

ISLAMOPHOBIA

*What Christians Should Know (and Do)
about Anti-Muslim Discrimination*

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INTRODUCTION

In the dark of night, outside a small mosque in Nashville, Tennessee, an unknown vandal shook a canister of spray paint, the clacking sound bouncing off the white brick walls. The person cast a blood-red stream across the building, spraying its exterior and windows with a hostile message that would greet the congregants of the Al-Farooq Mosque when they arrived the next morning: “MUSLIMS GO HOME.” The vandal committed the act just days after a local news program had aired a sensationalist film about the dangers of “homegrown jihad,”¹ putting a spotlight on a nearby Muslim community and making unfounded claims that they had connections to terrorist groups.

When congregants of Al-Farooq pulled up to the mosque the next day for their morning prayers, they found more: a series of interlocking crosses, undoubtedly a Christian symbol, spray-painted on the side of the building. A letter was also left there, which reportedly referred to Muslims as “friends of Satan” and as a “threat” to the United States.² The community was shaken up, but fortunately their neighbors sprang into action to help. An administrator at Belmont University, a nearby Christian college, quickly reached out to the mosque’s leadership. He said, “It was just terrible that the cross, a sign of God’s love for us, was used to terrorize, once again, a minority community here in Tennessee”—it had not been the first time.³ The administrator offered to have Belmont pay for the materials to remove the graffiti, and he and others from the area quickly scrubbed it away and repainted the walls a crisp white. Thanking the community for their support, the mosque leadership noted that while the vandal had tried to drive a wedge between Christians and Muslims, the act had ultimately brought them closer together.

This story reflects much of what this book is about: the prejudice and discrimination that Muslims have faced, the way Christians have contributed to it, and the moral and faith-filled duty that Christians are called to play in upending Islamophobia.

A Christian Calling

Throughout the twenty-first century, in the United States, Europe, and beyond, Muslims have arrived at their houses of worship to find them vandalized or destroyed. Attackers with racist views have opened fire on Muslims

while they were gathered for worship. Politicians have made anti-Muslim fearmongering the centerpiece of their election campaigns, drumming up bigotry to justify war or military spending. Muslim mothers and fathers have been verbally or physically assaulted while going about their daily lives, and Muslim children bullied by classmates. Governments and law enforcement agencies have put Muslims under special scrutiny, in some cases effectively criminalizing their religious practice and stripping them of their human and civil rights. Muslims have faced these forms of Islamophobia for a long time, but for many Christians—especially those like me who are American and White—the tragic reality of anti-Muslim prejudice and discrimination has often gone unnoticed, or has only recently appeared on our radar.

Islamophobia is not aimed at Christians.⁴ Yet because it inflicts harm upon members of the human family, it is something that we are called by God and our faith to address. Religious discrimination, in whatever form it takes and whomever it targets, is a grave injustice. We know this not just as human beings, but because of our faith as Christians. It goes against our most basic Christian value of love of neighbor, and our conviction that each and every person is equally beloved by God, possessing a dignity that cannot be taken away and must be respected in all realms of life. Mistreating people because of their religion is an affront to that dignity and the image of God that they bear. As the Catholic Church declared at its Second Vatican Council, “there is no basis”⁵ for discrimination or harassment against individuals or groups due to their religious affiliation; it is “foreign to the mind of Christ.”⁶ Muslims are by no means the only group to face religious bigotry. In a range of contexts both in the United States and abroad, Christians, Jews, Sikhs, and many other groups have been subjected to this kind of mistreatment. No matter who is targeted, prejudice and discrimination based on religious affiliation are wrong.

Despite this, Christians have contributed to anti-Muslim prejudice and discrimination, even justifying it through the language of our faith. Pastors and ministers make false and uncharitable claims about Muslims. Christian politicians and social media personalities advocate for policies that would discriminate against Muslims. Vandals target mosques and mark their destruction with Christian symbols. Sometimes Christians even advocate for or carry out violence against Muslims. Islamophobia is perpetuated by Christians in more subtle ways, too—by our offhanded comments, by negative assumptions we may have about Muslims in our midst, by our voting habits and the donations we give (or don’t give) to political interest groups, and by closing off our hearts to the humanity and suffering of our Muslim siblings in faith. Most often, we contribute to Islamophobia unintentionally, thanks to the untrue ideas and latent biases about Muslims that we hold. We are often unaware that

we hold these, and the fact that we have them is not entirely our fault, as they are ingrained in many aspects of society. Still, they negatively impact the way we think and even the way we act.

