

Oklahoma HUMANITIES

NOVEMBER 2009

TOWARD A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF ISLAM
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ON THE COVER

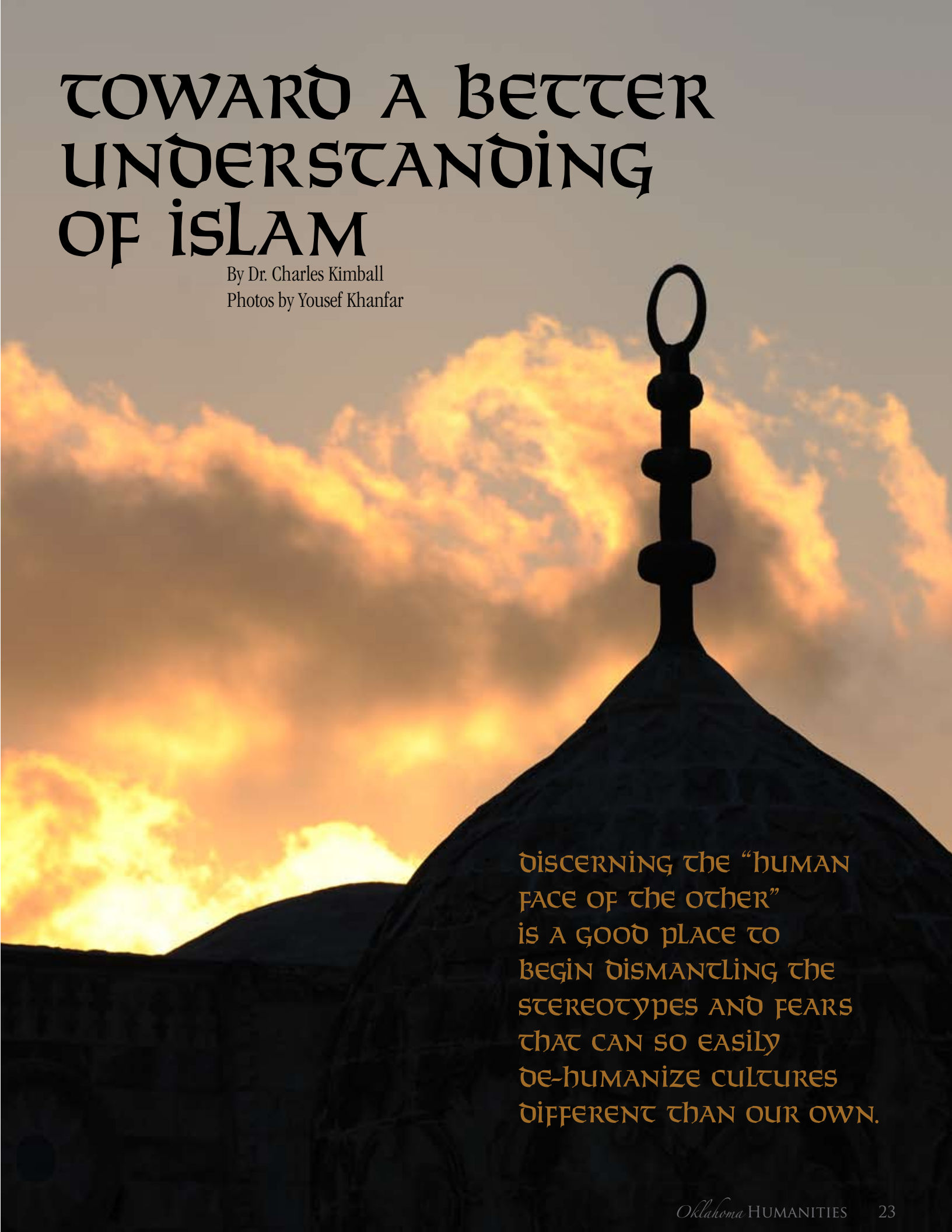
Photo by Yousef Khanfar.
Read Editor Carla Walker’s
interview with Khanfar on
page 18.



TOWARD A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF ISLAM

By Dr. Charles Kimball

Photos by Yousef Khanfar

A silhouette of a mosque dome with a finial, set against a dramatic sunset sky with orange and yellow clouds. The dome is in the foreground, and the sky is the background.

