

## The Perils of Public Scholarship on Islam after 9/11

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the challenges of public scholarship on religion and Islam in the post-9/11 era. The first section, which focuses on Stephen Prothero's introduction of Islam in *God Is Not One*, identifies a worrying trend in public scholarship that (1) confirms policymakers' suspicions about the danger of religion to U.S. interests and (2) buoys popular stereotypes of Islam as violent and intolerant. The second section reflects on the difficulties of explaining Islam within the constraints of popular and media discourses and includes an exploration of the author's public scholarship during the 2010 "Ground Zero Mosque" controversy.

I have been a professor of religious studies since 2000. So, for most of my career, I have taught about religion in time of war. My teaching, both inside the classroom and out, has been shaped, even constrained by the fact that my own country is responsible for much of the war-making. U.S. military interventions have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> I feel a deep personal connection to and a professional stake in the places and people against which my own government has waged war. I feel the costs of war at home, too. The USA PATRIOT Act, extraordinary rendition, the reclassification of U.S. citizens as enemy combatants, and aggressive counter-intelligence have made me afraid of my own government—and even more afraid for people who look like me but have foreign accents and Muslim-sounding names.

I try to teach about religion in a way that challenges this war-making. In doing so, I am inspired by other religious studies scholars who resist war and offer critiques of its causes and effects.<sup>2</sup> I also challenge the arguments of those who blame these wars on religion. In graduate school I used to argue constantly with other historians, urging them to stop treating religion as an epiphenomenon or a superstructure. Now, I argue against any simplistic use of religion to explain human behavior and especially human violence. This reversal in my own thinking is a response largely to the changing political contexts in which I work. In the past decade, my nation's counter-terrorism strategy has been explained, often explicitly, as a necessary struggle against radical Islam.<sup>3</sup> This obsession with Islamic religion as one of the greatest security threats to the contemporary United States obfuscates the role of the nation-state—and in particular, the political, economic, and military dominance of the United States—in producing the conditions that led to 9/11 in the first place. I will not say that religion is used to veil secular power; rather, it is employed in the same way that a magician uses a handkerchief in the art of misdirection. Focusing on religion's complicity in human violence while ignoring or downplaying other causes of violence ultimately shields the secular nation-state from criticism. It creates a form of silence that does not bear witness to my own government's violence.

Of course, most of us will agree that religion can play and has played a role in producing violence. Religion is a resource that can be employed in a variety of human pursuits, including war-making. But religion—whether we define it narrowly or broadly—is never the whole story when it comes to human violence. To attribute violence solely or even primarily to religion is one of the temptations of the post-9/11 religion scholar. Especially when grant dollars and publishing contracts are at stake, it is tempting to emphasize the explanatory power of religion over the role of politics and economics, especially of the world's remaining superpower, in analyzing war.

There is another reason why I worry about emphasizing religion's role over that of politics in creating violence. It is because most Americans think that one religion above all is likely to make human beings more violent than any other. It is Islam. According to a 2011 poll by the Pew Research Center, 70% of Americans surveyed believed that Islam was the most violent religion in the world; for the sake of comparison, 9% thought that Christianity was the most violent religion.<sup>4</sup>

How should religious studies scholars correct such misconceptions about Islam *and* analyze

the activities of Muslims who appeal to their religion in waging war? How do we manage this juggling act while also exposing the role of the secular nation-state in producing violence? In considering these questions below, my focus will be on problematic explanations of Islam's role in making violence. Though I offer a critique of one scholar's complicity in the public misunderstanding of religion and Islam, I do not give simple answers to the problems posed by these questions. Instead, I want to offer a cautionary tale. As part of this story, I will confess my own limitations as a public scholar by narrating my minor role in the so-called Ground Zero mosque controversy of 2010.