In my own personal circles of Christian family and friends, I have witnessed this range of Islamophobia. Family members have expressed support for discriminatory or harmful measures toward Muslims, relatives have mocked Muslims and spoken of them as if they are of lesser value than we are, priests have sowed suspicion and fear rather than love and fraternity, and friends have echoed stereotypical views without realizing it. I myself struggle with my own biases about Muslims and the way that my day-to-day actions and position in society contribute to Islamophobia, both in its interpersonal and systemic forms.

These realities in our Christian communities give rise to a second reason why we are called to care about Islamophobia—because Christian communities have often built it up in the first place. Islamophobia, as both a prejudicial ideology and a discriminatory state of affairs, is very often generated and perpetuated by Christian individuals and communities.⁷ Because we are caught up in this problem, we have a responsibility to learn about Islamophobia and to work to break it down.⁸ We must always look to Muslims for guidance in this endeavor, learning from their expertise and experiences—yet the task of addressing Islamophobia ultimately falls to us. As people on the receiving end of bigotry, Muslims should not have to advocate for themselves alone, nor spend their time educating us about why we should not fear them. Instead, we are the ones with the work to do. Combating Islamophobia is not “Muslims’ problem,” but rather our calling. Fortunately, many of us are coming to realize the harm of Islamophobia, to reckon with the fact that our Christian communities have contributed to it, and to respond to it. Drawing on the best of our faith tradition, countless Christians are already harnessing the core Christian values of love of God and love of neighbor to break down prejudice and discrimination and build up communities of hospitality and love.

Purpose and Structure of the Book

Written for a Christian audience, this book provides an introduction to the problem of Islamophobia, highlights its manifestations in Christian contexts, and offers ways for Christians to address it through the lens of our faith. In the last several years, numerous books about Islamophobia have been published, some written for academics and others for a more public audience. I draw on many of them here and am indebted to them for shaping my thinking. But this is the first book written specifically for Christians that seeks to comprehensively address Islamophobia.

In Part I, I give an overview of the issue, drawing on academic literature, media reports, and personal stories to offer a general picture of Islamophobia. Though this overview primarily focuses on the United States, where I live, it is not limited to the United States, since Islamophobia crosses national borders and is a globalized issue. In chapter 1, I give a definition of the word *Islamophobia*, which I understand as the *prejudice and discrimination that targets people based on their perceived association with Islam and Muslims*. I discuss the history of the word, the need for a term to name anti-Muslim prejudice and discrimination, and the stereotypes that fuel it. The term *Islamophobia* has only gained wide currency in recent years, but the phenomenon and its impact on individuals and communities long precede the word's use in popular discourse. In chapter 2, I look at the recent history of Islamophobia in the United States, showing how it has become more blatant and concerted, and offering a range of examples of how it has impacted the daily lives of Muslims. Chapter 3 looks at how—contrary to many people's expectations—Islamophobia is perpetuated on both the right and left of the American political spectrum. That chapter also explores the way Islamophobia extends around the world, beyond the bounds of what we call “the West.” Chapter 4 examines how people who are not Muslim often get caught in the crosshairs of Islamophobia, how Islamophobia overlaps with and connects to other forms of discrimination, and how Muslims and other groups have been similarly scapegoated. In chapter 5, I shed light on manifestations of Islamophobia that often go unrecognized. Like other forms of racism, Islamophobia is not just overt or apparent bigotry. It is also systemic and subtle—sometimes elaborately orchestrated and other times completely unintentional. In the sixth and final chapter of Part I, I address many of the common stereotypes about Muslims and the questions often asked of them. I also consider some of the broader problems in our public discourse on Islam, as well as the faulty understandings about religion in general that contribute to prejudicial thinking toward Muslims.

I hope these several chapters can be a strong foundation for understanding Islamophobia, allowing readers to come away not only knowing names and events, but also having tools and frameworks for identifying Islamophobia, regardless of its purveyor or setting. Readers will also see how Islamophobia is not a new phenomenon. Though many people first started recognizing the reality of Islamophobia during the 2016 U.S. presidential election or amid the rise of anti-immigrant political parties in Europe, it stretches back long before that, even prior to the attacks of September 11, 2001. Part I is intended to be accessible to readers approaching this topic for the first time, while still relevant for academic contexts. This portion of the book could be read on its own by both Christians and non-Christians as an introduction to Islamophobia.

