ISLAM

FROM A QUAKER PERSPECTIVE

BY
ANTHONY MANOUSOS

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Wider Quaker Fellowship
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Anthony Manousos and his wife Kathleen along with Dr. Hassan Butt and his family with whom they celebrated "Eid Mubarak," the closing ceremony of Ramadan.

This pamphlet, jointly published by *Friends Bulletin* and the Wider Quaker Fellowship, was written to help facilitate understanding of Islam and Quakerism and to encourage interfaith dialogue and cooperative peace ventures.

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About the Wider Quaker Fellowship

Friends World Committee for Consultation, Section of the Americas, works to facilitate loving understanding of diversities among Friends while we discover together, with God's help, our common spiritual ground, and to facilitate full expression of our Friends' testimonies in the world. Friends World Committee's Wider Quaker Fellowship program is a ministry of literature. Through our mailings of readings, we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages and Quaker traditions, and invite all to enter into spiritual community with Friends.

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PREFACE

This pamphlet is the first in a series that *Friends Bulletin* plans to publish to highlight concerns and perspectives of Western Friends. Not all of the writing that comes to us can be fitted within the limits imposed by a magazine format. Some topics deserve a chance to be presented at length and in a depth that can give a full appreciation of the subject. The subject of this pamphlet, *Islam from a Quaker Perspective,* is such a topic.

The mission of *Friends Bulletin* is "to build the Western Friends Community." We do this by making available to Friends the experience, insights, and work that other Friends have to share. The experience of Anthony Manousos in undertaking an observance of Ramadan and his study of the Qur'an is something that will benefit Friends by increasing their understanding and appreciation of Islam. Muslims can seem strange and different if all we see is our evening news or the stereotypes projected in movies. We need to correct the impressions the media provides. Anthony's experience and study shows Islam to have a human face and a spiritual discipline that can touch and challenge us.

It is a truism that we cannot fully appreciate the culture or religion in which we are immersed if we are never exposed to one that is different. Religious systems embody values, practices, and rules and when we look at one different from our own we can find new ground to make our own better. We may even be enabled to incorporate a practice that can strengthen our faith. Ramadan, a central practice of Islam, is about dedication to and a celebration of faith in a compassionate reality. Friends too know this compassion and we also need to dedicate ourselves and celebrate our faith. I know Friends will gain much by reading about Anthony's experience and learning how to reach out to another faith community.

On behalf of the Board of Directors of *Friends Bulletin* I would like to thank those who donated to the special publication fund that made the printing of this pamphlet possible. We encourage others to donate as the Spirit moves them to invest in this mission.—*Robert Griswold, Clerk,* Friends Bulletin *Board of Directors.*

PART I: OBSERVING RAMADAN

After the tragic events of September 11th, 2001, I felt led to undertake a spiritual discipline that would help me to deal with feelings of grief, anger, and confusion and also to discern where the Spirit was leading me during this troubled time. I decided to fast one day a week until war, or the threat of war, ended.

I chose the Muslim form of fasting—abstaining from food and drink from sunrise to sunset—because I felt it would help me to feel more solidarity with those who belong to what the Quaker writer James Michener called the "world's most misunderstood religion."

On the first day of my fast (Friday, September 14), I read a moving story about Ramadan in a pamphlet by Gene Hoffman, a peace activist who pioneered in "compassionate listening" work in the Middle East. During Ramadan Gene paid a visit on a poor Palestinian family who made her lunch but didn't eat a bite of food. "Why are you doing this for me?" she asked. Their reply touched her heart and mine: "*Ramadan kareem*. 'Ramadan is generous.'"

This and other stories piqued my interest in Ramadan and those who observe it. What are Muslims really like? What can we learn from Islam that can help us in our spiritual work and in our work for peace and justice?

In 1991, during the Gulf War, I made my first serious effort to understand Islam and what is really happening in the Middle East. I incorporated Islamic texts into a world literature course I was teaching at a university. With my wife, who is a Methodist pastor, I co-taught a class on Islam using material recommended for interfaith work, such as R. Marston Spreight's excellent introduction to Islam, *God is One: the Way of Islam* (Friendship Press: NY, 1989). We also studied the work of Father Elias Chacour, the Palestinian priest/peace activist who wrote *Blood Brothers* and *We Belong to the Land*. His works opened our eyes to what was happening in Israel from a Palestinian Christian perspective. I became friends with Sis Levin, who came to work for the American Friends Service Committee's Middle East program in Pasadena, California, during this period. Sis' husband Jerry (a Cable News bureau chief) was held hostage in Beirut in 1984. Sis wrote *Beirut Diary*, a compelling account of her efforts to free her husband and to learn the truth about the Middle East

situation. As a result of her experiences, Sis became an ardent peace activist and worked tirelessly to build bridges of understanding among Christians, Jews, and Muslims. These writers helped to dispel many stereotypes and provided valuable insight.