### ***Religion Creates Violence?***

Let us start with one of the most prominent examples of public scholarship to hit the bookshelves in recent years, Stephen Prothero's best-selling—*God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World—and Why Their Differences Matter*. *God Is Not One* is a humane and sometimes very funny introduction to world religions, but mostly, it is an example of what *not* to do when writing for a popular audience. According to Prothero, both religious studies scholars and members of the general public have a tendency to avoid the negative aspects of religion. This is wrong, argues Prothero, because religion has done some very evil things. God may not be one, but religion's tendency to produce violence is singular: "In the twenty-first century alone, religion has toppled the Bamiyan statues of the Buddha in Afghanistan and the Twin Towers in New York City. It has stirred up civil war in Sri Lanka and Darfur. And it has resisted coalition troops in Iraq."<sup>5</sup> In addition, "it [religion] gave us the assassinations of Egypt's president Anwar Sadat by Islamic extremists, of Israel's prime minister Yitzhak Rabin by a Jewish gunman, and of India's prime minister Indira Gandhi by Sikh extremists."<sup>6</sup> And that is not all. Religion has been the real force behind much of twentieth-century nationalism: "Religion was behind both the creation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in 1947 and the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, both the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s."<sup>7</sup> In a separate article in the *Wall Street Journal*, Prothero also blamed the phenomenon of Somali piracy not only on greed but also on the example of the Prophet Muhammad, who engaged in bounty raiding.<sup>8</sup>

Honestly, my reactions alternate between laughter and incredulity as I read these claims. Even if I translate and restate the argument as "the humans who were responsible for these activities were motivated primarily by their religious practices and traditions," I cannot accept the claim that religion provides the best explanation of these events. Surely the Reagan Revolution had something to do with race and class as well as religious belief. Despite the presence of some religious nationalists among nineteenth-century Zionists and important battles over the meaning of Zionism, David Ben Gurion and most other founding figures of modern Israel did not forge the state primarily for "religious" reasons; they were largely secularists who believed, with admittedly religious-like enthusiasm, that Jews were a nation in need of their own country.<sup>9</sup> In addition to

religious activists, the coalition behind the Iranian revolution included leftists, merchants, intellectuals, and workers, and their motivations were not primarily “religious.”<sup>10</sup> And al-Qa‘ida brought down the towers *not only* because of their murderous interpretation of Islam *but also* because of their radical political opposition to U.S. hegemony in the Middle East.<sup>11</sup>

Prothero’s explanation of religion’s role in public life is too simplistic; it obscures human complexity. It is the mirror image of a similar tendency to see religion only as superstructure or neurosis, the effect of some deeper cause. But instead of reducing human behavior solely to class or psychology or gender, it uses religion. Instead of explaining historical events citing multiple causes and precursors, this approach focuses on one kind of data and reads those facts through one kind of lens. If you wish to understand the behavior of human beings, Prothero argues, you need to study the history of their religions. It is their religious traditions that explain why they do what they do—whether they are humanitarians or pirates.

Prothero’s framing of religion as a main factor motivating both the constructive and destructive sides of human nature is not an isolated phenomenon. The focus on religion as a primary motivator of human violence is a key trope in religious studies. William T. Cavanaugh calls this trope the “myth of religious violence,” which is also the title of his book on the subject.<sup>12</sup> Part of modern Western societies more generally, Cavanaugh argues, the myth identifies religion as an especially dangerous and inherently violent component of human life in contradistinction to the secular nation-state, whose violence is seen as normal, redemptive, and even praiseworthy. Cavanaugh’s point is not to defend religion—or particular religious communities—against the claims that they promote violence. It is rather to show the incoherence of arguments that analyze human violence under the rubric of “religion” while downplaying “secular” categories such as politics and economics. Cavanaugh critiques the contemporary work of religion and violence scholars such as Mark Juergensmeyer, David Rapoport, and R. Scott Appleby, arguing that they fail to define “religion” as a coherent category of analysis. He then explores the origins of the myth of religious violence, which he argues was a central ideology in the formation of Euro-American nation-states. Cavanaugh asserts that Enlightenment liberal fears about religion and its power to stir emotions helped to justify the secular state’s monopoly on legitimate violence. To die for one’s religion was folly, but to die for one’s country was divine.

Finally, Cavanaugh scrutinizes the consequences of the myth of religious violence in domestic U.S. politics, especially in war-making against Muslims abroad. Cavanaugh shows how such arguments have been cited by policy makers, especially former Vice President Dick Cheney, to justify military actions against Muslims and concludes that “the logic is impeccable: if we are dealing with inherently violent and irrational social orders, there is not much hope of reasoning with them. We must be prepared to use military force.”<sup>13</sup> Cavanaugh also demonstrates how such logic can be derived from popular writings by Bernard Lewis, Charles Kimball, Paul Berman, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris.