In Part II, I look at the role Christian communities specifically have played in contributing to Islamophobia. In recent years, more and more books about Islamophobia have been published, a number of them discussing Islamophobia among Christians. But these have primarily focused on Evangelical Protestant communities, often leaving out discussion of other Christian denominations. Because I am Catholic and have focused much of my work on Catholic-Muslim relations, I dedicate considerable space in chapter 7 to Islamophobia in Catholic communities, seeking to fill the gap left by the existing material. In chapter 8, I dig into the long history of Muslim-Christian relations to shed light on the roots of contemporary Islamophobia, looking at how Muslims were treated in Christian-majority contexts, as well as how Christians throughout history have viewed Muslims and thought about Islam. In both chapters of Part II, I demonstrate how Christian religious discourse has been used to justify prejudice and discrimination against Muslims, as well as how Christian identity has often been constructed over and against Muslims. While many Christians are familiar with ways that Muslims have mistreated us throughout history and in the present day,⁹ we often have less exposure to the ways we have brought harm upon them.

Despite the Part II focus on Christians, Islamophobia is, of course, not solely a Christian issue. The problem of Islamophobia does indeed have a unique relationship with European Christian communities, which we explore later. But Islamophobia is a problem in other faith communities and among nonreligious people as well, including Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and atheists. As a systemic issue and a phenomenon that is woven into society more broadly, Islamophobia spans religious traditions, even while there are indeed unique manifestations of it that arise in some communities more than others. (For example, the Islamophobic ideas circulated by many in the New Atheist movement are in some respects different from anti-Muslim views held by Evangelical Christians.) This book should not be read as blaming Christianity for Islamophobia. There is not something baked into Christianity as a religion that would necessarily make Christians more Islamophobic than nonreligious people or people of other faiths. Though Islamophobia is often engendered and upheld by Christians, and some Christians do put forth interpretations that attempt to justify Islamophobia, it does not have to be that way. We can tread a different path, and many Christians are already doing so.

Few existing books on Islamophobia view it through the lens of Christian faith,¹⁰ so this book seeks to do that in Part III. Much can be drawn from the Christian tradition to craft a concerted response to Islamophobia today: stories in the Bible, examples of interreligious solidarity throughout history, Catholic social teaching, and our highest values of love of God and neighbor. In chapter 9, I highlight the principles and teachings from our Christian

faith that can be harnessed to forge a positive way forward in our personal and collective relationships with Muslims. In chapter 10, I offer guidance on how we can wed our religious convictions with effective methods to address Islamophobia, highlighting the numerous ways that Christians from a range of denominations are already doing so inside the church and beyond it. I draw on wisdom from Muslim activists and scholars, as well as insights from the social sciences, particularly behavioral economics. Bringing these latter perspectives to bear on the Christian conversation about Islamophobia is one of the things that makes this book unique. I hope that this combination of approaches can allow our response to Islamophobia to be not only principled and faith-filled, but also effective and lasting.

Overall, this book attempts to give a bird's-eye view of Islamophobia, while also putting forward a Christian response to it and providing concrete ways to live out that mission. I hope readers come away from the book not only having learned something, but also better equipped to challenge Islamophobia and to build up a more loving world.

Why Me?

For the broader reasons outlined above, Islamophobia is something I have felt called to address through scholarship, dialogue, and education. But my own personal calling to address Islamophobia occurred in the spring of 2008, on a Sunday afternoon in Indianapolis, when a chain email arrived in my inbox. The message had been circulated by many kind and well-respected individuals in my Catholic parish community. But the email was an Islamophobic one, portraying Muslims as a group not to be trusted, saying that they were becoming “our enemy” for their supposed failure to speak up against “fanatics.” Ordinary Muslims, the anonymous author wrote, are “irrelevant”; instead, “we must pay attention to the only group that counts . . . the fanatics who threaten our way of life.” The author then urged readers to send the email to as many people as they could, claiming that not forwarding it meant complicity in this problem.

