



**Building bridges. Living with differences.**

*Akbar Ahmed*  
*From Clash to Dialogue*  
*of Civilizations*

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**T H E   B U X T O N   R E A D I N G S**



*Akbar Ahmed*  
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**THE BUXTON READINGS**

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## Foreword

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, former United Nations ambassador Andrew Young borrowed for the title of his autobiography the plaintive cry of the old spiritual “A Way Out of No Way.” The hope was that God would clear a path where none was apparent. The spiritual’s sentiment, born of the seeming intractable and hopeless struggles of the American slave, is equally applicable to the daunting challenges posed today by both Muslim extremism and the West’s relationship to the general Muslim world. Is there any available path given what appears to be the world’s headlong race toward annihilation? Is the growing divide between the West and the rest irreversible? Can we live with our differences?

The central challenge of our times is whether modern people living in both Islamic and Christian cultures can coexist. Extremists fail to recognize the common Abrahamic faith traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As a result, those on the fringes have frequently defined the contours of what should be a rational discussion.

It is within the context of a deeply divided world that the Buxton Initiative was born. Two former diplomats, Dr. Akbar Ahmed, a Muslim, and former ambassador Douglas Holladay, a Christian, met soon after September 11, 2001, at the National Press Club in Washington. Their friendship blossomed, eventually expanding to include others of both faith communities.

The Buxton Initiative draws its name and inspiration from the life of Thomas F. Buxton, a nineteenth-century reformer and member of the British parliament. Buxton’s work was animated by a vital faith, which enabled him to confront formidable and complicated challenges with practical, “real world” strategies to find common ground and enable change.

Our effort understands that differences make a difference indeed. Yet in a diverse world, we simply must learn to live with differences rather than be threatened by them. At the core of this work is simple friendship. It is easy to vilify and stereotype those whom we don’t know. Thus, time and attention are given to building relationships and learning of the personal journeys of each participant. As human beings, we are all more alike than different, irrespective of ostensible labels which might suggest otherwise.

The central activity of the Buxton Initiative is the regular breaking of bread together and honest dialogue among leaders from both faith traditions. A similar effort among younger leaders is under way as part of the Buxton Young Leaders program. All gather to understand and build bridges, rather than debate policy. The results have been encouraging. Trust results from these very personal times together.

As followers of Christ, we are learning to respect, value, and love our Muslim friends without compromising the bedrock of our own faith. We have encouraged our Muslim friends to do likewise. Naturally, we have been criticized, and so have they. We think Jesus would have us do this. After all, after loving our God, we are implored to love others as ourselves.

The following remarks delivered by Dr. Ahmed at the prestigious London School of Economics are worthy of wide attention because they offer a hopeful vision for our troubled world. More than ever, we must reach out beyond our comfort zones to embrace, truly embrace, those quite different from ourselves. We must learn to live with our differences. The Buxton Initiative, by so doing, seeks to light a small candle rather than curse the considerable darkness. Please join us in our quest to connect on an intensely human and spiritual basis with others. We invite your prayers and participation.




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**J. Douglas Holladay** is general partner and cofounder of Park Avenue Equity Partners, with offices in New York and Washington. Previously, he was a senior officer with the international investment banking firm Goldman, Sachs & Company and held senior positions in both the White House and State Department. He recently completed with Harvard psychiatrist and friend Dr. Armand Nicholi the four-part PBS documentary *The Question of God*. He holds degrees from the University of North Carolina, Princeton, and Oxford University. He serves as cochairman of *The Buxton Initiative*.

**Robert Woody** is chief executive officer of Northstar Consulting Group, Inc., with offices in Baltimore and Washington. Previously, he was a partner with the law firm of Shook, Hardy & Bacon, L.L.P. He has held senior positions in the law firm of Lane & Mittendorf and of One to One/The National Mentoring Partnership. He has served as special counsel to the U.S. delegation to the United Nations and currently serves as chairman of the International Leadership Group. He also serves as cochairman of *The Buxton Initiative*.



# Islam under Siege: From Clash to Dialogue of Civilizations

**Miliband Lecture on Culture in the Age of Global Communications at the London School of Economics\***

**INTRODUCTION BY DR. DAVID HELD**

**W**ELCOME TO THE FINAL MILIBAND LECTURE this academic year on the theme of Culture in the Age of Global Communications. The lecture this evening is titled “Islam under Siege: From Clash to Dialogue of Civilizations.” I note there is no question mark after the title, so I expect we may hear an optimistic account. Indeed, I look forward to it.

