about Jesus and the Trinity. In Part Five, "Many Yet One," we'll meditate on the way the Hijab (the face veil Muslim women wear) and the phrase Takbir ("Let us extol him!") can act as symbols of healthy, creative tension between our religions. The fifth section leads to the Conclusion, where I'll sketch out where our meeting with Islam might lead us. The purpose of our inter-faith adventure is more than merely satisfying our private curiosity or need. Our purpose is also to is lay the groundwork for a greater flourishing of what we Christians call the Reign of God and what Muslims call salaam: fullness of life for all creatures. How does meeting Islam as Christians serve such an end?

Keeping in view the goal of passing over to Islam is important for many reasons. One of them has to be for encouragement. Interfaith adventure has its costs. We are not taking a cruise in exotic lands well-protected by tour guides. We are opening ourselves to transformation. We might get hurt. We might get lost. Many times I've wondered if I haven't, as the Qur'an puts it, "strayed from the right path." My consolation at such moments has been to remind myself that passing over is simply an expansion of the great commandment and its corollary: Love God with all your heart and your soul and your strength; and love your neighbor as yourself. To love your neighbor is to pass over into his or her skin, to walk in his or her shoes, to see out of his or her

eyes. It means to experience the world and God as our neighbor does, in all its concreteness. The risk—or great opportunity—of obeying the great commandment is this: As we experience the world and God in this way, we notice with a start that our neighbor's eyes are turning in a certain direction, one we wish the neighbor would avoid altogether. We're startled because this direction is the one that puts ourselves front and center. Oh, look anywhere but there! But we're helpless. We cannot control the neighbor's choices. Sooner or later we see ourselves as our neighbor sees us. What we learn from that gaze is our reward.

◆ The Islam I Have Met ◆

Allow me to put myself through a brief inquisition. Isn't *Meeting Islam* an exercise in hubris, or at least in grandiose self-delusion? What makes me think that it's possible for any one person, let alone a Christian North American, to "meet" a faith so vast and old?—speaking of Islam only as an historical phenomenon and a present-day global reality to say nothing of its purpose and reality in the mind of God. And what about the numbers involved? Just to imagine my or anyone's "meeting" the approximately one billion three hundred million Muslims in the world is an absurdity! What about the fact that my actual meeting of Islam has been almost completely confined to the opportunities offered me in Rochester, New York?—hardly a rival to Cairo, Kabul, Riyadh, Islamabad, or Jakarta as sites where the "real Islam" might be met!

My first defense is simply to lay before my internal inquisitors the opportunities just mentioned and to ask them to consider whether those opportunities, as limited in number and scope as they have been, haven't been plenty rich enough to offer a book's worth of experiences as a resource for other adventurers.

I'm speaking of the various ways I've been connected with Rochester's Islamic Center since 1991, and especially of the friendships I've formed with the extraordinarily enlightened people who worship there. If I haven't met Islam in its entirety (begging the question whether such a thing is possible), the part I have met has shown me and many others a warm, generous face. Rochester's Islamic Center, thanks to the leadership of Dr. Muhammad Shafiq and others over the years has set a high standard of citizenship among all Rochester's communities, both religious and secular, and has modeled for us an Islam that is peaceful, open-minded, hospitable, and progressive.

So it is no accident that on the evening of September 11, 2001, a large group of Rochester's pastors and rabbis brought flowers over to the Center and stood vigil on its front steps in solidarity with their Muslim friends and in common defense against the few expressions of anti-Muslim violence that did occur. The pastors and rabbis were responding to the concrete gestures of friendship previously made to them by the members of the Center.

It is no accident either that in May 2003, Matthew Clark, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Rochester, signed a Solemn Agreement with the Center and with the other mosques of Rochester. This agreement pledged a common front against religious bigotry as well as a commitment to ongoing education in each other's faith and to joint works of charity. As far as I know, this is the first and still the only such agreement in the U.S. between a Roman Catholic diocese and the local Muslim community.

This is the Islam I have met, the Islam of Rochester, New York—an Islam committed to bringing about salaam or fruitful relationships among all God's people. Yes, I'm aware that in

other places Islam does not wear so friendly a face. Perhaps in those different settings I would never have met Islam at all, or have met it in such a way as to cause me to describe the meeting very differently from the way I do here.