Cavanaugh’s critique of these popular writers can be applied as well to Stephen Prothero’s

account of Islam in *God Is Not One*. Prothero declares Islam to be the most influential religion in the world right now, arguing that it is critical to understand Islam in order to understand contemporary conflict. Why? Because Islam seems to make Muslims behave in a certain way, according to Prothero. He explains that “Muslims. . . have never accepted” a distinction between private and public life. “Most see Islam as both a religion and a way of life,” he claims.<sup>14</sup> While many Muslim activists continue to repeat this old, essentialist saw, the same activists deeply disagree about what, in practice, it means to have an “Islamic” state. There is no one model, as one can see clearly by comparing the self-identified Islamic nations of Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, by declaring that Muslims have “never” countenanced a distinction between private and public life, Prothero takes sides in the ongoing debates among Muslims about the proper relationship between the private and public spheres. For some contemporary Muslims, there has been and should be a traditional distinction between religion and politics.<sup>16</sup>

Prothero also mischaracterizes the relationship of shari‘a, or Islamic law and ethics, to Sufism. After declaring that Islam is predominantly a legalistic religion, he adds that Sufis have insisted on seeing Islam as the path toward a more intimate, spiritual relationship with God. One might get the impression from this introduction to Islam that Sufism is a relatively unimportant part of Islamic tradition, while the essence of Islam is to be found in the shari‘a. In reality, the history of Islam has been characterized by the marriage of mainstream Sufism and shari‘a. In the middle period of Islam, various parts of the shari‘a—for example, instructions on how to pray—may have affected a significant portion of Muslim populations while other aspects of Islamic jurisprudence, especially the more arcane points debated by the ‘ulama, or “law professors,” might matter little to people’s everyday lives. Most medieval Muslims in Afro-Eurasia could neither read nor write. For many of them, and many literate people, too, the heart of Islam was expressed in religious traditions such as ritual celebrations and life passages, the visitation of shrines and other holy places, and the use of amulets and other forms of material religious culture. Today many shari‘a-minded Muslims find parts of these traditions—for example, the belief that saints can intercede on behalf of humans—to be un-Islamic and superstitious; in medieval times, however, a majority of Muslims saw such beliefs as thoroughly normative, or “shari‘a compliant,” as one might say.

The chapter is full of similar disappointments. Prothero ignores the ways that Muslims have read and debated the Qur’an. Instead, he devotes significant space to his own personal interpretations of an English translation of the Qur’an. Since qur’anic Arabic can be translated in a variety of ways, one must at least compare different English translations to get a broader sense of the possible meanings of various verses; any scholar of religion who is not an expert in the Qur’an should consult how experts have interpreted various passages under consideration. But much more than that, one must understand that the Qur’an, the Recitation, is, technically speaking, different from a *mashaf*, or written volume, of the Qur’an. Muslims experience the Qur’an as oral performance, ritual object, and aural meditation as much as it is a series of ethical and legal guidelines.

Prothero’s chapter often adopts a particular modern, Sunni reformist, and middle-class view

of Islam. He also advances the Sunni argument—without telling us he is doing so—on how many times a Muslim should pray per day and how a Muslim should calculate zakat, or alms. He claims that “Islamic art has centered on calligraphy,” forgetting about Persian miniatures, metalwork, textiles, architecture, ceramics, illustrated manuscripts, and other forms of figurative art in Islam. We also are told that “more than any other religion Islam emphasizes life after death.”<sup>17</sup> No wonder they have so many suicide bombers, a reader might be tempted to conclude.

