

KNOWLEDGE BASE

In the first four chapters, I have described what it takes to adopt the identity of interfaith leader, to acquire an understanding of the theoretical landscape on which you build your interfaith bridge, and to ensure that the bridge leads to the destination of pluralism. In the following chapter, I will discuss the various types of stones that serve as the raw materials for the bridge. Stones, of course, are a metaphor for knowledge. What I provide is a framework for the dimensions of knowledge most useful for forming an interfaith bridge.

The Knowledge Base of Interfaith Leadership

Paul Knitter felt the call to the priesthood in his early teens. After four years of seminary high school and two years of additional novitiate training, he joined the Divine Word Missionaries (or SVD), an order whose main work was bringing non-Catholics into the Catholic faith. His regular prayers included the line “May the darkness of sin and the night of heathenism vanish before the light of the Word and the Spirit of grace.”

Reflecting on this practice in his book *One Earth Many Religions*, Knitter writes, “We had the Word and Spirit; *they* had sin and heathenism. We were the loving doctors; they were the suffering patients.”¹

Knitter’s journey took a number of unexpected turns. As he sat with the other seminarians listening to the stories of returned SVD missionaries, he discovered that he was fascinated by the slide shows of Hindu rituals and Buddhist ceremonies. He even detected a hint of admiration in the voices of older SVD priests as they described the elaborate non-Christian religious systems that they encountered on their missions. One brought in an Indian dance group and explained that their performance was developed in a Hindu context but had been adapted to glorify Jesus. Knitter was entranced by the intricacy of the movements and

found himself wondering whether “sin and heathenism” were the most suitable terms for a tradition that could inspire such beauty. His explorations of Zen Buddhism, which he studied in preparation for evangelizing in Japan, produced much the same effect. He describes feeling deeply moved by “the rigor of its practice, the claimed illumination and peace of the satori experience. There was much I couldn’t fit into my Christian categories; there was much I liked.”²

In 1962, Knitter’s studies took him to the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. He arrived just as the Second Vatican Council was getting under way. As the church conducted its business in Latin, and as Knitter’s language skills were markedly better than many of the bishops who were a formal part of the council, he was asked to translate *sub secreto* (confidential) church documents by sheepish bishops on a nightly basis. One of these documents was the “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” *Nostra Aetate*. Knitter was ecstatic to read the “positive statements about the truth and values” of religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam in an official church document.³

At the Gregorian, Knitter had begun studying with the renowned Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, who was struggling to articulate the relationship between his notion of Christian uniqueness and his respect for other religions. Knitter would go on to do his doctorate on a related subject and begin dialogues with important Christian theologians like Hans Küng and John Hick on Christian approaches to other religions. Taken together, these turns set Knitter on the path to developing his own theology of interfaith cooperation, a path that would ultimately become his calling and profession.

In 1991, Knitter took a sabbatical year in India. There he discovered a history of both interfaith strife and interfaith cooperation. He spent time with Christian communities that had a long tradition of deep dialogue with Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist groups focused on the goal of relieving suffering. He was inspired by the legacy of Gandhi’s interfaith efforts, especially his focus on identifying nonviolence as a shared value across different religions and applying the techniques of creative nonviolence to improve social conditions. Knitter returned

home with new energy and insight, even more committed to strengthening interfaith relations.

Paul Knitter’s biography serves as a perfect case study in how a personal journey can lead to acquiring a knowledge base for interfaith cooperation. Indeed, the major turns of his story highlight the four dimensions of the knowledge base that I detail in this chapter. As a young man in training for the Catholic priesthood, Knitter encounters dimensions of Buddhism and Hinduism, and develops an *appreciative knowledge* for both. As a slightly older graduate student, he has an opportunity to study Christian *theologies of interfaith cooperation*. This opportunity happens to coincide with a remarkable moment in modern religious history, the deliberations of Vatican II and the release of *Nostra Aetate*. Later, and now in the role of professor, Knitter travels to India and comes face-to-face with the realities of religious conflict in the past but also an inspiring *history of interfaith cooperation*. He is especially struck by the power, exemplified by Gandhi, of *identifying shared values across traditions* and applying these to social action.

I highlight Knitter’s personal journey to emphasize the idea that acquiring a knowledge base for interfaith cooperation need not be a dry or boring process. In fact, my guess is that your own personal journey has turned up some of these same four parts of an interfaith knowledge base, though perhaps without the drama of translating early drafts of *Nostra Aetate* for Latin-challenged bishops during Vatican II.

In this chapter, I will elaborate on each of these four dimensions—appreciative knowledge of other traditions, theology of religious pluralism, history of interfaith cooperation, and shared values between traditions. In the metaphor of the bridge, these various dimensions of knowledge serve as different types of stones for the bridge.

APPRECIATIVE KNOWLEDGE

In his award-winning book *Religious Literacy*, Stephen Prothero explores an interesting paradox in American life: Americans are highly

religious but have little content knowledge about religious traditions—their own or those of others.⁴ Prothero proves his case with myriad examples, including reporting on the depressing results of the religious literacy quizzes that he gives to his undergraduate students at Boston University. Such deep ignorance, he claims, is dangerous in a country like the United States, where public and political life is replete with religious topics and references. Prothero's proposed solution is to require that all students take two religion courses, one on the Bible and one on world religions. He reminds us that the Supreme Court has affirmed on several occasions—from the 1963 *Abington School District v. Schempp* case to *Edwards v. Aguillard* in 1987—that while the teaching of religion in public schools is unconstitutional, teaching *about* religion is both legal and important.

