

## Getting Closer to God Through Interfaith Work

### **Introduction**

This paper presents reflections on interreligious dialogue from the lived experience of two notable leaders. Based on conversations with Maha Elgenaidi and Rabbi Melanie Aron, and considering related scholarly material, I examine my next steps with regard to interfaith engagement in my work and ministry. The title of this paper comes from Maha Elgenaidi but I find it rings true for me as well. Interfaith work makes me feel closer to God. I am using this paper not only to document the accomplishments and views of two remarkable women but also to emphasize the benefits of interfaith work to the community.

On 20 November 2020, I spoke with Maha Elgenaidi, Founder of the Islamic Networks Group (ING) for this “Islam and its Interreligious Dimensions” paper.<sup>1</sup> We discussed formulating possibilities based on Islamic perspectives for interreligious alliances across traditions. ING is the leading Muslim-American peacemaking organization in the country, with a mission is to promote peace among all by fostering a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Muslims and other faith-based, racial/ethnic, and cultural communities, through teaching, learning, and engaging across differences. I have known Maha since 2016 when she gave a presentation called “Getting to Know American Muslims and Their Faith” at our parish women’s retreat. In 2017, I became a Certified Interfaith Speaker for ING and have been on interfaith panels representing

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<sup>1</sup> Islamic Networks Group (home page), *Islamic Networks Group - ING*, accessed 15 December 2020, <https://ing.org/>.

Christianity at schools, government and non-profit organizations, and universities four or five times a year since. ING recently asked me to join their Bay Area Board of Directors as well.

On 6 October 2020 for our sister class, “Judaism and its Interreligious Dimensions,” I spoke with Rabbi Melanie Aron of Congregation Shir Hadash in Los Gatos, California.<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Aron is also a Certified Interfaith Speaker for ING and we have served on several panels together. She reflected on her interfaith work and her goals in addressing the challenges and opportunities of interfaith engagement between Jews and their non-Jewish American neighbors.

This paper presents a summary of the reflections of Maha Elgenaidi and Rabbi Melanie Aron, which I kept as close as possible to the sense of what they said without being a verbatim transcript. Each of them has reviewed and approved what I wrote about them. I have appended related scholarly material to support their points as appropriate. For example, when Maha Elgenaidi quoted a section of the Qur’an, I included the entire verse for reference.

### **Maha Elgenaidi, Reflections**

Maha Elgenaidi lives in San Jose, California but she was born in Cairo, Egypt, and came to the USA at the age of seven with her family. She grew up on the East Coast, living in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York before moving to California. Something that surprises people when they get to know her is that she was an athlete growing up, competing in track, lacrosse, and baseball. Elgenaidi holds a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and Economics from the American University in Cairo, and a Master of Arts degree in Religion and Religious Studies from Stanford University. She also studied Architectural Engineering at the New York Institute of Technology.

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<sup>2</sup> “Rabbi Melanie Aron,” *Congregation Shir Hadash*, accessed 16 October 2020, <https://www.shirhadash.org/rabbi-aron.html>.

Maha Elgenaidi founded ING in 1993 and until very recently served as its Executive Director. In addition to being on the ING Board of Trustees, she serves as an advisor to California's Commission on Police Officers Standards and Training for cultural diversity and hate crimes, and is a recipient of numerous civil rights awards, including the "Citizen of the Year" Award from the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors. This remarkable background of accomplishments, education, and civic leadership makes Maha Elgenaidi a source of reliable wisdom on interreligious alliances.

Elgenaidi said that possibilities are infinite for interreligious alliances across traditions, even though there are fifty Muslim-majority countries with different perceptions on the advantages and challenges of interfaith engagement. In her understanding, salvation is open to all, the Muslim *ummah* (global community) has always embraced other religions and backgrounds. Elgenaidi notes that the Prophet Muhammad's Medina Constitution (622 CE) presented the Adamic *ummah* as including all of the human community, not just Muslims.<sup>3</sup> The *ummah* is one body from the same spiritual essence, born in a state of *fitrah*, or innocence and dignity.

Dr. John Andrew Morrow writes of the Prophet Muhammad's covenants, "The principles instilled by God and His Messenger are meant to be universal. If God and His Messenger provided rights to peaceful Christian and Jewish allies of the Prophet who lived in Arabia, then such rights should also apply to other faith communities regardless of where they reside."<sup>4</sup>

Professor Mahmoud Ayoub of the MacDonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, at Hartford Seminary, Georgetown University, writes of the

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<sup>3</sup> Yetkin Yildirim, "The Medina Charter: A Historical Case of Conflict Resolution." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 20:4 (2009): 448-450.