In this age of religious conflict that threatens to engulf the world in war, I have taken to heart Gandhi's words, which seems more important now than ever: "It is the sacred duty of every individual to have an appreciative understanding of other religions."

From past experience studying Buddhism, I realized that it isn't enough just to read books and study a religion. The best way to understand and appreciate a religion is to practice it, just as the best way to appreciate music is to play it—preferably in the company of other practitioners. Such practice does not require conversion, but immersion. I decided that the best way for me to understand Islam would be to observe Ramadan and to spend time with practicing Muslims.

Ramadan, I learned, is one of Islam's most important holy days—indeed, one of its "Five Pillars," or essential practices. During this month of observances, the Qur'an was first revealed to the Prophet Mohammed through the angel Gabriel. This event is to Muslims what the birth of Christ is to Christians—a revelation and incarnation of God's Word (the Eternal Logos) in human history. It is a solemn as well as joyous occasion. By day, Muslims dedicate themselves to God through the discipline of fasting. By night, they celebrate the benevolence and compassion of God through special prayers and meals. Muslims are also supposed to read the entire Qur'an during this holy month and give liberally to charities.

I began my Ramadan fast on November 17, 2001. In addition to fasting, I also made a commitment to read the entirety of Abdullah Yusuf Ali's monumental work, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, which was highly recommended by Muslims.

During the weeks that followed, I visited both Shi'ite and Sunni mosques and joined in communal prayers. I also incorporated some Muslim prayers into my daily religious practice. I learned to say the opening prayer of the Qur'an in Arabic and English:

In the name of God, the compassionate, the caring,
bi smi llahi r-rahmani r-rahim,
praise be to God , lord sustainer of the worlds
al-hamdu lillahi rabbi l-'alamin

master of the day of reckoning,
maliki yawmi d-din
to you we turn to worship
iyaka na'budu
and to you we turn in time of need
wa iyaka nasta'in
lead us on the straight road
ihdina s-sirata l-mustaqim
the road of those you have given to whom
sirata l-ladina an'amta 'alayhim
not those with anger upon them
ghayri maghdubi 'alayhim
not those who have gone astray.
wa la d-dalin.

This prayer sums up the essence of Islam and is to Muslims what the Lord's prayer is to Christians. Each day I rose before dawn, prayed this and other prayers, ate breakfast, and studied the Qur'an. I prayed at least five times each day, facing north (the direction of Mecca for those in California) and bowing with forehead to the ground in the manner of Muslims.

When I told Muslims that I was observing Ramadan, they were extremely pleased and impressed. They were not only eager to discuss Islam with me, they also wanted to know more about my Quaker faith. Observing Ramadan thus became an opening for what the Quaker scholar and ecumenist Douglas Steere called "mutual irradiation"—the sharing of the "Light that enlightens all men and women" (John 1:9).

The most common reason that Muslims gave for fasting during Ramadan was that it helps us to empathize with those who are poor and don't have enough food and water. Others spoke of self-discipline, or of religious obligation. A Muslim physician and religious leader from Orange County, California, named Maher Hathout pointed out that the ability to fast—to delay gratification—is what distinguishes human beings from animals. It is also a test of faithfulness and integrity since only God knows if we are truly fasting, or sneaking food when no one is looking!

Many Muslims seemed surprised that a non-Muslim American had the self-discipline to fast. Sad to say, we Americans are seen as an extremely self-indulgent people, given to compulsive overeating and to equally compulsive dieting. When we diet, we generally do it for selfish

reasons—to improve our health or our appearance. Fasting, on the other hand, is a discpline that helps us to become *un*-selfish and spiritually healthy. As the Greek Orthodox saint John Chrysostom observed: "Fasting is medicine" (*Homilies*, III. ca. 388 C.E.) Practiced with humility, fasting helps to free us of our addictive behaviors, and can deepen our connection with God and with our fellow human beings—especially with those who are poor and hungry.