No meeting can be hypothetical, however. Meetings are incarnational—to use a Christian word that gives me confidence to believe that what is local in my meeting of Islam is also universal. The fact is that I met Islam where I did, through the particular people and events described in this book. But the fact is bigger than its container. Everything I have to say about Islam, while colored by the specificity of each meeting, is not confined to it, because God was present at each meeting too. And, according to the Qur'an, God is not impressed by mere grandeur and size. He "does not disdain to make a symbol even out of a gnat" (*sura* or chapter *al-bakarah* or "The Heifer," 2:26). The Qur'an insists again and again that God's *ayat* or signs are everywhere present in creation, if we would bother to look. This is Islam's own way of expressing a firm belief in the immediate and concrete as the bearer of God's word.

But my main defense against my internal inquisitors is this: While my experience of Islam has its limits, it has its strengths as well. Though initiated by my personal encounters and friendships with Muslims, my knowledge of Islam isn't confined to that. The years that have passed since I first set a timid foot in the Islamic Center have been years of intense study of Arabic and of the Qur'an. One result of that study has been that I've felt able to make my own translations (or "versions," as Muslims prefer to say) of Qur'anic verses for this book. I've also bitten into a goodly chunk of the immense body of commentary on Islam by Muslims, Christians, and others. I've followed closely the history of Muslim-Christian relations

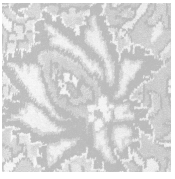
over the centuries and have kept abreast of the most recent controversies. I give talks, retreats, and classes on Islam both at home in Rochester and throughout the U.S. As an ordained Deacon in the Roman Catholic Church, I work with two interfaith groups in Rochester to plan informational sessions for both Muslims and Christians—to bring the groups together physically and to acquaint them with each other's views and struggles. In short, my commitment to meeting Islam, while centered in an unlikely place, Rochester, New York, is not therefore a narrowly personal or parochial one.

Whatever the ultimate judgment on my authority to speak about Islam, the really important question is about the book itself. How will it affect you, the reader? One of the most powerful of the early revelations to Muhammad, *sura al-zilzal* or "The Quaking" has helped me focus my own prayer for *Meeting Islam: A Guide for Christians*:

> At the day of judgment
> humankind will emerge in scattered groups
> to be shown their deeds.
> Whoever has done the tiniest bit of good will see it.
> Whoever has done the tiniest bit of evil will see it.

May my meeting Islam in Rochester become a "tiniest bit of good" for me who recount it and for you who meditate on it.

Into the Heart of it



◆ A Piece of Paper on My Dinner Plate ◆

In the winter of 1991, I sat with my wife, Peggy, comfortably at home in front of our TV watching bombs drop in splendid balloons of color over Baghdad. The War in the Gulf had begun.

As we listened to the voices of broadcasters, pundits, and generals talking jubilantly about "smart bombs" and "chicken shoots," we became more and more appalled. The war and the spectacle made out of it violated the body of Christ.

Peggy and I had both been baptized as Catholic Christians less than a decade before. The United States Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter on nuclear warfare, "The Challenge of Peace," had been published not long after that. The letter had greatly influenced our young faith, giving us the confidence to believe that as Christians we were called to seek alternatives to violence as a way of solving not only personal but international conflicts.

Peggy was more committed to this search than I was during the rest of the '80s. Inspired by the workshops on nonviolence offered by Jean and Hildegard Goss-Meyer under the sponsorship of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Peggy became an active member of the nuclear-freeze movement.

My own opportunity to respond concretely to "The Challenge of Peace" came at last, in front of the TV set. I said something like this: "What we're seeing is an outrage against the gospel of love. But I can't just blame the generals. I myself am complicitous in this, because with all my fancy education, I don't know anything about Iraq and its history. I can't even find it on the map. I don't know anything about Islam, either—or anything about these people who are being bombed in my name and with my tax money. I'm as guilty as anyone else."

All true enough, if a bit overstated. I rightfully saw that I had to be included among the generals and the others, at least to the extent that I had never taken any trouble to learn either about Iraq and its history or about Islam—or about the West's and the United States's relations with Iraq or any other country whose majority population was Muslim. I thought of myself as highly educated, had the degrees to prove it, and earned my living as a high school English teacher. In my position, I couldn't defend myself by saying, "No one ever told me I needed to know that!" My ignorance and indifference had contributed in a tiny but perhaps significant way to the ease with which the war fever had been whipped up and to the glorying in violence manifested by the politicians, the generals, and the media. So my loud declaration of complicity had its point.

