

“In our world so fraught with division and despair, Jordan Denari Duffner’s experiences bring a fresh insight into Muslim-Catholic relations. In addition to recounting her many positive encounters with people of the Muslim faith, Jordan shares her insights in the ways that her own Catholic faith has deepened as a result. This book is an oasis of hope and a must read by all who take seriously the need for dialogue and understanding, particularly between Muslims and Catholics.”

— Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski, Emeritus Chair of the Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs

“In a time of political division and fear, Jordan Denari Duffner offers us a refreshing work of love, compassion, and understanding. *Finding Jesus among Muslims* is an open invitation for all of us to better understand our shared values and the powerful beliefs that unite us. This is a work that can help all of us become peacemakers, love our neighbors, welcome strangers, and heal what has been torn apart.”

— Martin O’Malley, Former governor of Maryland and Democratic presidential candidate

“*Finding Jesus among Muslims* is a beautifully written and honest testimony to the value and power of interreligious learning, grounded in Jordan Denari Duffner’s own life experience, reflection, and prayer. It recounts in lucid terms the place of Islam, its piety, and friendship with Muslims in her journey as a young Catholic woman in the 21st century. That loving Islam has helped Duffner become a better Catholic will encourage many who find themselves today on the path between religions, encountering the new, yet finding their way home again. This fine addition to our growing library on interreligious learning is written with teaching in mind, and will be ideal for classroom use as well.”

— Professor Francis X. Clooney, SJ, Parkman Professor of Divinity, Harvard University

“Jordan Denari Duffner’s magnificent new book is a game-changer. Unlike so many ‘interfaith’ volumes where we are either talking at one another or attempting to demonstrate the superiority of our own tradition, this is a committed journey *with* one another. Duffner is passionately committed to not only learning *about* Islam and Muslims, but also *with* Islam and Muslims. A book like this could only be written by a committed Christian who shared a deep love for Muslims, and has genuinely, spiritually, and intellectually engaged both her own tradition and Islam. We do more than merely learn about religious traditions, we grow in faith as a result of journeying with Duffner. It is a moving, heartfelt, intellectually honest, and urgently relevant volume that moves us well beyond the usual parameters of the professional interfaith industry. Passionately and enthusiastically recommended for all Christians, Muslims, and people of faith who wish to live in a diverse world not in spite of our faiths, but because of them.”

— Professor Omid Safi
Director, Duke Islamic Studies Center

"This is an exceptional introduction to interfaith engagement between Catholic Christians and Muslims. This book will teach you about a different religion and deepen the understanding you have of your own. Moreover, it offers practical advice for building interfaith friendships—not to mention an awful lot of genuine hope!"

— Eboo Patel, Founder and President, Interfaith Youth Core and
author of *Interfaith Leadership*

"Weaving together her own compelling life story with the richness of the Christian and Islamic traditions, Duffner teaches, inspires, and challenges us. This book is ideal for students and adult learners. She persuasively explains why commitment to interreligious dialogue deepens—not threatens—one's faith in profound ways. With so much religious conflict in our world, we desperately need this passionately written testimony to grace at work in all people."

— Kevin O'Brien, SJ, Dean, Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University
Author of *The Ignatian Adventure: Experiencing the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius in Daily Life*

"I loved reading this book from a fresh young voice. As a protestant evangelical pastor I obviously have disagreements with Catholics—I grew up believing they were the 'other religion!' But having worked with Muslims at such a deep level globally, I've come to feel at home with Catholics plus or minus a few doctrines! You don't have to agree with Jordan on everything, but you can definitely learn from her in how to relate, think, and build bridges to others. Prepare yourself, this book will create more questions than it does answers—but it's time for this conversation to be had, for it is now the reality of our world."

— Bob Roberts, Founder & Senior Pastor of NorthWood Church in Keller, Texas
Founder of Glocal.net
Author of *Bold as Love*

"The gap between the world as it is and the world as it should be is daunting. I love *Finding Jesus among Muslims* because Jordan—full of passion, grit, and courage—invites all humans into one of the most important conversations happening on Planet Earth today. Read this book. Then put it down and do something about it."

— Dr. Joshua Graves
Preaching and teaching minister for the Otter Creek Church in Nashville,
Tennessee

"We are enriched in our own faiths, when we fully experience people in theirs. This is an elevating and personal read that challenges each of us to look deeper into others in order to learn more about ourselves. I appreciate Jordan's genuine friendship to the Muslim community, and her sincere desire to bring people of different faiths together."

— Imam Omar Suleiman
President of Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research

Finding Jesus among Muslims

*How Loving Islam Makes Me
a Better Catholic*

Jordan Denari Duffner



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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

*In the name of God,
the Most Compassionate,
the Most Merciful*

Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam

For the Greater Glory of God

*For my mother, who told me I had to write,
and for my father, who taught me how*

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My parents have encouraged my travels, interfaith exploration, and desire to be a writer since I was young. Over the years, they have read countless papers and articles, as well as drafts of the coming pages, providing critical feedback that improved my craft. My brother, too, has been a constant source of encouragement.