Then Prothero defines Islamism as “a radical form of politicized Islam that took the martyr tradition developed by Jews and adapted by Christians in a deadly new direction.”<sup>18</sup> This is a glaring error—no major scholar of Islamism has defined it in this way. Islamism, in almost everyone’s definition, is the idea that Islam should play a role in politics.<sup>19</sup> It is not a “radical form of politicized Islam,” it *is* “politicized Islam.” And it is espoused by the majority of Muslims abroad. According to a report of the Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project released on December 2, 2010, 91% of Muslims surveyed in Indonesia and 85% of Muslims surveyed in Egypt say that Islam’s prominent role in politics is “a good thing.” In addition, 65% of the Indonesian respondents and 59% of the Egyptian respondents, said that they prefer democracy over any other form of government, indicating that there is no necessary contradiction in their minds between Islam and democracy.<sup>20</sup> This is hardly radical. Prothero seems not to realize that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the leader of Turkey’s most popular political party, is an Islamist. As the recent revolution in Egypt conclusively demonstrates, devout Islamists, whether Muslim Brothers or Salafis, are anxious to participate in social change through nonviolent and democratic means.

The portrait of Islam that Prothero renders is one that largely confirms what many popular writers and policy makers already “know” about Islam: it is powerful and potentially dangerous, except for the progressives and the Sufis—who are introspective, non-violent, and innocuous to the national interests of the United States. It is also a tradition that seems to exist outside of time and place. Prothero completely ignores how colonialism, nationalism, and globalization have shaped Muslim responses to modern life, cloaking the messy stuff of modern Islam behind timeless and unchanging Islamic traditions.

### ***Explaining Islam to the Public***

Stephen Prothero’s challenge—to present religion, particularly Islam, in an accurate and intelligible way to the public—is probably one that many teachers of religious studies have faced at one point or another after 9/11. But perhaps no group of scholars has had as much at stake in the public understanding of religion of late as Islamic studies specialists. The attacks of 9/11 indirectly created opportunities for career advancement for Islam specialists. Though the number of positions for scholars of Islam advertised through the American Academy of Religion (AAR), North America’s largest “trade organization” for religious studies scholars, increased only modestly from 61 between 1996 and 2001 to 74 between 2002 and 2007 (see Appendix), Islamic studies scholars

found new funding sources through both the government and private foundations, and they scored higher publication rates in journals of record.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, all the new public attention resulted in attacks against Islamicists by the general public, and perhaps more alarmingly, systematic campaigns, led by groups such as Campus Watch, to deny tenure to scholars of Islam. In addition, foreign scholars such as Tariq Ramadan were prevented by the U.S. government from even attending the meetings of the AAR, which subsequently sued over the matter.

The expectation that Islamic studies scholars were prepared to “cover” the Islamic tradition and speak to its beliefs and practices on a normative, global basis was stressful for many of us. The idea that we could speak with authority about a religion that has had adherents for the last 1,400 years and the practices of 1.4 billion people who speak dozens of languages is absurd, of course. Like other academics, Islamic studies scholars are trained in certain fields of knowledge; in the best programs, they are trained to be exceedingly careful about claiming too much. The pressures to become the academic voice of Islam both on campus and in the media frequently led scholars to abandon caution. We reached for our copies of the *Encyclopedia of Islam* and sent out queries, sometimes quite urgent, to the AAR Study of Islam listserv. “What does Islam say about x?” was the way questions often were framed. We were not allowed to answer, “It depends.” What generally was desired, it seems, was a fatwa, an authoritative ruling on what the Qur’an, the Sunna, and the ‘ulama say about “x,” not a lecture on how the historical practices of real people refuse easy generalizations.

The pressure to come up with one-liners and sound-bites was particularly acute when Islamic studies scholars were asked or permitted to participate in media outlets. Here the line between professor of Islamic studies and practitioner of Islam often was blurred, as Muslim professors offered answers that reflected not only their considerable knowledge of the topic but also their personal opinion or practice of Islam. Not all of them did so, of course, but autobiography was one strategy for dealing with questions about Islam’s position on x or y. At the least these scholars could answer questions about what Islam says about love, war, life, and death by giving their own views as Muslims. It was as good as any other way of trying to answer impossible questions. But explaining one’s personal beliefs and practices was not a viable strategy for non-Muslims. In both cases, Muslim and non-Muslim scholars were forced to develop strategies or simply improvise to deal with questions about veils, terrorism, churches in Saudi Arabia, Ibn Taymiyya, and a whole host of topics that were bubbling up, especially among anti-Muslim hate groups and in online forums.