As I read the email, a sinking feeling grew in my stomach. The suspicion and blame the email cast on Muslims was unfair and untrue, and it sought to engender fear toward people like my Muslim classmates at the local Catholic high school I attended at the time. My concern and distress over the contents of the email itself were compounded by the fact that it was circulated by good, faithful Catholics. The people who sent around the email, including close family friends, were well-intentioned people active in my parish. In sending the email along, they were not in any way meaning to cause harm. They likely thought that sharing the message with others was helping to solve a problem of ignorance, rather than furthering bigotry.

That email was not the first manifestation of Islamophobia I had encountered. As I watched the presidential election campaigns playing out that year, I had begun to recognize the ways that politicians—even back then in 2008—were sowing misunderstanding and fear of Muslims. It was a problem that already concerned me, at least in an abstract way. But receiving that chain email brought the troubling reality of Islamophobia—which I didn't even have a word for at the time—into clear and present relief. Though I only knew a few Muslims and had yet to study Islam or Islamophobia formally, I felt the impact of the email in a deeply personal way. The email not only said something about Muslims, it also said something about *us*—the Catholic Christian community that approved of the message enough to forward it along. It demonstrated a deep disconnect between the values we professed and the way we sometimes failed to live them out.

The experience of receiving this anti-Muslim chain email was a moment of personal calling for me, and it engendered a vocation that has since been nurtured by my Christian faith and my friendships with Muslims. This book is an outgrowth of those experiences, as well over as a decade of study and work on Muslim-Christian relations. After attending Catholic schools in Indiana, I obtained my undergraduate degree at Georgetown's Walsh School of Foreign Service in Washington, DC, where I studied Arabic, the Middle East, and both Islam and Christianity. I was very involved with the Muslim student group on campus, participated in numerous Catholic ministries, and led an interfaith group. During that time, I also gained professional experience interning at the Council on American-Islamic Relations and at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, both in Washington. After studying abroad in Amman, Jordan, during my undergraduate years, I returned to the country (which, perhaps providentially, shares my name) a year later on a Fulbright scholarship. Funded by a yearlong State Department research grant, I studied how everyday interactions between Christians and Muslims in Jordan were impacted by Christian television media, particularly by the rise of American-funded Christian stations and their (often negative) portrayal of Islam. Back in the United States, I worked as a researcher for three years at the Georgetown-based Bridge Initiative, where I studied Islamophobia, writing on the range of manifestations of anti-Muslim prejudice and discrimination. I devoted particular attention to Christian (especially Catholic) views of Islam and Muslims, and to how Islamophobia had become normalized in some Christian contexts. Currently, I am pursuing a doctorate in theology and religious studies at Georgetown, having received an M.A. in the same program. (These experiences have afforded me a unique and informed perspective on Islamophobia, but as a White, Christian female living in the United States, I am not directly impacted by Islamophobia or other related forms of discrimination—a fact that surely limits what I can know and convey to others about the phenomenon.)

Some of my fellow Christians are puzzled by my career trajectory, but its motivations are not too different from my peers who devote their energies in other realms. Christian faith informs countless other personal vocations that Christians live out; I have friends and family members who work to remedy problems like climate change, mass incarceration, and healthcare inequality, or who serve others through professions like medicine, physical therapy, and teaching. Similarly, the need to break down Islamophobia is not unrelated or tangential to our faith commitments as Christians. As the Catholic Church has affirmed in its Vatican II statement on other religious communities, “We cannot truly pray to God the Father of all if we treat any people as other than sisters and brothers, for all are created in God’s image.”¹¹ The temptation to overlook Muslims’ inherent human dignity is damaging to Christian faith and its authentic expression in our daily lives. Yet the work of dismantling Islamophobia affords us the opportunity to live out the gospel message we profess with even greater integrity. At my church growing up, we would often sing a song with the refrain,

*And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love
Yes they’ll know we are Christians by our love!*

I have written this book in the hope that my Christian faith community can better live out this ideal.

Threats, Harassment, and Fear

Unfolding a piece of paper left in her school cubby, a ten-year-old girl found a sinister accusation scrawled inside—“You’re a terrorist,” it said. The next week, this young Muslim girl living in the Boston suburbs found a second note in the same place. This time it was a threat—“I will kill you.”¹² Reduced to a dehumanizing caricature that did not resemble her nor anyone she knew, the usually upbeat girl felt a justified sense of terror.