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And, of course, I am perpetually grateful for the companionship of my many Muslim friends, who continue to reveal to me truths about God that transcend—yet are deeply manifested in—our different religious traditions. Thank you for inviting me to encounter God with you.

Notes on Translation and Terms

Throughout this book, I often use Arabic words that may be unfamiliar to Christian readers. These terms—many of which come from Muslims' scripture, the Qur'an—are important to learn for understanding the religion of Islam. I always define these terms upon first use, and put them in italics. To aid readers with this new terminology, I have included a glossary in the back of the book. Additionally, since some readers might be unfamiliar with the names of Muslim friends I mention, I have also included a list of given names with their pronunciation and meanings at the end of the book. The book's index can also aid readers in locating references to significant topics.

Here, I should define some of our basic terms: *Muslim* and *Islam*. To put it most simply, a *Muslim* is someone who adheres to the religion of *Islam*. But these words have deeper meaning in the Arabic language from which they come. (Arabic is a Middle Eastern language related to Hebrew, the language of much of the Bible, and Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke.) In these "Semitic" languages, concepts are contained in three-letter roots that are used in different formulations to form words with related meanings. Both "Muslim" and "Islam" come from the root *s-l-m*, which means peace. This is not only a peace that connotes physical security or the absence of war, but also an interior, spiritual state of calm, trust, reassurance, wholeness, and harmony. *Islam* is the act of giving one's self over to God, and aligning one's own will with God's; a *Muslim* is a person who willfully undertakes this act of devotion, and experiences the peace that comes with it. (In the Qur'an, Jesus and his disciples are counted as "Muslims.") The idea at the root of these Arabic words is why many

Muslims describe Islam as a “religion of peace.” The word “Islamic” is an adjective used in English to describe inanimate things related to the religion of Islam, like history, art, or a community center.

For some Arabic words and Islamic concepts I discuss in the book, I use the English translation. When referring to God, for example, I don’t use *Allah*, which simply means “God” in Arabic, but rather use the English word that readers are familiar with. I have made this choice to mitigate the confusion and sense of difference that often arises when words in foreign languages are used to describe otherwise familiar concepts.

Because the book is directed primarily at a Catholic and Christian audience, when I use the word “we,” it usually refers to people who identify as Christian. I have made this choice reluctantly, since I am aware of the tendency for my faith community to treat Muslims as an outside group. This decision is not meant to reinforce an “us-versus-them” dichotomy, but rather to enable me to speak clearly to my own Christian community.

Kenneth Cragg’s *Readings in the Qur’ān* served as the basis for the translations of Qur’anic passages in this book. In some cases, Cragg’s translations were adjusted for clarity. *The Study Quran*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and English translations compiled on Quran.com were also consulted in rendering the Qur’an into English for this book.

In the Qur’an, God refers to himself using three different pronouns: the third-person “He,” the first-person “I,” and the first-person “We.” The use of “We” should not be understood as referring to multiple gods; rather, it connotes God’s honor and greatness. (Comparably, use of the royal “We” was common among royalty in Europe.) As in Judaism and Christianity, God in Islam is understood to be singular, one. Though the use of “We” might be surprising for those encountering the Qur’an for the first time, readers should see God using “We” in the Qur’an as no different from using “I.”

Throughout the book, I use transliteration—the process of rendering the letters of one alphabet into another—when writing Arabic words in English. I have attempted to use spellings that best mimic the pronunciation in Arabic. Alternative spellings and further details on pronunciation are included in the glossary or list of names when

necessary. Transliterations of *al*, the Arabic word for “the,” for example, will sometimes appear *ar* or *as*, depending on the word that follows it. This is due to an Arabic linguistic convention that allows for ease of pronunciation. Thus, the phrase “the Entirely Merciful,” one of the attributes Muslims use to refer to God, is transliterated *ar-Rahman*, with *r* rather than with *l*.

Like Hebrew, the Arabic language does not have capital and lower-case letters. Still, as is common practice among Muslims writing in English, I capitalize proper nouns relating to the divine or to honored figures like the Prophet Muhammad.

Readers will notice that there are different spellings of the name Muhammad throughout the text. For the Prophet Muhammad, the spelling “Muhammad” is used. For other people mentioned in the book who share the Prophet’s name, I spell it the way they do (e.g., Mohamed, Mohammad, etc.).

Readers will also notice the usage of *dh* in the transliterated word for the Islamic call to prayer, or *adhan*. The *dh* sound resembles the “th” sound in the words “the” or “than,” not “three.”

Readers will also notice my use of the words “interfaith” and “interreligious” throughout the book. Though some theologians have unique definitions for these terms, I will use these two words interchangeably. Interfaith, which is often used in American contexts to describe relationships between people of diverse religious backgrounds, is a word readers might be more familiar with. Interreligious is the term the Catholic Church uses to talk about its interactions with other religions.

Introduction

Interfaith Dialogue

Walking Together Toward Truth

All Christian communities are called to practice dialogue.

