

**Stanford Memorial Church  
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**A FAITH THAT WORKS  
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**Old Testament: Proverbs 22.1-2, 8-9, 22-23  
Epistle: James 2.1-10, 14-17**

“Faith without works is dead” (James 2.17) My most recent encounter with this popular, frequently quoted verse, occurred in one of the last settings I would have imagined. It happened this past Labor Day weekend in the Chicago area—at the convention center in Rosemont, adjacent to O’Hare airport—where I registered, along with about 55,000 others, for the 43<sup>rd</sup> annual meeting of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). Among the many components of the ISNA conference, one of the most popular is the bazaar, which includes over 500 booths featuring everything one could think of—from clothing, jewelry, books and DVDs to all sorts of non-profit organizations devoted to education, healthcare and current social issues.

As I walked by one stall that featured elegantly carved wood sculptures and furnishings, I was somewhat surprised to see a large round carving, about the size of a card table, with the Ten Commandments cut into the center of it. Then I noticed a kind of circular garland around the Ten Commandments, in which more words were carved. There in bold letters—and I had to read it twice to assure myself it was real—were the words “Faith without works is dead.” Finally, on the outer edge was an Arabic inscription from the Koran which I believe is translated, “Verily God will not change the state of a people, unless they change the state of their own selves.” Once again I was reminded how Islam recognizes Judaism and Christianity as People of the Book, each with a significant prophet: Moses, Jesus—along with Mohammad, the prophet for Islam. Here was another reminder that what we have in common is so much more significant, persuasive and pervasive than those things that separate us.

But the ISNA Conference bazaar also held two more surprises for me, particularly relevant to the fact that tomorrow we will be observing the fifth anniversary of the horror and tragedy of 9/11. First there were the many booths devoted to the goal of obtaining peace in the world. Amnesty International had a booth denouncing the extensive torture conducted in places like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo—in addition to the secret prisons abroad. Moreover, there was an official announcement circulated by ISNA entitled, “Against Terrorism and Religious Extremism.” Defining “terrorism (as) the epitome of injustice because it targets innocent people,” the statement emphasized five fundamental points: 1) The Arabic equivalent of “Holy War” is never mentioned in the Qur’an. 2) Islam does not consider people of other faiths “infidels,” and it does not advocate violence against them. 3) Muslims are to act as responsible citizens. 4) Islam prohibits religious extremism. And 5) Muslims are part of the universal human family and are committed to co-existing in peace and justice.

Reading and reflecting on these statements was strangely juxtaposed by one more totally unexpected encounter at the bazaar. I was attending the ISNA conference to encourage Muslim chaplains--currently functioning primarily in prisons and the military—to take the clinical pastoral education training we offer at Stanford Hospital, as well as about 350 other medical centers across the country, in order to have more Muslim chaplains in the health care field. As I was finishing the arrangements on our information booth for hospital chaplaincy, some of the leaders responsible for the conference stopped by with an obviously distinguished guest, accompanied by a one-star general and several Secret Service men. His name is Gordon England, Deputy Secretary of Defense. He was the keynote speaker for the inaugural session. So we chatted briefly next to our little bazaar booth, and I felt it more advisable to talk about training for hospital chaplaincy than to enlighten him with my perception of the current political situation. Though there was a brief Stanford moment when I felt the temptation to say, “Be sure and give Condi my regards.”

After parting from the Deputy Secretary of Defense my thoughts could not help but linger on this fifth anniversary of the horrendous tragedy of 9/11. Most importantly, what does it mean to have a Faith that Works in such a seemingly dangerous and vulnerable situation? The phrase, “A Faith that Works” can be understood in two ways. First, it is a faith that works in the sense that it has proved its meddle and stood the test of time. I believe this can be said of the three historic and large monotheistic faiths of our world: Judaism, Christian and Islam. They have provided meaning, direction and assurance for millions of individuals over the centuries. The second characteristic about these faiths is that they work—in the sense that belief is expressed in action and deed. As the writer of the Epistle of James so aptly and boldly put it, “Faith without works is dead” (James 2.10).

As you may know, Martin Luther did not like the Epistle of James, and frequently dismissed it as an “Epistle of Straw.” Within the context of his day, of course, he was condemning the Roman Catholic practice of the time of selling indulgences, with the implication that people could buy their way into heaven. In denouncing this practice, he proclaimed, “Grace alone” . . . he forthrightly condemned any indication that we may attain salvation by our works and deeds with the bold proclamation that it is God’s grace alone that provides the foundation for our salvation. Unfortunately, as the Reformation progressed, increasing attention was given to the question of how to identify those who had attained salvation? Who are the blessed and who are the condemned? As Max Weber noted in his well-known classic, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the emerging middle class of business and professionals began to think in terms of their financial success being an indication of God’s favor. This, in turn, fostered an elitism of the prosperous elect which justified their indifference to, and criticism of, the poor; since they were obviously not blessed by God. Now, in retrospect, we recognize that the dichotomy between grace and works was a false one, and in point of fact they belong together. Grace finds expression in mercy and justice.