For such a program to be successful, Prothero cautions that it needs to be neutral in its approach. He writes, "Teachers should stick to describing and analyzing these religious traditions as objectively as possible, leaving it up to students to make judgments about the virtues and vices of any one religion, or of religion in general."⁵

I understand the reason for Prothero's counseling a "neutral" approach, not least because we are friends and have talked about this many times in person. Prothero hopes for a sea change in American education and is concerned that either the secular left or the religious right will seize on any kind of teaching about religion initiative as too preachy (in the case of the secular left) or too relativistic (in the case of the religious right). For Prothero, the only chance to chart a course in between this Scylla and Charybdis is to advocate an objective, neutral, "just the basics" approach.

I certainly think it would be an improvement on the status quo if more Americans could, for example, identify the Qur'an as the sacred scripture of Islam and locate nirvana as a Buddhist concept. But I do not think a just-the-basics understanding of other religions is a sufficient knowledge base for interfaith leaders. This is something I have hashed out with Prothero, and which he has not only agreed with but helped me come to better understand.

The main reason for this is that interfaith leaders are not dealing with abstract systems in textbooks, but actual people interacting in real-world situations. The renowned preacher Barbara Brown Taylor has a funny story about the difference. Teaching world religions at a small college in Piedmont, Georgia, she patiently reviewed the textbook's explanation of the doctrinal differences between Shia and Sunni Muslims, and tried to help her class of mostly rural, evangelical Christians see how those divisions could explain the violent intrafaith conflicts between Muslims they were accustomed to seeing on the news. Someone in the class turned to the lone Muslim student, a young man named Muhammad from Sierra Leone, and asked, "Are you a Sunni or a Shia? Do *you* hate the people on the other side?"

"I've never heard those words until today," he responded.

Certainly the terms "Sunni" and "Shia" would belong on a religious literacy quiz as an objective, neutral fact about Islam. But it was not an especially relevant bit of knowledge in that particular interfaith situation in Piedmont, Georgia.

My view is that interfaith leaders need what I am calling an "appreciative knowledge" of other traditions. By appreciative, I mean both a general orientation and a substantive knowledge base. As in the appreciative inquiry method of organizational development and the asset-based approach to community development, an appreciative orientation to other religious traditions actively seeks out the beautiful, the admirable, and the life giving rather than the deficits, the problems, and the ugliness. It is an orientation that does not take its knowledge about other religions primarily from the evening news, recognizing that, by definition, the evening news reports only the bad stuff. This is not to say that stories about terrorist attacks by Muslims, land grabs by Israeli settlers, or sexual misconduct by Catholic priests are false, only that they are not the whole truth. By being attuned to the inspiring dimensions of other religious traditions, such ugliness is properly contextualized. This general orientation is connected to an important skill that I will discuss in the next chapter—developing an interfaith radar screen.

The substantive dimension of appreciative knowledge has three main parts: recognizing the contributions of other traditions, having a sympathetic understanding of the distinctive history and commitments of other traditions, and developing ways of working with and serving other communities.

- The first part of an appreciative knowledge of other traditions is to recognize their contributions. In my experience, this is most effectively done through highlighting exemplary figures. This is the approach that Black History Month takes through a public registering and celebration of the contributions of major black figures, including writers, musicians, activists, and scientists. Initiatives like Black History Month do not focus only on neutral, objective facts, like the percentage of the US population that is black. The emphasis is instead to correct for a gap in the general knowledge base about underrepresented populations. Building an appreciative knowledge of the contributions of religious communities would take the same approach based on a similar rationale.

An appreciative knowledge base about Islam would, for example, highlight that some of America's greatest athletes have been Muslim, including Muhammad Ali and Hakeem Olajuwon. It would recognize that Muslims like Rumi and Hafiz are among the best-selling poets in the United States, that a Muslim (Fazlur Rahman Khan) designed the Sears (now Willis) Tower in Chicago, and that a Muslim woman (Malala Yousafzai) is the youngest ever recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. Ideally, these figures would be understood as illustrative of core Muslim principles like courage, commitment to excellence, and a high value on education.

- The second part of an appreciative knowledge base is developing a sympathetic understanding of where a differing religious view is coming from. For me, this is most powerfully illustrated in Chaim Potok's beautiful novel *The Chosen*, about the friendship between two Brooklyn-based Orthodox Jewish boys and

their rabbi fathers at the end of World War II.⁶ Danny's father, Reb Saunders, is a Hasidic rabbi who lives in a narrow world sealed off from other forms of knowledge and types of people. He is a perfect illustration of the bunker approach to diversity described in chapter 2. Reuven's father, Rabbi Malter, is of a more liberal bent and writes articles that put Judaism in conversation with other intellectual traditions and seek to make the tradition relevant to the contemporary world. He exemplifies the bridge response to diversity.

Reuven becomes a regular visitor to Danny's house and is taken aback by how Danny's father, Reb Saunders, treats his children and runs his community. Reuven learns, for example, that Danny's pretty teenage sister was promised to the son of one of Reb Saunders's followers when she was two years old. She will marry him when she turns eighteen. This is common Hasidic practice, Danny informs him. In fact, Danny's own marriage has been prearranged as well.