<sup>4</sup> John Andrew Morrow, "The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad Continue to Cause Controversy," *Maydan Islamic Thought*, 16 October 2019, <https://themaydan.com/2019/10/the-covenants-of-the-prophet-muhammad-continue-to-cause-controversy>.

worldwide community, “Like the individual, the *ummah* is an organic being with definite rights and responsibilities toward God and the rest of creation.”<sup>5</sup>

Maha Elgenaidi believes that there is no compulsion in religion, that is, we have a God-given right to worship God, or not to worship. We can embrace our fellow humans for who they are and what they bring. Elgenaidi says she has no tolerance for unsubstantiated violence. She loves to see the Muslim world at the forefront, more than just participating in basic interreligious dialogue, but solving and advising on the world’s needs and priorities, both religious and secular.

If Maha Elgenaidi were to start a new project in addition to ING, she said she would like to focus on doing something for our elders. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she has seen so many Muslim doctors and medical staff of other religious backgrounds working together, going into nursing homes to help the sick. Elgenaidi says that no one should suffer indignities and die from neglect as has been happening. She envisions having volunteers knocking on doors in protective gear to help other human beings at the end of life despite the pandemic. Organizations like ING can support Muslims at the forefront, working together in a pluralistic understanding.

Speaking against the artificial and false identities of gender, race, and religion, Elgenaidi quotes the Qur’an,

We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about. (excerpt, Quran 5:48)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *Islam: Faith and History* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 220.

<sup>6</sup> M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, trans., *The Qur’an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), Excerpt from Quran 5:48, 71-72.

She believes we are all created by one God. Religious people have the tools but some are too busy being Christian or Muslim to embrace the spirit of God and the divine essence within.

When we claim God, we claim all of humanity.

Elgenaidi said that study groups writing within the context of their time and place in the pre-modern era thought that way. In every chapter of the Qur'an, God is merciful and compassionate. We can learn from everybody, starting with God and being just. The unjust does not come from God. God came to everybody, with a messenger to all peoples, He sent Jesus and Buddha too. Faith is an experience, a very real knowing is based on faith. We need to understand the ancient faith of Islam. All modern biographies of the Prophet Muhammad are based on chronicles of wars. Maha Elgenaidi grew up with the idea that all the Prophet Muhammad did was fight battles. Records of his battles do not include his family, community, and engagement with non-Muslims. The Prophet Muhammad was not just a military general.

Elgenaidi believes that many of the problems with the Muslim world today are based in the history of colonialism. Colonialism was a violent and destructive historical process by the British, French, and others who taught that their culture was better. She asserts that colonialism explains much of the Muslim world today. There is religion and there is spirituality and they are very different. Religions are more like ethnic groups, in contrast to spiritual people who embrace the world. Connecting religion with nationalism distorts and is violent. Some countries like Iran and Pakistan enforce religion and it is a horrible mess. Government should be secular and separate from religion.

In Maha Elgenaidi's view, interreligious efforts need to involve both men and women, unless women want to work alone. Public works should be open to men and women equally, with

both of them observing modesty in every situation. Sexuality is disruptive to any environment and is not acceptable to express openly, whether in a corporate or a religious environment.

Elgenaidi is part of the Sunni tradition of Islam. She sees Sunni Islam as too complex for a cohesive tradition, since there are different groups in the USA, among Sunnis, and all over the world. In her view, neither Sunni nor Shia Muslims as a group have understood the point of interfaith dialogue, except during the period after 11 September 2001, when security became a motivation. Muslims then needed to teach their neighbors about who they really were. However, Maha Elgenaidi says that the post-9/11, interfaith communication was not bidirectional, because Muslims did not want to learn about Judaism or Christianity and their perspective.

Despite ING's success since 1993, and their admirable work for twenty seven years to counter prejudice and discrimination, promote intercultural understanding, and foster mutual respect through education and community engagement, Muslim groups have not invited ING into mosques to hold interreligious dialogue. Maha Elgenaidi and the ING staff have discussed why interfaith discussions are not held in mosques the way they are in churches and synagogues. It may be that mosque leaders are concerned that holding such an event might entail risk for their community. ING is still discussing how to address this issue.