—Pope St. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (57)

On the edge of a vast salt lake on the Mediterranean island of Cyprus sits a small mosque. Nestled in a grove of palm trees, it is dedicated to a seventh-century woman named Umm Haram. She was an aunt of the Prophet Muhammad, who Muslims believe was a messenger of God's revelation. During a trip to Cyprus in 2016, I walked into the courtyard, where the mosque was surrounded by brightly painted yellow buildings with green trim. I took off my shoes in the shade of the domed roof and, though no one asked me to, I covered my head with the scarf I had brought with me and stepped sock-footed into the old mosque. Though the site is mainly visited by tourists now, its historical holiness was still palpable. This house of worship is believed to be the burial place of Umm Haram, and is considered to be one of the holiest sites for Muslims, after the mosques in the cities of Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. Umm Haram, whose name means "honorable mother," had a close relationship with her nephew, Muhammad, and she is remembered as a generous and self-sacrificing person who served the poor.¹

As I walked into the mosque and across the patterned carpet, I noticed the *mihrab*, the curved alcove cut into the wall that is a central

2 Finding Jesus among Muslims

feature of all mosques. Resembling the niche, or apse, in churches, the *mihrab* indicates the direction of Islamic prayer and points to the cube-shaped *ka'aba* in Mecca, thousands of miles away in the Arabian peninsula. The *ka'aba* marks the place that Muslims believe is the most sacred; it is the “house of God” on earth. According to Islamic tradition, the structure was originally built by the first man, Adam, then repaired by Abraham, and restored by Muhammad—all of whom are considered prophets. Every year, Muslims from around the world converge on the *ka'aba* in a ritual of pilgrimage, to pray and to cultivate trust and dependence on God. Each Muslim person endeavors to make this pilgrimage, or *hajj*, at least once during one's life.

As I approached the *mihrab*, the focal point of the mosque, I felt an inclination to genuflect. I dropped down onto my right knee and made the sign of the cross, touching my fingers to my forehead, chest, and each shoulder. The feeling I had, standing before the *mihrab* in the Umm Haram mosque, is the same one I have felt hundreds of times in Catholic churches. Since childhood, I have experienced a sense of reverence when approaching the consecrated Host, the Body of Christ, stored in the gilded tabernacle. A similar feeling also wells up in me today when I enter a mosque, like the one I visited in Cyprus, or when I hear the *adhan*, the melodic call to worship recited in Arabic before Islamic prayer. As I become aware of God's presence in that place or in that moment, I feel viscerally the need to bless myself with the sign of the cross to acknowledge it.

This recurring experience—of recognizing the divine in a setting defined by Islam, and responding with a gesture that is distinctly Catholic—grows out of countless encounters I've had with Muslims and their religion in recent years, both in the United States and in the Middle East. At Georgetown University, where I went to college, I made friends with students who were Muslim, and lived for a year in a dorm community for Muslim students. My roommate and I had long conversations about religion, but more often I connected with my Muslim friends over more familiar college traditions like playing basketball at the campus gym, attempting to make pancakes on the dorm stove, or procrastinating on homework by watching YouTube videos of cute animals.

During those years, as I studied theology, international affairs, and Arabic, I attended Islamic liturgies on occasional Fridays and festive dinners during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. I also went on a retreat for Muslim students, and served on the Muslim Students Association board. Moved by the experiences I had dialoguing with peers and chaplains-in-residence who were Muslim, I became involved in the interfaith group on campus, in the hopes of facilitating for other students the kinds of encounters I'd been fortunate to have.

I also lived in the Middle Eastern country of Jordan, first as an undergraduate living with a host family for a semester, and again after college as a Fulbright researcher exploring Muslim-Christian relationships for a year. I talked about religion over tea with Jordanian friends I made in Amman, where I experienced a society shaped by Islam and where I also felt comfortable and supported in living out my Christian faith.

In the United States, I have interned and worked for organizations dedicated to improving understanding between Muslims and Christians, including the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. Particularly at the Bridge Initiative, where I worked for three years as a research fellow writing about anti-Muslim prejudice, Muslim colleagues became close friends and confidants with whom I could have deep discussions about God. Now, as a doctoral student studying Islam and Christianity, I continue these conversations with classmates and professors.

These experiences of interfaith dialogue—both formal and informal—have allowed me to grow in friendship with Muslims, and offered me a new approach to encountering God. And, in a way I didn't initially anticipate, these experiences have helped deepen my connection to my own Christian faith, too. My relationships with Muslims, my exposure to their faith, and my resulting reconnection to my Catholic roots draw me closer to God. This threefold blessing of interfaith dialogue is what this book is about.

Dialogue: A Fundamental Aspect of Being Christian

The Catholic Church teaches that interreligious dialogue is part of our vocation as Christians. Pope St. John Paul II insisted that dialogue

is “fundamental” to the church’s mission, a duty from which no person or parish is exempt.²

Why are we called to interfaith dialogue? And, why is it a part of our Christian vocation? We are called to dialogue because God dialogues. As Christians, we believe in one God who is also Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Saint Augustine understood this three-in-one God as a communication—or dialogue—of love, in which the Father and Son give and receive love, and the Holy Spirit is the love between them. God also dialogues with humanity. Throughout human history, God has revealed his love to us in countless ways. The Bible recounts beautiful stories of God dialoguing with figures like Abraham and Moses. Because we are made in God’s image, and because we have received his love, we are called to imitate God’s way of dialogue in our interactions with our fellow humans.

