THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH ABOUT ISLAM

A Christian Pastor Separates Fact from Fiction

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INTRODUCTION

WHILE WRITING THIS BOOK I HAVE ATTEMPTED TO CAPTURE something of the spirit of my late aunt Donnabelle Mullenger, my mother's eldest sister, who was born in 1921 in the quintessential small town of Dennison, Iowa, and who, in a subtle but culturally significant way, stood up to and confronted America's irrational, Cold-War-era fear of communism.

After graduating from Dennison High School in 1938, my beautiful and talented aunt moved to Los Angeles, where she lived with my great-aunt Mildred and studied at Los Angeles City College. During her second year of studies she was crowned Campus Queen, her picture appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, and all the right people noticed her. Before long she signed a contract with MGM. That contract and her subsequent work at MGM made her a star, but at the cost of her name. Mullenger sounded too German; Donnabelle sounded too much like the name of someone from a small

town in western Iowa—which, of course, she was. Without consulting her, the studio bosses gave her a new identity: my aunt Donnabelle would, for the rest of her life, be known to the world as Donna Reed.

Aunt Donna had a successful career in film. In an era when the worth of a female actor was often measured by the men with whom she was cast, Aunt Donna starred opposite some of Hollywood's biggest leading men, including John Wayne, Rock Hudson, Mickey Rooney, Steve Allen, and most famously, Jimmy Stewart in the iconic holiday film *It's a Wonderful Life*. As Frank Sinatra's love interest in *From Here to Eternity*, she played a woman of ill repute and won an Academy Award.

Her greatest success, however, was not in film but on television as the star and uncredited coproducer of *The Donna Reed Show*. Officially, the producer of *The Donna Reed Show* was Tony Owen, who at the time was also Aunt Donna's husband. It was a joint effort, however, with Tony working the business end of production while Donna was in charge of everything creative and artistic. This is how my aunt was able—quietly, but with a strong maternal vibe—to reject America's fear of communism and stand up to the nation's most powerful purveyors of that fear.

During the 1950s Hollywood was a hard place to be if your politics happened to lean to the left. Anticommunist fervor swept the nation in the wake of World War II, and in what amounted to government-sponsored witch hunts, both houses of Congress conducted investigations and held hearings in an attempt to ferret out communists and their sympathizers, particularly those holding government jobs and those in positions to influence American culture through entertainment and the arts. During this time, which often

is called the McCarthy era (so named for Senator Joseph McCarthy, a leader in the anticommunist movement), those in Hollywood who were deemed communist or communist-leaning were blacklisted, unable to work in film or television.

In 1960 my Aunt Donna helped bring the McCarthy era to an end by hiring blacklisted writers to work on *The Donna Reed Show*. It was a bold move. Not only was she risking her career, but she also was allowing suspected communists—the people Americans feared most—to write scripts for a television show that, for better or for worse, would shape, for generations, American ideas about what motherhood and family life should look like. She did not just give jobs to a few (real or suspected, current or former) communists; my Aunt Donna essentially invited the communists into the living rooms of millions of Americans each week for more than a decade. America survived. So did motherhood and the family. As far as I know, *The Donna Reed Show* inspired exactly no one to join the Communist Party. My aunt's instincts were vindicated: Americans really didn't need to be so afraid.[1]

LATTER-DAY MCCARTHYISM

There are significant analogues between the American fear of communism during the McCarthy era and the American fear of Islam at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The fear of communism and the fear of Islam are similar in that Americans have understood both to pose an existential threat to the United States. Congressional committees have held hearings to scrutinize both communists and Muslims, and Americans have been willing to abdicate civil liberties in the fight against the perceived threats of both communism and Islam.

Nowhere is the general American fear of Islam brought into clearer focus than in presidential politics since the ascendance of Barack Hussein Obama. Google "Muslim" and "Barack Hussein Obama," for example, and you will find a long list of Web sites that, with equal measures of alarm and certitude, proclaim that the forty-fourth president of the United States is a Muslim. It doesn't really matter that Barack Obama self-identifies as a Christian. Nor does it matter that even if Mr. Obama were a Muslim, nothing in the United States Constitution would prevent him from serving in the nation's highest office. The president, according to these Web sites, is a Muslim because he has Muslim relatives and a Muslim-sounding name; therefore he is a threat to America.[2]