Still, whether it had a point or not wouldn't matter if my behavior weren't influenced as a result. What exactly did I propose to do about my announced complicity? If I'd been cau-

tious and more thoughtful at this stage, I might not be writing this book at all. I might have said, simply and reasonably, "I'm going to read up on this subject." I would have become better informed, and that would not have been a negligible result.

Whatever the value of a more temperate approach, that is not the one I took. Carried away by my horror at the bombing and by the histrionics of my declaration of complicity, I paused and then made the following vow: "I'm going to learn Arabic."

Saying "I'm going to learn Arabic" seemed to show I meant business, but in reality it didn't commit me to anything, since there couldn't possibly be a practical way of learning Arabic in Rochester. I'd never heard of Arabic classes being offered locally. Yet my bold statement, "I'm going to learn Arabic," hung in the air. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say that this declaration of intention had a kind of resonance that awoke echoes in subsequent occasions and events.

At first Peggy and I pursued the more moderate course, that of informing ourselves. A class on Islam was being offered as part of continuing education through a local interfaith organization. As it happened, the class was taught by the accomplished Arabist Professor Emil Homerin of the University of Rochester. Short, and as necessarily limited in scope as Emil's class was, it proved to be an excellent and indispensable initial step in overcoming my ignorance. But what would the next step be? Exactly how was one supposed to go further? Perhaps one had gone far enough! Perhaps so, but not if one had already vowed to "learn Arabic"!

Then one evening during the fall I came home from school and saw, as I got ready to sit down at the dinner table, that Peggy had put a piece of paper on my plate. The resonance I spoke of earlier had produced its first echo.

The paper was an announcement Peggy had found that day

on the bulletin board of our cooperative market. It announced that Arabic lessons were to be given at our local Islamic Center for a modest fee, that the public was invited, and that the last day for sign-up was that very evening. Call the following number for more information.

If I were drawing a cartoon of my reaction to this information, I'd elongate my neck and make sweat droplets shoot from my head. Then I'd pull out my tightly buttoned collar with a hooked forefinger and put the word "Gulp!" in my speech balloon.

A thousand excuses occurred to me in a rush. I was too busy. School was very demanding, too demanding, especially during the fall. I shouldn't over work, it wouldn't be good for my health. And Arabic, from what I'd heard, was horrendously, impossibly difficult.

Peggy was eyeing me, curiously. It looked as if I would have to make that phone call. But as I approached the phone I glimpsed a ray of hope. Perhaps not all was lost. Wasn't this the last day for sign-up? Surely the places would be filled! Doesn't everyone want to learn Arabic? It was bad luck that I'd found out about the classes so late. Maybe some other time!

I called. Someone with a strange accent answered. I timidly inquired about the lessons. "Probably you're all filled up, right?" No, the person said, not at all. You're very welcome. Plenty of room. Name? Address? See you there.

On the evening of the first class, I drove across town to Rochester's Islamic Center filled with dread, as if I were heading to my execution. But while I was victim of my emotions, I was also appalled by them. Why on earth was I feeling this way? What was I expecting to happen when I walked into that boxy building with the minaret and the sickle and star on top? Did I think I was going to be jumped on by fanatics and cut to

pieces? I realized to my shame how vulnerable I actually was to years of anti-Muslim propaganda. It wasn't true that I "knew nothing" of Islam. My imagination was saturated with negative images that also had their violent allure. "Islam" without my knowing it had become a symbol for "otherness"—a thing to be feared and rejected but also to be titillated by.

These images weren't my own creation, nor did they pop up overnight. They were well in place long before the War in the Gulf. For example, Dante Alighieri, in the greatest of all Christian poems, *The Divine Comedy*, completed just before the author's death in 1321—a poem I was at that point teaching regularly in my English classes—planted Muhammad far down in one of the lowest reaches of hell among the Sowers of Discord. There he is split open from chin to anus by a great demon with a bloody sword. Guts hanging out, Muhammad trudges forward round that terrace in hell reserved for unrepentant schismatics like himself. By the time his route takes him back to the demon again, the wound is healed, whereupon the demon splits him open again. The process is to be repeated into eternity.

Though seriously rattled by mental pictures like these, I managed to knock on the front door of the Center and to stand firm when it was opened. Managed, not through courage, however, but through the greater fear of having to face Peggy later if I didn't go through with it. The heavy door slowly, ominously opened. . . .