Danny and his father have no semblance of normal conversation at all. No words of affection, no simple banter about school or life or sports. The only time they communicate is on Friday evenings when Reb Saunders quizzes Danny in a harsh and unforgiving manner about Talmud and other dimensions of the Jewish tradition in front of the congregation that has gathered for the Shabbat service. Reuven comes to learn that, except for this weekly public spectacle, Reb Saunders is intentionally raising Danny in silence.

Reuven, who has a close relationship with his own father, is bewildered by Reb Saunders's behavior. He views it as cruel. Rabbi Malter, Reuven's father, also doesn't like Reb Saunders's interpretation of Judaism, but he understands where it comes from and takes the time to share the history with Reuven.

Reb Saunders, he explains, is a *tzaddik*, a righteous one. *Tzaddiks* personally led their people out of anti-Semitic Europe and into the relative safety of the United States with the primary purpose of creating communities to continue their Hasidic

traditions. As a *tzaddik*, Reb Saunders believed it was his spiritual calling to personally absorb the suffering of his particular religious community, even the whole of Jewry. Rabbi Malter explains, "Reb Saunders is a great man, Reuven. Great men are always difficult to understand. He carries the burden of many people on his shoulders."⁷

The final part of the novel brings to light the full horror of the Holocaust—six million Jews killed in gruesome fashion—and causes a massive rupture between Reb Saunders and Reuven's father. Reb Saunders believes that the Holocaust is the will and work of God. The lot of Jews is to accept their suffering and to pray harder. Reuven's father sharply disagrees. For him, the story of the Holocaust is the story of the deeds of people, actions that other people can stop. The paramount action to take now is establishing a Jewish state, Israel. Rabbi Malter throws himself into this work with all of his energy. Reb Saunders views this as an apostate position. He believes that such a state can only legitimately be established at the time the Messiah returns. When Reb Saunders finds out about Reuven's father's advocacy for Israel, he explodes at Reuven and bans Danny from seeing him.

Even then, Reuven's father continues to articulate an appreciative understanding of Reb Saunders's position. "The fanaticism of men like Reb Saunders kept us alive for two thousand years of exile," he solemnly informs his son.⁸ He does not hide his disagreements with Reb Saunders but remains restrained in his critique, saying, "There is enough to dislike about Hasidism without exaggerating its faults."⁹ And when he reaches the limits of his own understanding of Reb Saunders's behavior, he simply tells Reuven, "I am not a *tzaddik*," emphasizing that Reb Saunders has made commitments to God, tradition, community, and family that put him in a different position, one that can be disagreed with but ought to be appreciated as well.¹⁰

The themes in *The Chosen* bear a striking resemblance to contemporary interfaith relations. What if a pro-Palestinian

Muslim could look at a pro-Israel Reform Jew and think, "I do not agree with her view, and I will protest and vote against it. But given the history of her people and her commitment to a particular tradition, I understand why she stands where she does. My position is also, after all, a function of my particular commitments to tradition and community." What if that pro-Israel Reform Jew, a strong supporter of abortion rights, could look at a Catholic priest who runs a school in the inner city and protests vehemently against abortion and think, "I will challenge him on his views regarding abortion, but I admire so much the work he does in education."

- The third part of an appreciative knowledge of other traditions is the kind of knowledge that allows you to work effectively with a different community. In her masterful book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, the writer Anne Fadiman tells the harrowing story of the Lees, a Hmong family in Merced, California, whose infant daughter Lia has suddenly begun to experience periodic convulsions.¹¹ The medical professionals at the state-of-the-art hospital, some of whom are widely regarded in their field, diagnose the condition as an electrochemical storm caused by the misfiring of brain cells, a condition commonly known in the West as epilepsy. They treat it in the manner of Western medicine, by taking blood, running tests, and prescribing various cocktails of drugs.

Few of the forty or so medical professionals who attend to Lia over the next few years have anything but the vaguest idea how her Hmong family and community understand her situation. Next to the religion box on a bureaucratic form, one has marked, *none*.

The Hmong believe that Lia's soul has been captured by a malevolent spirit called a *dab*. This occurred when Lia's older sister slammed a door too loudly, causing Lia's spirit to be frightened and run away, and a *dab* to take advantage of the opportunity. For Lia to get well again, her soul must be found and returned to her body. To accomplish this, chickens, pigs, and

cows have to be sacrificed and a Hmong shaman must travel between the material world and spirit world to barter the souls of these ritually sacrificed animals for Lia's soul.

There is an interesting complication at the heart of the story. While Lia's physical shaking is certainly scary, the Lees believe that the situation is not all bad. The Hmong shamans that they call upon to serve as mediators between the material and the spirit worlds were often prepared for their roles by their own fits of uncontrollable shaking. This means that Lia's physical condition may be preparation for her ultimate role as a shaman as well, a revered position within the community. The Lees do not understand why the doctors seem to be oblivious to this sacred opportunity.

The doctors, for their part, are acutely frustrated that the Lees do not administer Lia's medicine properly. A senior doctor at the hospital decides at one point that the Lees are unfit as parents and has a California court put Lia into the care of the state for several months. It is a nightmare situation for any family, especially one that speaks no English and has a very limited understanding of the system.

