Reaching the Heart and Mind of Muslims
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Chapter 1—Introduction

Indiana Jones: "Get back to Cairo, get us some transport to England. Boat, plane, anything... Meet me at Omar's. Be ready for me; I'm going after that truck."
Sallah: "How?"
Indiana Jones: "I don't know. I'm making this up as I go.

I have taught Muslims studies for about 15 years, and during that time, invariably a student will ask, "What do you think is the best way to reach out to Muslims?" or "What model do you like best?" I never know quite what to say, for reasons that will become clear throughout this book. However, often I have responded, somewhat tongue in cheek—but not fully so, with "I like the Raiders of the Lost Arc approach." I then proceeded to relate to them the conversation between Indiana Jones and Sallah written at the beginning of this chapter. Indiana Jones and Sallah were in a very tense situation and Sallah wanted to know what they should do next. It was at that point that Indiana Jones said, "I don't know. I'm making this up as I go. Sure, I am joking when I say that this is my model, but at the same time I am not joking.

I am joking because the fact is that I have spent years studying Muslims and Islam, and interacting with Muslims in all kinds of settings. I do have some knowledge about interacting with Muslims from diverse backgrounds. So I am not totally just making it up as I go along. However, there is a sense in which every Muslim is different, every situation is different; consequently, there is always an element of "not knowing" in each encounter. Therefore, I always find myself in a curious situation of knowing and not knowing at the same time.

For many people not knowing is an uncomfortable state of being, so they look for structure, for a model, for the "right" way, for a step-by-step manual that makes ambiguous situations clear and how to act in those situations, clear. They want to know exactly what to do, when. That is natural and normal for many of us. The problem is that the unhelpful thought that we can't stand ambiguity leads to the unhelpful action of moving too quickly away from the discomfort of ambiguity. One way that this gets manifested is in a tendency within humans to declare something that is not absolute, an absolute. Stated differently, we seem to have a tendency to confuse our pictures of reality for the reality itself.

Models are helpful, in the same way that habits are helpful. They allow us to navigate through new and sometimes confusing situations without always starting at ground zero. Models are like maps. Maps are pictures, simplified pictures or representations of territory. They are condensed, can be folded and accessed when we need them. However, maps are not territory itself. Some maps are good maps and help us steer through geography without too many problems. Some maps aren't quite so good and end up having us go down paths with dead ends or venturing into dangerous territory. Models can be helpful, but they should never be confused with the territory itself. Maps can never give you the feel of the land, its uniqueness, its smells, or its sounds. If we focus exclusively on the map and not the territory, we miss the richness of the land.

Models for reaching Muslims are maps. They aren't necessarily bad, but they are not a replacement for experiencing individual Muslims and the richness of their culture, groups, families, and individuality. Models of missions are helpful when viewed in a big brush stroke kind of way, but they are not helpful to the degree that they get in the way, i.e., when they have us focus too much on the model and our loyalty to it and too little on the uniqueness of the Muslim right in front of us.

In this book, I will look at how we can experience Muslims in their uniqueness in ways that are informed by broad cultural and theological insights and the recurrent patterns in which individual differences are expressed in the context of culture, group, family, etc. I will try to do so without reducing individual Muslims to mere examples of types.

It is certainly not an original stance, but I shy away from talking about Islam and Muslims, and instead, try to refer to "whose Islam" and "which Muslim." I shy away from questions such as "What does the Qur'an say about….." Instead, I focus on what does this group of Muslims, or even better, this individual Muslim believe about this particular verse in the Qur'an, and so forth. In 1988 Alisdair MacIntyre wrote a book entitled, **Whose Justice? Which Rationality?** I guess I am asking, "Whose Islam? Which Muslim?" Extend this approach to include, "Whose Muhammad? Which Shari'ah?" Clearly, only one historical Muhammad existed. That said, I encourage you to pick up some of the existing books on the life and person of Muhammad. What you get are multiple maps or pictures of Muhammad, and some of the aspects of those pictures are widely divergent even when Muslims are the creators of those pictures. For example, consider **23 Years** by Ali Dashti, a liberal Shi'a Muslim who was critical

of what he took to be the myths used to describe the life of Muhammad. Contrast this with The **Life of Muhammad**, a biography of Muhammad by Haykal, a conservative Sunni Muslim whose biography of Muhammad is filled with what Dashti would simply dismiss as myth but which Haykal appeals to modern science to interpret and justify. Finally consider the biography of Muhammad written by Martin Lings, a British convert to Islam and a Sufi whose picture of Muhammad embraces an appreciation for what Dashti would reject outright. Even some Christian writers see a significant difference between the Muhammad in Mecca and the Muhammad in Medina. Which picture of Muhammad is the "real" picture? That is not for me to say, but something of deep passion for many Muslims.