What is the end goal of this interfaith dialogue that all Christians are called to? Often, the reasons cited for engaging in dialogue are things like ending conflict, working for justice, collaborating to preserve religious freedom, improving mutual understanding of differences, or arriving at more definitive statements about common points of belief. All of these are important and beneficial outcomes of dialogue, but they should not be its impetus or its ultimate goal. Instead, dialogue should be driven by the desire to seek God together.

The goal of dialogue, like the rest of our life, is to grow closer to God. In interreligious dialogue, we undertake this journey toward God with Muslims or people of other faiths. Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, the former head of the Vatican’s interfaith council and a former Vatican ambassador to Egypt, writes that dialogue allows us to “help one another to respond to God’s call.”³ As the Catholic Church teaches, to dialogue is “to walk together towards truth.”⁴

The late Fr. Christian de Chergé describes Muslim-Christian dialogue as digging a well to the same source. Father de Chergé was a French Catholic priest, monk, and scholar who lived in a Cistercian monastery in rural Algeria in the 1990s. In 1996, he and his brother monks were killed during the country’s civil war, after being captured by a rebel group. Before his death, he worked and prayed alongside his Muslim friends in the town. Father de Chergé borrowed the image of digging a well to God from his friend, Mohammed, who

would often drop by the monastery and say, "It's been a long time since we've dug our well!"⁵ Once, Fr. de Chergé asked Mohammed whether they would find Christian water or Muslim water at the bottom of the well. Mohammed answered that the water didn't belong to either faith group; rather, he said, the water they would find together is *God's*. For Fr. de Chergé, interreligious dialogue is born of the recognition that "the same thirst"—God—"draws us to the same well."⁶ Believing that the ultimate destination of both Christians and Muslims is God, Fr. de Chergé also described dialogue as climbing on a ladder to God. One side-beam is Christianity, the other is Islam, and the many rungs are shared by both the Muslims and Christians who climb it.

What does this interfaith dialogue look like in everyday life? How are we—busy people who already do our best to serve our local community—supposed to engage in interfaith dialogue on top of everything else? For the Catholic Church, dialogue is not as much an activity as it is an attitude. More than an event to put on the schedule, dialogue is the open, friendly spirit that we bring to an encounter with someone of another faith. We might not realize it, but we participate in interreligious dialogue anytime we approach those of another faith with hospitality and love, ready to hear what others have to say. This can happen over meals, at the dentist office, in a school hallway, or in the grocery store.

When these kinds of neighborly encounters with people of other faiths occur in our ordinary, day-to-day activities, we are participating in what the church calls the "dialogue of life," which is considered the most important and the most common of four forms of dialogue that the church identifies in its teaching.⁷ In addition to the dialogue of life, the church also encourages other, more formal ways of being in interfaith dialogue.

One of these forms is the dialogue of religious experience. It is about sharing experiences of prayer, worship, and other religious practices. It could involve attending Muslims' Friday liturgy, inviting Muslims to come to church, sharing about one's spiritual life, or even praying to God together. Reflecting together over passages of scripture from the Bible and the Qur'an and telling stories of inspiring saints or religious figures are other ways of sharing religious experiences.

This form of dialogue allows us to discuss what our relationship with God is like, and to get a window into how others relate to God.

Another form of dialogue is that of deeds and action. Motivated by our commitment to work for peace and justice in our communities, this form of dialogue entails working with people of other faiths to improve society and help all people flourish. Both Islam and Christianity have deep traditions of striving for social justice. When individuals of different religions collaborate to do community service, or when houses of worship team up to do good in their city, this is considered a form of interfaith dialogue.

The final form of dialogue centers around theological exchange. Usually described as a task for religious scholars or clergy, this type of dialogue is about more deeply understanding another's religious tradition and spiritual values. At their best, these formal conversations should not be preoccupied with arriving at hard-and-fast answers. Rather they should be approached as an opportunity for participants to listen intently to the other's point of view, articulate one's own beliefs, and see both religious traditions in a new way. Theological exchange should not just be reserved for experts; nonexperts should feel empowered to participate as well.

These four types of dialogue—the dialogue of life, of religious experience, of action, and of theological exchange—are encouraged by the Catholic Church in its teaching documents on interreligious encounters. In practice, these forms often overlap and should often be carried out together.

When we participate in dialogue, we do not intend to convert those of other faiths to Christianity. Father Tom Ryan, a veteran scholar of interfaith relations, explains that “dialogue does not seek the conversion of others to Christianity but the convergence of both dialogue partners to a deeper shared conversion to God.”⁸ In this sense, conversion is not changing one's religious community or affiliation but rather “the humble and penitent return of the heart to God in the desire to submit one's life more generously to Him.”⁹ To convert is literally to “turn around” or “turn toward.” Dialogue allows all those involved to turn toward God together, and to deepen one's own religious commitment.

While the Catholic Church also encourages “proclamation,” this task of sharing Christianity with others in the hope that they will become baptized Christians is a separate activity from dialogue. Dialogue is not done with ulterior motives and is not an instrument of proclamation. Dialogue and proclamation are two distinct activities of the church’s broader mission.