The doctors, of course, see the Lees as noncompliant. They do not see the considerable effort the family is going through to care for their daughter according to Hmong shaman traditions. Many ceremonies have been held to coax Lia's soul back; many animals have been sacrificed; thousands of miles have been driven to consult with Hmong shamans in other parts of the country; expensive amulets have been purchased, filled with sacred healing herbs and carefully placed around Lia's neck.

After hundreds of seizures and dozens of trips to the hospital, Lia finally has the "big one" and is left in a vegetative state. It is a terrible situation. Fadiman cannot help but wonder whether things might have been different if the doctors had an appreciative understanding of Hmong religion. She offers the example of Dwight Conquergood as instructive.

Conquergood, an ethnographer with a special interest in shamanism and a performance artist with a creative flair, becomes a public health worker in a Hmong refugee camp in the 1980s. One of the first things he notices is a Hmong woman whose face is decorated with blue moons and golden suns. He recognizes them as the stickers that the Western doctors working in the camp were placing on medication bottles to indicate whether pills should be taken in the morning or at night. Clearly, they were not being used for their intended purpose. Conquergood notices that the woman is singing a folk song and wonders if the stickers decorating her body are somehow enhancing the drama of the song. It occurs to him that folk tales play a particularly powerful role in the Hmong worldview.

When an outbreak of rabies occurs among the dogs in the refugee camp, the medical staff attempts to organize a mass dog-vaccination program. Characteristically, they go about this in a manner that takes no account of Hmong worldview or religion. Not a single dog is brought to the medical facility. Conquergood is charged with creating a different campaign. Drawing on his observation of the power of folklore for the Hmong, Conquergood designs costumes for central figures in Hmong folktales—a tiger, a chicken, and a *dab*—and creates a drama in which these characters explain to the audience what rabies is and why it is dangerous. The next day, so many dogs were brought to the medical tent that the medical staff could not treat them quickly enough.

As specific as this situation might seem, some version of acquiring and creatively wielding knowledge of another community's faith is relevant across a vast number of settings and professions, from food preparation to funeral services.

THEOLOGIES OF INTERFAITH COOPERATION

A theology of interfaith cooperation means interpreting the key sources of a tradition in a way that puts forth a coherent narrative and deep

logic that calls for positive relationships with people who orient around religion differently. When I say “key sources,” I mean both the central texts of a religious tradition but also important historical moments, examples of archetypal figures, writings of significant scholars (philosophers, theologians, and jurists), and art that seeks to tap into the ineffable dimensions of the tradition. A coherent narrative is a theme that is clearly traceable throughout the different dimensions of a cumulative historical tradition (texts, history, archetypal figures, scholarship, and so on).

There are at least two reasons that developing such a theology is important for an interfaith leader. The first is personal. If you happen to be an interfaith leader who identifies deeply with a particular tradition—Christianity, Buddhism, humanism, and others—you will want to know at some point that your work as an interfaith leader is not in opposition to your tradition or ancillary to it, but rather expresses a central value of that tradition. In other words, being an interfaith leader is about advancing the five civic virtues I spoke of earlier, *and* it is part of being a faithful Jew, Sikh, Bahá’í, and so on. The renowned philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre expresses this sentiment well when he writes, “I can only tell you what I am going to do when I know the story or stories of which I am a part.”¹² Those of us who view ourselves as part of religious traditions want our work in the world to be aligned with the “story” of our tradition. A theology of interfaith cooperation offers us the chance to develop an interpretation of that story. For atheists and humanists, the term “ethic” is probably more comfortable than “theology,” but the principle of identifying a theme within the key sources of the tradition is much the same.

The second reason developing a theology of interfaith cooperation is important is for mobilizing *other people* who view themselves as connected to particular traditions. In his book *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?*, the Christian writer Brian McLaren notes that people generally believe that strong faith is connected with hostile views toward other communities. People with appreciative knowledge of other traditions and positive relationships with other communities consequently are viewed to have weak faith. This

means that any time an interfaith leader proposes an interfaith activity to a group that thinks strong faith is a virtue, they are likely to think that such a path is meant to water down their faith. McLaren writes, “Many faithful Christians see our plea for them to become less hostile as a temptation to love God, their religion, their community, their ancestors, their history and their future less. Before they’ll listen to our case for a new kind of strong-benevolent Christian identity, they must be convinced it is the path to more love and fidelity, more strength and meaning, not less.”¹³

The solution to this problem is to define “strong faith” as including positive relationships with others and to offer interpretations of the tradition that substantiate this position. To do this, the interfaith leader is going to need to articulate a theology of interfaith cooperation.

My own Muslim theology of interfaith cooperation begins with important stories from the life of the Prophet Muhammad that speak to interfaith cooperation. In fact, the first people to recognize his prophethood were actually Christian: There was Bahira, a Christian monk who noticed that Muhammad, when he was a boy, had the mark of prophethood on his back. And there was Waraqa, who, after Muhammad’s earth-shattering experience on Mount Hira in the year 610, explained to Muhammad and his wife Khadija that what Muhammad had experienced was God’s revelation. The person most responsible for protecting Muhammad during the early years of Islam, when he and his fellow Muslims were hounded and harassed in Mecca, was a pagan, Abu Talib. One of Muhammad’s first acts when he emigrated from Mecca to Medina was to create what became known as the Constitution of Medina, which allied the various religious groups and tribes in that area in an alliance of goodwill and common defense.