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Charles A. Kimball is an ordained Baptist minister and is currently Presidential Professor and Director of the Religious Studies Program at The University of Oklahoma. In October, he was the featured speaker for the 2009 McBride Lecture for Faith & Literature at Oklahoma Christian University, an event funded in part by a grant from OHC. Kimball is the author of four books, including *When Religion Becomes Evil* (HarperCollins, revised, 2008). He earned his doctorate in comparative religion with specialization in Islamic studies at Harvard University. He served as Middle East Director for the National Council of Churches based in New York from 1983 to 1990.

At the international level, the necessity of cooperation across religious and cultural lines is obvious. Major economic, ecological, medical, and other challenges require unprecedented levels of collaboration. But the challenges are also increasingly important at the local level here in the U.S. Most American cities of 100,000 or more are now microcosms of the entire world community. A growing sector of that microcosm is Muslim, followers of the Islamic faith.

If it has not done so already, Islam will soon pass Judaism as the second largest religion in the U.S. Despite intense media attention since September 11, 2001, most Americans still know very little about Islam. Much of what people think they know is both incorrect and highly distorted. The dominant images

of Islam in the U.S. are distinctly negative. This is a dangerous dynamic in our increasingly interconnected and interdependent world. Now, perhaps more than ever, it is important that people seek to overcome the ignorance, bias, and fear that have too often characterized relationships between the U.S.—frequently perceived as a Christian nation—and the Middle East, which is assumed to be largely Muslim.

THE MEDIA MAZE

Media images combine with a long history of mutual antipathy and contemporary rhetoric from leaders on both sides who seek to portray the “other” as menacing and evil. The American media’s tendency to focus on “the sensational” results, quite understandably, in extensive coverage of the violent rhetoric and actions of Osama bin Laden, *al-qaida*, Taliban leaders, hijackers, kidnappers, and suicide bombers. While violent extremists pose serious threats, these individuals and groups constitute only a tiny fraction on the fringe.

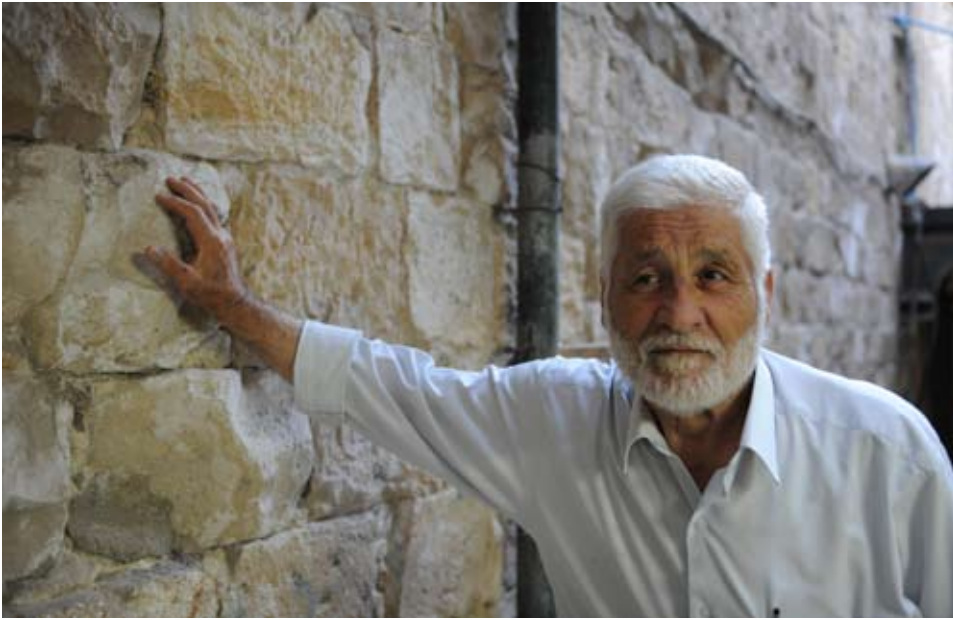
The vast majority of the 1.4 billion Muslims all over the world are like the vast majority of Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and people of no particular religious faith. They are raising families, working to put food on the table, helping neighbors in need. Discerning the “human face of the other” is a good place to begin dismantling the stereotypes and fears

that can so easily de-humanize cultures different than our own. It is a vital step toward respectful and peaceful coexistence.