I learned this lesson very keenly one afternoon when the hunger pangs became so intense, and my energy level so low, that I had to quit work at four o'clock. I walked to a nearby park to watch the sun set (which seemed to take forever). My throat parched, and my belly rumbling, I realized that I could break my fast and end my discomfort at any time, whereas hundreds of millions of people (most of them children and mothers) don't have this option. That night, after my meal, I sat down and wrote checks to charitable organizations with more joy than I have ever before experienced. Fasting, I discovered, can do wonders to stimulate compassion and the urge to be charitable.

Fasting can also be a humbling experience. I was surprised to learn that most young Muslims are eager to start fasting since it is a mark of adulthood. (Children don't have to fast, nor do the sick, pregnant or nursing women, the frail elderly, and travelers.) A charming story called *Magid Fasts For Ramadan* by Mary Matthews describes how an eight-year-old Muslim boy decides to fast for Ramadan because his big sister has turned twelve and has begun fasting, and he wants to be grown up like her. Because Magid's parents say that he is too young to fast, he secretly feeds his lunch to the ducks. When his parents find out, they take their son aside and tell him that it is admirable for him to want to fast, but it's not healthy for one so young. Besides, the father explains, Muslims must always tell the truth! The fact that many Muslim teenagers feel like Magid and take pride in fasting gave me pause. Whenever I was tempted to give up my fast, I recalled their example and said to myself, "If teens can do it, so can I!"

Muslims who were spiritually mature reminded me that fasting means abstaining not only from food and drink, but also from other habits that intrude upon our relationship with God and our fellow human beings. During Ramadan, I was told, one should abstain from backbiting, judgmentalism, and anger. This proved at times far more challenging than simply skipping lunch.

I was also told that during this holy season one's spiritual life is supposed to be heightened. Prayers uttered during this period "count" more than prayers at any other time, and acts of kindness are supposed to carry more weight with God.

But I liked best what one Muslim mother said: "Ramadan is a time when I try to become a better person." The practice of fasting and prayer certainly made me *want* to become a better person. It also made me more acutely aware of my human foibles, and of my deep need to feel connected with God and with other human beings.

Ramadan and the Qur'an

Ramadan is celebrated because it is the month in which the Angel Gabriel first began to reveal the Qur'an to Mohammed. Qur'an literally means "recitation." Muslims believe that the Qur'an is literally the Word of God, transcribed exactly as it was revealed to the Prophet. Muslim scholar Yusuf Ali observes: "It is the duty of every Muslim—man, woman, or child—to read the Qur'an and understand it according to his own capacity" (xi).

Since reading the entire Qur'an is recommended for all Muslims during Ramdan, I made this a part of my daily practice. It is not an easy work to read or to understand, however. It is written in Arabic which native speakers insist is indescribably beautiful, but which doesn't translate easily. It is also full of subtle cultural allusions that require extensive explication.

One of the works that helped me to appreciate both the poetry and meaning of the Qur'an was Haverford College Professor Michael Sell's *Approaching the Qur'an* (White Cloud Press: Ashland, Oregon, 1999). His recent work on the Qur'an and Islamic culture has attracted considerable attention in the Quaker community as well as in the popular media. *Approaching the Qur'an* deals with the short, mostly early Suras (or chapters), which are lyrical and highly allusive (and at times elusive). Selections from this book were published in pamphlet form by the Quaker Universalist Fellowship. I recommend purchasing the book because it contains a CD with excellent recitations from the Qur'an along with commentaries explaining the cultural background, religious meaning, and poetic effects of the text.

The Qur'an is meant to be recited aloud. In the Muslim world, those who are skilled in reciting the Qur'an are regarded with the respect and

admiration that Westerners accord to master musicians and singers. Listening to the Qur'an recited well is an unforgettable experience, even if you don't know the words. Sells' book makes the music and meaning of the Qur'an come alive for Western readers.

As I read the Qur'an as part of my daily devotions, I came to think of it as similar in many ways to a Beethoven symphony. To appreciate the majestic scope of such a work, we must experience it in its entirety. Themes and motifs appear and reappear in subtle variations, and are re-phrased in different contexts, with different nuances of meaning and emotional tone. We must not only read, but listen to the Qur'an being recited—and we must listen with our hearts as well as minds, as one would to a work of literature or to music. Only then does the beauty and meaning of the Qur'an begin to unfold.

Muslims feel that the Qur'an cannot truly be "translated" at all since it can only be fully understood in Arabic. Therefore, Yusuf Ali's work is not called the Qur'an but rather *The Meaning of the Qur'an*. Ali's version of the Qur'an is a 20th century classic of spirituality and scholarship. Deeply spiritual as well as learned, Ali's commentary contains allusions to British poetry, the Bible, and also the latest discoveries in science.