So what does it mean to have a faith that works in the context of this fifth anniversary of 9/11? We undoubtedly have a complex and challenging task set before

us. Our work is further complicated by the fact that since at least the time of the Crusades in the eleventh century, Christianity has not been able to generate a very tolerant, enlightened, or empathic response to Islam. The prevailing practice over the centuries has been to condemn and denounce Islam as worshippers of a false god, in spite of the fact that Muslims insist that all three of our monotheistic religions are descended from Abraham; and we worship the same God as Abraham.

As an exercise in the dynamics of understanding the nature and process of prejudice, I would invite you to reflect on the first time you can remember, generally in your childhood years, being introduced to the nature of Islam. Perhaps it came from a Saturday matinee at the movies, a novel, a comic strip, or some such source. For me, it came most vividly from Mr. Harrison, one of my high school history teachers. To this day I have no idea whose history we were studying—America, Europe, or whatever—but I do clearly recall his love of regaling us with his experiences as a soldier in Turkey during World War I. His favorite story had to do with him and his buddies passing a group of Muslim men kneeling in prayer. Laughingly he described how he and his friends each picked out a Muslim to kick and then ran for their lives. And we laughed too, little realizing how our perceptions and values were being shaped by such negative and racist stereotyping. I can only hope and pray that high school students today are receiving a much more sensitive and informed understanding of Islam.

The current use of the phrase “Islamofacism” is simply one more example in a long line of dishonoring litanies. The use of this term would be tantamount to calling Timothy McVeigh or the IRA terrorists in Ireland “Christofacism.” Such simplistic and negative caricatures imply the rejection of the entire faith—whether Islam or Christianity. In actuality, it appears that over the course of history, Islamic cultures have been much more tolerant of Christian and Jewish minorities than have their Christian counterparts. Many point out that for almost 600 years Christians, Jews and Muslims lived in relative harmony and peace in Islamic dominated Spain. Yet when the Inquisition was introduced a few centuries later, the primary victims were Jews and Muslims.

So how do we put our faith to work in such a threatening and complex situation, especially as the forces and acts of terrorism are so much more rampant and extensive today than they appeared to be at the time of 9/11? One obvious place to begin is to recognize that religious extremism and fanaticism is rampant and appears to be growing—throughout the world, in all the major religions. Very few terrorists are simply crazy or sadistic. They regularly proclaim their commitment to doing God’s will and that the mainstream of their faith is, at best, lukewarm and false believers who have strayed from the true path. Thus the major thrust of the violence and virulent denunciation is frequently directed, ironically, at members of their own faith group. At the same time, criminal behavior, regardless of the religious motivation, must be recognized and addressed as such.

So, once again, how do we put our faith to work in this current highly charged climate of terrorism? By now it should be evident that it does not help to buy into the misleading and often inaccurate characterizations of Islam. I, for one, do not believe that

the God worshipped by Islam is any different than the one we worship—and who is referred to by many different names in the Bible. Rather than repeating we are on the threshold of World War III—as some extreme right Christians like to proclaim, with the implication that this will hasten the return of Jesus to take us to glory—we would be better advised to pursue pathways to peace, to learn as much as we can about Islam, and to get to know our Muslim neighbors. In this regard, having the Deputy Secretary of Defense as the ISNA gathering was definitely a step in the right direction. Here at Stanford, we are fortunate to have an Islamic Study Center, under the direction of Bob Gregg our former dean, to provide us with ample programs, speakers and resources. I am also quite pleased that the national headquarters for ISNA is in Indiana—and not San Francisco. It is also a sign of hope to me that Detroit has more than 170 mosques and that there are almost as many in the Chicago area. And we also have a very active Muslim community in the Bay Area with whom we can work.

This faith at work is very well captured in the next hymn in our worship service, written by Ruth Duck as a response to 9/11, which begins with:

We human build to frame a life with meaning, love, and feeling, but time or hate  
can bring collapse and loss can leave us reeling.  
Let faithful souls from rubble rise to find new ways from sorrow  
and slowly, slowly form a shape to welcome God's tomorrow.

It will not be easy. It will take time, dedication and resources. But I cannot think of a more appropriate to honor the many innocent individuals whose lives were tragically destroyed by a few fanatics on September 11, 2001. Amen