Frenzied assassins with their own bloody swords raised high on the other side?

A gentle, middle-aged man, the very first Muslim I had ever met, welcomed me with a smile. He was Dr. Muhammad Shafiq, the Center's imam and the teacher of the Arabic class. He remembered speaking with me by phone, about the class.

A *barakah* (blessing) on me for coming. Would I please to take off my shoes and leave them in a cubbyhole in the foyer?

I felt ashamed at my fears as well as abashed. I hadn't even known that taking off one's shoes was mandatory. But I also felt relieved. The violent images I had been conjuring seemed to dissipate like bad air before a fresh breeze. Dr. Shafiq's warm smile and handshake put me at ease. I even began to feel eager to penetrate this mysterious place. Its mysteriousness was no longer built up of fantasy projections. The mysteriousness now had to do with fact. Here I was finally, not simply talking about Islam and looking at it from the outside through the eyes of those pretty much as ignorant as I was. Now I physically touched it: The hand of my host and teacher, Dr. Shafiq, to start with, then the hands of my classmates, mostly all Muslims, in the classroom above. Truly, I was meeting Islam for the first time, by meeting real flesh and blood Muslim people.

◆ The Root of Islam ◆

But the meeting wasn't simply social. The other students, some twenty of them, had come to the Islamic Center for a purpose or rather for purposes, all of which seemed much more clearly defined than my own.

The two other non-Muslims in the class intended to visit Egypt soon and wanted to learn at least enough Arabic to be able to find out where the nearest bathroom was in the event of an emergency. A clear and laudable goal.

For the Muslims in the class, the motive was to learn enough Arabic to be able to understand their own prayers.

I wasn't surprised to discover this. I'd already learned in Dr. Homerin's class that Arabs and Muslims are not synonymous and that only one-fifth of all Muslims speak Arabic as their native

tongue. The vast majority of Muslims knew no more Arabic than I did, or what they did know they knew by rote. Again, a clear and laudable goal, this time the goal of overcoming a deficiency in understanding the language of one's faith.

But me? What actually was my goal in studying Arabic? Something as fuzzy as assuaging a sense of complicity with my country's assault on Iraq? Or as self-serving as saving face before my wife?

I had to postpone asking such questions. Class had begun! I had my first homework assignment—that of mastering the mysterious Arabic alphabet. The confusion about my motives would have to wait.

Now I must ask you to accept a fact about me that will color the way I present my meeting Islam as a Christian throughout the rest of this book. I love words and I love languages. The stranger the word and the stranger the language the hotter my love grows. To me at that time Arabic seemed very strange. So it was love at first sight.

We all take certain tools with us when we set out on adventures. A love of languages is one of my tools. On the whole it has been very useful in my adventure in Islam, since Islam depends so much on the special beauties and characteristics of the Arabic language as they are expressed in the Arabic Qur'an. So I make no apology for my love-affair with Arabic (with all the challenges and storminesses that the phrase "love affair" implies) since, thanks to this love affair, I've been able to meet Islam with an intimacy that would have been closed to me otherwise.

For example, a loving engagement with words helps us see the very meaning of the word Islam unfold beautifully from within its triliteral root.

Yes, I know: "triliteral root" doesn't sound as if it could be a source of beauty. The first thing that comes to my mind when I hear "triliteral root" is a textbook on dentistry. I picture a tooth that requires special clamps and forceps to extract, leaving a bloody hollow behind.

What "triliteral root" does refer to may seem at first to be a little gruesome, unless you're a lover of languages like myself. "Triliteral root" actually refers to the structuring of almost all Arabic words around a cluster of three consonants. This cluster forms the word's basic meaning. Other elements, vowels in particular, are added to the cluster to give specific meanings and to determine the cluster's part of speech.

Peering into the word Islam, we see first the triliteral root, s-l-m. The basic meaning of this cluster has to do with being safe and sound, usually as a result of treaty arrangements between previously warring parties.

So far so good. Now let's probe a little deeper for the various vowel and other additions that will give s-l-m its specific meanings.

In the form *salima*, the word—now a state-of-being verb—means "to be safe and sound." Some of the nouns derived from this verb form are: *salamun*—a treaty of peace, usually reached through an exchange of gifts or hostages; *salimun*—one who has been made safe through such a treaty; salaam—the state of safety or peace itself, as well as the greeting of peace (the familiar *assalaam aleikum*—*"peace be to you"*—used by one Muslim to another).