Her family was understandably stunned at this threat of mortal violence, and her fifth-grade teacher was heartbroken, too, that a classmate (or, even worse, a teacher) would do such a thing. In the eyes of the anonymous person who left the note, the girl was seen not for who she is—caring, funny, and smart—but instead as someone defined by the heinous actions of a few who claim to share her Muslim faith. On these crumpled pieces of note paper, the girl’s humanity and individuality were written off in a few words. And the fact that her fellow Muslims in the United States and throughout the world live out their faith in widely diverse yet ordinary ways was overlooked, too.

Nearly two decades earlier, on a fall morning in 2001, teenager Nazir Harb Michel was combing his hair in front of his bedroom mirror, listening to an oldies station before heading off to his high school. Before he could finish, the music was interrupted by a breaking news update. A feeling of shock overcame him as the journalist reported on commercial airliners crashing into New York City's two tallest towers and into the Pentagon building just outside Washington, DC—centers of U.S. financial and military power. Eventually, Americans would come to learn that the perpetrators were Arab Muslims who were part of a terrorist group called Al-Qaeda, which killed close to three thousand Americans on September 11, 2001.

In the days and weeks that followed, Nazir—a Muslim who is Arab and Latino—found himself made fun of, ostracized, and with fewer friends. Classmates he had socialized with before the attacks no longer sat with him at lunch, and a Christian friend he had had since childhood gave him a sneering look that said, *How could you?*, as if Nazir had committed the horrific crime. His social studies teacher, who had previously fostered Nazir's learning about Islam, openly asked him, "How could you belong to a community that would do this?" Nazir had grown up in a mixed Muslim-Christian household, but had only formally accepted his Muslim faith a few months prior to 9/11. Now he was constantly expected to speak on behalf of his entire faith tradition, as the representative of over 1.7 billion people. That pressure, and the suspicion he felt from others, has not dissipated in the almost two decades since 9/11. And it would come to have more devastating impacts on his family—in 2005, his uncle was killed in a hate crime.¹³

As these stories convey, it is deeply unfair and unjust to define Muslims by their religion's worst adherents. The young girl outside Boston and Nazir, like their fellow Muslims everywhere, are not less deserving of fair treatment because of the horrible actions of a few of those who share their religious identity. Yet this troubling and false logic often underpins the way that many people think about Muslims today, and it leads to threats, harassment, hate crimes, and institutionalized discrimination. As Christians, we know that when some of our fellow Christians do something wrong and immoral—even if they claim to do it out of their religious convictions—it does not warrant treating our entire community as if we have committed the same crime. In our own Christian tradition, many of us look at groups like the Westboro Baptist Church, the Ku Klux Klan, or the White Christian supremacist groups that have proliferated in recent years and see interpretations of the faith that are radically at odds with our own.

Yet we often fail to carry over this perspective when we think about Muslims. Even among Christians who recognize that religious bigotry is morally wrong, questions still linger: *Isn't Islamophobia justified? Don't we have*

good reason to fear Islam, and to treat Muslims differently? Aren't Muslims more dangerous and utterly different from the rest of us? The fact that these questions arise in us is understandable. Many of us do not know Muslims personally, and the news media often show us militants rather than ordinary people trying to live their lives. On top of that, we constantly hear from best-selling authors and well-paid pundits that “they,” Muslims, are nothing like “us.”

But what we know from our experience as Christians is also true of Muslims. Though some Muslims invoke or express their faith tradition in harmful ways—and they are the ones who often make headlines—many others do so in ways that contribute positively to the human family. Muslims are a large religious community, second only to Christians globally in size. They are not a uniform or monolithic bloc, but rather just as diverse as Christians around the world. Muslims interpret and live out their faith in a range of ways, so much so that two people who call themselves Muslim might have widely divergent practices and nearly opposite views on some matters. The militants we hear about in the news do not represent or reflect the vast majority of Muslims, who live quiet lives amid struggles common to all human beings.