Similarly, while it is helpful to understand believing Muslims and their cultural identities, we need to be cautious about talking too globally about "The Muslim Mind" or "The Arab Muslim." Muslims are not products of cultural factories; Arabs are not all the same. Understanding someone's culture is tremendously helpful in understanding that individual, but I shy away from embracing cultural determinism that glosses over differences and can, in its worse form, view individuals merely as an expression of culture.

In philosophy a distinction is made between essentialism and nominalism. Roughly, the difference between these views is whether one tends to see abstractions as really real and assign a lesser place to individual or particular existing things (a view called essentialism), or whether one views individual existing things as the primary reality and sees abstractions as ideas or words whose use is helpful for communicating but are not as fully real as individual things (a view called nominalism). I realize that this distinction sounds abstract and perhaps not useful to the topic at hand. However it is relevant because the view one takes largely determines how one approaches Muslims. If you tend to see Islam as the primary reality and groups of Muslims as mere examples of that larger reality, you tend toward essentialism. You might be predisposed to expend your energy trying to get at some purported essence of Islam and its message, try to understand "the Muslim mind" or "Arabs," etc. If you see particular expressions of religious beliefs and practices of Muslims as primary and view Islam as merely a word that is helpful to communicate with others, you tend toward nominalism. You might then try to study specific beliefs of particular Muslims, the diversity of expressions of Muslims as they live and believe, the multiple interpretations of the Qur'an and Sunnah (the life example of Muhammad as captured in the hadith), etc.

I tend toward nominalism, less for metaphysical or theoretical reasons and more for pragmatic reasons. When we think that Islam is the really real, we tend to lump Muslims together and blur diversity. We tend to say things such as "Islam teaches…," or "There is something in the essence of Islam that gives rise to terrorism," "If Muslims truly understand the Qur'an, then they will be violent," or "Islam is an aggressive religion." Essentialism tends toward "all" and "none," "always," and "never," whereas nominalism tends toward "some," "many," or "a majority." Nominalism makes more subtle qualifications and fewer absolute generalizations. In the extreme, essentialism gives rise to or supports prejudice and bias. Nominalism also has its limitations. It is more ambiguous, messier, and harder to reduce to "a" model or a single strategy. For those of us who lean more toward nominalism it is important to work hard to avoid being a nominalist who has simply despaired of finding trends and similarities to live in a world of mere unique entities without commonalities. It is a fine line to walk that requires humility, ongoing dialogue within a community of believers and scholars, and ongoing curiosity about the self and one's biases.

I have doctorates in philosophy and psychology. That academic background invariably shapes how I view reaching out to Muslims. My philosophical studies and my experience teaching rhetorical theory, especially modern rhetorical theory as set forth by Stephen Toulmin, impact how I think about argument and the nature of persuasive conversations with others. Philosophy is to a large degree about argument and what makes an argument valid and sound. So, of course, I have been fascinated by the apologetics of Christians and Muslims in their interaction with each other. As a philosopher I am curious about the "bad" arguments both present to describe their own faith and to critique the other's faith. However, rhetorical theory has made me keenly interested in what makes an argument persuasive and how Muslims and Christians may offer valid or sound arguments but in ways that fall flat or fail to persuade the intended audience. Finally, as a student of psychology, I am quite curious about the emotional dimension of human interaction, in this case, Christian-Muslim interaction, and the psychology of persuasion. So my approach in this book is informed by those disciplines, but not to come up with "a" model, but rather an approach to sharing one's faith logically, effectively, and with emotional depth in ways that accept and address the uniqueness of the precious Muslims in our lives and in ways that are loving, respectful, and embrace the intrinsic value of the individual Muslim.

All that said, I am also interested in you. How do your thoughts and beliefs impact your interaction with Muslims such that you experience emotions that are not helpful or engage in behaviors that sabotage you in reaching out to Muslims? How do you make yourself anxious, angry, or highly frustrated in those interactions? What gets you derailed and overly-focused on winning an argument rather than staying curious and loving in your interaction? Why do you cling to a given model even when it doesn't seem to be working for you? How much is confirmatory bias at work in you, namely, do you have some general beliefs about Muslims and then you tend only to focus on those aspects of your interactions with Muslims that confirm that bias and have you end up saying to yourself, "See, all Muslims are that way."

You are not going to agree with everything I say in this short book. I am absolutely fine with that. My goal is to explore the ways in which we interact with Muslims and the pitfalls in doing so and to think seriously about how we can do it lovingly and respectfully without manipulation. I am only one voice in this discussion. I will consider other approaches that differ significantly with how I do things. Beneath it all, my goal is to act out of a love for Christ, be open and informed by the ways in which He interacted with others, and to enter into the lives of Muslims with the same love Christ had for others. My belief is that all hearts cry out for the living God whether Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, or atheist heart. The rightful and natural object of our deepest desire is God as witnessed to and seen in the person and life of Jesus whether we realize it or not.