This work is one that beginners or non-scholars may find a bit overwhelming (it consists of 1,700 pages, in very small print). When I finished reading Ali's *The Meaning of the Qu'ran*, I was reminded of what the 18th century English critic Samuel Johnson said of Milton's *Paradise Lost:* "It is one of the great productions of the human mind, but no man would wish it longer than it is."

The essential message of the Qur'an is clear and simple: there is one God, who is infinitely compassionate, but also infinitely just. We were created to serve and honor God and to render an account of our lives on the Day of Judgment. Those who believe in God and live moral lives will be rewarded (whether they happen to call themselves Muslims, Christians, Jews, or whatever). Those who are disobedient and immoral, or worship many Gods or none, will be punished. The Qur'an also gives detailed instruction relating to the entire gamut of human conduct—worship, war, marriage, divorce, inheritance, punishment for crimes, etc. These rules comprise the Sharia, or Laws, and are the basis of Islamic jurisprudence.

The Qur'an was written for people at all stages of spiritual development. Commentators note that the Arabs were at a very low moral level

when Mohammed appeared as their Prophet. They were addicted to polytheism, infanticide, feuding and vice of the grossest sort. The purpose of the Qur'an is to raise people from the lowest to the highest possible level of spiritual development. For that reason, you find in the Qur'an passages about heaven and hell that are intended primarily for those who need strong incentives to be good and "God-fearing." Other passages are written for those who have internalized their moral imperatives and are seeking a deeper connection with God and their fellow human beings based upon the ethic of love. In the Qur'an one finds teachings that range from the most elementary etiquette ("be sure to knock on the door before entering") to the most sublime ethics.

Eid Mubarak: The "Blessed Celebration"

No discussion of Ramadan would be complete without describing the celebrations that take place each day at sunset, and also at the conclusion of the 30-day fasting period. Ramadan is not a time of repentance like Lent (which commemorates Jesus' 40 days of struggle against temptation in the desert); it is a time of celebration, like the birth of Christ for Christians. When the sun sets, a Muslim is supposed to go to the mosque or to his home and break fast with prayers and special food. Traditionally, Muslims break fast by eating dates and drinking water or milk (as the Prophet is said to have done). There is then a time of prayer, followed by a sumptuous feast called *iftar*.

It was my privilege to celebrate *iftar* at various mosques and also at the home of a Muslim family. I came to know this family through some peace activities I was involved with. When I showed up at a special meeting called by our city's mayor, I met a woman from Kashmir who had just joined the Cultural Affairs Commission. I invited her to speak at one of our Quaker events, and we began meeting to discuss ways of raising awareness about Muslim culture. Soon a friendship developed.

When my wife and I were first invited to her house, I realized that it was the first time I had ever been in the home of a Muslim and experienced Muslim hospitality. Soon after the sun set, we broke fast by eating various fruits and drinking sugared tea (sugar helps to restore one's energy). After some prayers, we ate a feast consisting of various curry dishes and some special foods from Kashmir. The evening was spent in a wide-ranging conversation about everything from religion and politics to family life and customs.

On the final day of Ramadan, I went with this family to celebrate *Eid-ul-Fitr* (one of Islam's two major holidays). When I arrived at their home, I was greeted with *Eid Mubarak* ("Blessed Celebration"). For morning prayers, we drove to a sports arena at the Fair Grounds in Costa Mesa, California. An estimated 14,000 Muslims gathered for this event—of all nationalities and colors, including many Anglo converts. The men and women went their separate ways. We men entered a large hall and lined up facing the north east (the direction of Mecca). There were large screen TVs so that we could see the speaker. The usual upbeat talks were replaced by more somber, reflective sermons. Prayers were said for the victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and the loved ones they left behind. More prayers were uttered for the loss of innocent life in Afghanistan, Palestine, Kashmir and other hot spots around the world. Preachers spoke of their concerns for the erosion of civil liberties in the post-9-11 era, which have hit the American Muslim and Arab-American communities especially hard. This Eid was also different in a few positive ways. American Muslims expressed deep gratitude to Christians who offered support, particularly those who broke bread with their Muslim neighbors by hosting them for the evening fast-breaking meal of Iftar.

One speaker observed, "Now we can only pray together that the rest of the world stumbles upon this simple but powerful formula for peace."