But the form of most interest to us is the one in which the triliteral root s-l-m becomes *aslama*, a form both causative and reflexive. It means: "to commit oneself, to pledge oneself, to hand oneself over." The sense is that we are entering into a

peace treaty by making ourselves a hostage or at least by pledging something we consider precious to the person who demands it. Islam is the noun form of this verb, referring to the act of committing oneself in this way. *Muslim* is the active participle of the verb, referring to the person who makes the commitment.

That may seem like a too-large dose of technical talk. But look at the bounty of what our investigation into the s-l-m root yields so far: *Islam* and *Muslim*—the two key words to be used during our adventure—root themselves solidly in the bloody earth of the inter-tribal Bedouin conflicts that characterized life in the Arabian peninsula before the advent of God's revelations to Muhammad in the late 500's CE. Islam refers to the method for escaping the inter-tribal feuding through truces. Muslim is the one who makes the method his or her own.

But the heart of the matter, the true flowering from the root, unfolds like this: The Qur'an seizes on the s-l-m root and forces it to reach from earth to heaven. The Qur'an insists on our making our truce first and foremost with God. And the way we make that truce is Islam.

The Qur'an takes words from the Arabic cultural world that Muhammad grew up in, a world of tribal warfare, and changes the scope and meaning of those words so radically that the original meanings might seem in danger of being lost.

Yet some roots go deep, as you'll know if you've ever tried to pull out an old yew bush that's taken over your front yard or even the dandelions in your lawn. The tough conservatism of the triliteral root preserves older meanings, giving the newer ones a special density. Without the awareness of these older meanings, we're in constant danger of misunderstanding the newer ones. The words of the Qur'an carry in their roots a

wide range of meaning from the tribal, Bedouin world that is simply not possible to render easily and accurately in languages that work by other systems. I am not putting Arabic on a pedestal. I'm only naming one of its distinctive qualities and then saying that when such a language is given over to God's use, as happened through the revelations to Muhammad, it has to be understood on its own terms, if we want to know what it is saying.

We can't follow the way all those tribal, Bedouin words were transformed under the pressure of God's revelation in the Qur'an, but we can trace in a deeper way the transformation that took hold of the s-l-m root. The Qur'an, still referring to treaty making, stretches the s-l-m root up to heaven to include as chief partner in the negotiation, not another person or another tribe, nor even Muhammad himself as tribal leader, but God alone. The notion of treaty making is raised to a wholly different level. What is required now is not the exchange of human or material hostages between warring tribes, but the exchange of our very self for God's mercy.

For us human beings, the reevaluation of meaning requires, in the first place, a reevaluation of what it means to be human. To be human is no longer to find our meaning within tribal allegiances. To be human is to recognize that we are, before all else, creatures or creations of God: and created not just as a physical body but as a moral and spiritual entity as well. To enter into treaty relations with God means we have to hand over to him the fullness of our human identity. The new meaning of s-l-m also reveals what was previously hidden about that identity—our utter dependence on God.

Human community must be reevaluated also. God is no longer the god of the tribe, the protector of the individual group, as

against other groups with their own gods. God is the God of every person because it is God who created each one of us. As a result, we're no longer able to enlist our own god in the bargaining against or with another god within the tribal system. Just as the concept of the person opens up to include the entire physical, moral, and spiritual dimension of the human, so too does the tribal system open up to embrace what was hitherto concealed, the whole community of humankind. The part becomes the whole. The tribe is now the tribe of all tribes.

One circle of expansion leads to or reveals another. For greater still than the expansion of the human person and the human community is the expansion of what it means to be God. God is no longer the powerful protector of a particular tribal group, no longer even an irascible Father Zeus trying to hold in check a pantheon of squabbling minor deities reigning over separate tribes. (It was to such a Zeus-like figure that the word for God in Arabic, *Allah*, most often referred in the tribal system.) Those tribal gods vanish into the nothingness of human folly from which they came. God is now revealed as one. To this one God all Islam, all self-hostaging, is due.

God's power does not become greater than before. Power itself is God. We can't drive any sort of wedge, however tiny, between God and a greater boundary that contains him. God *is* the boundary and the boundary-maker. Our self-hostaging to this God must be complete, absolute, without reservation.