As the 2012 presidential election heated up, a general fear of Islam showed no signs of abating. On June 13, 2011, at a debate for Republican presidential hopefuls, candidates addressed the question of whether or not Muslims are fit to hold cabinet-level positions in the executive branch. Republican contender and former Godfather's Pizza CEO Herman Cain, to enthusiastic applause, responded by saying he would have to think long and hard about appointing a Muslim to a position in his administration. "I would not be comfortable because you have peaceful Muslims and then you have militant Muslims—those that are trying to kill us." He went on to sound an alarm about Muslim law, sharia, being adjudicated in American courtrooms. "I don't believe in sharia law in American courts," Cain said. "I believe in American laws in American courts, period. There have been instances in New Jersey, for example, and there was an instance in Oklahoma, where Muslims did try to influence court decisions with sharia law. I was simply saying, very emphatically, American laws in American courts."[3]

Mitt Romney, the former Massachusetts governor and eventual Republican nominee, who as a Mormon is affiliated with an oft-maligned and usually misunderstood religious tradition, responded reassuringly, "Of course, we're not going to have sharia law applied in U.S. courts. That's never going to happen. We have a constitution, and we follow the law." He went on to sound a note of inclusion: "We recognize that people of all faiths are welcome in this country. Our nation was founded on a principle of religious tolerance. That's in fact why some of the earliest patriots came to this country and why we treat people with respect, regardless of their religious persuasion."[4]

It was a short-lived moment of goodwill. Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, another aspirant vying for the Republican nomination, was quick to restore and exacerbate the paranoia inherent in Herman Cain's initial response. "Now, I just want to go out on a limb here," Gingrich said. "I'm in favor of saying to people, 'If you're not prepared to be loyal to the United States, you will not serve in my administration, period.' We did this in dealing with the Nazis, and we did this in dealing with the Communists, and it was controversial both times, and both times we discovered, after a while, there are some genuinely bad people who would like to infiltrate our country. And we have got to have the guts to stand up and say no." Gingrich's comments on Islam were among the most enthusiastically-applauded responses during the debate.[5]

CONFRONTING POPULAR MISCONCEPTIONS

If we were to ask Mr. Cain or Mr. Gingrich why they fear Muslims, the two men might respond that Islam is "a

religion of violence." At first blush that answer, however ill-informed, might seem plausible. After all, in the twenty years preceding the publication of this book, militant Muslims committed some heinous acts of terrorism. Upon further examination, however, the idea that all Muslims should be feared because Islam is violent is flawed logic. While it is true that violence is, at times, perpetrated in the name of Islam, non-Muslims are violent and engage in acts of terrorism as well, yet the world's non-Muslim majority is not equally offended when non-Muslims are violent. For example, when Roman Catholics plant pipe bombs in Ireland, or evangelical Protestants murder abortion providers and destroy their clinics, Christianity does not become the focus of our fear. When Jewish settlers in the West Bank attack their Palestinian neighbors, building on their land and uprooting their olive groves, we don't fear that Jewish violence will spread beyond the Holy Land. We don't fear all Hindus for the militant extremism practiced by a radicalized few, nor do the repressions of Buddhist governments in Sri Lanka and Myanmar invoke widespread fear of Buddhism.

We do, however, fear Islam. I think the first and most important reason for our fear is archetypal. As I did research for this book, I discovered that non-Muslims—particularly European non-Muslims and their progeny in the New World—have been afraid of Muslims for centuries. The fear probably is rooted in the threat Europeans felt as the empire of the Muslim caliphs began to creep north and west into Europe from the seventh century to the eleventh, and certainly the European fear of Islam both inspired and was reaffirmed by the Crusades, the so-called reconquest[6] of Spain, and later European

conflicts with the Ottoman Empire. For Americans, fear of and conflict with Islam and Muslims is almost exactly as old as our country itself. The United States' first war after gaining freedom from England was against Muslim pirates from North Africa and the states who sponsored their acts of terror, and our fear of Islam has never really departed from us.

Since the fall of communism and the First Gulf War, and especially since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, writers and bloggers such as Pamela Geller, Daniel Pipes, Robert Spencer, Steven Emerson, Michelle Malkin, and David Horowitz—to say nothing of media personalities such as Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh—have discovered that there is good money to be made and lots of attention to be grabbed in the fear-purveying industry. Bowing to Mammon, they have stoked this historic and inchoate fear of Islam through demagoguery in the public square, and the results have been tragic.