Our speaker is known to all of you—Professor Akbar Ahmed, Chair of Islamic Studies and professor of international relations at the American University in Washington, D.C. Dr. Ahmed is the former high commissioner of Pakistan to Great Britain; he has advised Prince Charles and spoken with President George W. Bush, among other leaders, about contemporary Islam. He is a distinguished anthropologist, writer, and filmmaker; he has been actively involved in interfaith dialogue for a long time. Dr. Ahmed has been a leader in the study of Islam and its impact on contemporary society for many years. He has been a visiting professor at Harvard University, Cambridge University, and the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. So I must ask him, “What was wrong with the LSE?”

Dr. Ahmed is a prolific writer and a prolific communicator and has made many media appearances in the United States and the United Kingdom, including interviews on CNN, NBC, and BBC. I hope you heard him yesterday here in London on *Start the Week*; it was a fascinating discussion. He appeared several times recently on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Please join me now in welcoming our distinguished visitor, Dr. Akbar S. Ahmed.

**ADDRESS BY DR. AKBAR AHMED**

My Lord Adam Patel, Excellencies, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, my first duty is to thank Professor David Held for the honor of this invitation and for that very warm and generous introduction. For me this evening is indeed a great honor. The LSE has such a great name on the international stage. It is also an honor because of the name that has inspired this lecture series—Sir Ralph Miliband. As a social scientist interested in translating ideas into action, I have always looked up to him. He was not a scholar locked away in an ivory tower but a man of action.

It is also an honor to see so many friends whom I have not seen for several years here this evening, some of them sitting in front of me, and so many have come from outside London. I think you will appreciate my mentioning some of them: Dr. Tahir Abbas and Raja Khan from Birmingham, Imam Abdul Jalil Sajid from Brighton, Donald Welbourne from my old college in Cambridge, Selwyn College, and Ishaque from Edinburgh. And I am delighted that my daughter Amineh Ahmed, who is a graduate of the LSE, is here with her family, having freshly received a PhD from Cambridge.

If you think that is impressive, let me acknowledge the presence of a dear friend who has come from Washington, D.C., to be with us this evening, Ambassador J. Douglas Holladay. Doug and I have begun a significant dialogue—The Buxton Initiative—rooted in friendship where ambassadors, senators, cabinet ministers and CEOs from our respective faith communities—Muslim and Christian—regularly gather to build bridges.

With these acknowledgements and heartfelt thanks, let me introduce the following questions this evening in relation to the subject of my lecture. The first question is: What are the main global theories that explain our present world? I will briefly try to highlight some of the influential ideas and point out the understanding of Islam. Secondly, why is it important for all of us in this audience, Muslim and non-Muslim, to understand Islam? After all, our focus will be on Islam and not some other world civilization equally praiseworthy and deserving of attention. And, finally, how do we move ahead from our present crisis in the world? I wish to explore some of the paths that I believe lie in front of us in the coming days. I hope you will assist me in exploring these questions.

**WHAT ARE THE MAIN GLOBAL THEORIES THAT EXPLAIN OUR PRESENT WORLD?**

After September 11, 2001, people frequently said that the world had changed forever. Personal security, economics, politics, and social life across the world have been affected directly or indirectly by the events of that dreadful day. In an important sense, they are right. But changes were already in motion as a result of the process of what is called “globalization.” Scholars were attempting to explain our world.

Political scientists, historians, religious scholars, journalists, dramatists, and social scientists are trying to help us understand the world we live in.

In 1993 and again in 1996, Samuel Huntington wrote about the clash of civilizations, an idea that gained currency after September 11. Huntington argued that the clash in our times would be defined by cultural and religious civilizations. He identified Islam as a major global civilizational opponent to the West.

The idea and term “clash of civilizations” first came from the historian Bernard Lewis at Princeton University. His recent bestseller *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (2002) is a rather gloomy and somewhat deterministic account of Muslim history. Lewis describes the spectacular rise and irreversible fall of Muslim civilization.

Opposed to the idea of a clash of civilizations, President Khatami of Iran proposed a dialogue of civilizations at the United Nations in 1998; he pointed to the strengths of Islam and its great traditions of scholarship, understanding, and dialogue. Another religious scholar, Dr. Jonathan Sacks, the chief rabbi of the United Kingdom, in his book *The Dignity of Difference* (2003) argues that the roots of the clash go much deeper. According to Sacks, the clash is really between Abrahamic values—which define Judaic, Christian, and Islamic cultures—and our contemporary values, which have little time for piety, modesty, humility, compassion, and scholarship. He, too, advocates dialogue and understanding.