A similar set of problems in perception and misunderstanding permeate many of the predominantly Muslim countries around the world. Large numbers of Muslims in lands as diverse as Algeria, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Indonesia often develop stereotypes of Christians and Western cultures associated with Christianity based on the actions of extremists.

Imagine yourself to be a citizen of Bangladesh, an impoverished country with almost 150 million Muslims. Your images of Christianity may be shaped by media reports in recent decades on violent confrontations between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, horrific atrocities suffered by Bosnian Muslims at the hands of Serbian Christians, and gruesome pictures from the confrontation with David Koresh and the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. Add to this the perception of insulting depictions of the prophet Muhammad in Danish and other European newspaper political cartoons and the hostile rhetoric of TV preachers who label Islam an “evil” religion. If these images dominated your worldview, it would be easy to think of Christianity as violent, aggressive, and menacing. When one puts these contemporary perceptions against the backdrop of centuries of Crusades, European colonial rule, and more recent superpower domination of Muslim populations, the human face of other is easily obscured.





THE LANGUAGE OF ISLAM

For Muslims, the imperative to seek peaceful relationships and co-operation with others is a central tenet of Islam. The Arabic language makes clear this basic orientation for Muslims. Most Arabic words are derived from three consonants, which convey a basic notion. The root meanings of the consonants *s-l-m* have to do with submission to the will of God and peace. Three familiar words derive from this root: *salam*, Islam, and Muslim. “*Salam*” means “peace”; it originates from the same Semitic root as the Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*. “Islam” literally means “submission to the will of God” and the “religion of peace.” Those who submit themselves in obedience to God are “Muslims.”

Allah, the Arabic word for God, is clearly understood by Muslims as the same God that Jews and Christians worship. Having spent a substantial portion of my professional life working with mission and service ministries of U.S. and Middle Eastern churches, there is simply no ambiguity on this point. Fifteen million Arabic-speaking Christians in the Middle East pray to Allah. While their understandings of revelation clearly differ, Christians, Muslims, and Jews are talking about the same God.

CONSTRUCTIVE ROLES FOR RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

Numerous churches in the U.S. are pursuing educational initiatives with interfaith dialogue and extended study series. At the same time, many Christian leaders and churches appear to reject any effort to learn more about Islam and other world religions. For those who harbor fear

that such inquiry is threatening, it is important to remember that more accurate understanding of other people and religions does not require or imply agreement. In my view, pursuing an accurate understanding of Islam or any other religion relates to central biblical teachings: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18; Mt. 19:19; Gal. 5:14). “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18). How is it possible to love one’s neighbor or to live together in peace if your fundamental understanding about your neighbor is inaccurate or distorted?

The most visible and celebrated Christian leader in recent decades, Pope John Paul II, was deeply committed to interfaith understanding and cooperation. He wrote about the need for education and modeled respectful engagement with Muslim neighbors. He was the first Pope to visit a mosque—in Egypt and in Damascus. He

was the first to visit a synagogue (in Rome) and to travel to Jerusalem to meet with Jewish and Christian and Muslim communities. In 1985, he addressed 80,000 Muslims in Casablanca. His words are as relevant today as they were 25 years ago:

“We believe in the same God, the one God, the Living God who created the world . . . In a world which desires unity and peace, but experiences a thousand tensions and conflicts, should not believers come together? Dialogue between Christians and Muslims is today more urgent than ever. It flows from fidelity to God. Too often in the past, we have opposed each other in polemics and wars. I believe that today God invites us to change old practices. We must respect each other and we must stimulate each other in good works on the path to righteousness.”

In 1986, John Paul II invited leaders from all the major religions as well as many other religious communities to Assisi for a day of prayer and dialogue. He continued these efforts throughout his papacy.

Increasingly, Muslim institutions—local mosques and groups promoting understanding across religious and cultural lines—are also taking the lead in educational initiatives. Muslim leaders in local mosques (*imams*) often participate in civic events, provide media interviews, and so forth. Campus organizations like the Muslim Student Association or national groups like the Institute for Interfaith Dialogue (IID) and the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) host lectures and educational programs.