Yet this same God who fills the universe he has made, and who has abolished all previous gods, preserves and cherishes human liberty. If this were not so, the Qur'an's constant insistence on God's mercy would be meaningless at best or a cynical trap at worst. The treaty by which we achieve salaam or peace with God and all the rest of his creation is not forced upon us. This

is why the typical translation of islam as "submission" is misleading. "Submission" suggests collapse before a superior force, a breaking of the will, and a denial of human responsibility. Nothing could be farther from the spirit of those Muslims whose islam or act of handing themselves over to God is most conscious and informed. This spirit that characterizes Islam at its truest and best—just as love characterizes Christianity at its truest and best—is dignity. For alone upon all created things God has breathed into humankind God's *ruh* or spirit.

Every Muslim is conscious of this dignity not as entitlement or as a personal achievement but as a gift that is to be honored in every way and at every moment. It is honored primarily by acts of solidarity with every other creature under God's heaven. We can see this by watching what happened to the word salaam after it was seized by God for use in the Qur'an. In the old, pre-Islamic tribal world, salaam referred to the condition between tribes after they had concluded a treaty—to an absence of hostilities, at the least; to certain gestures of mutual support at best. But now, in the Qur'an, the word opens up an entirely new world, not just a better version of a previous one. In this new world, salaam begins to share much of the meaning of another famous Semitic word, the Hebrew *shalom*: Fullness of life for all people resulting from a human order built on the principles of just relationships and of right governance of creation. Unimaginable in a tribal setting, salaam is achievable now only because of God's intervention. But will salaam actually come about? That depends on each one of us! The Qur'an is insistent on this point: that the public outcome of salaam is dependent on each individual's islam. Yet the Qur'an is equally insistent that the two, the individual and the public commitment, are inextricably bound together. There cannot be salaam

without a pure act of self-rendering. There cannot be Islam for oneself alone.

True Islam enters history as the islams of individuals are lived out in community. The Qur'an provides some guidelines for the historical, communal unfolding. Foremost among these are the famous Five Pillars: Confessing one's faith in God and in Muhammad as his messenger, fasting during Ramadan, payment of the poor-tax, performing the five daily prayers, and pilgrimage or Hajj to Mecca. But Islam in its historical, communal dimension embraces as well the behaviors developed over the centuries as Muslims have continued to reflect on the revelation. These behaviors cover the gamut of righteous human possibilities, from the communal requirements of peaceful daily life as codified in Islam's rich traditions of *shari'ah* or law, to the more private requirements of inner peace with God as imagined in the equally rich tradition of Sufism or Islamic mysticism. All such activities reflect the spirit of people freely acknowledging their dependence on a being infinitely greater than themselves.

Yet that greatness must embrace all humanity. The particular revelation of God's mercy to the *ummah* or community of Muhammad does not, cannot, exhaust this mercy. In fact the Qur'an insists that this mercy was extended to all people at the dawn of human creation. And it has been revived in subsequent generations by the many prophets sent by God, beginning with Abraham. With the Arabs it was always a case of *their* "remembering" as well. For according to the Qur'an, the world didn't begin in tribal darkness. The roots of Islam push down and deep through the outer crust of Bedouin polytheism to the original strata of the Creation itself. Nor are those deepest roots confined to the Arabian desert. They spread out laterally as well. Dig down far enough, and we'll find them in Rochester, New York,

and in your hometown too. How could it be otherwise, if God is the God of all creation?

Islam kept this universal sense of itself unequivocally until the early nineteenth century. Until the time, that is, when the West began to dominate Muslim lands. Until then, Muslims had referred to their way of worshipping God not as Islam—which in its substantive form occurs only eight times in the Qur'an—but as the very frequently occurring term *iman* or faith. We Westerners had referred to Islam as "the religion of Muhammad" or "Muhammadism." This grossly inaccurate term—reflecting a belief that the creator and center of Muslim worship was Muhammad himself—was rejected by Western scholars of the new science of comparative religion. The scholars sought a more accurate term for a religion they were seeking to classify according to their own scientifically based taxonomy. So they renamed the religion "Islam" on the basis of those few instances in the Qur'an where the word *islam* actually appears. The most decisive of these (for the scholars) was the following, a verse thought to be the very last one handed down to Muhammad by God:

> Today I have perfected your *din* and have fulfilled my favor towards you and have approved *islam* as your *din*. (*sura al-bakarah* 2:128)

The traditional Muslim understanding of din in this and other verses had been "way of worship," as the general name for those moral and cultic practices which the ummah or community was to abide by. Islam names those practices as characterized by self-yielding. The traditional emphasis—flowing from the special character of the Arabic language itself—was on action,

behavior, and on one's internal disposition revealed and shaped by that behavior.