There are powerful moments from the classical period in Muslim history that affirm the value of interfaith cooperation, from the Prophet Muhammad inviting a group of Christians to pray in his mosque, to the Caliph Ali writing to his governor in Egypt: “All those there are your brothers in faith or your equals in creation.”¹⁴ Many Muslim groups since have followed in this tradition of respecting and protecting non-Muslims. The only country in Europe with a higher Jewish

population *after* the Holocaust was Albania. The reason is that the people of that majority-Muslim country made it a part of their public honor to protect Jews during that dark time. Similarly, the Muslims of Rwanda appeared to be the only organized group who protected Tutsis from the machete-wielding Interahamwe militia during the genocide of the 1990s.

Like stories from the life of exemplary figures and key moments in history, religious art is an important contributor to a theology of interfaith cooperation. Muslim poets have long been known for their respectful attitudes toward other religions. Take Ibn Arabi, who wrote about his heart being capable of taking a range of religious forms, including a convent for Christians, a table for the Torah, and even a temple for idols.¹⁵

There are also key ideas in the Islamic tradition that can be interpreted as embracing of diversity. Take for example the term *ayat*, commonly understood as a “verse of the Qur’an,” but more literally translated as “sign.” God gives us his signs in many places—in his revealed scripture, in our relationships with others, in the natural world, and in the culture of the societies in which we live. In this way, the growing diversity of our societies may be viewed as an *ayat* of God and, therefore, something sacred.

For a tradition like Islam, the text is central. A theology of interfaith cooperation needs to involve the dimensions I’ve cited and also have an interpretation of the sacred scripture that supports and advances such a theology. In a brilliant essay entitled “The Place of Tolerance in Islam,” the Islamic scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl accomplishes this task in a particularly audacious way. He lists various verses from the Qur’an that are clearly intolerant toward other religions alongside verses that command positive interfaith relationships and essentially asks, Why should we follow one set of verses rather than the other?¹⁶

The verses in question could not be more different. Here is an example on the intolerant side: “Fight those among the People of the Book who do not believe in God or the Hereafter, who do not forbid what God and His Prophet have forbidden, and who do not acknowledge the religion of truth—fight them until they pay the poll tax with willing submission and feel themselves subdued.” (9:29)

And an example that calls for interfaith cooperation: “O human-kind, God has created you from male and female and made you into diverse nations and tribes so that you may come to know each other. Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of God is he who is the most righteous.” (49)

Which view is the “correct” one? When it comes to relating with Christians and Jews, what should a conscientious Muslim do? To answer this question, Abou El Fadl puts forth a “hermeneutic” (a fancy word for “way of interpreting”) for approaching the Qur’an that essentially has four parts. I will present these parts and augment Abou El Fadl’s argument with the views of other Muslim scholars who also hold to a Muslim theology of interfaith cooperation.

The first part of the hermeneutic has to do with the historical context of the text. Muslims believe that the Qur’an was revealed over the course of twenty-three years, years during which the Prophet Muhammad was not only spreading the message of Islam but building a Muslim society. As in any real-world movement, there were moments of tension and conflict both within the fledgling Muslim community and between Muslims and other groups—Jews, Christians, Sabians, pagans—in the area. According to Muslim belief, God would reveal Qur’anic verses that helped the Prophet Muhammad deal with particular situations—this specific dispute between two people, that group over there causing problems. Many Muslim scholars, Abou El Fadl among them, say that the verses from the Qur’an that are intolerant toward other groups are meant to be specific advice for particular times and places, and not meant to be applied broadly. The verses that speak of interfaith cooperation, on the other hand, contain an ethic that is meant to be understood in a universal and eternal way.

The second part of the hermeneutic deals with the overall moral thrust of the Qur’an. Abou El Fadl points out that at the center of the Qur’an are a set of “general moral imperatives such as mercy, justice, kindness, or goodness” and that the entire text must be read “in light of the overall moral thrust of the Qur’anic message.”¹⁷ In his essay “Mercy: The Stamp of Creation,” Dr. Umar Abd-Allah affirms this view and states that the core value of Islam is mercy. He writes, “Islamic

revelation designates the Prophet Muhammad as ‘the prophet of mercy,’ and Islam’s scriptural sources stress that mercy—above other divine attributions—is God’s hallmark in creation and constitutes his primary relation to the world from its inception through eternity, in this world and the next.”¹⁸ Abd-Allah highlights what is known as the tradition of primacy in Islam, the first lesson that classical Muslim scholars taught their students: “People who show mercy to others will be shown mercy by the All-Merciful. Be merciful to those on earth, and he who is in heaven will be merciful to you.”¹⁹

Third is the conscience of the reader. In addition to the historical context of the text and the general principles of the Qur’an, Abou El Fadl emphasizes that morality is contained not only in the text but also in the heart or conscience of the reader. After all, according to Muslim belief, God gave all people his breath (*ruh*). People are required to bring this inner morality to their reading of the Qur’an, and their lives in general. As Abou El Fadl writes, “The meaning of the religious text is not fixed simply by the literal meaning of its words, but depends, too, on the moral construction given to it by the reader . . . The text will morally enrich the reader, but only if the reader will morally enrich the text.”²⁰ This particular view is probably most associated with Fazlur Rahman, among the twentieth century’s most important Muslim scholars. In his book *Major Themes of the Qur’an*, Rahman writes that *taqwa*, translatable as “inner torch” or “moral conscience,” is probably the most important single term in the Qur’an. It is the quality through which people align themselves with God’s will.²¹