It is worth reemphasizing that interfaith dialogue is not about converting others to Christianity, proving that we as Christians have all the answers, nor collaborating only for the sake of peace-building. At the core, dialogue is about growing closer to God. What we study in school, the career we choose, whether or not we choose to marry, and how we support our family are all ideally guided by this mission of deepening our relationship with God. The same is true of interfaith dialogue. Like everything else, dialogue should be rooted in and directed toward God, who John Paul II calls the “transcendent goal” that we have in common with people of other faiths.¹⁰

Interreligious dialogue allows us to grow closer to God in three ways: through the people we meet, through their religion, and through our own Christian faith. In dialogue, we learn to recognize God’s Holy Spirit operating in those of other faiths, who are made in God’s image. In dialogue, we are also given the possibility to encounter God through a faith tradition not our own. Finally, dialogue provides us an opportunity to reconnect with our Christian faith tradition. Questions and conversations that arise in dialogue may ignite our curiosity and spark a desire to delve more deeply into our own Catholic teachings and spirituality. Our friendships with those of other faiths and engagement with their religions can enrich our lives as Christians, and may even mean that we live out our Christianity in new ways that reflect the relationships we’ve built.

The Need to Dialogue with Muslims

This book focuses not on interreligious dialogue in a general way, but on dialogue with Muslims specifically. This is for a few reasons. First, this book centers on Islam because the Catholic Church—especially Pope Francis—has encouraged Christians to put special emphasis on dialogue with Muslims. In his first days as pontiff,

Francis expressed that it is “important to intensify dialogue [with Muslims particularly]” because “it is not possible to establish true links with God, while ignoring other people.”¹¹ As the pope pointed out in his apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*, there are more Muslims today living in historically Christian-majority societies than there used to be. Yet, in the United States at least, the vast majority of Catholics say they don’t know any Muslims personally.¹² If we want to truly know God, the pope says, we must know our Muslim neighbors.

Second, the Catholic Church believes dialogue with Muslims should be a priority because of our shared religious beliefs and heritage. Christians and Muslims, along with Jews, believe in the one God, and we trace our religious roots to the figure of Abraham. (More similarities between Christianity and Islam will be laid out in chapter 1.)

Third, we as Christians have a special obligation to get to know those who are often misunderstood or feared. In my work researching anti-Muslim prejudice, I’ve observed that many Catholics, like other Americans, have lukewarm, if not negative, feelings toward Muslims, and most know very little about their religion. Many are also unaware of the impact that anti-Muslim prejudice has on the lives of ordinary Muslims. Dialogue offers us an opportunity to get to know and stand with people who we might perceive as the “other,” beginning to view them as part of “us.”

Lastly, this book focuses on Islam because dialogue with Muslims has been my own personal experience. Though I have been fortunate to know people who practice many different religions, the lessons I’ve learned about dialogue have occurred through my relationships with Muslims, both in the United States and in the Middle East. Islam has been the faith tradition that has most shaped my own experience.

While Muslim-Christian dialogue is the primary concern of this book, readers should recognize that the lessons of the book translate into interfaith dialogue with members of other religions, too. Immersion into another religious tradition, like Judaism or Sikhism, for example, can result in the same deepened relationship with God that I found among Muslims.

Drawn to God through Dialogue

As I have mentioned, Muslim-Christian dialogue can draw us to God in three ways: through our personal relationships with Muslims, who, like us, are created by God; through our encounter with the religion of Islam; and through our deepened connection to our Catholic Christian faith. This book is organized around these three blessings of dialogue, each addressed in two chapters.

Chapters 1 and 2 focus on our relationships with Muslims, who are made in God's image. To paraphrase Pope Francis, we Christians cannot truly be in relationship with God while being out of relationship with Muslims. Growing in friendship with Muslims means that we are willing to learn about the other, to allow each person to teach us something and reveal to us God's action in the world. In chapter 1, we begin this process of relationship-building by learning about Muslims' lives, particularly about their faith. I introduce readers to Muslims I have known, and present Islam as it has been presented to me—through the lived experiences of diverse individuals. I highlight aspects of Muslims' faith that are often overlooked, and draw particular attention to Islam's similarities with Christianity.

In chapter 2, we continue to get to know Muslims, including the prejudice that many in Western countries experience because of their religious affiliation or the way they look. Today, American Muslims living in the United States face discrimination that bears striking resemblance to the way Catholics were once treated in the US. In this chapter, I emphasize the importance of learning about Muslims' experiences of Islamophobia and also of acknowledging the way our stereotypes contribute to the suspicion and hostility that Muslims often face. We must be open to having our prejudices about Muslims challenged and our misconceptions dismantled. As Pope Francis reminds us in *The Joy of the Gospel*, our respect for Muslims "should lead us to avoid hateful generalisations" and to embrace them, especially refugees, with affection.¹³ Growing in relationship with Muslims—learning about their joys and sorrows—reveals God to us. In dialogue, we encounter God with and through Muslims we meet.