EDUCATION—THE WAY FORWARD

While negative stereotypes and misinformation are widespread, there are also clear signs of hope for the future. Although we cannot easily control what people and governments do in other lands, we in the U.S. can pursue educational initiatives that offer balanced, objective views and accurate information.

Approaches to the study of religion in public schools can be tricky, if not volatile; however, increasing numbers of school boards and local schools are clarifying appropriate ways to learn about world religions and cultures. It is a useful

step toward understanding how the large majority of people, both past and present, approach questions about human existence, the meaning of life, and how to live in society.

Numerous colleges and universities have increased the number of courses on world religions, Islam, and politics in the Middle East. I have worked with a number of schools as they shaped new course offerings along these lines. For students and interested citizens who don't have access to such classes, organizations like The Teaching Company offer a variety of courses on world history, literature, and religion on DVD

and CD-ROM. Other forms of education are available through public lectures, conferences, and television documentaries.

The collective impact of these educational initiatives can help raise the level of informed discussion. In the process, we reduce prejudice fueled by ignorance and model the affirmation of pluralism and the principle of religious freedom that are cornerstones of America.

CONNECTING THROUGH THE HUMANITIES

The humanities offer ways to connect, understand, and even celebrate human commonalities in the midst of differences. In addition to history and language, as we have discussed, other disciplines of the humanities—archaeology, ethics, philosophy, comparative religion, etc.—foster conversation and new perspectives. In the process of such exploration, we discover how Western civilization has been deeply influenced and shaped by Islam as well as the Judeo-Christian tradition. For example, architecture, geometric design, mathematics, and astronomy have deep ties to Islamic culture.

Literature, another humanities discipline, is a readily accessible tool in propelling the discussion of Islam. Two superb novels by Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, humanize the people of Afghanistan. Hosseini's characters come to life in the real-life,



historical context of that war-torn land. Readers experience warmth, generosity, love, and devotion in the lives of various Muslims. At the same time, thuggish, sexist, and racist attitudes are also evident. All the endearing and offensive human qualities one sees in any community are manifest in Hosseini's novels. He helps put a human face on Islam.

Greg Mortenson and David Relin's non-fiction thriller, *Three Cups of Tea*, tells the story of one man's mission to repay people who saved his life and to provide opportunities for underprivileged children in Pakistan by building schools in remote villages. This narrative does not sugar-coat real problems. The dramatic events that dominate media attention are put in a wider context.

Three Cups of Tea goes further in another important way. As Mortenson and his well-intentioned friends work to build schools and supply materials and teachers, they encounter stiff resistance from narrow-minded Muslim

leaders who oppose education for girls. Readers learn a good deal about the closed system and incendiary indoctrination in many strict Islamic schools (*madrasas*), as well as the massive funding provided by oil-rich countries like Saudi Arabia. Education is vitally important; but it cuts both ways. Some types of "education" serve more to reinforce biases and dehumanize the other. This book identifies the serious challenges facing people in Pakistan and Afghanistan. It also reveals ways many Muslims and supporters around the world are seeking constructive alternatives and more hopeful futures through education for all children.

SHARING ACROSS RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

An increasingly popular and valuable point of connection between communities is experienced through meals shared across religious traditions. The Oklahoma Center for Community Justice (OCCJ) sponsors an "open table" program. Over a six-month period a group of people (at least

two people from three different faiths) agree to meet for dinner at least three times. At the end of the six months, all participants come together to share ideas and opinions on what they learned. A similar effort took place last year under the auspices of "Amazing Faiths" in Oklahoma City. Sponsored by several churches and interfaith organizations, families from different religions sat down together for dinner and conversation in homes across the city.

The actions detailed here may seem modest steps, but they are enormously important. Education, conversation, breaking bread, and sharing in the religious and cultural traditions of others are ways to dismantle stereotypes and overcome biases. All of us can do a great deal to educate ourselves and "put a human face on the other" if we will but open our eyes and learn from the rich diversity in our communities. The ways in which we seek to understand one another and interact during the 21st century will have profound consequences for all religions—and for the world. ■