Rabbi Dr. Reuven Firestone, Professor of Medieval Judaism and Islam at the Hebrew Union-College Institute of Religion, has written about the circumstance described by Maha Elgenaidi, saying that while Muslim and Jewish academics have been engaging in interfaith dialogue since the early 1980s,

At the congregational level both the Muslim and Jewish communities are divided internally over whether or not dialogue should be encouraged...The Muslim community is similarly divided over dialogue in general and dialogue with Jews in particular...the more

traditional Muslim congregations tend to be less interested in reaching out to the non-Muslim community in general.<sup>7</sup>

Later, Firestone goes on to attribute differences in interreligious dialogue engagement by Muslims and Jews to the relative integration of those groups into American culture. He writes, “Jews have lived in the United States and have been integrated into its social, economic and political networks for at least two or three generations more than Muslims, and this basic difference affects power relationships between the two communities vis-à-vis the larger society.”<sup>8</sup> (Firestone is, of course, writing about the contemporary era, since Sylviane Diouf has demonstrated that African Muslims brought their faith to the Americas hundreds of years ago.)<sup>9</sup>

Maha Elgenaidi describes ING’s approach to interfaith discussions as coming from the point of view of equity, with the intention of helping people in the workplace, getting respect from civil society, and supporting a human rights perspective. Nonetheless, Elgenaidi thinks that many Muslims are where Catholics and Protestants were in history, still learning to tolerate people whom they think are going to hell. The Sufi tradition might be the best group to reach across traditions since they are more spiritual in their approach. Historical Sufis like the famous Ibn ‘Arabi taught that religions are like the different languages of God. None are the way to all people but God is greater than one conception. We don’t know God’s mind, can’t be definitive or specific. We have to seek God out but once He grasps you and you grasp him, it becomes easier. She quoted the Qur’an,

When Moses came for Our appointment, and his Lord spoke to him, he said, ‘My Lord, show Yourself to me: let me see You!’ He said, ‘You will never see Me, but look at that mountain: if it remains standing firm, you will see Me,’ and when his Lord revealed Himself to the mountain, He made it crumble: Moses fell down unconscious. When he

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<sup>7</sup> Reuven Firestone, “Jewish-Muslim Dialogue,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 232.

<sup>8</sup> Firestone, 233.

<sup>9</sup> Sylvianne A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

recovered, he said, ‘Glory be to You! To You I turn in repentance! I am the first to believe!’” (Quran 7:143)<sup>10</sup>

Like Moses, no one can grasp God, but Elgenaidi sees the Sufis as the Muslims who are most comfortable in interfaith work.

Elgenaidi said, “I find God in interfaith work. I am closer to God when engaging with people who are different from me.” She finds inspiration in Qur’anic verses like this one,

People, we have created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should get to know one another. (excerpt, Quran 49:13)<sup>11</sup>

The Qur’an does not present a sequential narrative tradition like the Torah and Gospels, which can make it harder to read. Muslims across many traditions are incredibly diverse but Maha has hope for the Sufi engaging in interreligious pluralism.

Mahmoud Ayoub writes in his chapter on the mystical tradition of Sufism about its most important master of Islamic theosophy, “Ibn ‘Arabi’s doctrine of the unity of being had many implications. For instance, if God alone really is, then all ways ultimately lead to him. This means that the various religions are mere names, for the reality is one.”<sup>12</sup> This supports Maha Elgenaidi’s hope that the Sufis may be the best Muslim ambassadors to encourage the expansion of interreligious alliances across traditions.

## **Rabbi Melanie Aron, Reflections**

Rabbi Melanie Aron and I are both certified speakers in the Islamic Networks Group (ING) - Interfaith Speakers Bureau, for which we have served together on several community panels.<sup>13</sup> She told me that in her interfaith work, she has three goals in addressing the challenges and opportunities of interfaith engagement between Jews and their non-Jewish American

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<sup>10</sup> Haleem, 103.

<sup>11</sup> Haleem, 339.

<sup>12</sup> Ayoub, 151.

<sup>13</sup> Islamic Networks Group (home page).

neighbors. Her first goal is to educate, that is to provide basic familiarity with Judaism, especially for communities which have had very little contact with Jews. Her second goal is to promote collaboration (she said “ally-ship”) with communities that need help, for example Muslims dealing with the travel ban, as well as refugees and asylum-seekers, because many Jews identify with immigrants. In particular, she works against white nationalism and anti-Semitism and has been an advocate for change with many community organizations like ING, and the Solidarity Network of People Acting in Community Together (PACT), a grassroots organization of synagogues, temples, mosques, and temples.<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Aron’s third goal is to invite and participate in theological dialogue with a variety of other faiths. She has held joint study programs with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, Islamic mosques, and several Roman Catholic parishes on topics including Bible study, midrash and Jewish traditions, sin, diversity, and stewardship of the earth.