On July 22, 2011, the day I finished writing the first draft of the manuscript for this book, a Norwegian man by the name of Anders Behring Breivik, after killing eight people with a bomb planted in downtown Oslo, attacked and murdered sixty-nine people attending a youth camp affiliated with Norway's left-leaning Labor Party. Before carrying out his attacks, Breivik wrote a tome of considerable length that credited Robert Spencer as an inspiration for his rampage.[7] Breivik also had a fondness for Daniel Pipes,[8] Pamela Geller,[9] and many of the other promoters of Islamophobia I have written about in this book. Such writers and thinkers claim to offer a cure for the encroachment of Islam into Europe and North America. It is a treatment for a nonexistent ailment; it is medicine that kills.

THE ILLUSION OF BALANCE

"But aren't you going to write about Muslim terrorists, anti-Semites, and woman-haters so that your book will be balanced?" Over the course of this project, friends and acquaintances who are disappointed to hear that I am writing a book that is Islam-friendly have asked me this question with a regularity that I found surprising and a little bit disturbing.

The short answer to the question is "no." I'm inclined to say that I'm not particularly interested in balance. I have an agenda. I want to soothe the anxieties and calm the fears around Islam that afflict so many of my non-Muslim friends and neighbors. But a more reflective response to the issue of balance must ask if an in-depth exploration of Islamic terrorism alongside an equal measure of ink dedicated to descriptions of peaceable and neighborly Muslims would, in fact, be balanced. It is a question of fulcrums. Despite the considerable havoc violent extremists have wreaked in the name of Islam, the number of such extremists is negligible in comparison to the population of Muslims worldwide. In order to create a "balance" between extremists and the rest of Islam, the fulcrum must be moved ridiculously far to one side. Such attempts at "balance" serve to distort rather than to clarify our understanding of Islam.

What I can say is that the following chapters present a balanced portrayal of Islam as I have encountered it in the Muslims I know. More important, I have endeavored to write this book honestly—to say what is true. My desire is to be judged on my attempts at truth-telling rather than by elusive standards of balance. It is clear to me that America needs more Donna Reeds, wise individuals willing to risk

their reputations to calm our fears relative to Islam and its adherents. Unlike my famous aunt, I don't have a television show that can be used in the effort to overcome fear. I do, however, have a pulpit. I am a pastor who wants Christians everywhere to remember the words of Jesus, who promised us that when we know the truth, the truth will set us free.[10] My prayer is that the search for truth presented in these pages will bring freedom to those in bondage to a fear of Islam.

This book, written in the family tradition of confronting fear, is dedicated to my children, and I offer it to you in the hope that the people you meet in these pages, and the presentation of Islam you encounter in these chapters, will alleviate any fear that afflicts you and creates enmity between you and your Muslim neighbors, friends, and family members.

Part 1

The Keys to the Kingdom

Basics: What Is Islam?

It seems logical that a book on Islam for a non-Muslim audience should begin with some basic information that takes no prior knowledge of Islam for granted, and the most basic information involves the definition of terms. Each of the five main sections of this book begins with a "basics" interlude that addresses one of the key questions about the religion of Islam.

Islam—an Arabic word that derives from a root that can mean "peace" or "submission"—is a religion that is monotheistic (affirming a belief in one God) and Abrahamic (understanding that one God to be the same God worshiped by Jews and Christians). A Muslim is someone who practices Islam; the word "Muslim" is derived from the same

root as "Islam" and means "one who submits" or "one who makes peace."

Muslims believe that the angel Gabriel appeared outside the city of Mecca to a prophet named Muhammad in the seventh century of the Common Era and, over the course of several years, revealed to Muhammad a new way of knowing and serving God. Muhammad memorized the words of the angel and repeated them to his friends, who transcribed them, preserving them for future generations in the form of Islam's holy book, the Qur'an.[1] "Qur'an" means "recitation."

In addition to the Qur'an, which is the most important source of religious inspiration for Muslims (see "Basics: What Is the Qur'an?" in part 4 of this book), Islamic faith and practice are also formed by the traditions (hadith, in Arabic) that remember the life and sayings of the Prophet. One such tradition records a conversation between Muhammad and the angel Gabriel, in which the Prophet and the heavenly being enumerate Islam's core doctrines:

- A belief in one God. This is probably the most important of Muslim beliefs: rigid monotheism distinguishes Islam from Christian Trinitarian beliefs about God and from the polytheism practiced on the Arabian Peninsula before the emergence of Islam.
- A belief in the angels of God (this belief is necessary for a religion whose holy book was revealed by an angel).
- A respect for other holy books of Western religions. Muslims believe the Qur'an is unique in its revelation of God, but they also honor the Jewish and Christian Bibles.