In some places and contexts, Muslim militant groups or individuals have indeed harmed and mistreated Christians and other religious groups—not to mention their fellow Muslims, who are by far the largest share of their victims.¹⁴ In the mid- to late 2010s, the self-styled “Islamic State,” also known as ISIS, committed atrocities against Christian communities and other groups in areas of Iraq and Syria where ISIS had taken power. During this period, individuals claiming affiliation with ISIS also targeted Christians in places like Nigeria and France, while scores of Christian worshippers in Egypt and Sri Lanka have been killed during church services in bombing attacks by other militants who were Muslim.¹⁵ The fact of these tragic and brutal events does not mean, however, that all or most Muslims are committing acts of violence or are intent on doing something similar. Only a tiny sliver of the Muslim population globally has been involved in militant activities—statistically speaking, only a small fraction of a single percentage point of the global Muslim community. Far too often, we wrongly assume that most Muslims share the same motives and intentions as the militants covered in news programs. But this erroneous thinking can have dangerous consequences, leading to tangible forms of anti-Muslim discrimination and collective blaming, such as the harassment, threats, and even violence endured by Muslims like Nazir, his late uncle, and the anonymous fifth-grader in Massachusetts.

The egregious actions and ideas of militant groups like ISIS or Al-Qaeda stand in stark contrast to the views and values of the vast majority of Muslims worldwide. Muslim theologians and religious leaders around the globe have strongly condemned the brutality and ideology of these groups, though their

vocal outcry is not often covered by mainstream media outlets. One such condemnation came in the form of an open letter to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS. Over two hundred senior Muslim scholars and leaders around the world signed the letter, which outlined how ISIS violated Islamic norms and values.¹⁶ This letter was only one of myriad condemnations of terrorist groups that Muslims have issued in the last two decades. Friends and colleagues of mine who are Muslim have also expressed their sadness and frustration that Christians often presume they would agree with the actions of militant groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda. On the contrary, their faith motivates them to enact justice and goodness in the world.

Oftentimes, both in popular media and public discourse, harmful acts committed by Muslims are explained as being motivated “by religion.” Boiling these events down to solely “religious” motivations is inaccurate, as I discuss in more depth later in this book. A host of other factors related to political, social, and economic power, as well as human psychology, play into conflicts, even those that sometimes break down across lines of religious identity. The idea that “Islam is the problem” is not only a flawed way of diagnosing the issue, but it also wrongly leads us to view Muslims as a whole with suspicion.

To reiterate, the fact that some Muslims do harmful, condemnable things to Christians and others gives us no license to treat Muslims as a group—or those we come into contact with—poorly or differently than we would treat anyone else. Nor does it give us permission to brush off the seriousness of the prejudice and discrimination that Muslims face. In fact, the concern we have about the mistreatment of Christians by Muslims should be part and parcel of our concern about Islamophobia. No matter whom is targeted, discrimination and violence are unacceptable.

Living Out the Golden Rule

On a hot summer afternoon in 2018 in central Nigeria, Muslims sat shoulder to shoulder in the local mosque, concluding their afternoon prayer. Knees pressed to the floor and sitting back on their feet, they followed the prayer leader’s movements, turning their heads to the right, and then to the left, and whispering, *Peace be with you*, the concluding gesture of *salat*, the brief prayer ritual many Muslims complete five times a day. As the congregation rose and began to disperse, the leader, Imam Abubakar Abdullahi, heard shots fired in the next town over. Increasingly concerned as the gunfire grew louder, Imam Abdullahi opened the doors to his mosque and adjacent home, urging those in the town center to enter quickly to hide. Over two hundred people—mostly Christians—huddled on the ground to avoid stray bullets, while the imam locked the doors and stood guard outside.¹⁷

Gun-toting militants, with their faces covered so that he could not recognize them, approached Imam Abdullahi. Relations between Muslims and Christians had, up until the year before, been good in central Nigeria, but conflicts between herders, who are predominantly Muslim, and farmers, who are predominantly Christian, had led to violence and communal reprisals in the area. In a later interview, Imam Abdullahi said, “We [Christians and Muslims] never had a problem with each other. We have lived in peace until suddenly these attackers came to destroy the village and kill people. I wouldn’t let that happen.”¹⁸

He found himself prostrating on the ground, pleading with the attackers to spare the people inside.¹⁹ After some time, and to the imam’s great relief, the militants left. Those sheltering inside shared a meal together before they were moved to a safer location. But the ordeal was traumatizing for the imam, who had trouble sleeping for over a week after the incident, which could have turned out very differently. Imam Abdullahi cited his faith as his reason for protecting the Christians in his care. After winning the 2019 International Religious Freedom Award from the U.S. government for his courage and bravery, he told an interviewer, “Our religion as taught by the Prophet Muhammad showed that he lived in peace and harmony with diverse ethnic groups and people of different faiths. . . . We follow his teachings and footsteps.” Paraphrasing a passage of the Qur’an, he called on all people to remember that God created the diversity of humanity for a reason, and that we must respect that diversity and work for peace among our God-given differences.²⁰