But as reinterpreted by the Western scholars, din no longer referred to a way of worship—to a complex of practices given to all humankind by God—but to "religion," a thing, a name, a proper noun denoting the way one group lives out that call, as distinguished from the way other groups do. In contrast to Islam's once universal application to all humankind, as a response to God being available to everyone, this new westernized Islam seems to shrink to fit human categories alone: *this* religion as opposed to *that* one. Islam as distinct religious "other" rather than Islam as humanity's response to God's gift of mercy.

Muslims did not themselves choose this shrinkage. But the pressure exerted by Western scholarship, backed by the power of Western colonizers of Muslim lands, was too great. Eventually, Muslims themselves began to use Islam in the new, restricted sense: as one religion among many—a sad fate for the rich s-l-m root whose meanings we watched proliferate transformatively in Muhammad's own time. Islam as a sign of socio-political distinction (*their* religion as opposed to *ours*) begins to crowd out all other meanings, as if the mighty s-l-m root were reduced to this one shoot only. For almost all Westerners, Islam came to mean only the religion and civilization of those "others." The sense in which the term also refers to the basic human orientation to God is lost. Lost too is a mediating sense of Islam, one that combines the universalizing sense with the effort by a particular community, the ummah of Muhammad, to understand God's call to Islam in their particular tribal world. Because each Muslim in the world today struggles with her or his Islam in a different way, it would be better to speak of Islams rather than of Islam.

If our study of the s-l-m root means anything, it informs us that this root goes down too deep and spreads too wide to be crimped and pruned into a thin little tuber supporting just another human ideology, however seductive its bloom may be to some eyes—however noxious to others. Islam is how people respond to the call of God as that call has been heard primarily, but not exclusively, through the Qur'an. Any other meaning is contingent on this primary one.

◆ How a Christian can become muslim ◆

Is the call to become a muslim one that a Christian can or should hear? There is only one way of finding out. That's by opening ourselves to the possibility and seeing what happens, confident that, however confusing the result, God will never lead us astray. Here is my own attempt to practice what I preach.

One early spring I spent eight days on retreat at Eastern Point, the Jesuit retreat house just outside Gloucester, Massachusetts. The house overlooks a picturesque bay facing the open Atlantic. Just across the lawn and through some bushes you come to an outcropping of gigantic red granite rocks that form a kind of promontory. As most retreatants at Eastern Point do, I spent hours sitting atop those rocks, watching the waves surging toward shore and crashing like thunder below me. It was an exhilarating experience. Those who have watched waves like that at some time or other will know what I mean.

But I was at Eastern Point on retreat—I wasn't there just to stare at rocks and sea. One of my missions at the retreat was to read deeply the Gospel of John.

Prayer and solitude and good spiritual direction are necessary preconditions for this kind of reading to happen. I had all

three at Eastern Point. But nothing is guaranteed or forced. That is not how God works with us, if it is God whom we are seeking. Sometimes unexpected influences trigger a deepening. That happened to me.

The trigger was provided by the waves and rocks. At some point during my sitting I became aware of the extraordinary beauty in the response of those waves and rocks, and the extraordinary response of all the other natural phenomena around me, to God's will for them. The waves surged and crashed in perfect accord with nature's laws; the rocks resisted in the same way. The barnacles clung according to the laws of their own nature. Likewise the strands of seaweed lashed to and fro as the surf crashed over them. The gulls sailed above the swell or perched on rocks and dropped live mussels on them, all in accord with the laws of their natures. Everything I was looking at was acting in complete agreement with its purpose for being. And everything, even the seemingly violent things—the crashing of the surf, the occasional dead fish, birds, and other animals I saw—everything was beautiful, because everything was fulfilling its nature. Nothing was trying to be what it wasn't. Waves weren't trying to act like rocks, nor rocks like waves, nor gulls like barnacles, nor barnacles like gulls. All things in their infinite variety were one in their yielding to the laws ordained for them by God.

I don't claim that thoughts like these are original. Perhaps they occur to most people who stare at the sea as long as I did.