- A belief in the prophets of God. Muslims view Muhammad as the last and greatest of the prophets, but they also revere the prophets of the Jewish and Christian traditions, including Jesus, whom Muslims hold in high esteem.
- A belief in the judgment day and in the afterlife.
- A belief in divine sovereignty.[2]

Of course, Islam is much more than a simple list of affirmations, just as Christian belief is much more than what is contained in the Nicene Creed. Although that creed is affirmed by all Christians, it does nothing to explain Byzantine architecture, John Calvin's views on predestination, or the Pope's red shoes.

As with Christianity, in Islam there are various divisions, traditions, denominations, and schools of thought. While the two largest divisions of Islam—the Shiite and Sunni branches of the faith—date back to conflicts that occurred during Islam's earliest years (see chap. 5), other traditions, denominations, and schools of thought have arisen in the various historical, cultural, political, and social contexts in which Muslims have lived.

Chapter 1

THE CITY OF GOD

Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God;
He whose word cannot be broken
Formed thee for his blessed abode.

John Newton[1]

Jerusalem. Al-Quds. The Navel of the World. The very footstool of God. I arrived in this holy city through the well-ordered, rush-hour gridlock of the Jewish neighborhoods that lie to the west of what certainly must be the world's most beloved and disputed bit of real estate. As my journey continued, Western-style commuting gave way to chaotic third-world traffic patterns in the Arab neighborhoods in the eastern part of the city, where I found my hotel on the Mount of Olives.

It was dark when I arrived. I ate a meal of lamb kebabs accompanied by pita bread with seven different dips and fell

asleep to the pulsating dance music of an Arab wedding. I was a long way from my home in northern California.

In the morning I looked out my window and found myself at the hub of Abrahamic spirituality, the intersection of the religious traditions whose followers the Muslims call "People of the Book." My hotel was perched atop the Mount of Olives, just up the hill from the Garden of Gethsemane, and just down the street from a Jewish settlement. My window looked directly over an olive grove that separates the hotel from a Carmelite convent. Across the street was an ancient Jewish cemetery.

As the sun rose over the monastery steeple, it gave the Crusader-built walls of Jerusalem's Old City a rosy hue, which faded to grey as the sun climbed higher, dispersing the shadows that covered the Kidron Valley and the cemetery established by the great Muslim leader Saladin. Three religions tell me that if the world had come to an end during my stay, I would have a front-row seat from which to witness the apocalypse. That is why so many people—Jews, Muslims, and a few Christians (most notably, according to tradition, the Blessed Virgin herself)—are buried nearby: when God returns to collect his own from among the faithfully departed, it's good to be first in line.

Bells rang, announcing prime. Young men from the nearby settlement walked past the hotel on their way to pray among the tombs of their ancestors, facing the Temple Mount, which is called Haram al-Sharif (or, the Noble Sanctuary) by those who have controlled it since the end of the Crusades (and for several centuries before the Crusades as well). The Temple Mount is an outcropping of rock that once was home to the Jewish temple, and some say will be again in the fullness of time. There, according to Jewish and

Christian tradition, Abraham made his aborted attempt to sacrifice Isaac, and there, a generation later, Jacob had his nocturnal vision of angels climbing the stairway to heaven.

Today the former Temple Mount is graced with the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque. After the cities of Mecca and Medina, it is Islam's third-holiest site. The Prophet Muhammad is said to have visited it, traveling on the wings of a celestial being. According to tradition, from there he ascended into heaven and, for a time, enjoyed the fellowship of the great prophets of old before returning to Mecca.

I traveled to Jerusalem because I wanted to test a hypothesis. In the years that followed the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—an epoch of wars and rumors of wars—I became sensitive to an oft-repeated narrative whose plot suggests an inescapable showdown between Christianity and Islam, an unavoidable conflict predicated on the fundamental incompatibility of two of the world's largest religions.[2] Such a pessimistic assessment of the religious landscape seemed like an exaggeration to me. In my opinion there was no reason Muslims and Christians should not be able to exist side by side in peace. To see if my optimism had merit, I went to the place on earth where Islam and Christianity have had the longest ongoing relationship.