Writing with passion and eloquence, Dr. Sacks lays out a forceful argument in his book. Here are his opening lines:

*The Dignity of Difference* is a plea—the most forceful I could make—for tolerance in an age of extremism. I see in the rising crescendo of ethnic tensions, civilizational clashes and the use of religious justification for acts of terror, a clear and present danger to humanity. For too long, the pages of history have been stained by blood shed in the name of God. Allied to weapons of mass destruction, extremist religious attitudes threaten the very security of life on earth. In our interconnected world, we must learn to feel enlarged, not threatened, by difference.

Tom Friedman of the *New York Times* writes of globalization to explain our world in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (2000). For him globalization is equated to “Americanization,” and at its heart is the concept and practice of democracy. Muslim states must respond to the challenge, in my view, by adopting genuine democracy.

Other commentators focus on a less benign and idealistic image of the United States. They see the emergence of the United States as the sole superpower and its role as the new global imperialist driven by greed, mendacity, and stupidity. In this vision of international affairs the “ugly American” becomes the Hulk and is on the rampage—in the words of Harold Pinter like a “beast in the jungle.” Indian writer Arundhati Roy argues in the same vein. She notes that the “War on Terror” is driven not by the need to get “Al-Qaeda” but to get “al-faeda,” which in Hindu and Urdu

means ‘profit.’ Analysts like these see a cabal of malicious gnome-like figures who live in the half-light called Neo-Cons and drive the American engine. They argue that the savage cruelty and cynicism we see in examples like the abuse at Abu Ghraib prison are a consequence of the culture engendered by this leadership.

Mine is a social scientist’s perspective of what is happening in the world. I gave the title *Islam under Siege* (2003) to my book from the notion of societies being under siege. We are living at a critical and dangerous time in history because several world civilizations are feeling simultaneously under siege. Muslims feel under siege and point to the plight of the Palestinians, the Kashmiris, and the Chechens. In spite of the UN resolutions and the suffering we see on television, little has been done to settle the problem of these people. Muslims view the continuing instability and violence in Iraq and Afghanistan with growing anger. They talk of the cloud of Islamophobia—a hatred of things Islam. Indeed, television channels after September 11 broadcast news under the heading “America under Siege.” Israelis have felt under siege for several decades, believing that they are surrounded by Arabs determined to exterminate them.

Individuals living in societies under siege are thrown off balance. They fall into notions of excessive group loyalty. In a heated climate there is little room for dialogue; the dominant ethos is one of group survival and security. Dishonorable acts, even rape and murder, are committed in the name of the group. Ironically, these dishonorable acts are meant to proclaim the honor of the individuals committing them. We may be living in a time which could be characterized by the notion of “post-honor.”

I have borrowed a concept to examine Muslim societies from the great Muslim historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldun, who lived in the fourteenth century. His notion of *asabiyya*—group loyalty or social cohesion—explained how societies were bound together and passed on values, customs, and behavior patterns from one generation to another. I argue that *asabiyya* in our times is loosening and even disintegrating. But as societies don’t disappear into a black hole, different expressions of *asabiyya* begin to form. In our times we are seeing excessive or exaggerated group loyalty. I call this hyper-*asabiyya*. Hyper-*asabiyya* encourages a rigid drawing of boundaries around a group and can promote violence. Many societies around the world are driven by hyper-*asabiyya*, but I will focus on Muslim society. Let us see how we arrive at hyper-*asabiyya* in our world.

I have pointed to the rapid urbanization in Muslim society. Take Karachi—the city where I grew up. It had a population of a few hundred thousand when Pakistan was created in 1947 and it has about 15 million people today—it is literally bursting at the seams, and law and order, transport, health and civic facilities simply don’t function in many parts of the city. Over the last decades, something like 70–80 percent of a once-rural population in the rest of Pakistan is now urbanized. These people are suspended between two ways of life and are particularly vulnerable.

The gaps between the rich and the poor are growing dangerously wide. In Cairo or Karach, a visitor will see a shiny new marble palace erected in the midst of shantytowns. Anger is caused not only by the widening gap but also by the fact that many of the rich have made their money through illegal means.

Muslim leaders need to worry about the social and demographic trends in their countries. Muslim population growth rates are among the highest in the world and literacy rates are among the lowest. The figures for health facilities are unsatisfactory and the life expectancy below average. A large percentage of the population is young, jobless, and restless for radical change, and an aggressive Islam, which easily translates into violence, is the natural way out.