I went home with my host family, had breakfast (my first meal during daylight hours in a month), and watched with delight as the children were given their Ramadan gifts. It felt a lot like Christmas, only there was no tree or special decorations. The presents were not even wrapped (which the kids didn't seem to mind). This simplicity seemed very Quakerly. I felt very much at home, and very thankful to God. In these dark days, the light of Ramadan—and my new Muslim friends—has been a precious gift!

PART II: ARE MUSLIMS FRIENDLY? A THEOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

The question, "Are Muslims Friendly?" holds a double meaning for Quakers (who are also known as "Friends"). It means not only "Are Muslims sociable and hospitable?" but also, "Do Muslims have anything in common with Friends, theologically speaking"?

Even though there are an estimated three to six million Muslims in the US, I couldn't have answered the first question based on personal experience prior to September 11th because I had never actually socialized with Muslims. During my observation of Ramadan, I met with numerous Muslims and found them to be very friendly. They were keenly interested in sharing their faith and also in learning about what Quakers believe. We discovered much common ground, and also some intriguing differences. This interfaith sharing was an extremely rewarding exploration—one that I hope that many others will seek for themselves.

Trying to explain "what Quakers believe" proved challenging because Friends display such diversity of views and because most Friends (the author included) have not taken sufficient pains to learn how to articulate our faith and practice. Indeed, many Friends (especially in the Western USA) have an aversion to theology and see it as potentially divisive, prideful, and "notional."

Nonetheless, I found myself with no option but to express what I knew about Quakerism and to try to see it from a Muslim perspective. Many of the topics I address in this essay were ones that came up for discussion when I went to mosques or visited Muslims in their homes.

As has been noted before, the basic faith and practices of Islam are relatively easy to describe. Friends' faith and practices are much harder to pin down, however. Because we believe in "continuing revelation," and have no formal creed, our religious views and practices have evolved over time. Contemporary Friends range theologically from evangelical Christian to non-theistic universalist. There are at least two main Quaker branches—those who have paid pastors and ascribe to a Christian belief system (so-called pastoral Friends), and those who do not have paid pastors and tend to be universalist/liberal Christian in outlook (unprogrammed Friends). Unprogrammed Friends meet in silence, without any set order of worship, and "wait upon God" to inspire them with uplifting messages or guidance for action. This second group will be the focus of this discussion.

Islam began during a period sometimes described as the "Dark Ages," among a people addicted to polytheism and tribal warfare. The Qur'an's main purpose is to stress the "basics" of monotheism and to instill ethical values leading to unity and peace.

Quakerism emerged in the 17th century during a time of religious war and turmoil, much like what is happening today in certain parts of the

world. One of the major missions of Quakerism has been to take a non-violent approach to conflict, especially religious conflict.

Quakers differed from the vast majority of Christians of that time who believed that only the "elect" (i.e. those chosen by God) would be "saved." Quakers believed that *all* people, even those who have never heard of Christ or the Bible, have a divine spark within them.

Quakers and Muslims both agree that *every* human being—whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or "pagan"—is a child of one universal, loving God and therefore worthy of respect. Muslims believe that God has provided all people with prophets and a "Book" to guide them on the path of Truth. Quakers feel that within every person there is an "Inner Light" that enables us to experience Truth directly and to have a personal relationship with God.

Muslims I spoke with sometimes asked how Quakers felt about the Trinity, the Atonement, and other Christian doctrines. I replied that most unprogrammed Friends (of which I am one) are not interested in such matters. They tend to be practical and to "let their lives speak" rather than speculate about religion.

Unprogrammed Friends often describe their religion as consisting of five *testimonies*: simplicity, peace, equality, integrity and community. *Testimonies* are not dogmas but rather evidences or manifestations of how we put our faith into practice. *Simplicity* means putting aside anything that stands between us and God—whether it be religious images, wealth, "notions," or excessive busy-ness. *Peace* means harmony with the will of God, and includes the concept of social justice. *Equality* is based on the idea that there is "that of God" in every one and therefore every human being deserves to be treated with equal respect and dignity. *Integrity* means that our deeds must match our words. *Community* is the basis for our spiritual practice—it is the place where we test our insights, commune with God and each other, and seek to follow the leadings of the Spirit.

Keeping these beliefs and testimonies in mind, let's look at some of the similarities and differences between Quakers and Muslims.

Simplicity. Muslims, like Quakers, seek to simplify religion and to integrate it with everyday life. Yusuf Ali, translator and author of *The Meaning of the Qur'an*, saw parallels between Islam and the Protestant movement from which Quakerism emerged: "The Protestantism of the 16th century gave a fresh stimulus to the main ideas for which Islam stands, *viz.* the abolition of priestcraft, the right of private judgement, the simpli-

fication of ritual, and the insistence upon the simple, practical, everyday duties of life" (p. 998).