In Jerusalem, Christians and Muslims haven't always enjoyed a peaceful coexistence—in fact, Christian attempts to expel Muslims from Jerusalem during the Middle Ages remain among the bloodiest examples of religious violence the world has ever known—but today Christians and Muslims live together in Jerusalem in relative peace. This truth is embodied in the person of Wajeeh Nuseibeh, the man who holds the keys—both symbolically and actually—to the peace enjoyed between Christians and Muslims in Jerusalem.

According to his business card, Mr. Nuseibeh is the "Custodian and Door-Keeper of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre."[3] It's a job that has been passed down in his family, from father to son, since the end of the Third Crusade; Nuseibeh family tradition says that the family had a similar position before the Crusades as well, since the days when Sheikh Umar (ca. 586–644), a companion and father-in-law of the Prophet and the second Muslim caliph, peacefully wrested control of Jerusalem from the Zoroastrian Persians. Umar respected the right of Christians to keep the churches in Jerusalem, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which houses the traditional sites of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

In the West, where conflict between Islam and Christianity all too often is considered to be the natural order of things, it is not well known that a Muslim family has, each day for centuries, opened and shut the great doors to the church that commemorates the place of Jesus' death and resurrection. Nor is it commonly known that this same family has used its role as custodians of Christianity's most sacred building to make peace and preserve the holiness of the place. But the relationship between the Nuseibeh family and the scene for the Easter story should be learned and remembered because it suggests that a better and more peaceable model for coexistence is possible. In fact, it has been fully operational for centuries in the city where Christianity and Islam have their most intimate interaction.

GETTING LOST

Now, if you're me, and if you're staying in a hotel on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem's Old City, this is how

you get to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre: you get lost. You head down the Mount of Olives on foot, whistling the hymn "All Glory, Laud and Honor" because this is the same route Jesus took in the procession Christians celebrate on Palm Sunday. You walk through Jewish cemeteries and past the little church that sits upon the ancient site commemorating the verse in Luke (19:41) where Jesus weeps over Jerusalem.

After passing through the Garden of Gethsemane, you come to a busy street, which you cross, risking your life, in the middle of traffic. You figure any gate into the Old City will do, since you don't know where you're going anyway, so you head in through the Lions' Gate and find yourself in a place for which there can be no preparation: it is a warren of streets, some of them made out of stairs, some not much larger than a hallway in a suburban home, none laid out according to a plan that makes sense to someone like you. It's morning, and the vendors are opening their shops, which further complicates matters because the streets are changing before your eyes as merchants set out everything from religious trinkets to hookahs, from incense to orange juice. It is an unfolding, blossoming place, filled with strange and wonderful colors and scents and sounds. You are not in Kansas anymore. In fact, you have no idea *where* you are.

From time to time you see markers that denote stations of the cross, so you figure you must be on the Via Dolorosa, the route walked by Jesus as he carried his cross from Pilate's house to Calvary, and you know that you are *going* to Calvary, so you cannot be too lost. But then you cannot find the next station, and someone wants you to come in his shop to buy a piece of pottery upon which are written the words "Shalom Y'all." "For you, very cheap, my friend," he tells

you, but you blow him off because you've lost track of the Via Dolorosa, and you're starting to panic, just a little bit.

You see signs with arrows pointing to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, but they lead nowhere. You realize that you're starting to go in circles because you keep running into the same guy selling pottery, and he keeps hoping you've changed your mind. By now you know he calls himself Mike and has a sister in Toronto. About the time you're getting desperate (and you're thinking of buying something from Mike just so he'll give you directions), you see a sign that reads "St. Helena Road," and you think to yourself, "What the hell." You know that Saint Helena, the mother of the emperor Constantine, was responsible for identifying most of the Christian holy sites in the place we now call Israel/Palestine, including your destination.

It turns out that St. Helena Road is a good bet. It's only about six feet wide and fifty feet long. It takes a dogleg turn at the gate to the Sheikh Omar Mosque, and you know you must be close because this has to be the same Sheikh Umar (you say Umar, I say Omar), the companion, father-in-law, and second successor of the Prophet, who first entrusted the Nuseibeh family with their custodial duties at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Saint Helena Road ends at a doorway through which you can glimpse a plaza. Once on the plaza, you turn to the left, and now finally you can see the facade of the church. The building itself is enormous—one of the largest structures in Old Jerusalem—but you'd never know it, because everything here is packed together so closely.

