

Muslim, My Neighbor – Part 2

After outlining the basic concepts and essential features of Islam in the previous text, in this continuation we present comments and reflections of prominent thinkers outside the Islamic tradition on this religion. We also offer our own view on several matters related to Islam.

What Others Say

Goethe once wrote: “Faith in the one and only God is always uplifting, for it directs people toward the unity of their own inner being.” Elsewhere, influenced by verse 115 of *Al-Baqarah*, the great German poet declares: “To God belongs the East and the West; the northern and southern lands rest in His hands.”

Martin Luther wrote a preface to the Qur’an. The first Latin translation of the Qur’an was published in Basel in 1422 by Theodor Bibliander, with Luther’s foreword.

Leo Tolstoy, the Russian novelist, wrote: “Muhammad may take pride in having rescued a primitive, blood-soaked tribe from the devilish grip of barbaric customs.”

Here are further quotations:

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), German poet and thinker

Goethe wrote repeatedly about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad.

“If this is Islam, are we not all within Islam?”
(*West-Eastern Divan*, 1819)

In the same work he expresses admiration for Islamic spirituality.

Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), Scottish philosopher and historian

“A lie cannot create a religion; a man who lies could never produce a faith like Islam.”
(*Heroes and Hero Worship*, 1840)

He praised Muhammad’s sincerity and the power of his ideas.

George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), Irish writer and Nobel laureate

“If Muhammad were alive today, he would solve the world’s problems while drinking a cup of tea.”

Although this quote appears in several versions, Shaw's admiration for Islam—particularly its moral framework and social discipline—is well documented.

William Montgomery Watt (1909–2006), British orientalist and philosopher of religion

“Muhammad deserves our utmost admiration.”

He emphasized the Prophet's moral integrity and realistic statesmanship.

Karen Armstrong (1944–), British historian of religion

“Islam was remarkably advanced in its humane and social solutions.”

She stressed that Islam did not cause the ‘Dark Ages’; rather, Europe overcame them thanks to Muslim scholarship.

Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), Indian leader and philosopher

“Islam has preached tolerance and brotherhood among people.”

He spoke of the honesty and dedication of Indian Muslims.

Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), French military leader

“Islam is a simple, dignified, and rational religion.”

During his time in Egypt he praised the clarity of Islamic monotheism.

Sir Mark Sykes (1879–1919), British diplomat and travel writer

“Nowhere have I found such a sense of honor and hospitality as among the Muslims.”

Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), Russian writer

Tolstoy read Islamic texts and corresponded with Muslims.

“Islam is a religion of reason, and Muhammad is a man who spoke the truth.”

Will Durant (1885–1981), American historian

“Islamic civilization created one of the most magnificent eras in human history.”

In *The Story of Civilization* he describes in detail the achievements of Muslim science.

John Davenport (1789–1877), British writer

“Muhammad was a man of the highest moral purity.”

He wrote works defending Islam against Victorian prejudices.

Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), British philosopher

“Muhammad was a great man, full of humanity and concern for justice.”

This sentiment reflects themes found in his essays on religion and civilization.

G. E. von Grunebaum (1909–1972), orientalist

“Islamic civilization was among the most advanced societies of its time.”

Islam and Muslim Culture in the Literature of the Former Yugoslavia

In the literature of the former Yugoslav lands—especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina—Islam and Muslim culture often appear as an authentic, aesthetic, and moral dimension of life. Christian writers observing multi-faith communities recognized distinctive values in Islamic tradition.

Ivo Andrić, whose work is inseparable from Bosnia, affirmed the Islamic cultural layer through his depictions of bridges, bazaars, and charitable endowments. In *The Bridge on the Drina* and *The Bosnian Chronicle*, the beauty of Oriental architecture appears as a civilizational contribution. The bridge, as the loftiest symbol of connection, reflects the creative energy of Muslim builders, which Andrić saw as outlasting the conflicts of history.

Miroslav Krleža, in his essays on Yugoslav culture, describes with respect the Oriental ornamentation, Bosniak craftsmanship, and architecture that enriched the Balkans with a unique artistic expression.

Branko Ćopić, in his short stories, portrays Muslim characters as honest, upright, and hospitable. He does not engage in theological abstraction; instead, he shows Islam through human morality—patriotism, selflessness, honor, and warmth.

Momo Kapor, writing about the spirit of Sarajevo, highlights the gentleness and rhythm of life shaped by its Islamic urban tradition: the mahala, the coffeehouse, the bazaar, the serenity of Ramadan evenings.

Predrag Matvejević, in *Mediterranean Breviary*, speaks with great respect of the Islamic Mediterranean and its contributions to science, medicine, mathematics, philosophy, and navigation.