Simplicity is reflected in the Quaker style of worship and worship place. A Quaker meetinghouse, like a mosque, is extremely plain. There are no crosses, no religious symbols or representations of any kind. There are also no set prayers or order of worship, and no priest or paid minister. The Quaker practice is to free the mind from any distractions so that it can focus on Truth and be led by God's Holy Spirit.

Peace. Muslims insist that Islam is a peaceful religion, and that its very name suggests "peace." *Islam* (which means "Surrender") is derived from the Arabic word *Salaam*, which is used today as a greeting among Muslims (*Salaamu alaikum*, which means "Peace be with you"). To become a Muslim one must "make peace with" or "surrender to" God.

Islam is not a pacifist religion, however. Most Muslims I met point out that the Qur'an permits the use of violence for self-defense if one's religion, home or family is attacked. Muslims are enjoined by the Qur'an to struggle against oppression and injustice. "You may kill those who kill you, and you may evict them whence they evicted you. Oppression is worse than murder" (2:154).

It is important to note, however, that the Qur'an imposes strict limitations on the use of violence. In *Reading the Muslim Mind*, Hassan Hathout (a well-respected Muslim leader in the Los Angeles area) observes that the Qur'anic rules of war forbid Muslims from harming houses of worship (non-Muslim as well as Muslim), or even the trees or animals of one's enemy. Under such stringent rules, it would be morally wrong for a Muslim to crash land into the World Trade Center, or for the US to drop a bomb on Hiroshima or on Afghanistan. Hathout concludes: "Since modern war is so devastating, war itself should cease to be an option in conflict resolutions. War should be obsolete just like slavery!" (p. 102).

The word *jihad*, as used by some Muslim groups and by the Western media, is sometimes translated "holy war." Moderate Muslims are disturbed by this usage and point out that the word in Arabic means "struggle," not "holy war." When Mohammed returned from a battle, he is said to have told his followers: "We have left the minor *jihad*, now we must begin the major *jihad*"—meaning the moral struggle within one's soul is far more important than the struggle on the battle field. For most Muslims, this moral struggle is the true meaning of *jihad*.

Although the Qur'an condones violence in self-defense, it holds up reconciliation as the highest goal: "Repel evil with what is better, then will the one with whom there is enmity become an intimate friend" (41:34). This recalls Jesus' words: "Do not resist an evildoer, but if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other one also" (Matt 5:39).

Quakers and Muslims would both agree that when we turn our enemies into friends through "what is better," i.e. non-violent means, we are acting in accordance with the highest teachings of our religion.

Integrity. Quakers originally called themselves the Religious Society of Friends of Truth. Truth-telling, or veracity, has always been an essential part of Quaker witness. This is one reason that Quakers refuse to swear an oath to tell the truth: we are supposed to tell the truth *at all times*, and not simply under oath.

Islam also places great emphasis on truthfulness and integrity. In the *Hadith* (a collection of Mohammed's sayings), the Prophet was asked; "Could a believer ever be a coward?" and he answered, "Maybe." "Could a believer ever be miserly?" the Prophet was asked, and he answered, "Maybe." But when asked, "Could a believer be a liar," the Prophet answered, "No. Never!" (quoted by Hathout, p. 83).

Community. Although Quakers believe that each individual must find his or her direct encounter with the Divine, they feel just as strongly that we must ground ourselves in a spiritual community committed to the discovery of Truth. For this reason, Quakerism has sometimes been described as a form of "group mysticism."

While Muslims believe that each individual is directly responsible for his or her relationship with God, they also feel a deep commitment to the community, or *umma.* Indeed, one of the primary missions of Islam is to lead all believers into a unified community that transcends tribe, nation, and race.

Equality: A core belief of both Muslims and Quakers is that each person is equal in the sight of God. As a result of this conviction, Quakers have been on the forefront of movements to end slavery and to insure equal rights for women, people of color, and the oppressed.

Most contemporary Muslims, especially in the United States, believe that it was the original intent of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammed to promote equality and discourage discrimination based upon sex, race, or national origin. Many current practices associated with Muslims, such as the wearing of veils by women, are regarded as culturally based customs

rather than religious obligations. They note that Islam originally granted women the right to hold property and to file for divorce—rights that women in Christian lands did not possess for many centuries.