You're on time but not by much, and Mr. Nuseibeh is waiting for you, sitting on a pew just inside the doors he and his ancestors have opened each morning and closed each night for centuries.

That's how you get from the Mount of Olives to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, at least if you're me.

WAJEEH NUSEIBEH

After welcoming me to the church, Wajeeh Nuseibeh invited me to sit down in what he called the "Muslim part of the church," which consisted of his pew and a narthex-like area that was probably six feet deep and twelve feet long. Along the wall were cupboards, from which he collected the key to the church, and proceeded to give me a demonstration of how the massive doors are locked each night and opened each morning.

Mr. Nuseibeh is a short man with a round face and a sturdy frame. His face is adorned with a well-trimmed moustache perched above an easygoing smile. He chatted in heavily accented English as he gave me an insider's tour of the building, which is divided between the Greek Orthodox Church, the Armenian Orthodox Church, and the Franciscan Order of the Roman Catholic Church. "Every stone is assigned to someone," my host told me,[4] "and some stones are divided. It's how we keep peace between the groups." Somehow, thrown into the mix, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church also has established itself as a claimant to the sacred space. They've built a monastery on the roof of the church and chapels along the staircase that leads from the roof to the ground. Inside the church they've placed an altar on the back of the structure—a church within a church, really—that covers what is believed to be Jesus' tomb.

It's hard to keep things straight. Mr. Nuseibeh told me, "Sometimes there are problems, arguments over who gets to clean the church, who gets to say mass, who gets to have a

procession, so I make a schedule, and everyone must follow my schedule. This is why it is important that I am a Muslim. I am seen as being neutral."

To say that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre needs the Nuseibeh family is something of an understatement. At various times throughout history, the church's several claimants have decided not to abide by the Nuseibeh family's directions: the results have been absurd and, at times, tragic. On the front of the church a ladder rests on a ledge above the front door, and it leads to an upper window. Mr. Nuseibeh told me it was left as a monument to the time when, after an internecine dustup over some long-forgotten triviality, using a ladder and entering through the upper window was the only way the Franciscans could gain access to the sanctuary. This was in the year 1853. In 1808, the building was gutted by a fire that started as the result of a brawl between clergymen from different traditions arguing over rights to the church's spiritual treasures. When I visited, 202 years later, an alcove belonging to the Greek Orthodox Church but on loan to the Syrian Orthodox Church remained a burned-out ruin because no one had yet agreed on who got to restore the space, which happened to be the entrance to what's believed to be the Arimathea family tomb (that's Arimathea, as in "Joseph of"—he's the benefactor who placed Jesus in the tomb). In the Holy Land, where there's a shrine to everything, it's odd that the grave of so important a Christian saint is a charred hole in the wall of a fire-gutted chapel.

As Mr. Nuseibeh gave me a tour of the church, he took me to all of the building's holy sites and, in the Franciscan vestry, showed me the sword and spurs that once belonged to Godfrey, Duke of Bouillon (ca. 1060–1100), a leader in

the First Crusade. After conquering Jerusalem, Godfrey held the title of Advocate of the Holy Sepulchre, which made him the de facto king of Jerusalem. (Not wanting to wear a golden crown in a city where Jesus wore a crown of thorns, Godfrey rejected a royal title; he did not, however, reject the power or wealth that came with the title.)[5]

The weapons of a crusading duke are not the only relics of the church's connection to holy war. In the stairway leading down to a chapel commemorating St. Helena's discovery of the true cross, Mr. Nuseibeh showed me hundreds of small crosses carved by Crusaders into the stone walls, yet for the Muslim custodian of its doors, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is a sacred space.

As we sat together and talked on his bench by the great doors, Mr. Nuseibeh greeted priests, monks, and tour guides he considers to be his friends. Part of his job is to make sure that no one enters the church wearing shorts and that décolletage (plunging necklines were in that year) was covered. From time to time he scolded me for crossing my legs. We were sitting directly across from Calvary, after all, and like his Muslim forebears since the time of Sheikh Umar, it is Wajeeh Nuseibeh's job—his personal jihad, or struggle—to keep this Christian place holy.

He is proud of the work he does, proud to be part of a living tradition. "It's like being a king," he told me. He was describing the hereditary nature of his life's work, but "royal" seemed also to describe the pride he felt in his position.