Finally, the context of the reader matters. Like all texts, the Qur’an emerges in a particular time and place. And like all people, we read it in particular times and places. In interpreting the Qur’an, both the context of the text and the context of the reader have to be taken into account. To support this view, Abou El Fadl gives the following example: “The Qur’an persistently commands Muslims to enjoin the good. The word used for ‘the good’ is *ma’ruf*, which means that which is commonly known to be good. Goodness, in the Qur’anic discourse, is part of what one may call a lived reality—it is the product of human experiences and constructed normative understandings.”²² In other words,

the Qur’an expects readers to approach the text not only with their God-given *taqwa*, but also with ideas of what is “good” from their own context. For Abou El Fadl, this means that evolving notions in culture and civilization, from progress in science to ideals like universal human rights and the benefits of diversity, ought to be brought to bear when interpreting the Qur’an.

In his essay “Islam and Cultural Imperative,” Dr. Umar Abd-Allah reinforces this view. He emphasizes that the genius of Islamic civilization was its ability to integrate its sacred law in various cultural contexts. In fact, he writes, one of the five maxims of Islamic law is to respect cultural usage and sound custom across time and place. Islam is meant to be a tradition that harmonizes with a range of cultures, not sets out to destroy them.²³ To support his point, he quotes from a renowned thirteenth-century Islamic legal scholar, Al-Qarafi: “Persons handing down legal judgments while adhering blindly to the texts in their books without regard for the cultural realities of their people are in gross error. They act in contradiction to established legal consensus and are guilty of iniquity and disobedience before God.”²⁴

At the end of his essay, Abou El Fadl emphasizes that any tradition, including Islam, “provides possibilities for meaning, not inevitabilities. And those possibilities are exploited, developed and ultimately determined by the reader’s efforts.”²⁵ No doubt one can understand the Qur’an and the Islamic tradition as one that compels building bunkers of isolation or barriers of division. One possibility does not, of course, mean the only possibility. One of the fascinating things about religious traditions is that they contain a multiplicity of potential interpretations and expressions. Some of these seem, at least from the outside, contradictory. Islam can be read as a religion that both seeks converts and emphasizes cooperation. The real question is not, therefore, “What does Islam say?” It is, “Which of the many possibilities and logics within Islam do I most want to emphasize?” That has as much to do with the reader’s understanding of the tradition and the times as it does with anything else. What is crystal clear is that the tradition of Islam, like other major world traditions, has ample resources through which a faithful Muslim can construct a theology of interfaith cooperation.²⁶

HISTORY OF INTERFAITH COOPERATION

I caught up with an old friend from high school one summer day a few years back. When I told her I was involved in interfaith work, she scoffed and said something to the effect of, “Religions have always fought, and they will always fight. End of story. At least that’s what we learned in high school.” It was true. What little education we got about religion in our high school was mostly related to violence—Islam spreading by the sword, the European wars of religion, the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust. Clearly, it shaped her framework.

Flipping through the *New York Times* later that day (July 12, 2013), I realized how high-profile current events seem to confirm my friend’s paradigm. The picture on the cover was of a Bosnian Muslim mourning the Srebrenica massacre, where more than seven thousand Muslim men and boys had been executed on this day eighteen years earlier. In The Hague, genocide charges were reinstated against Radovan Karadžić, a wartime leader of the Bosnian Serbs, for his role in massacres against Bosnian Muslims during the 1992–1995 war in the Balkans. The Taliban, a Muslim extremist group in Afghanistan and Pakistan, were vowing to attack schools for girls, calling the education of women a Western plot against Islam. Officials in Northern Ireland were calling in police reinforcements in response to a rise in tensions between Catholics and Protestants. More than twenty Buddhists in Myanmar, many of them part of the extremist 969 movement, were given jail time because of their role in an attack on a Muslim school that killed thirty-six people. Members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt were vocally denouncing the Christian minority in that country, claiming that Christians were responsible for the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi, the former president, who was closely aligned with their party. Closer to home, articles on abortion in North Carolina, gay marriage in Pennsylvania, the availability of “morning after” pills in New York City public schools, and federal immigration legislation all made reference to religious tensions.

My high school friend’s conviction that religious diversity could only ever be associated with violence is a classic case of what scholars call *inference error*. Humans tend to make sweeping judgments based on two

things—the knowledge structures (narratives, theories, schemas) we carry in our minds, and recent vivid instances that fit within the broader story of those knowledge structures. My friend’s knowledge structure about religion was set in high school, through history lessons about the prominent role of religion in conflict. Viewing religion as an agent of violence across the span of history heightened her sensitivities toward stories in which religion is associated with violence today. The fact that the news is full of those stories simply confirmed her worldview.

Perhaps this is why so many people were so taken by Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” theory. It was not so much an accurate appraisal of history as it was a compelling confirmation of people’s psychological biases.