Christ as Messenger/Savior. Muslims believe that Jesus, like Abraham and Moses, was a great prophet (or Divine Messenger), but not God or the biological offspring of God. While Muslims revere Mary and Jesus, and regard Jesus' teachings as divinely inspired, they feel that it is blasphemous to worship Jesus rather than God or to consider Jesus as equivalent to God.

Many liberal Friends would agree with these Muslim views. They do not believe that Jesus was literally the "Son of God" or that he died on the cross as a propitiatory offering for humanity's sins. Instead, they are apt to regard Jesus as an inspired teacher or as an incarnation of Divine Love and Truth. While they do not worship Jesus, they take very seriously his teachings, particularly his injunction to "love our enemies" and "turn the other cheek." In this respect, unprogrammed Quakers have more in common with Muslims than with traditional Christians and Christ-centered Friends.

Aversion to Theological Controversy. The Qur'an makes it very clear that theological hair-splitting and disputation are to be avoided: "And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation)....". As noted previously, modern Quakers also seek to avoid theological disputes. Rather than try to convert others through argument, the Quaker motto is "let your life speak."

Even though Quakers and Muslims differ on many points of theology as well as on some social issues, we agree on many essentials. As we become better acquainted with each other and with our faith traditions, we may find that apparent differences are not as important as they first appear. As George Fox once said: "The Lord has many ways to lead His people...." Commenting on the fact that not all prophets and messengers are mentioned in the Qur'an (40:78), Yusuf Ali writes: "We must recognize the Truth wherever we find it" (p. 1225).

PART III: QUAKER/MUSLIM RELATIONS: SOME HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

During this time of conflict between the Islamic and non-Islamic world, many thoughtful persons are studying history to understand the root causes

of our current problems. The history of Muslim/Christian relations has been extremely problematic, but there have been some bright spots—particularly as far as Quakers are concerned—that bode well for the future.

During the 17th century, Quaker missionaries went out over the whole world, including Muslim nations, to share their vision of the Inward Light and Universal Truth. Some of the these valiant missionaries were women like Mary Fisher. She voyaged to Turkey to tell the Sultan and his Court about "the Truth." When asked what she thought of Mohammed, she replied "that she knew him not, but Christ enlightened every man who came into the world. Him she knew...And concerning Mahomet,' she said, 'they might judge him false or true according to the words and prophecies he spoke." The Turks acknowledged this to be a reasonable response, and she was well treated. In fact, she was treated far better in Turkey than she would have been treated in New England during this same period, where being a Quaker was punishable by imprisonment, flogging, or death.

Throughout the 17th century, Muslims and Christians engaged in what today would be called "low intensity warfare." They sometimes captured each other's ships and made slaves of their captives, subjecting them to cruel treatment. It therefore seems remarkable, indeed almost miraculous, that a Quaker named Thomas Lurting successfully used non-violent means to avoid being sold into slavery when he and his crew were captured by Turks in the year 1663.

Instead of resisting his Turkish captors, Lurting responded with friendliness and cooperation. He was so courteous, and so fearless, that the Turks were lulled into a false sense of security. On the second night, after the Turkish captain had retired, it began to rain. Lurting persuaded each of the Turkish guards to go to sleep. When they were all asleep, he took their weapons.

At this point, the Christian crew again wanted to butcher the Turks, but Lurting insisted that no blood be spilled.

When the Turks realized that these peculiar English Christians would not hurt or enslave them, they became willing to help. Lurting gave them free run of the ship, which caused some of the English sailors to grumble. The Quaker replied, "They are strangers. I must treat them well."

When the ship reached a place near a Muslim town about fifty miles from Algiers, Lurting let the Turks loose on shore and even provided them with bread and other necessities. On shore, Lurting wrote, "the Turks all embraced me very kindly."

This story was published and became widely known in England. Perhaps this is what William Penn (Quaker leader and son of a well-known English admiral) had in mind when he wrote: "Let us try what love can do, for if people see that we do love, they would not harm us." This nonviolent approach is one that Quakers have used—and have tried to teach—for the past three hundred fifty years in various situations of conflict.

Friends' outreach in the Middle East began in 1889 when a Quaker school for Palestinian girls was started in the village of Ramallah, ten miles north of Jerusalem. This school was expanded to include boys in 1901, and eventually included a baby clinic and Friends Meeting. The Ramallah Friends School now has over 950 students who receive an education in English and Arabic.

