

COUNTERING
RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM:
**The Healing Power of
Spiritual Friendships**



COUNTERING RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM: The Healing Power of Spiritual Friendships



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the memory of Lisa Morrison whose passion was building bridges of understanding between peoples of faith.

It is also dedicated to the Spiritual Oneness Group in Indianapolis, Indiana, the Interfaith Forum of Columbus, Indiana, and all such groups that shine a bright light of hope for the world's future.

**PROLOGUE
AND
INTRODUCTION**

PROLOGUE: THE CHALLENGE FACING US

WHEN THE SECOND SEMESTER of the college year ended in May of 2014, I wondered whether it was time to stop teaching a course that I have offered for ten years. Perhaps, I thought, the course's topic—Religion and Violence—was a bit shopworn, a bit overworked.

And then ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria)—also known as ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant)—exploded on the scene. Within a matter of days, I realized that religion and violence had again become *the* topic, more important now than ever.

I also realized something else. ISIS/ISIL's vision, which the West has finally grasped is frighteningly attractive to young people around the world, is the complete opposite of another future that is dawning.

ISIS/ISIL envisions reclaiming Syria, Iraq, and the Levant (the nations bordering the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea), a part of the world that was once both Islamic and part of an expansive and powerful empire. ISIS/ISIL is fighting to remove from “their world” the last vestiges of Western influence, an unwanted influence that ISIS/ISIL believes has humiliated Muslims at every turn of recent history. ISIS/ISIL believes that only then can the region fully live out God's will, which the group understands to be a severe and rigid interpretation of Islam.

ISIS/ISIL has odd parallels in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. When extremists in such places think of the glory of this country, they picture a time in the past when the majority was almost entirely white, English-speaking, and Christian. They also wish to remove from “their world” newcomers who have come in search of freedom and economic possibilities. Similar sentiments against Arabs can be found among Jewish extremists in Israel, even as such sentiments are found among those who oppose Zionism. Some even believe that ridding their country of Muslims, Jews, Arabs, or other minorities and creating cultural and religious uniformity is doing the will of God.

Despite these narrow visions, ISIS/ISIL and other extremists have succeeded in recruiting followers. In ISIS/ISIL’s case, their recruits have come from around the world, including the West. ISIS/ISIL’s vision is proving to be compelling and therefore alarming. The same can be said for extremists in the United States, Europe, Israel, and elsewhere as they also have been successful in recruiting vulnerable youth. In *Terror in the Name of God: Why Militants Kill*, Jessica Stern argues that those who believe that their tribe or community has been humiliated or displaced are more likely to be attracted by the promise of “dehumiliation;” that is, actions, often violent, that seek to remove that humiliation and put history right.¹

One of the main sources for ISIS/ISIL’s early success in Syria and Iraq is found in this drive for “dehumiliation.” The fact that beheading representatives from Western countries has *helped* ISIS/ISIL recruit rather than scare off young people is understandable in this context—ISIS/ISIL’s extreme actions prove that it will not compromise with the West. For ISIS/ISIL, the humiliation stops now.

As the world considers how to respond to extremists such as ISIS/ISIL, Al-Qaeda, Al-Nusra, and Boko Haram, it is vital to remember that most Muslims consider

such radical visions a dangerous distortion of Islam. Sheik Abdullah bin Bayyah, a respected cleric, takes this position in his recent *fatwah* (denouncement) of ISIS/ISIL. Still other observers, both Muslim and non-Muslim, view ISIS/ISIL's goal not only as a misinterpretation of Islam but also as a fruitless attempt to reverse history. While many Muslims might agree that during colonial and now post-colonial times in the Middle East Islam has been humiliated and betrayed by the West, they want no part of ISIS/ISIL's rigid and extreme new "state."

The same can be said of extremists in the United States, Europe, Israel, and elsewhere in the world. From the Ku Klux Klan to more recent white supremacist groups in the United States to radical Zionist groups in Israel and anti-Semitic groups in the Middle East and elsewhere, such perspectives are anathema to the majority of Christians, Muslims, and Jews despite the fact that their actions may be baptized in religious language and symbolism.

Yet in a superficial sense, such extremists are sensing something that is true—the future will be far different from the present. A "you leave me alone and I'll leave you alone" stance that privatizes religious faith and promotes benign tolerance leaves humanity ill-equipped to handle the intercultural and interreligious interactions that increasingly characterize the modern world.

Furthermore, in the case of ISIS/ISIL and extremists in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, the present state of the world *is* part of the problem. ISIS/ISIL is able to attract recruits from around the world through its damning assessment of Western culture and values. Extremists in the West and the Middle East also see their radical dreams as the only alternative to the banality and sins of secularity and materialism. Such perspectives reject the tendency of modern nations to seek the will of the people, not what they maintain is the will of God.

An increasing number of young people around the world are susceptible to these extreme visions, as can be seen in the determination on the faces of these recruits. The ISIS/ISIL recruits and American, European, Israeli, and other Middle Eastern youth who are joining such causes may appear terrifying, but their vibrancy contrasts with the flatness in the faces of many others in the West—the faces of *haute couture* models in fashionable magazines, the faces of a great many American college students slumped in desks in packed lecture halls, or the faces of subway commuters.