I was happy to learn more about Rabbi Aron’s community work and for us to get to know each other better through our conversation. I think that her goals and communication methods provide a good structure for effective action in the years ahead. I believe many of the challenges facing the Jewish community can be addressed in the long-term by increasing society’s basic familiarity with Judaism, growing collaboration between individuals and organizations to share power with each other and with those in our society who are marginalized or under attack, and whenever possible, creating opportunities for Jews and non-Jews to gain a deeper knowledge of each other’s beliefs and traditions through discussion and mutual study of scriptures.

Rabbi Aron’s goals are similar to those presented by Dr. Yehezkel Landau in “Judaism and its Interreligious Dimensions.” He advocates for the development of awareness and

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<sup>14</sup> “Join the Solidarity Network,” *People Acting in Community Together - PACT*, accessed 18 October 2020, <https://www.pactsj.org/en/join-the-solidarity-network>.

sensitivity by both Jews and non-Jews to build trust between communities that for too long have been adversarial. Dr. Landau speaks of being aware of the risk to individuals who publicly support Jews and interfaith dialogue being balanced by the benefits of what he memorably calls an exchange of blessings.<sup>15</sup> It seems that religious extremism (or extremism in the name of religion) is growing in today's world among Buddhists,<sup>16</sup> Christians,<sup>17</sup> Hindus,<sup>18</sup> Jews,<sup>19</sup> and Muslims.<sup>20</sup> In time, I hope that effective communication methods like those of Rabbi Aron and Maha Elgenaidi will make a lasting difference, not just among Jews and Muslims but among all faiths, so that more of us can sing the Lord's song together in peace.

### **Next Steps in Interreligious Study and Communication**

I will apply what I have learned in "Islam and its Interreligious Dimensions" and "Judaism and its Interreligious Dimensions" as I continue down my path of interreligious study and communication. I have served on ING community panels about once a quarter, and I am also a mentor for the U.S. State Department's TechWomen program for technical women of the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia.<sup>21</sup> TechWomen was started in response to President

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<sup>15</sup> Yehezkel Landau, "Instructor Presentation - Looking Ahead," *Graduate Theological Union - GTU Moodle* - HR8171-1: Judaism and Its Interreligious Dimensions (Fall 2020), accessed 16 October 2020, <https://moodle.gtu.edu/course/view.php?id=7176>.

<sup>16</sup> Hannah Beech, "Buddhists Go to Battle: When Nationalism Overrides Pacifism," *New York Times*, 8 July 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/08/world/asia/buddhism-militant-rise.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Daryl Johnson, "Holy Hate: The Far Right's Radicalization of Religion," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, 10 February 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2018/holy-hate-far-right%E2%80%99s-radicalization-religion>.

<sup>18</sup> Eliza Griswold, "The Violent Toll of Hindu Nationalism in India," *New Yorker*, 5 March 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/on-religion/the-violent-toll-of-hindu-nationalism-in-india>.

<sup>19</sup> Scott Neuman, "Police Arrest Anti-Lockdown Protest Leader In New York's Orthodox Jewish Community," *National Public Radio - NPR - KQED*, 12 October 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/10/12/922998574/police-arrest-anti-lockdown-protest-leader-in-new-yorks-orthodox-jewish-communit>.

<sup>20</sup> Geneive Abdo, "Like Most Americans, U.S. Muslims Concerned About Extremism in the Name of Islam," *Pew Research Center*, 14 August 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/14/like-most-americans-u-s-muslims-concerned-about-extremism-in-the-name-of-islam/>.

<sup>21</sup> TechWomen (home page), *Institute of International Education - IIE*, accessed 16 October 2020, <https://www.techwomen.org/>.

Obama's 2009 speech in Cairo, Egypt, about bringing the Muslim and American worlds together and it is considered a success in many dimensions.<sup>22</sup> I am proud to have been the Process Architect for the TechWomen program in 2010 - 2011. Many of my sister-mentors are Jewish and Muslim, and it is not unusual for Muslim, Jewish, and Christian mentors to share the personal and professional guidance of a Muslim emerging leader. Each TechWomen year, mentors and mentees collaborate with each other, usually continuing friendships in the long term.

In addition to working with community organizations, I interact with prisoners of many faiths as a jail chaplain in Santa Clara County, California. While most prisoners are Christian, the second largest religious group is Muslims, followed by Buddhists. I have interacted with very few Jewish inmates in jail. In fact, I know more Jewish chaplains than I have known Jewish inmates. The Correctional Institutions Chaplaincy (CIC) that sponsors county jail chaplains trains all faiths together (except Roman Catholics, who have their own chaplaincy), so we have interfaith discussions several times a year.<sup>23</sup> Many of the ING Interfaith Speakers are also jail chaplains with CIC. Fall 2020 is my last GTU semester of classes for my Master's degree in Christian Theology. Last year, I decided to join the GTU's new Interreligious Chaplaincy certificate program to become a better jail chaplain by learning about the theology and practices of the Muslim and Jewish inmates as well as those of my own faith.<sup>24</sup> This certificate program will continue my GTU interreligious studies for a further year.