I also pointed out a little-discussed but significant feature of Muslim society: the poor treatment of scholars. Scholars are chased out of the country, sometimes silenced and even killed. The climate of sycophancy surrounding the rulers and the widespread powers of the intelligence services make life a living hell for the scholars of conscience. Over the last decades, there has been a brain drain from the Muslim world to the West, which even the growing hatred of Islam has not prevented. In the absence of critical and intelligent scholarship, neither objective analysis nor sensible predictions are possible in society. Muslims are aware that knowledge is highly prized in Islam. The word for knowledge, *ilm*, is the second-most-used word in the Quran after the word for God.

Muslims face another, greater, challenge, an internal one: They need to re-build an idea of Islam, which includes justice, integrity, tolerance, and the quest for knowledge—the classic Islamic civilization—not just the insistence on the rituals, not just the five pillars of Islam, but also the entire building. Reducing a sophisticated civilization to simple rituals encourages simple answers: reaching for guns and explosives, for instance. Today, piety and virtue are judged by political action—often equated to violence—not moral integrity or spirituality.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of compassionate and wise leadership in Muslim society. Most of the leaders fall into one of two categories: they are either military dictators or tribal chiefs. Genuine elected leaders working in a democratic system, which can remove them under the law, are few and far between. It is however a hopeful sign that they do exist, as in Malaysia and Bangladesh.

To make matters worse, the West does not generally understand Islam and therefore does things which make the relationship worse. The West needs to respond to the Muslim world firstly by listening to what Muslims are saying and secondly by trying to understand Islam.

#### WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND ISLAM?

The twenty-first century will be the century of Islam. The events of September 11 saw to that. The hijackers of the four American planes, not only killed thousands of

innocent people, but also created one of the greatest paradoxes of the twenty-first century: Islam, which sees itself as a religion of peace, is now associated with murder and mayhem.

In light of the fact that the Muslim world population is one of the fastest growing, let us consider three important facts about Islam today: First, there are about 1.3 billion Muslims living in 57 states. One of these states, for the time being, is nuclear, and one-third of the world's Muslims live in non-Muslim countries. Second, about 25 million live in the West. Of these 25 million, 7 million live in the United States and 2 million live in the United Kingdom. And third, Muslim nations are indispensable for American foreign policy. Foreign policy experts have identified nine "pivotal" states on which the United States bases its foreign policy. Of the nine, five are Muslim, according to the experts (see Robert Chase et al., in *Foreign Affairs*, 1996). The main terrorists on America's wanted list are Muslim—Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, and Taliban leaders such as Mullah Omar—but so are America's main allies in the "War on Terror"—President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan, President Karzai of Afghanistan, and King Abdullah of Jordan. Therefore, if both implacable opponents and close allies are Muslims, it is imperative to begin to understand Islam.

We know that for the first time in history, due to a unique geopolitical conjunction of factors, Islam is in confrontation with all of the major world religions: Judaism in the Middle East; Christianity in the Balkans, Chechnya, Nigeria, Sudan, the Philippines, and Indonesia; Hinduism in South Asia; and Buddhism—after the Taliban blew up their statues—in Bamiyan. And Islam is on a collision course in the western province of China, where culture represents an amalgam of the philosophy of Confucius, Tao, and communist ideology.

It is this historic conjunction that both singles out Islam and creates the global argument that the twenty-first century will be a time of war between Islam and the other world civilizations. Of course, this neat concept is challenged because so many Muslim countries are clearly allied to non-Muslim ones. Besides, so many Muslims now live in non-Muslim nations. But it is true to say that the major world civilizations are experiencing problems in accommodating or even understanding Islam, both within their borders and outside them.

Whatever the economic, political, and sometimes demographic causes of social transformation on this scale, simplistic ideas often capture the imagination and become the filter through which ordinary people understand them. One such idea has firmly caught the imagination of people across the world—that there is an ongoing clash between Islam and Western civilization. The argument has been stoked by Harvard professors and European prime ministers, but it has been around for a thousand years. Whether one adheres to the notion of the clash of civilizations, or whether one chooses dialogue, understanding Islam will be key.

For example, the critics of Islam ask: If there is such an emphasis on compassion and tolerance in Islam, why is it associated with violence and intolerance toward non-Muslims<sup>1</sup> and the poor treatment of women?<sup>2</sup> The answer is that both Muslims and non-Muslims use the Quran selectively.

Take the first criticism of Islam: that it encourages violence. The actions of the nineteen hijackers had little to do with Islamic theology. Killing a single innocent person is like killing all of humanity, warns the Quran (Surah 5: Verse 32). The Quran clearly preaches tolerance and understanding. Indeed, there is an anthropologically illuminating verse which points to the diversity of races: “O Human Beings! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female and have made you into nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another. . . . The noblest of you, in the sight of God, is the best in conduct” (Surah 49: Verse 13).