We also encounter God through Muslims' religion, Islam. In chapters 3 and 4, I discuss how we can come to know God better through Islam, a religious tradition that is not our own. The Catholic Church

acknowledges that God does not simply work in people, but also in their religions. When we participate in interreligious dialogue, we are witnesses to the reality of God working through other religions, teaching us something. In chapter 3, I talk about the ways my relationship with God has been deepened by my exposure to Islam. This has also been the experience of other Christians, even Catholic priests, and I share their stories. In chapter 4, I take a close look at some of the challenging theological topics that arise in Muslim-Christian dialogue, like the question, Do we believe in the same God? I also delve into differences in our creeds, and demonstrate that there are more similarities between our views of God than we are often led to believe.

The third section of the book—chapters 5 and 6—is about how dialogue helps us embrace and live out our own Christian faith in new and deeper ways. In chapter 5, I discuss how dialogue with Muslims propelled me to connect more deeply with God through my own tradition. Rather than pulling me away from Christianity, interreligious dialogue helped me approach my own religion with a fresh perspective and eager curiosity. Chapter 6 focuses on the rewards, challenges, and responsibilities of living as a Christian in dialogue with Muslims, how we might live our Christianity differently as a result of dialogue. At the end of the book, I also provide ideas and examples for putting interreligious dialogue into practice in one's own life, so that readers can carry the book's lessons into their daily activities. In the appendix, I also give questions that can be used to prompt personal reflection or group discussion. Additionally, I have provided a list of suggested readings and a prayer that can be used by Christians and Muslims in joint prayer.

I've chosen the title *Finding Jesus among Muslims* because it gets at the book's multilayered message and the reality of my own life: that dialogue with Muslims offers us the opportunity to deepen our relationship with God. Thanks to interreligious dialogue, I have found God—Jesus—in people who are Muslim, in their religion, and in the religion I grew up with: Catholicism.

This book is intended to be a facilitator of dialogue, to be a step along readers' journeys of faith. It can be read by individuals alone, or as a part of a course, book club, or prayer group. My hope is that it

can speak to a broad audience, not just to Catholics or other Christians, though those groups are the book's primary audience. After reading the book, I hope my fellow Christians will feel empowered to reach out to Muslims in their local communities. I hope they gain new exposure to the Catholic Church's rich perspectives on dialogue, and find their relationship with God stretched and deepened. Non-Christian readers should also find the book encouraging, as it is rooted in my conviction that interreligious dialogue, no matter who is involved, can be an opportunity for discovering God in new ways. I hope Muslim readers in particular will feel affirmed by the book's message and by my deep appreciation for them and their faith.

Part I

MEETING GOD IN MUSLIMS



Mary, Mercy, and Basketball

*Truly, [God] has chosen you [Mary]
above all women everywhere.*

—Qur'an 3:42

In a small town in the north of Jordan, atop a hill surrounded by pine forests and olive groves, there is a shrine dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Known in Arabic as *Sayyidat al-Jabal*, or Our Lady of the Mount, the site overlooks the expansive Jordan River Valley and marks the place where Jesus, his mother, and his disciples are thought to have stayed during a journey from Jerusalem to the region of Galilee. For decades, Arab Christians have traveled on pilgrimage to the shrine to pray before the statue of the Blessed Mother, which many believe has been the source of miracles.

When I lived in Jordan, I visited the statue on pilgrimage with a few Filipina friends, who have worked for forty years in the Catholic Church's libraries in Jordan and Israel-Palestine. Under a sky blanketed by heavy clouds, we climbed the rolling hills of northern Jordan in a small car, and reached the Our Lady of the Mount compound, which also houses a school, church, and large room for veneration of the statue. There before the shrine, we prayed part of the rosary, surrounded by Orthodox-style icon murals depicting Jesus and Mary.

Our Lady of the Mount is not just a holy site for Christians. It is also a place of pilgrimage for Muslims. For those who practice Islam, Mary is an important religious figure whose name and story appear frequently in the Qur'an. Muslims revere her as the virgin mother of Jesus, and their holy text tells the story of the annunciation with

striking similarities to the version in the Gospel of Luke. In the Qur'an, Mary asks the angel Gabriel, "How shall I bear a son when no man has known me?" (Qur'an 3:47).

Muslims see Mary as a model of faith. Like Catholics, they look to her as an example of someone who deeply trusted in God amid uncertainty and struggle. In the Qur'an, as in the Bible, Mary bears Jesus out of wedlock, facing scorn from her community. Maryam, as she's known in Arabic, is also honored for her intellect and deep spiritual connection to God. Chosen by God "above all women everywhere," the Qur'an says (4:32), Mary spent much time in solitude, praying in a place reserved especially for her in the sanctuary. The *mihrab*, the arched alcove in the mosque, is often associated with Mary's special place of prayer. In every Turkish mosque, there is a quotation from the Qur'an about Mary mounted above the arch. Because of Mary's centrality to the faith, many Muslim women and girls share her name, Maryam.

Shrines dedicated to Mary, like the one in northern Jordan, can be found throughout the Muslim-majority world. In Egypt, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Israel-Palestine, both Christians and Muslims visit Marian shrines in an act of devotion to her and of worship of God.