All of this made me think of one of the most profound moments in my life. It took place in Cape Town, South Africa, in December 1999, just before the turn of the millennium. I had gone there to help organize the youth program for the Parliament of the World’s Religions, and I had gotten myself a ticket to hear Nelson Mandela speak.

When he came on stage, he looked even more regal than he had in the pictures I had seen of him. A man in the back stood and began to sing a chant that the person next to me explained was a praise song for an African chief. Mandela cocked his head to the side and closed his eyes and let the chant fill the room and wash over him. When it was over, he pointed out to the Cape in the direction of Robben Island and said, “I would still be there, where I spent a quarter century of my life, if it were not for the Muslims and the Christians, the Hindus and the Jews, the African traditionalists and the secular humanists, coming together to defeat Apartheid.”

I was both inspired and stunned. Inspired because the image of people praying in different languages and working together to end a system of oppression gave me goose bumps. Stunned because, somehow, I had never considered this possibility before. Although I wasn’t as set in a paradigm of religion-connected-to-conflict as my high school friend, I certainly did not have a clearly articulated knowledge structure regarding interfaith cooperation, or nearly enough compelling cases to form one.

In my view, an interfaith leader has to have both. Partially this is about having a more complete picture of history. As David Cannadine writes in his book *The Undivided Past*, "Open war has never been the whole picture in the history of religion, for alongside (and even during) periods of wrenching disagreements and searing spiritual conflicts, there have also been times of toleration and episodes of peaceful interaction."²⁷ Partially this is about forming a paradigm that gives us hope for the future. As Zachary Karabell writes in his book about the history of interfaith cooperation, *Peace Be Upon You*, "If we emphasize hate, scorn, war, and conquest, we are unlikely to perceive that any other path is viable."²⁸

All of this is why interfaith leaders need a knowledge base that includes a history of interfaith cooperation.

In my mind, such a knowledge base recognizes that history doesn't simply happen; people make it. Consequently, the most powerful examples of interfaith history are cases where people have intentionally erected bridges of interfaith cooperation. Illustrations involving social movements—King and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in the Jim Crow South, Gandhi and Badshah Khan in colonial India—are undoubtedly inspiring. But lately I have been favoring cases that are not quite as well known, the behind-the-scenes interfaith movements that explain seemingly magical historical shifts.

In 1955, the sociologist Will Herberg wrote, "To be an American today means to be . . . a Protestant, a Catholic, or a Jew."²⁹ Just a quarter century earlier, there was a widespread sentiment that Catholics and Jews were not fully Americans. A Catholic candidate, Al Smith, had been trounced in the 1928 presidential election in a frenzy of religious prejudice. Catholics were viewed as aliens in America, undemocratic by nature and given to fascism. Jews were commonly portrayed as financially devious, clannish, and unwilling to assimilate. They were blamed for everything from the Great Depression in the United States to Hitler's rise in Europe. Both groups were commonly understood to be loyal to foreign elements rather than American democracy. The slogan of the Ku Klux Klan—"Native, white, Protestant supremacy"—described the conviction of a good part of America. Even Franklin Roosevelt privately

said that the United States was "a Protestant country, and the Catholics and Jews are here under sufferance."³⁰

So what accounts for the profound shift in attitudes regarding Catholics and Jews between the time of Al Smith's presidential campaign in 1928 and Herberg's book in 1955? The answer, according to social historian Kevin Schultz, lies in the work of an organization called the National Conference of Christians and Jews, commonly known as the NCCJ (which now stands for the National Conference for Community and Justice). Formally launched in 1928 to combat the growing popularity of the Klan, the NCCJ took as its mission the advancement of a tri-faith America where Protestants, Catholics, and Jews were understood as equally American, none suffered discrimination, and all worked closely together to benefit the common good. NCCJ programs quickly took root across the United States. One of the most popular was the Tolerance Trio—a Protestant minister, a Catholic priest, and a Jewish rabbi—who barnstormed across the country, engaging in "trialogue" with one another and giving presentations to religious and civic groups. These presentations inspired local tri-faith organizations in two hundred US cities and two thousand small towns.³¹ When the United States entered World War II, in the early 1940s, NCCJ Tolerance Trios became a staple of military life. By the end of the war, they had spoken to nine million US servicemen and -women across nearly eight hundred military installations.³² NCCJ films and printed materials reached even more. In the immediate aftermath of the war, the NCCJ partnered with the Ad Council to create the "United America" campaign, which promoted the tri-faith ideal on dozens of popular radio and television programs. The campaign lasted for six years, making over a billion audience impressions in 1949 alone.

In his review of the NCCJ's impact, the sociologist Alfred McClung Lee wrote that the organization's programs were creating "a social change with permanent effects."³³ Herberg's determination in *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* that all three of these communities were equally American affirmed McClung's findings.³⁴ Little is remembered today, in the popular imagination at least, of these highly intentional and effective efforts. People seem to have a faint recollection that there

was once ugly bias against Catholics and Jews in American history, but such sentiments simply faded away as the nation evolved. It is closer to the truth to say that a group of people formed an organization that intentionally drove that prejudice into the past. To borrow an insight from Martin Luther King Jr.: It is a mistake to think that the pendulum of history swings of its own accord. The reality is, *people push it*.

Knowing interfaith history helps you understand how others have pushed that pendulum, and gives you the conviction that you might do it, too.