Listening and understanding are crucial. Take the most commonly used words about Muslims, such as “fundamentalist” and “*jihad*.” Because the world media equate the former with an extremist, fanatic terrorist who is (invariably) Muslim, we can only wonder how many media people pause to ask: Can we legitimately apply a term devised to describe something in one culture (a certain brand of Christian behavior and thought) to another distinct culture? Is every Muslim on earth today an extremist, a fanatic, and a terrorist? No, obviously not.

Among Muslims and non-Muslims alike, how many know that the notion of the greater *jihad*—the word derives from a word meaning ‘to strive’—commonly misunderstood as an aggressive act of religious war in the West, was explained by the Prophet as the attempt to control our own base instincts and work toward a better, more harmonious world? The lesser *jihad* is to battle physically for Islam; that, too, only as a defensive action against tyranny and injustice.

If we are to prevent the world from lurching toward one crisis after another, from one flashpoint to another, then we all need to radically rethink the relationship between our religion and other religions—a radical reassessment of one another.

Islamophobia or a generalized hatred or contempt of Islam and its civilization appears to be widespread and growing. This is the reality on the ground—however grand and noble even the best-written constitutions and charters. The result is pressure on the Muslim family and on social, political, and even moral life. The consequence is anger, confusion, and frustration; acts of violence result. *Fitna* and *shar*, chaos and conflict, become common. God’s vision of a just and compassionate human society remains unfulfilled. Understanding Islam becomes important.

The consequences of what happens within Muslim society will be felt by societies everywhere. No one is immune from the debates that now rage around Islam. These issues concern scholars, policy makers and ordinary citizens.

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<sup>1</sup>For further discussion, see: Louay M. Safi (2001) *Peace and the Limits of War: Transcending Classical Conception of Jihad*, International Institute of Thought, Herndon, Virginia.

<sup>2</sup>For further discussion, see: Katherine Bullock (2002) *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes*, International Institute of Islamic Thought, Herndon, Virginia.

### WHAT SHOULD WE BE DOING?

The first and most important step is to help create a climate that will allow the real problems of the Muslim world to be solved—in Palestine, in Kashmir, in the Balkans, and in Chechnya. Stability and security must come to Iraq and Afghanistan as soon as possible. So far, the formal world bodies have failed miserably. More is needed than just the political resolution of the problems in the Muslim world. Muslim honor and dignity must be restored. No other people in our times can be so openly abused and humiliated with such impunity as the Muslims. Their God, their Prophet, their holy book, and their culture can be attacked openly and freely. This has resulted in a growing sense of powerlessness and despair that has fed into anger which, in turn, encourages violence. That is why Muslims like me who speak of dialogue and understanding are dismissed as “Uncle Toms.”

The West must send serious signals to the ordinary Muslim people—via the media, through seminars, conferences, meetings—that it does not consider Islam to be the enemy, however much it may disagree with certain aspects of Muslim behavior. The West needs to understand Islamic expressions of revolt as movements against corruption and lack of justice, not as anti-Western.

The West must discourage the knee-jerk “nuke ’em” response to Muslims and the labeling of any Muslim act as “fundamentalist.” It must learn to curb and control its Islamophobic tendencies. The international media and Western governments need to be more sensitive to Muslim society. The Western media’s generalized and intense contempt of Islam provokes many Muslims into an anti-Western stance. It also makes those who talk of dialogue and moderation more vulnerable.

### LOOKING FOR ANSWERS OBJECTIVELY

I noted, for example, that after September 11 the answers in the media were not only incomplete, they were pushing the debate in the wrong directions. The social sciences could have provided answers. Yet in all the discussion of suicide attacks, I did not once hear the name of Emile Durkheim, whose seminal work on suicide informs scholarly discussions (*Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, 1966 edition; also see Anthony Giddens, 1978; for a contemporary overview of Durkheim, see Gianfranco Poggi, 2000).

Durkheim underlines that traditional explanations of suicide, such as mental disturbance, race, or climate, do not fully explain the act. He argues that suicide is a consequence of a disturbed social order. Moral codes are disrupted in times of change and affect rich and poor. The strain leads to suicide and abnormal behavior, which he identifies as “anomie” (*The Division of Labour in Society*, 1964 edition). Durkheim was echoing Ibn Khaldun’s *asabiyya*. These two thinkers provide us with a useful central thesis to consider in looking at our times. We need to look for answers in the changing social order, in the sense of social breakdown, and in the feeling of the loss of honor and dignity. This is what I have tried to do in my book *Islam under Siege*.