My opportunity to participate in national debates over these questions came with the Ground Zero mosque controversy in the summer and fall of 2010. This controversy took the spotlight away from Islam abroad and shone it on Muslim Americans. Like many other Americans, I was angered by the intolerant tone of the debate. I was especially maddened by the idea that building a Muslim community center near Ground Zero would be insensitive to the hallowed ground of the 9/11 attacks. I did not like the conflation of the 9/11 hijackers with the Muslims of lower Manhattan and one of their leaders, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, one of the most prominent proponents of interfaith

dialogue in New York City. I decided I had to do something.

So, I wrote an op-ed.

Rather than discuss issues of freedom of religion or the politics of contemporary Islamophobia, I wanted to stress the idea that Muslims have lived and worshiped in lower Manhattan since the Dutch first arrived in the New World. I do not know, in the end, if shedding light on Muslim contributions to the history of the United States helps to reduce contemporary prejudice against Muslim Americans or Muslims more generally, but if I am to participate in public scholarship, this is one area in which I can do so with intellectual integrity. Even if history is boring to a lot of folks, as some people have admitted gingerly in response to my speeches about Muslim American history, I also know that this is a novel approach to Islam in America—I still frequently hear “I didn’t know that,” “wow,” and “gosh” in both public and academic forums when I outline the imprint of Muslims on the thirteen colonies and the United States.

The editorial that I penned included descriptions of the enslaved Muslims who lived and worked either on or just blocks away from the Ground Zero site when New York was still New Amsterdam. It mentioned the escape of Muslim slave Mahommah Baquaqua from a Brazilian ship on Manhattan’s docks. It reminded New Yorkers of the Arab American Muslims who lived in the very neighborhood where the twin towers eventually were built. I sent it to a few papers and heard back from the *New York Daily News*—to be sure, not the *New York Times*, but still, a New York daily with a circulation in the hundreds of thousands. The editor did not think he could run it, but he did ask if I had references for all of my claims. Yes, I told him, I did, and I sent him a very long list of peer-reviewed references. The take-home line of the piece was, “It may be a strange, even perverse fact of history, but Islam in New York began on or near Ground Zero.”

The first draft that I sent to the *Daily News* was informational. It largely avoided direct criticism of the anti-Muslim activists who opposed the building of the community center. My goal was to make it impossible to talk about Muslims as new or foreign, thinking perhaps that if Americans thought of Muslims as part of their shared past, they would be less inclined to perceive them as threatening. But my editor encouraged me to take a stronger stand and to criticize the Islamophobia that animated much of the opposition to the community center.

Thus my third draft used the word “troubling” to describe how politicians had exploited the pain of 9/11 victims to advance their own anti-Muslim agendas. I even used the word “lie” to label the argument that the community center would be a “9/11 victory mosque.” But this still was not enough for the editor, who wrote and added the following lines himself: “Comments by [Governatorial candidate Rick] Lazio and [Sarah] Palin are mere drops in an ocean of right-wing vitriol over this issue.” The editor also made this sentence more pointed: “Rhetoric that treats Muslim Americans like hostile foreigners fundamentally—and intentionally—skews the story of New York and its Muslim community.”

My reaction to these edits was, “Yes! Exactly! But ... I did not know that I was allowed to write that way.” My first draft, which attempted to report the long history of Muslims in Manhattan



as an antidote to Islamophobia, assumed that the reader would understand my larger purpose. I was writing history without explaining why I thought that it was so urgent to expose this history, and I had forgotten that I was writing for an editorial page. It was a form of self-censorship. In order to find a publisher, I unconsciously had written in the dispassionate tone of the so-called objective academic, trying to avoid the expression of my own feelings. I never expected that an editor for the *New York Daily News* would help me find my voice, but he did, and he made the op-ed better as a result.<sup>22</sup>

But if working with the *Daily News* helped me to find my voice, my next experience with a major media outlet, the *Washington Post*, was a different story. In this case, I lost my voice, or at least a part of it. The *Post* contacted me to become a one-time contributor to a regular feature of the “Sunday Outlook” section called “Five Myths.” They wanted me to identify and then correct five myths about mosques in the United States. I pointed out that religious studies scholars use the word myth to mean more than misconception, but they responded that that was just the name of the feature. I accepted their offer and submitted the five myths that I wanted to correct.