This story is just one of myriad ways that Muslims around the world have stood with and defended Christians, both amid the usual struggles of daily life and in precarious situations of life and death. They do this not just as individuals of goodwill, but as an expression of their Islamic religious faith. In Mosul, Iraq, after ISIS was pushed out, Muslim residents of the city advocated that two historic Catholic churches be included in the UNESCO rebuilding project, stating that the city would not be itself without them.²¹ In Pakistan, Muslims of a small town financially supported the rebuilding of the local Catholic church used by their Christian neighbors,²² and leaders like Maulana Syed Muhammad, the head of a mosque in the city of Lahore, work to promote interfaith harmony.²³ In Morocco, Muslim clergy from around the world gathered in 2016 to advocate for improved protection of minority religious communities in Muslim-majority countries.²⁴ In Lebanon, Muslim theologians like Nayla Tabbara draw on religious texts and centuries of tradition to construct robust theologies of interfaith hospitality and welcome.²⁵ On the U.S.-Mexico border, American Muslim imam Omar Suleiman advocates for the rights of detained migrants, many of whom are Christian. In Tennessee, Georgetown’s Muslim student association spent a Thanksgiving

break restoring a run-down church. In Jordan, a Muslim family orchestrated a surprise Christmas celebration—complete with gifts and a tree—for a family who could not celebrate that year. And in Australia, for over a decade, a group of Muslims have attended Catholic Easter services to show solidarity with their Christian friends in faith, despite the fact that their religious beliefs about Jesus differ.²⁶

It is a shame that we rarely hear about these positive stories, and it is worth pondering why our media does not cover them more often. Because we hardly hear about them, many Christians I know have the false perception that Muslims do not care about Christians or anyone else beyond their own religious fold. But these accounts are a reminder of the countless ways that Muslims support Christians and defend our rights, just as Christians in so many places and contexts support Muslims. For those of us who are fortunate to have Muslim friends, colleagues, or neighbors, we know this firsthand. In my own life, Muslims have been steadfast friends, offering up prayers for me and supporting me in tangible ways in work and life. When I lived in Amman, Jordan, Muslim acquaintances and strangers took care of me, shuttling me safely across the city in cabs, welcoming me in for tea, and displaying the compassion that is central to their faith.

Of course, there is still much more to be done; Christians and Muslims both have a long way to go in how we treat the religious “other.” Anti-Christian attitudes and actions exist among Muslims in some places, and the inverse is true of Christians. Recognizing the failures of both groups helps us to resist falling into the false dichotomy of comparing an idealized yet untrue image of ourselves with the worst, imagined view of Muslims. As we lament the shortcomings and biases of our two faith communities, we can also celebrate the successes and seek to build upon them in our own lives. As Christians, we are grateful for all that Muslims do for us, knowing that—regardless of any reciprocation—we are called to address Islamophobia in whatever ways we can.

Them and Us

I hope readers come away from this book understanding what Islamophobia is and how it works—that it is interpersonal, institutional, and implicit, and that it is generated and propped up by industry and imperialism.²⁷ But most importantly, I hope readers get a glimpse into the *impact* that Islamophobia has, how it deeply affects the lives of parents and children, teachers and students, siblings and grandparents who strive to devote themselves to God and neighbor. In my own circle of Muslim friends alone, I know individuals whose mosques have been targeted by anti-Muslim protests and arson, who have experienced harassment on the street or in public places, who have tolerated offensive comments made toward them by colleagues

and college professors, and whose relatives have been killed in hate crimes or unjustly imprisoned. And many of them have faced the range of subtle suspicion to outright hostility from people who call themselves Christian.

Though it is less obvious and more indirect, Islamophobia also has an impact on *us* as Christians. Indeed, some Christians have been on the receiving end of bigotry intended for Muslims. But even beyond that, Islamophobia is harmful to us. When we fail to address our own prejudice and to do our small part to combat Islamophobia in our communities and society, we fall short of living up to our Christian calling. The goal of this book is that we may better live up to the melodic refrain sung in so many of our churches: *that they'll know we are Christians by our love.*