The thesis about the clash of civilizations, which remains influential in some circles, rests on the assumption that the wars of this century will be fought along religious lines. It is therefore logical and urgent to understand what factors are responsible for the emergence of religion and how religion will be playing a role in deciding political developments in this century. However, we need to penetrate beneath the sensationalist nature of these theories and discover alternative ways of understanding society. I do not suggest that we accept all religions uncritically. I suggest instead that we understand one another's religions in order to make sense of what is happening in global society.

### ENCOURAGING EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY

The Muslim world needs to institute and ensure the success of democracy. While the practice of democracy in the Muslim world has been disappointing and is synonymous with corruption and mismanagement, in the end there is no alternative. It is the only system that allows corrupt leaders to be removed without bloodshed. The world can help by ensuring that elections are fair and free and that resources are provided in the holding of elections and maintaining of institutions that safeguard democracy.

Muslims must be able to feel that they can participate in the process of governance. They must feel that they are able to elect their leaders and that if those leaders are not able to deliver, that they can throw them out as well. Too many Muslim leaders are kings and military dictators. Many of them ensure that their sons or relatives stay on to perpetuate their dynastic rule. Most Muslims feel truly disenfranchised.

With a working democracy Muslims will be able to ensure that the gaps that are widening between the rich and the poor will be bridged. The sight of palatial mansions guarded by security guards carrying automatic weapons and, nearby, the miserable squalor of shantytowns teeming with poor children is common in Muslim cities. The redistribution of wealth must remain a priority of any democratic government.

If the West is able to focus on democracy and education, there will be clarity both of vision and of objectives. This will also ensure that Muslims do not feel that the West is out to subvert Islam. The West can put pressure on Muslim governments—and it interacts with most of them overtly or covertly—to get their act together, to ensure justice, and to provide clean administration. Western governments can help for instance in education programs. Take the example of Pakistan: After September 11, Pakistan is to receive more than four billion dollars in American aid. How much of it will disappear as commissions and bribes? How much of it is earmarked for education? Is the syllabus of the *madrassahs* being improved? How much investment is being made in the libraries and the teachers' training programs? Muslim societies need to have access to affordable, high-quality education so that they can be put on a par with other developed societies. Education must not be restricted to the small Westernized elite. The majority who benefit from the *madrassahs* must also learn sciences, technology, mass media, and information about the world and its diversity.

Muslim education needs to emphasize the tolerant and compassionate nature of Islam. Only then will the central features of Islam re-emerge. When *adl* ‘justice’, *ihsan* ‘compassion’, and respect for *ilm* ‘knowledge’ resurface, there will be tolerance for scholars and for minorities in society. Most important: women will be given their rightful place in society.

Muslims must rediscover the tolerance that once characterized their societies. We need also to point out what Muslims sometimes gloss over or refuse to acknowledge: There are far too many complaints about human rights violations, especially concerning non-Muslim minorities, in Muslim countries. This is because there is too little of the Islamic spirit of tolerance and compassion. Why are Muslims ignoring the Quranic instructions to “forgive and be indulgent” to the people of the Book, Jews and Christians (Surahs 2 and 109)? Why are they forgetting that God’s greatest names are the Beneficent and the Merciful?

Dialogue and seminars can encourage ideas of education and democracy in the Muslim world. It is commonly assumed that there is no democracy in the Muslim world. This is, again, based on ignorance. The example of Muhammad Ali Jinnah confirms that as far back as the first half of the last century one of the most important political movements in the Muslim world, the Pakistan movement, resulted in the creation of what then was the largest democratic Muslim nation on earth: Pakistan in 1947. It was led by a man who embodied Western democracy. Jinnah believed in respect and rights for women, minority rights, human rights, and above all, in a constitution. Americans in the Middle East propagate democracy, and Arabs resist the idea as they see it being imposed by America as a new imperialist power. The argument would shift if they understood that democracy is very much part of the Muslim tradition and they were given the example of Jinnah. That is why I spent over a decade of my life creating the *Jinnah Quartet*—a feature film, a documentary, an academic book, and a comic book. Yet when I talk about Jinnah, very few Americans have heard his name.

Over a decade ago, while a don (a very privileged and academic position at Cambridge or Oxford University)—and as someone who had been a senior field administrator in the Muslim world—I became aware of the coming storm around Islam. I asked myself two questions: how can I help to rediscover compassionate or tolerant Islam and where are the models of Muslim political leaders who could inspire us in the Muslim world? I therefore spent my time in developing and completing major projects around these two questions. The first question was answered in my work on Islam, which resulted in a BBC six-part television series to be shown on prime-time called *Living Islam*. The second resulted in the *Jinnah Quartet*.