In 2010 in Lebanon, Muslim leader Sheikh Mohamad Nokkari brought Muslims and Christians together to celebrate the shared story of Gabriel's appearance to Mary. Now, the feast of the Annunciation is celebrated each year as a national holiday in Lebanon. Muslims and Christians from different traditions, along with their religious leaders, travel to a town called Jamhour to join in song and prayer at a church dedicated to *Sayyidatuna*—Our Lady.¹

Our journey of interreligious dialogue with Muslims begins with meeting them, learning about their lives, their faith, and what we have in common. In this chapter, I introduce readers to some of the many Muslims I've been blessed to meet and befriend, both in the United States and in the Middle East. Through these relationships, I've come to learn about what Islam means to them—how they understand it and live it out in their daily lives. This picture of Islam I present—painted by roommates, colleagues, shopkeepers, and professors—is supplemented with references to Islamic theology, history,

tradition, and scripture that they've shared with me and that I've encountered in my academic study and personal exploration of Islam.

This first chapter also places a strong emphasis on Catholics' similarities with Muslims. Emphasizing our commonalities first, and our differences down the line, is the approach the Catholic Church takes in *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council document that speaks about other religions. Rather than focusing on our differences with Muslims, this groundbreaking document, which was released during the 1960s and has shaped the Catholic Church's teaching since then, lingers on what is shared. This approach of beginning with commonalities will help us more quickly develop bonds of friendship and understanding with Muslims that, in turn, will help us grow closer to God.

In this chapter, and throughout the entire book, it is critical for us to remember what the Bible tells us—that every human being is made in God's image and likeness. This truth has no exceptions; it includes the 1.6 billion people in the world who practice the religion of Islam. I've experienced this truth in my own life, thanks to my encounters with Muslims, whether they be strangers or close friends. Countless times, Muslims have revealed God to me. I have seen God at work through their generosity, kindness, courage, and selflessness. In this chapter, I share only a few instances in which I have experienced God through Muslims.

Honoring God by Serving Humanity

The first Muslim I met was Nadir Zaidi. He, like me, attended Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School, a Catholic high school run by Jesuit priests in Indianapolis, Indiana. Like many American teens, Nadir was obsessed with NBA basketball, and also aspired to be a doctor. Coincidentally, after graduating from Brebeuf, both of us attended Georgetown University, where Nadir studied biology, taught science to students from marginalized communities, and kept my intermural basketball team afloat with his killer jump shot. After college, Nadir taught seventh grade in Los Angeles through Teach for America, and was named a Los Angeles Lakers "Teacher of the Month."² Now, he's a medical student at Cornell, living out his high school dream of becoming a physician.

I vividly remember one seventh-period religion class in high school in which Nadir talked about wanting to become a doctor. He spoke of his desire to perform medicine not just in Carmel, Indiana, where he was from, but also through humanitarian aid missions abroad, perhaps in a place like Pakistan, where his parents were born. "I know people talk about burnout," he said, "but can I really justify not devoting myself fully to helping as many people as possible, regardless of the toll it takes on me?" His passion for helping others struck me, and it challenged me and my classmates to consider how we might help others in our careers. I didn't know a lot about Islam at the time, but I knew that Nadir was a faithful person, and I could see that his passion for helping others flowed from his devotion to God and his religious convictions.

Since meeting Nadir, I've been fortunate to know hundreds of other Muslims, some of whom have become close friends and colleagues, and others of whom simply sold me chewing gum at a corner food mart in Amman. But, nearly all of them have embodied this same spirit of self-giving service I first encountered in Nadir over ten years ago. Kristin, a former colleague and convert to Islam, campaigns to secure paid family leave for workers in Washington, DC. My college roommate, Wardah, now volunteers at a health clinic run by the local Muslim community in New Haven, Connecticut. Even while enrolled in an intense medical program, she plans to run for local office to improve the education system in New Haven. Khalid, a cabdriver I knew in Jordan, once phoned me during a snowstorm to see if I needed a ride to get groceries or to visit friends. When he arrived to pick me up from my apartment, he trudged up the street, took my hand, and helped me down the slippery, snowy hill.

The good works that Muslims do for others are so often an expression of their faith. In their holy text, the Qur'an, Muslims find commands to serve humanity and all of creation, to make a more peaceful and just world where all people can flourish. One scriptural verse often cited as motivation for establishing social justice, even amid difficult circumstances, is this one: "Believers! Be resolute in the doing of justice, as witnesses to God, even though it be against yourselves, your parents or your kinsfolk, and whether it concerns rich or poor. For what has to do with God is more relevant than

wealth or poverty. Do not follow your own desires into the perversion of what is right. If you act in bias or prejudice God is well aware of what you are doing" (4:135). A common refrain throughout the Qur'an is about promoting what is good and preventing what is wrong. In one verse, God says, "Let there be a single community of you, sounding the call to good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong. It is such who truly prosper" (3:104).