One myth was that “all Muslims pray in mosques.” I hoped to point out that Muslims also pray in private homes, Sufi lodges, Shi‘a imambargahs, Isma‘ili jamatkhans, and Nation of Islam temples. There was too much focus on mosques, I thought, and not enough on other Muslim American sacred spaces. But this suggestion was rejected on the grounds that it was “interesting, but maybe not worth devoting a full myth to.” In its place, a new myth was suggested by the editors: “Mosques seek to spread shari‘a law in the United States.” One editor wrote that “this one has been coming up so much in conversation... in particular, people have been raising the status of women under shari‘a law.” I went to work correcting the five myths—in 1200 words or less.

I responded to the myth about shari‘a by writing that shari‘a is an ideal, that it is not codified, and that the human attempt to realize this ideal is called “fiqh,” or jurisprudence. I said that most contemporary mosques do not actually teach the shari‘a because it is too dry, pedantic, and arcane. I stressed that mosques devote their weekend classes instead to discussions of the Qur’an and the Sunna and how they apply to everyday life.

But my answer had sidestepped the question. In retrospect I realized that I was trying to respond to the negative feelings of Americans toward shari‘a by downplaying its importance in American mosques. I did not want to leave people with the idea that lots of Muslims were busy learning when and how to take the law into their own hands and apply hudud penalties such as the stoning of adulterers. Working on a deadline and with space for two paragraphs or so, perhaps this was the best I could come up with that day. I was much more pleased with the other parts of the piece, but I had to move on.

In any case, it did not seem to hurt the piece’s reception. Whereas the *Daily News* op-ed about the history of Muslims in Manhattan received about 500 likes on Facebook and a few dozen comments, this piece received 4,000 likes on Facebook and 523 comments.<sup>23</sup> It was syndicated in papers around the world, and more people read this short piece than anything else I have ever writ-

ten. It led to two subsequent interviews on NPR's *Weekend Edition* and *Tell Me More* with Michel Martin; a harrowing call-in show on a Pittsburg Fox radio affiliate (during which my wife almost took the phone away from me to tell off some callers); several speaking engagements; some severe criticism by *Stop Islamization of America* leader and professional Islamophobe Robert Spencer; and some very angry emails. I got a lot of compliments, too. All of this attention and feedback made me nervous, excited, and scared.

I also received an e-mail from a colleague who wanted to quibble about my claims regarding the teaching of shari'a in American mosques. Yes, he said, I was technically right that the whole shari'a is not taught in mosques. That would be impossible. But some of it is, he said. That's how Muslims know when and how to pray, how to observe Muslim holidays, how much money to give to charity, etc.

He was right. My answer had not been wrong exactly, but my response to the question was not sufficient. In addition, it did not respond explicitly to the public's biggest fears, for instance, about the cutting off of hands and stoning. When a Middle East studies newsletter asked for permission to reprint the piece, I kept some of my original answer but added the following: "most mosques in the United States teach only those parts of the shari'a having to do with religious rituals and obligations. They do not teach the part of the shari'a having to do with criminal law." And further: "Few Muslim Americans advocate a shari'a-based theocracy. Instead, most Muslim Americans insist that democracy is the most Islamic system of governance in the world today."

During the brief course of my five minutes of high-profile public scholarship I came to realize just how difficult such work is. Many of the topics about which I was asked and the ways that I could write about them seemed to be determined ahead of time; I felt like I was making an appearance in a largely pre-written script. Responding to the public's misconceptions about Islam is part of what we do. But if we cannot question the assumptions on which questions are posed, we cease to be critics. We must retain the ability to ask questions as well as to answer them. The problem with my *Washington Post* piece was that I did not name explicitly the prejudice that was animating the question about the shari'a in the first place. Talk of anti-shari'a legislation proliferates in over twenty states, demonstrating that there is a special animus on the part of millions of Americans toward shari'a, which is viewed, like Islam more generally, as particularly dangerous to the American way of life.