SHARED VALUES

Finally, I return to the biography and insights of Paul Knitter. As I wrote at the beginning of this chapter, Knitter's personal journey allowed him to acquire an appreciative knowledge of multiple religions, develop a theology of interfaith cooperation from his own Catholic faith, and learn about the history of interfaith cooperation in countries like India. Over the course of his life and career, Knitter used this vast knowledge base to identify shared values across traditions and to learn from the diverse ways that traditions approached such shared values.

For interfaith leaders, both shared values and diverse approaches are important. Religious and ethical traditions hold values like compassion, peace, and hospitality in common. But they approach these values in highly diverse ways, through different rituals, narratives, heroes, and philosophies. This is a hugely important opportunity for interfaith leaders because it gives us a way to identify *commonality without the pretense of sameness*. If Muslims, Hindus, and humanists all related the same story when you asked them to speak about hospitality, it would be like pointing to the same stone. The fact that they are likely to cite different texts and rituals when speaking about hospitality means that they are bringing diverse stones to the gathering.

Knitter's own story in this regard is especially striking. In his beautiful book *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, he addresses how Christianity and Buddhism approach the shared value of peace in remarkably different ways.³⁵ In part inspired by his knowledge of

the history of interfaith cooperation, and in part moved by Christian theological concepts like creating the kingdom of God on earth, Knitter becomes involved in social action organizations like Christians for Peace in El Salvador (CRISPAZ) and the Peace Council that seek to stop violence in various parts of the world. He travels with these organizations to El Salvador, Mexico, Israel, and elsewhere, often in interfaith groups, to promote peace. As part of his work, Knitter participates in protests against government forces and the upper class, writes papers on the "structural violence" of certain policies, and mobilizes people to action in American churches. He feels confident that he is engaging in a prophetic tradition of witnessing for justice—a central Christian idea in his interpretation of Christianity—but he also struggles. Is he really being effective, he wonders? Year after year, he sees more and more violence. Even as the number of demonstrators increases and the size of the protests grow, the reality on the ground is still more violence. He has to ask himself, Is this really the way to peace?

That is when he awakens to the very different approach that Buddhism takes to the shared value of peace. As he prepares once again to confront the death squads in El Salvador, a Zen master tells him, "You won't be able to stop the death squads until you realize your oneness with them."³⁶ As he sits with indigenous people in Chiapas, crafting a statement that denounces the North American Free Trade Agreement, he hears a Buddhist monk who is part of the Inter Religious Peace Council calmly desist, stating, "I'm sorry, but we Buddhists don't denounce anything."³⁷ As he participates in ceremonies to commemorate the horror of the Holocaust in Jerusalem, he observes a Buddhist monk ask, "But why do you have to remember? What would happen if you let go of such memories of suffering?"³⁸ The monk explained that in the Buddhist view, the Nazis were acting out their karma and deserved sympathy, just as the Chinese do for their persecution of Tibetans. To hold on to terrible memories is simply to relive the persecution, perhaps even to recycle the karma. The better course is detachment.

As Knitter deepens his exploration of Buddhist approaches to peace, he realizes just how different they are from Christian approaches. Prominent dimensions within Christianity emphasize the importance

of action in the belief that the world is meant to head in a particular direction and Christians must accelerate the process. Peace comes when Christians bend the arc. Prominent dimensions within Buddhism emphasize contemplation, cultivating nonviolence within oneself. Knitter is shocked to discover that Buddhism does not really have a theology of justice. He is so used to the progressive Christian chant, "No justice, no peace," that he believes it to be a universal. But for Buddhists, to achieve peace, one must first *be* peace. Nor does Buddhism have a concept of the world heading in any particular direction, something that is central to Christian eschatology. In Buddhism, the universe is simply here, and Buddhists are meant to be mindfully here with it.

Ultimately, Knitter finds ways to connect these stones, the Christian approach to peace and the Buddhist one. He has long been confused by the Christian paradox of waiting for the kingdom of God and accelerating its arrival, what Christian theologians refer to as the "already/not yet" problem. The Buddhist equanimity about the natural tension between contemplation and action seems to be a useful parallel. He tells a Zen master that he feels the need both to meditate and to stop the death squads, and he cannot figure out which one he should pursue. The Zen master simply says, "They are both absolutely necessary. You have to sit. You have to stop the death squads." That Buddhist wisdom helps Knitter be present with the tension, recognizing it as simply a part of the nature of both the universe and the human condition. Energy devoted to disentangling the tension is wasted, a distraction from the important task of being mindfully present.

SKILL SET

The stones of interfaith knowledge do not magically form themselves into a bridge, much less one held together by an arch. The work of linking stones takes the interfaith skills that I outline in this next chapter. Sometimes, interfaith leaders will use the skill of public narrative to connect stones that they themselves have collected by using their interfaith radar screen. Sometimes they will curate an interfaith activity and facilitate an interfaith discussion to evoke stones of interfaith knowledge from the group. To create an arch, meaning a shape that ensures the bridge to pluralism holds, interfaith leaders have to take great care in connecting different stones in proper ways. Which stone of theology connects best with what stone representing a shared value? Finally, an interfaith leader will need the skills of relationship building and mobilizing to gather a group in the first place. After all, what is the use of building a bridge toward pluralism if you haven't gathered a group willing to take the journey?