Extremists recruit young people by promising that they will make history. This appeal works, as such promises exploit their sense of lethargy and malaise in the West. And lest we dismiss this critique of the West as uninformed, baseless, or simplistic, we should recall that Pope Benedict XVI also has diagnosed Western culture as tired, depressed, and divorced from its spiritual roots.²

There is, however, another vision of the future, one that neither concedes the future to God-absent materialism or religious extremism. *Countering Religious Extremism: The Healing Power of Spiritual Friendships* profiles how diverse peoples of faith are coming together, a way of life that rejects both conversionist competition (without succumbing to relativism) as well the unacceptably low hurdle of tolerance. This alternative future, this “third way,” is embraced by Muslims, Christians, Jews, Sikhs, Buddhists, Hindus, and people who adhere to other faiths or to no faith at all. And the look on their faces is also vibrant, for they too sense that they are making history.

The phrase “spiritual friendship” might sound innocuous if it conjures up images of people sitting around a cozy room with punch and cookies. That type of occasional being together is hardly a credible antidote to extremism. In fact, the concept of spiritual friendship is anything but bland and placid. This type of relationship makes great demands but offers great rewards. In truth,

spiritual friendships offer a vision of the future as radical as those of the extremists.

Extremist groups often begin with a regional vision that can quickly become international in scope. The same is true of spiritual friendships. While at present these friendships are found primarily in Western societies, participants believe that this depth of relationship and encouragement will one day flourish in the Middle East, Africa, Southeast Asia, and other current “hot spots.”

The West must recognize that vibrant extremist ideologies can be countered and defeated only by a better, sounder, and equally vibrant ideology. Military or police action may actually drive impressionable individuals into the arms of extremists.

Young people who turn away from soulless Western materialism need a stronger spiritual vision than extremism. Extremist utopian visions always end up in stifling uniformity and isolation. In contrast, spiritual friendships acknowledge, yes, even celebrate, religious diversity. They offer a future of new and life-enriching possibilities, where across religious lines people of faith encourage one another to live more compassionately; where, without sacrificing their distinctiveness, peoples of faith cooperate in purposeful and healing action and give birth to new methods of defusing religious suspicion and hatred.

No one can predict what the next decades will bring. Will ISIS/ISIL collapse from within as have so many other extremist movements? Will extremists in our own country continue to proliferate? Will extremist leaders overreach themselves and unleash a Taliban-like society where no one is allowed to express an independent thought? What will happen when recruits return home or when they want to “de-recruit?”

Imagining a future with flourishing spiritual friendships is far more pleasing, and these friendships will not be restricted to the West alone. The globalization,

mobility, and technological advances that affect the entire world (although at different rates and often in the service of materialism) provide an opportunity, greater than ever before, for people of diverse faiths to meet. And as the world's demographics change, this contact will not be merely virtual, but actual. As will become clear from the chapters that follow, diverse communities already exist where the "religious other" is perceived not as a threat but as a gift of God.

Western secularism and materialism will not die out soon, but they have failed to counter extremism at home and abroad. Indeed, these Western traits fuel extremism. Spiritual friendships can provide a remedy. Partners in spiritual friendships know that religious tension, hatred, and violence need not be humanity's future. They know that the healing power of religion is just dawning, and this power can transform the lives of individuals. Between peoples of faith, religions can build not walls of separation but bridges of understanding. Such bridge building is essential in providing a viable alternative to religious extremism.

Our world is at the dawning of interreligious encouragement. This understanding and encouragement is not to be confused with religious convergence or conformity. Those interviewed for *Countering Religious Extremism: The Healing Power of Spiritual Friendships* believe that the future will not bring an amalgamation of the world into a bland whole. The world's religions will remain distinct—intact and respected. Yet more and more, religious isolation will give way to spiritual friendships between diverse peoples of faith.

Countering Religious Extremism: The Healing Power of Spiritual Friendships invites readers on a journey. Those interviewed for this book have already built bridges of understanding and have crossed them into a far better future, one superior to the vision of extremism or Western materialism. We call on people who love their faith to join us.

THOSE MOHAMMEDANS

I Might As Well Have Been Blind

IT IS HIGHLY UNLIKELY that someone like me would ever have entered into spiritual friendships with Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Sikhs and Hindus. The person I was as recently as fifteen years ago would be surprised, no, shocked, at the path that I now follow.

In the mid-sixties I attended high school in north-central Illinois, where religious diversity meant that some of my classmates were Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, or Catholic. There were three Jewish students in my school, but I knew no Muslims, or “Mohammedans,” as textbooks at that time often labeled followers of Islam: “Morocco has an annual rainfall of x inches, is rich in mineral deposits, and the people are Mohammedans.”

From history books, I pictured “Mohammedans” as robed warriors astride horses or camels. With their curved swords these enemies of my faith had fought and eventually defeated the Christian Crusaders.

In hindsight, I find it revealing that I was never asked to consider “Islam” or “Muslims” in my United States history classes. I grew up with no sense of Muslims being part of our country’s religious landscape. Even with the rise in the sixties of Malcolm X and the Black Muslims, those angry men and women seemed to be threats, not members of our society.

The one exception was Muhammad Ali, whose life story from his boxing days until his death inspired me as a youth and continues to inspire me. Ali was undoubtedly