The Prophet Muhammad and his community instituted major social reforms in their society of seventh-century Arabia. At that time, the city of Mecca (where Muhammad was born) was marred by sectarian conflict and economic injustice, as well as racial, gender, and social inequality. The injustices of the society, which was dominated by a few wealthy families, were intertwined with a culture of polytheism and idol worship. The Muslim community, led by Muhammad, endeavored to change that. In the Islamic tradition, believing in God is inseparable from doing good works for humanity. The Qur'an constantly pairs monotheism—faith in the one God—with action: "God has promised those who have believed and who practice righteous deeds that forgiveness and a great reward are theirs" (5:9). Another verse instructs, "Worship God and do not elevate anything at all to share His worship. Deal kindly with your parents and your kinsfolk, with orphans and the poor, as well as with the neighbor who is of your kin and the neighbor who is a stranger, with the companion beside you, and with the wayfarer and the slaves in your charge. God does not like the conceited and the boastful" (4:36). In a version of the Golden Rule, the Prophet Muhammad said, "None of you believes unless he wants for his brother what he loves for himself."³

Muslims look to the example of the Prophet Muhammad, who they view as the ideal role model for living out God's message. In the Qur'an, God says that he has not sent Muhammad "except as a mercy to the world" (21:107). Muslims strive to live out God's will as Muhammad did—by honoring God through serving humanity. They remember the Prophet as a generous person, always inclined toward forgiveness and gentleness. He was prayerful, extremely frugal, and funny, too. In contradiction to the conceptions many non-Muslims have of him and of the society he helped build, Muhammad's community was built on ideals of equality and religious pluralism,

and it remedied many of the injustices that harmed the most vulnerable in seventh-century Arabia.

Muslim individuals, congregations, and communities draw from their faith tradition in carrying out works of service and social justice that extend well beyond their own religious community. Syria Civil Defense, also known as “the White Helmets,” is an organization of civilians who attempt to rescue their fellow Syrians harmed in the civil war. Since the beginning of the war in Syria, they have rescued thousands of people from bombed-out buildings in their war-torn country.⁴ Concerned with saving as many lives as possible, the group chose a verse from the Qur’an as their motto: “To save a life is to save all of humanity” (5:32).

When numerous African-American churches in the United States were burnt down in 2015, American Muslims raised over \$100,000 to help rebuild them. In their efforts, they cited a Qur’anic quote about the importance of protecting churches and houses of worship (22:40).⁵ They also cited this one, in which God reminds the Muslim community of their similarities with Christians: “You will find the closest to the believers in affection to be those who say: ‘We are Christians,’—the reason being that among them are priests and monks, and they are not a people given to arrogance” (5:82). In a village in Pakistan in 2016, Muslims paid for the rebuilding of a church, which one Muslim contributor called a “house of God.”⁶ After tombstones belonging to Jewish families were vandalized in St. Louis in 2017, Muslims quickly raised funds to repair them, too. And during the protests in North Dakota against the building of an oil pipeline, Muslims traveled to the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation to express their support for the protests and to give the tribe’s leaders holy *Zamzam* water from a well in the holy mosque in Mecca.⁷

In Washington, DC, and London, Muslim-run restaurants serve meals to the homeless on Christmas Day, when many other businesses are closed.⁸ Across the United States, Muslims run free health clinics, homeless outreach programs, and shelters for women. As one Milwaukee Muslim put it after delivering aid packages to her city’s homeless population, “You don’t have to be Muslim to get our help.”

This loving spirit of care is also expressed in more subtle, ordinary ways. It is manifested in the dozens of text messages, Facebook mes-

sages, and Snapchat videos I have received from Muslim friends like Ayah and Aamir on Christmas. It is contained in the trinkets that friends have brought me from their travels abroad—like the white elephant Aly bought outside the Taj Mahal in India, the flower-petal tea that Aamina brought back for me from Spain, the purse Norbani purchased for me in Indonesia, and the bracelet that Nazir picked up in Rome. This generosity was also contained in the bills and coins my Jordanian cabdriver handed to me after he ran from car to car, and bus to bus, to break my twenty *dinar* bill, so I could get the proper change after our ride through Amman. This kindness was tucked into the packet of cookies that a grandfatherly man with gapped, yellow teeth handed me when I encountered him on the sidewalk on Arar Street, named for the twenty-century Jordanian poet who wrote of Muslim-Christian coexistence.

I saw this hospitality in the friendly, waving gesture of Reema, a mother of four who lives in the green, stone-strewn hillsides of rural Jordan. In the spring of 2012, some American friends and I passed by her home on the outskirts of Amman on our way to visit the ruins of an ancient Jewish castle in the valley. “*Marhaba!* Hello!” I said as we walked by. “*Tafaddili,*” she beckoned from the porch, with her young son on her lap. “Come join us for tea!”

For the next hour, my friends and I talked in broken colloquial Arabic with Reema and her family, sipping gritty coffee and sweet tea under a tangled web of grapevines. Its branches split the sunlight into shards that stretched across her face and that of her husband, Muhammad, whose eyes crinkled in the sunshine as he handed me fresh mint to suck on. All of us sat together, watching their daughter Aseel bounce a blue marble on the floor, and we laughed as baby Ahmed smeared coffee grounds all over his face. When we left and continued down the winding road, nine-year-old Abdullah gave us a snack of unripe almonds as a parting gift. Though the tea and snacks are long gone now, the memory of the family’s generous service—and that of so many Muslim friends and strangers—remains one of my most treasured possessions. Their hospitality has been an undeniable expression of God’s love for me. Countless times, God has loved me through the Muslims I’ve met.