COFFEE WITH CARDAMOM

It is a requirement of Wajeeh Nuseibeh's position that he press a lot of flesh, and because he could not give me his

full and undivided attention there in the doorway across from Calvary, he invited me to his house later that evening. It is a comfortable, if somewhat formal, home located just outside the city wall. The house is large by the standards of this part of the city: it has a driveway and a small front yard. When I arrived, my host ushered me in and gave me coffee, apologizing for the fact that his wife was visiting family in Jordan. Evidently, in his universe, coffee made by a man is inferior, but I was more than satisfied. This was Arabic coffee, mixed with cardamom and sugar—truly a delight.

Before making my trip to Jerusalem, while researching the Nuseibeh family, I found conflicting information about the length of the special relationship between this particular family and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, so I asked Wajeeh Nuseibeh to set the record straight. He told me that his family had arrived in the seventh century from Medina in Saudi Arabia, where they were early followers and companions of the Prophet. "We were among the first people in Medina to accept Islam," he explained. "We protected the Prophet, and we broke bread with him. One of our matriarchs was called 'One who receives him,' and with her husband and children she fed the Prophet and she protected him from the *kofar*, the unbelievers."

One of the faithful matriarch's sons—Mr. Nuseibeh's ancestor—accompanied Caliph Umar on his campaigns of conquest in territory once held by the Persian Empire (see chap. 5). These adventures of annexation brought Umar's armies to Jerusalem in 638, where they were welcomed by the Christian patriarch, who invited the conquering caliph to pray in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Umar declined the invitation, choosing instead to pray at a rock just across

from the church. The patriarch was surprised—and perhaps a bit offended—but Umar was firm in his decision, knowing that if he prayed in the Christian church, his followers would do likewise, and eventually the church would become a mosque.

In gratitude for Umar's wisdom and sensitivity, the patriarch presented the caliph with the keys to the church, which Umar passed on to Wajeeh Nuseibeh's ancestor. The keys were kept in the family, passed from father to son, until 1099, when Crusaders took the city of Jerusalem. When the Crusaders conquered Jerusalem, the invading soldiers of Christ killed tens of thousands of Muslims, Jews, and Orthodox Christians, but a remnant of the Nuseibeh family survived by escaping to Nablus, where they remained until the sultan Saladin took Jerusalem from the Crusaders in 1187. Saladin restored the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to the Orthodox Church, and he gave the keys to the church back to the Nuseibeh family, in whose hands they remained until three hundred years ago, when the Ottoman Turks recruited a second family—the Joudeh family—to help in the work of guarding the keys.

For three centuries now, a member of the Joudeh family has conveyed the keys to a member of the Nuseibeh family, who has unlocked the church's massive doors and kept watch over the church during the day. Every night a Nuseibeh locks the doors and gives the keys back to a Joudeh. This arrangement is reaffirmed ceremonially three times during Holy Week each year. On Maundy Thursday the two key-keeping families formally present the keys to the leaders of the Franciscan Order. They do the same for the Greek Orthodox Church on Good Friday, and once again for the Armenian Orthodox leaders before their celebration of the

Easter vigil. At each ceremonial presentation, the keys are returned to the safekeeping of their Muslim custodians.

"They need us to be there because we know everything about the agreements that govern the church," Wajeeh Nuseibeh told me. "We are the neutral party between all the churches. We are like the UN. And we try to be friendly with everybody, and we are, indeed, good friends. I visit them, they come to visit me, they invite me to celebrate holidays with them. We are not just working: we are living as a bridge of peace between Christianity and Islam."

Mr. Nuseibeh refreshed my coffee as the evening began slipping into night in the City of God, a place that is timeless in a way that makes it seem disconnected from the modern world. Certainly the arrangement by which the Nuseibeh family keeps peace at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre seems out of place in a modern world. I asked him if his job remains full-time work that can support a family. "No," he told me. "I used to work in electronics, but I was able to retire and take this job when my father passed away." He impressed upon me that his family does not perform this service for free; they receive a small stipend of about $150 a month. Mr. Nuseibeh is training his son to take up the family duty one day, but at the moment his son is more interested in completing his education and making a living as a hairdresser.