The American Friends Service Committee (which was started to provide alternative service for conscientious objectors during World War I) undertook relief work in Syria in 1922 and has continued to work for relief, reconciliation and justice in this region ever since. In 1948, under the auspices of the United Nations, the AFSC established the Gaza Strip program to provide food, clothing, tents and medical care to the 250,000 Palestinian Arab refugees. The AFSC later worked under the auspices of the Israeli government to establish a similar program to help Palestinian Arabs in Western Galilee.

Because the American Friends Service Committee aided both Jewish and Palestinian refugees, and because Quakers were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1948, they came to be widely trusted by all parties in this highly volatile region. Just before the British withdrew from Palestine, Harold Evans, an AFSC staff person, nearly became mayor of Jerusalem!

Since 1949 the AFSC has been involved in numerous development and peacemaking activities in the Middle East. From 1990 to 1993, the AFSC provided funds and material assistance to the Gulf region following the Gulf War. It has actively campaigned to end the Iraqi sanctions and has engaged in numerous efforts to bring together Israelis and Palestinians interested in promoting an "enduring peace" based on justice.

Not only the AFSC, but individual Friends have also traveled to the Middle East and worked for peace and justice. Among them is a veteran Quaker peace activist from Santa Barbara, California, named Gene Hoffman. Using techniques she had learned in counseling, Hoffman listened deeply to the Israeli and Palestinian points of view. She found that the practice of listening non-judgmentally helped to create a climate of

understanding (if not agreement). She called it "compassionate listening." Listening deeply to all sides in a conflict situation may be one of Quakerism's most important contributions to peacemaking.

VISIONING A FUTURE WITHOUT "HOLY WAR"

As the shadow of terrorism looms large in the American consciousness, it is easy to fall prey to fears of unending war and impending environmental catastrophe. Such fears may paralyze us, or lead us to take actions that are counterproductive. That is why it is important to take time for prayer (and perhaps fasting as well) to discern where the Spirit is leading us during these difficult times.

What observing Ramadan has taught me is that by reaching out to those in a different faith tradition, we can begin to take those small, but necessary first steps that can bring us closer to peace. As a Friend, I believe, and try to practice, what Fatma Reda once observed: Peace is achieved one person at a time, through a series of friendships" (quoted in *The Little Book of Peace*, Patricia J. Chui, editor, p. 28).

Ending the longstanding conflicts that have divided Christians, Muslims, and Jews will not be easy, but it was not easy to end the Cold War, either. The Berlin Wall fell, and the Cold War ended, in part because "ordinary" people of the East and West took risks, reached out in friendship to one another, and were unwilling to let the politics of fear divide us.

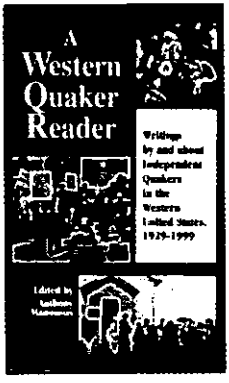
Reconciliation between Christians, Muslims, and Jews will require an even greater effort by people of faith willing to reach out beyond their comfort zones to build bridges of understanding and friendship. It will require the work of scholars and religious leaders willing to listen to each other and to find common ground. Finally, it will require the work of enlightened political leaders willing to take risks to create a compassionate and just peace in the Middle East.

This work will probably not be completed in our lifetime. The forces promoting fear and militarism, and profiting from terrorism, are powerful and determined. But it behooves us to seek Divine Guidance, to begin where we are, and to do whatver we can to make this world a place where people of all faiths can live together in peace. Observing Ramadan, and seeking to understand the Spirit that inspired it, can be a small, Friendly step in this direction.□

About the author: ANTHONY MANOUSOS *joined the Religious Society of Friends in 1985 and is currently editor of* Friends Bulletin, *official publication of Independent Western Quakers. He also edited A* Western Quaker Reader: Writings By and About Western Independent Quakers, 1929-1999.

Manousos has been involved in numerous Friends' projects. During the 1980s he helped to edit a Quaker-inspired anthology of writings by Soviet and American writers called The Human Experience *which was jointly published in the USA and the former USSR in 1989. This effort at citizen diplomacy is described in a Pendle Hill pamphlet called* Spiritual Linkage with Russians: the Story of a Leading *(1991). In 1993 Manousos helped to start a youth service program under the auspices of the American Friends Service Committee and has led youth and adults on service projects to Mexico, the Soviet Union, and other places. He has published numerous articles in Quaker magazines.*

He is married to a Methodist minister whom he met at Pendle Hill, a Quaker study center near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. They currently live in Torrance, California.



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