#### STARTING DIALOGUE

The shocking fact, which several polls confirm, is that about 75 percent of Americans said they knew nothing about Islam or that they were hostile to Islam.

This figure illustrates the extent of the problem. It is made worse because the figures for the Muslim world are equally as alarming. Anti-Americanism is now rampant and widespread. Even Muslims living in America know little about American history or the great American figures like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin. These founding fathers dreamt noble and grand dreams with universal appeal for their new nation. Unfortunately the poster child for America in the Muslim world is now Lynndie England, shown in a photograph gleefully pulling a cowering and naked Iraqi prisoner by a dog leash around his neck. This is now perhaps the best recruiting propaganda for fighting Americans.

It is therefore essential that we create by any and all means a process of mutual understanding and dialogue. This work can be done through conferences, seminars, and the dissemination of knowledge about one another.

With dialogue comes knowledge and understanding. Many Americans would be pleasantly surprised to know that Islam is not a religion of “idol-worshippers” and “Satan-worshippers,” as some have said in the media, but is very much rooted in the Abrahamic faith. In particular, Muslims revere and love Jesus; indeed, Jesus is referred to as *Ruh-Allah* ‘the Spirit of God’ in Muslim Sufi literature. There is an entire chapter on Mary in the Muslim holy book, the Quran. The Prophet of Islam singled out Jesus as one of the most inspirational figures of history and a personal favorite. For theologians looking for what is common in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, there is rich material: the idea of one invisible and omnipotent God, the angels, the messengers, the sacred texts, the revelations, the commandments, the notion of the afterlife, and many of the customs and values.

The idea of common humanity is central to the Muslim perception of self. By knowing God as *Rahman* and *Rahim*, Beneficent and Merciful—the two most frequently repeated of God’s 99 names, those that God himself has chosen in the Quran by using them to introduce the chapters—Muslims know they must embrace even those who may not belong to their community, religion, or nation. God tells in the Quran to appreciate the variety He has created in human society: “And of his signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the differences of your languages and colors. Lo! Herein indeed are portents for men of knowledge” (Surah 30: Verse 22).

Verses about fighting Jews and Christians—or Muslims who are considered “hypocrites”—must be understood relative to a specific situation and time frame. What is important for Muslims is to stand up for their rights whoever the aggressor. “Fight against those who fight against you, but begin not hostilities,” the Quran tells Muslims (Surah 2: Verse 190). Men like bin Laden cite this verse and the next to justify their violence. They give the impression that God wants Muslims to be in perpetual conflict with Jews and Christians. They are wrong. These verses are taken out of context; they relate to a specific situation at a certain time in the history of early Islam. The verses that follow immediately after clearly convey God’s overarching

command: “Make peace with them if they want peace; God is Forgiving, Merciful” (Surah 2: Verses 192-193).

Misguided Muslims and non-Muslims, including the instant experts in the media, are guilty of this kind of selective use of the holy text to support their arguments. In this case, the Muslims would argue that violence against Jews and Christians is allowed; the non-Muslims would point to this and say it confirms the hatred of Muslims against others. They imply that the idea of fighting against Islam is therefore justified.

### BUILDING FRIENDSHIPS

I suggest a formula for the new millennium: If justice and compassion flourish—and are seen to flourish—in the Muslim world, if its rulers are people of integrity, and if Muslims are allowed to practice their faith with honor, then Islam will be a good neighbor to non-Muslims living outside its borders and will provide a benevolent and compassionate environment to those living inside them. It will continue to resist attempts to subvert its identity or dignity. Resistance can take the form of a Jinnah or a bin Laden.

The events of September 11 appeared to push the world toward the idea of the clash of civilizations, but they also conveyed the urgency of the call for dialogue. The creative participation in the dialogue of civilizations, in the struggle to find an internal balance between the needs and traditions of local communities and a world increasingly dominated by international corporations and political concerns, in the committed search for global solutions to the common global problems confronting human society, and the quest for a just, compassionate, and peaceful order will be the challenge human civilization faces in the twenty-first century. To meet the challenge is to fulfill God’s vision; to embrace all humanity in doing so is to know God’s compassion.

Encouraging friendship across religious and cultural boundaries simply must be done. The example of E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* is a relevant one. Forster dedicated his famous novel, written in the 1920s, to an Indian Muslim, Sir Ross Masood. He crossed imperial, religious, and cultural boundaries. Forster was wise when his dedication in another novel read “Only Connect.” Inspired by Forster, I reciprocated from the East to dedicate my book *Islam under Siege* to my friend Lawrence Rosen of Princeton University. Without dialogue, knowledge, and friendship, human society—all of us, everywhere and at any time—in the twenty-first century and beyond, will face a more dangerous, violent, and uncertain future. We must do everything to encourage understanding between cultures and societies. Dear friends, we must build bridges between people and nations.