Then something happened that, original or not, gave the experience a different color. I found myself thinking, *Yes, all that I see is beautiful. But I need a way to sum up what makes it so. Is it rather that everything I see is muslim? That everything I see is faithfully carrying out its own islam? That everything I see has handed itself over completely to*

God in praise? Yes, that is why each thing acts according to its own nature and no other. That is why each thing is beautiful.

I wasn't stretching a point. God's invitation to Islam isn't made to humankind alone. The Qur'an makes clear that the invitation was and is made universally. The Qur'an throbs with verses identifying each created thing as radiating its gratitude for that very creation. The following verse serves as well as any:

> Don't you see that it is God whom all beings praise in the heavens and on earth? That the birds praise him as they wing their way? Each creature knows its own form of prayer and praise. And God knows very well what they do. (*sura al-nur* 24:41)

No Qur'anic verse is simply descriptive. The verse just quoted is typical. The birds aren't meant to be imagined or looked at. They're meant as ayat or signs of God's mercy. All such signs are placed throughout heaven and earth to call our attention to God. In this way the Qur'an gets moral leverage on the listener, a pressure applied in this case by interrogatives. Who is the "you" addressed at the beginning of the verse? Why does this "you" have to be addressed in such a challenging way? The Qur'an is so deeply imbued with moral challenge that it's impossible not to turn every remembered phrase in it into a mirror on one's conscience.

I say this because, soon after making the Muslim connection, I began to hear a little voice in my imagination. It was a voice that seemed to speak for the waves and the rocks. It said something like this: *You're quite right, George. We ARE muslim. And because of that, every action of ours is in accordance with the wishes of the One who*

made us. But that's not the question. The question is rather: What about you? How muslim are you?

Much later on, after I'd gotten back home, I came upon a verse from the Qur'an that seemed to raise the ante of the questions raised in the previous verse:

> Do they stray so far as to struggle to worship someone else than God? Even when every creature in the heavens and on the earth has pledged itself (*aslama*) to him, either willingly or not? Even when they shall all return to him? (*sura al-'imran* 3:85)

Or more loosely: What is the matter with you mortals, that unlike the supposedly "dumb" beasts—unlike the seagulls or even the barnacles clinging to the rocks—why is it that you refuse to hand yourselves over to me? Even though you have promised to do just that? Even though you know you will all return to me at death to render an account of yourselves?

I can keep questions like these at bay as long as I don't put them to myself directly. They sound safe in the verse just cited, when the question is put to all humanity and thus to no one in particular. Although the questions have that universal dimension, their primary goal is always the individual believer. This is one of the great tasks of the revelation as handed down to Muhammad's heart, to reveal and thus make real the individual's conscience, detaching it from bondage to the group ethics of the tribe and from the private designs of the ego.

My own conscience was in a vulnerable state during my retreat. Deliberately so. I was on retreat to give my conscience a good shake. I had invited the waves' and rocks' interrogation.

But what was the point of their interrogation? Were the waves and the rocks asking whether I might be just too stupid or too easily distracted to hand myself over? Or were they asking whether I might be like a naughty child: told to do one thing but stubbornly insisting on doing another? Or is there something much more critical at stake in my possible refusal of Islam than bad behavior?

If the waves and rocks are muslim because they agree to be what God has asked them to be, then isn't the question about my Islam a question of my refusing to *be* what God has made me to be? Why would I do that? What *am* I supposed to be?

Back in my room at the retreat house I again picked up the Gospel of John. The waves and the rocks had aroused and directed my attention to John with renewed vigor. They seemed to give me a way of approaching this Gospel that answered my original hope, that I might enter more deeply into it. The key was to follow where the thread of Islam led me, and to do so freely and fearlessly, without worrying about the doctrinal contradictions I might stumble on along the way.

I began by acknowledging that my resistance to Islam, to handing oneself over to God, is one of the chief issues in this Gospel. For example, we're told in the very first chapter of John that "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." Again and again in this Gospel Jesus explains his message of friendship and healing to us mortals and backs that message up with a series of what the Gospel also calls "signs." (Like the Qur'an's "signs," Jesus' "signs" in the Gospel of John challenge us to recognize God's mercy.) Each time Jesus is met at the best by incomprehension and at the worst by open hostility.

We see this resistance take ominous shape beginning in the sixth chapter after the multiplication of the loaves. Here Jesus