As we were finishing our coffee, Mr. Nuseibeh got up and rummaged around in another room. He came back with a box of mementos—gifts he had received from visiting dignitaries. He had met many of the world's influential political and religious leaders, and many of them brought him gifts. He's particularly fond of a watch that was a present from Russian leader Vladimir Putin. He told me about his experiences meeting both Barack Obama and John McCain.

Behind his chair was a framed photo of Mr. Nuseibeh shaking hands with Pope John Paul II.

"I always greet them as equals," he told me. "None of this kissing of rings or bowing. In God's eyes we are the same. We are all brothers."

Wajeeh Nuseibeh walked me to the front gate of his house and showed me the place where he used to have a roof over his front porch. The old roof had rotted, and he needed to replace it, but in Jerusalem, at the time of this writing, the city government seemed to be doing everything it could to prevent Arabs from building or even repairing homes.[6] To fix his porch, Mr. Nuseibeh was looking at spending upward of $20,000 and countless hours in court just to get the necessary permits. He seemed disinclined to spend the money. The house looked fine, and an orange tree was growing up and would provide shade soon enough. The unrepaired porch would stand as a reminder that not everyone in Jerusalem shares Wajeeh Nuseibeh's vision of a city in which people share sacred space by keeping peace one with the other.

We said our goodbyes, and I took my leave, walking along the wall of the Old City, past the Lions' Gate and then up the Mount of Olives. Nighttime was falling, and muezzins from a dozen minarets were calling faithful Muslims to prayer as I returned to my hotel, taking the same path that Jesus took when he was in Jerusalem and wanted to pray in Gethsemane.

TOURISTS IN THE CITY OF GOD

After eating dinner in my hotel's dining room, I walked out into the gardens behind the hotel. A warm breeze was

blowing up off the Dead Sea. During the day the view from the hotel's backyard looks out over the Kidron Valley as it wends its way into the Judean desert. The view was spectacular, but it was bisected by the ugliness of a wall that snakes its way through the landscape, separating Israel proper from the West Bank and the people who live there.

I hesitate to write about politics both because several years will have elapsed between my visit to Jerusalem and the publication of this book. A lot can happen over the course of several years, and the political situation is serious and complex enough that it deserves more time and ink than can be rendered faithfully at the tail end of a chapter in a book such as this. In the Holy Land, however, politics are unavoidable because life is entirely infused with politics. So I will say just this: when I asked Wajeeh Nuseibeh how the Israeli policies of occupation affected his work, he told me about frequent attempts by the Israeli government to give the keys of the church to Christian patriarchs who claim ownership of the church, thereby ending the delicate, peaceful balance brokered by generations of Nuseibehs at Christianity's holiest shrine. He was quick to make sure that I understood these attempts in a broader political context, with a gentle critique of Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories and its subjugation of Arab populations within its borders. "This land is not for you or for me: it is for everybody. It is the land of God, and we are all tourists here. We should respect everyone and be friends."

These are wise words, and while I'm not naive about the deep conflicts that have marked Jerusalem's past and almost certainly will characterize its future, still I am glad to know that I, as a tourist in life, have as traveling companions people like Wajeeh Nuseibeh.

Besides being a holy site for Christians, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was ground zero for the Crusades. Taking possession of Christianity's most important shrine was a motive for the wars waged by Western Christians against Islam in the Middle Ages. To this day, the Crusades elicit bitter memory among Muslims around the world, yet for centuries a Muslim family has kept peace between Christians at the place that inspired the Crusades, a place where marauding knights by the thousands scratched crosses into the disputed stones in an effort to gain heaven's favor, stones that once echoed with the jingle of armor stained by Muslim blood.

It is a remarkable example of compassion that a family of Muslims should, for well over a thousand years, devote their lives to keeping peace between Christians who—at least historically—may not deserve such kindness. It is a gift, a reminder that conflict between Muslims and Christians is not inevitable. Though commentators and prognosticators—secular and religious, Christian and Muslim—have suggested that an apocalyptic clash between Christianity and Islam is unavoidable, still the pacifying presence of the Nuseibeh family at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre bears witness to the hope that those who seek God along separate religious paths can keep peace not just with one another but also *for* one another.

This knowledge, when put into practice, may be the key to a peaceable future between Muslims and Christians. That was my theory, anyway, but I knew I'd have to test it in places farther removed from Jerusalem's holy ground. I'd need to see if the peace I saw on Zion's mountain could be found in Silicon Valley. For an answer to that question, I would need to go home.