As I reflect on my moment of high-profile public scholarship and on teaching religion more generally, I want to conclude with three further responses to the "myth" that "mosques seek to spread shari'a law." First, perhaps my response to the myth should have been: "Yeah, but so what?" Most American religious organizations seek to educate others about their ethics and rituals, and that is exactly what most of the shari'a taught in American mosques is all about. Second, most Muslim American are not "spreading" shari'a. Those Muslims for whom the shari'a is meaningful are trying to figure out how to apply in their own lives.<sup>24</sup>

The final point I should have made is that public discussions about shari'a and other aspects of

Islam inevitably are influenced by and reflect anxieties about the nation's war-making in Muslim lands. It is far easier to project blame onto the Muslim foreigner abroad or the Muslim other in our midst than it is to acknowledge and reflect on American culpability for the deaths of thousands. To be sure, foreign Muslims who resist U.S. dominance in their own countries utilize their religious traditions in so doing. But analyzing this religious violence in isolation from U.S. foreign policy, economic dominance, and military interventionism renders us mute as critics of our own society and serves—however inadvertently—to normalize the secular nation-state's monopoly on legitimate violence. There *is* a clash of interests between the U.S. and those whose lives it seeks to shape, often in its own image. But this story does not begin in Mecca; it begins mostly in Washington. Middle Easterners, including Osama bin Laden, were not fantasizing when they saw the U.S. establish military bases in the Gulf region, restore the Kuwaiti emirate to power in 1991, intervene on behalf of both the Iraqis and Iranians in the Iraq-Iran war, shell Lebanon in the 1980s, and the list goes on. This is not primarily a story about religious fanaticism, but a story about secular, imperial power.

It may be tempting for religious studies scholars to take advantage of this historical moment by deploying one-dimensional explanations of religion to justify our own usefulness to the academy and to the nation. But even if we have to admit our ignorance or just say that it is complicated, it is better to resist further propagating or reinforcing simplistic conceptions of Islam, or of religion in general. Instead, we should spend more time exposing the political contexts in which popular understandings of Islam and religion are generated, disseminated, and used. And if we must produce an overly simplistic sound-bite about Islam's role in making violence for the media, then let it be this: "Islam is not the cause of violence, but it does offer one means of resistance to U.S. political, military, and economic domination in Muslim lands."

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**Appendix**

Islamic Studies Jobs Advertised through the American Academy of Religion; Ratio of Candidates to Number of Positions

|       | Candidates | Positions |
|-------|------------|-----------|
| 1996: | 8          | 12        |
| 1997: | 17         | 15        |
| 1998: | 12         | 4         |
| 1999: | 16         | 11        |
| 2000: | 14         | 10        |
| 2001: | 19         | 9         |
| 2002: | 11         | 14        |
| 2003: | 8          | 7         |
| 2004: | 7          | 9         |
| 2005: | 25         | 13        |
| 2006: | 26         | 14        |
| 2007: | 23         | 17        |

[Based on data from the American Academy of Religion as reported in *Religious Studies News* 18, no. 2 (March 2003): 7; 20, no. 1 (January 2005): 28; 21, no. 1 (January 2006): 39; and 23, no. 2 (March 2008): 24.]

*(Endnotes)*

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "Why They Hate Us (II)," *Foreign Policy*, November 30, 2009, [http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/11/30/why\\_they\\_hate\\_us\\_ii\\_how\\_many\\_muslims\\_has\\_the\\_us\\_killed\\_in\\_the\\_past\\_30\\_years](http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/11/30/why_they_hate_us_ii_how_many_muslims_has_the_us_killed_in_the_past_30_years) (accessed February 2, 2012).

2 See, for example, Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

3 National security strategy in the Bush administration included fighting against “the emergence of violent Islamic radicalization” and defeating “homegrown extremism.” See Homeland Security Council, “National Strategy for Homeland Security,” October 2007 <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/homeland/nshs/NSHS.pdf>> (accessed November 7, 2007). In a similar way, the Obama administration’s struggle against “violent extremism” has targeted Islamic radicalism. See “Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States,” <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/sip-final.pdf>> (accessed December 15, 2011).

4 Pew Research Center, “Muslim-Western Tensions Persist,” <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/07/21/chapter-2-how-muslims-and-westerners-view-each-other/>, (accessed February 2, 2012).

5 Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World—And Why Their Differences Matter* (New York: Harper One, 2010), 8.

6 *Ibid.*, 9.

7 *Ibid.*, 10.

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