I am grateful for your interest and especially grateful to Professor David Held for the privilege of sharing these thoughts with you this evening.

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## Faith, Friendship and Peace: How Religion Can Promote Understanding\*

Akbar S. Ahmed and J. Douglas Holladay

**D**ECADES BACK, FORMER SEN. GEORGE AIKEN from Vermont famously observed: “If we were to wake up one morning and find that we were all the same race, religion and nationality...we’d find some other reason to hate each other by noon.” How utterly prophetic and sad. Is human nature indeed that dark, seeming devoid of any true humanity? Is there an antidote to what appears to be a race toward annihilation? Is the growing divide between the West and the rest reversible? President Bush, your main challenges will be terrorism and relations with the Muslim world during your administration. We have something to offer you. By way of example, we — a Muslim and a Christian — declare a resounding “yes,” there is in fact a way forward.

Relationships are the best bridge to real understanding. Whether on the interpersonal level — between two individuals — or on the geopolitical stage — between two nations — understanding and trust grow in the rich soil of friendship. Christians and Muslims need to be encouraged to have real dialogue in their communities, especially during Ramadan, and as Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda try to threaten our societies. As our world becomes increasingly intolerant and polarized on the basis of economics, race, ethnicity, culture and, most sadly, religion, we offer an alternative.

Our suggestion is counterintuitive and starts modestly between individuals. Knowing that millions are killed regularly in the name of religion, one might conclude that we would avoid the “faith factor” at any price. Yet we instead offer a simple yet profound proposal: Look to faith and friendship as the vital bridge to establishing deep and lasting understanding. Consciously or not, the world is in search of authentic models which engender hope and where genuine faith breeds civility and trust. The relationships of which we speak don’t skirt the tough issues but take the time to establish a “bank account” of goodwill and respect. The more solid the

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bridge, the greater the ability to weather the tough stuff of differences. Unfortunately, at present, the airwaves add to the climate of division and mistrust by giving relentless focus to the worst in human nature. Naturally this feeds cynicism, while compassion and understanding, formerly prized virtues, are now viewed with contempt and considered “soft” and irrelevant.

The two of us, one from the Muslim tradition, the other Christian, met shortly after September 11 at the National Press Club in Washington. Each was in search of a “soulmate” to explore, in a climate of growing suspicions and brewing hostility, a way to avoid what Harvard’s Samuel Huntington saw as the inevitable clash of civilizations. While both of us enjoy politics, we prize faith much more. Thus began an unusual journey together.

A decision was taken to meet regularly to better understand our faith traditions and their effects upon our beliefs and behavior. As the trust, understanding and respect grew, we expanded our regular conversation to include others similarly inclined—ambassadors, CEOs, policy-makers, senators, even a few media types and generals. Our objective was really quite simple: to create a safe table around which all could express their views and where we could learn to live with our differences. In many parts of the world today, people are killing over differences. We decided instead to delight in them, concluding that on this small planet, a sustainable model of hope and civility might serve as a light in the midst of so much darkness. Such models must celebrate candor and free expression in the context of trust and openness.

What we are learning is profound in its simplicity. We are all more alike than different. Caring and attempting to understand another’s faith journey and perspective are not compromises but rather love in action. Taking time to be friends is an investment, yet it establishes a climate to challenge and ultimately modify one’s set views and those of others. It is humbling to enter into another’s life and worldview. It is far easier to demonize and make caricatures of those who differ from ourselves.

While the focus on our initiative has been deeply personal, one interesting theological bridge has been the person of Jesus. While one of us reveres Him as the Lord and Savior of the world, the other holds him as a highly revered and loved revelation of God as was the prophet Muhammad. We are working hard to convince one another of the veracity of our views. Differences need not be a threat to another. Mutual understanding in an increasingly violent world needs to be rediscovered.

Must the war on terror be won? Absolutely. Yet the antidote to the prophets of violence is not only to use force but to construct bridges. Simple friendship just might be the “real” ticket.

*Akbar S. Ahmed holds the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University in Washington. J. Douglas Holladay is a partner at Park Avenue Equity Partners. Their dialogue sessions alternate between Muslim and Christian homes.*

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## *The Buxton Initiative*

### **VISION**

To foster reconciliation among people from different faiths and worldviews.

### **MISSION**

To establish a safe table supported by friendship and trust where candid dialogue and understanding among people from different faith traditions and life experiences can find ways to live with differences.