Jovan Skerlić recognized the softness and mysticism of dervish poetry, calling it an indigenous value of the South Slavic cultural landscape. Similar elements appear in the poetry of Vasko Popa, where Sufi symbolism gains universal meaning.

Borislav Pekić emphasized the way Islamic tradition contributes to urban culture and the moral life of communities across the Balkans.

These writers, despite their differences, recognized in Islam qualities that elevate the human being: morality, balance, beauty, and piety. In their works, the Muslim cultural world is not foreign; it enriches the Mediterranean and Balkan milieu.

What We Say

We hold our Muslim neighbors in high respect and regard them as our brothers and sisters. We believe that their devotion to faith is sincere, and that their dedication to God can often serve as an example to the average and “sleepy” Christian. This devotion is especially evident in prayer and fasting, both of which closely resemble biblical examples and early Christian practice.

Some Muslim practices that may appear unusual—or even the subject of mockery—to people in our region can, upon closer examination, be found in the Bible itself. For instance, prayer performed in prostration: why should one not bow before their God and Creator, when prophets and God’s people did the same? Would we mock Moses for prostrating himself before God?

It is also noteworthy that Scripture describes prostration before God, but never the making of the sign of the cross. There is no mention in the New Testament of any apostle or disciple “crossing themselves.”

Avoiding certain foods, such as pork, is likewise a biblical command, given as a sign of Israel’s distinctiveness. By abstaining from pork—viewed as unclean and unhealthy—Muslims express respect and trust in God as Creator, believing that His commands apply not only to ancient Israel but also to the descendants of Ishmael.

The moral life of Muslims (and Muslim women—indeed, we believe that a modestly covered woman shows moral responsibility and reverence toward God, just as all people respect the modesty of Christian nuns), their detachment from worldliness, avoidance of vices such as gambling, alcohol, and pornography, their charitable giving—all of these are noble practices consistent with Scripture.

We believe every educated person, and especially every Christian, should read the Qur'an and seek to understand the faith and customs of their Muslim neighbors—especially since Muslims recognize the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospel as divine revelation.

Accordingly, we cannot approve of Qur'an burnings (in America), bans on minarets (in Switzerland), bans on the hijab (in France), attacks on mosques (in Serbia), or any form of hatred or Islamophobia—particularly since, in our region, Muslims and Christians are largely of the same Slavic blood.

We speak out against all violence, oppression, and injustice inflicted for decades upon the Arab world by Western powers—today especially by the United States. We consider its interventions—such as the assault on Libya, the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan—as illegitimate and shameful. Long-term sanctions against Muslim countries (such as Iran) constitute a form of aggression and a violation of international norms and human rights, including extrajudicial killings carried out by drones (in Pakistan, Yemen, and elsewhere).

We oppose all Western interference in the affairs of the Islamic world and the imposition of “democracy.”

Thus, we look with unease upon the way America presents itself as a Christian nation, knowing that its actions disgrace its own people and genuine believers among them. No one ever gave that nation a mandate to speak for Christianity—least of all in such a manner.

And just as a true Muslim rejects and distances himself from extremist “jihadists” (and we urge Christians not to equate them), we likewise reject the so-called “Christianity” that has nothing in common with Jesus. We ask Muslims, in turn, to distinguish clearly between nominal Christians and genuine followers of the Way.

True Christians ought to grieve for everything that has been done to Muslims in the name of Christianity and by “Christian” nations, and that is exactly what we are doing here and now by writing this text. We grieve, but we also hope for better times and for reconciliation.

Ishmael and Isaac

Reconciliation through their father's burial (Genesis 25:9)

Although the Bible does not describe their relationship after Hagar and Ishmael left for the wilderness, one passage offers a powerful symbolic message:

Genesis 25:9

“And Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah...”

This means:

- Both sons came together to bury Abraham.
- This is the only biblical meeting of Ishmael and Isaac as adults.
- In Semitic culture, the joint burial of a parent is a strong act of reconciliation, respect, and family unity.

How does tradition describe their relationship?

Jewish and Christian tradition

They hold that Ishmael remained Abraham's beloved son, even though he was not the son of the promise.

Their meeting at the burial is understood as a restoration of family harmony.

Islamic tradition

It does not portray a conflict between Ishmael and Isaac.

It considers both of them righteous, and therefore does not emphasize the idea of division between the brothers.

Yishma'el – “God Has Heard”

Finally, if God loved Ishmael so much that He protected him while he was still in his mother's womb and all the way through the desert and beyond (Genesis 16, 21), what can we, as people of the Book, do?

We can do nothing—and must do nothing—other than imitate the Father. Whoever does not do what the Father does is not His, nor does he know Him. This applies to both sides alike.

More to come...