An aspect of jail chaplaincy that concerns me is the frequent anti-Semitic comments I hear from inmates when we study the Bible. Although there are many Muslim prisoners, few of

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<sup>22</sup> Barack Obama, "The President's Speech in Cairo: A New Beginning," *The White House - President Barack Obama*, accessed 16 October 2010,

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/foreign-policy/presidents-speech-cairo-a-new-beginning>.

<sup>23</sup> Correctional Institutions Chaplaincy (home page), *Correctional Institutions Chaplaincy*, accessed 6 October 2020, <https://sites.google.com/cicministries.org/welcome/>.

<sup>24</sup> "Interreligious Chaplaincy Program," *Graduate Theological Union - GTU*, accessed 16 October 2020, <https://www.gtu.edu/projects/icp>.

the inmates with whom I interact seem to know any Jews personally; they are mostly passing along the prejudices they have heard. Through these classes, I have developed a deeper understanding of the history and theology of Judaism and Islam and I now have teaching materials to expand my students's familiarity with the three largest Abrahamic faiths. Some of the best of my new resources are Jewish, Muslim, and Christian scriptures that support interreligious respect, including the *Aleinu* prayer (including the phrase *tikkun olam*, "repairing the world"),<sup>25</sup> Qur'an 5:48 (cited above), and Romans 14:4-8,

Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds... We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.<sup>26</sup>

I also have valuable references like Professor Jerusha Tanner Lamptey's *Never Wholly Other: A Muslima Theology of Religious Pluralism*,<sup>27</sup> and Ayoub's *Islam Faith and History*.<sup>28</sup>

During Ramadan in 2019, I asked one of the Muslim inmates to come into my jail-based Bible seminar to tell fellow inmates about his beliefs and experience. After his talk, the class discussed how fasting and prayer during Ramadan was similar to ancient Christian practices during the season of Lent that continue today. This is an example where elements of worship, in this case fasting and prayer, served to bring communities together across religious traditions. In jail, Christian and Muslim prisoners are almost like separate gangs or sports team fans, rivals who do not interact much. Finding areas of common ground through interreligious education and dialogue can help.

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<sup>25</sup> "Origins of Tikkun Olam," *Beth El Temple Center*, accessed 18 December 2020, <https://www.betheltemplecenter.org/tikkun-olam/323-origins-of-tikkun-olam>.

<sup>26</sup> Rom. 14:4-8 (New Revised Standard Version).

<sup>27</sup> Jerusha Tanner Lamptey, *Never Wholly Other: A Muslima Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Ayoub.

Perhaps my major learning from taking “Judaism and its Interreligious Dimensions” and “Islam and its Interreligious Dimensions” (and “Introduction to Islamic Theology”) at GTU this semester is a greater appreciation of the extreme complexity of both Jewish and Muslim religious traditions and sects. My belief that the Muslim faith is cohesive has been both strengthened and shredded. This Qur’anic verse presents the basic structure for Islam,

The [Muslim] believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians - all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good - will have their rewards with the Lord. No fear for them, nor will they grieve. (Quran 2:62)<sup>29</sup>

With regard to Quran 2:62, Indonesian Islamic scholar Nurcholish Madjid writes that salvation for Muslims, “is awarded not based on factors of descent, but based on faithfulness to God and the Day of Judgment, and the carrying out of good deeds.”<sup>30</sup> While acknowledging that basic belief structure, I have also learned about many more Muslim sects than I ever knew, in addition to becoming aware of political and theological interpretations of what it means to be Muslim.

In particular, I found resonance with Maha Elgenaidi’s statement that she finds God in interfaith work. When I am on an ING panel, I almost always learn something new, not only about Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, but about my own Christian faith as well. Listening to how those of other faiths consider and answer theological or religious practice questions from an audience gives me a deeper context for my own responses. While Maha finds inspiration in the Qur’an, and Rabbi Aron is influenced by the Torah, I find motivation, wisdom, and solace in the Bible. Yet without diluting our own beliefs or connections to our source of revelation, year after year each of us seeks to engage people whose faith is different from our own to learn more about ourselves and God.

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<sup>29</sup> M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, trans., *The Qur’an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), Excerpt from Quran 5:48, 8-9.

<sup>30</sup> “Overview - Nurcholish Madjid,” *Oxford Reference - The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, accessed 2 December 2020, 6, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110810105514968>.

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