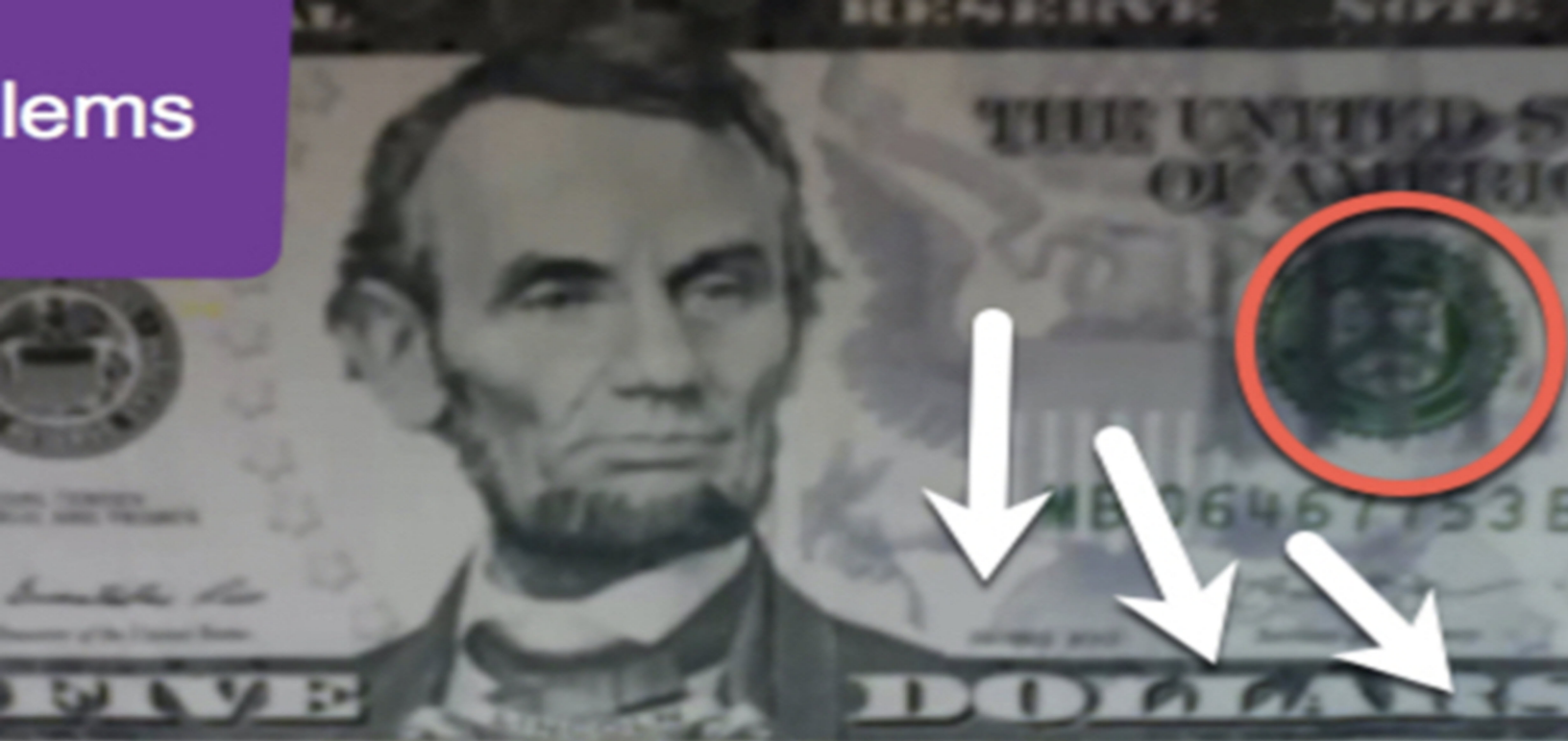


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**counterfeit**

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About nine years ago I read the book *My Year Inside Radical Islam* by Daveed Gartenstein-Ross. While reading the book, a number of thoughts and emotions bubbled to the surface, among which were a certain sense of resonance with various facets of the author's experiences, as well as a sense of empathy for him because of his worries that he might be assassinated by some radicalized, fundamentalist, self-appointed, presumptuous 'agent' of an invented theology who believed that if anyone became Muslim and, then, moved on to some other faith system, then such an apostate must be killed. On the other hand, I also found myself in disagreement with a number of the author's ideas and some of his conclusions.

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Once I finished the book, I had intended to write something, but the project kept being put on a back burner as other contingencies of life took on more immediate importance. However, now the original intention has been taken off the back burner and moved to a front burner where an analytical stew is being simmered in the form of the present essay.

Earlier, when I indicated that I felt a certain resonance with some of Mr. Gartenstein-Ross's experiences that had been described within the aforementioned book I did not mean to suggest I have spent time inside any sort of radical, fundamentalist Muslim group. Nonetheless, during various situations and circumstances, I have come in contact with such individuals along the path of

my own spiritual journey, and I am familiar, to some extent, with the mind and heart-set of such people.

I always have felt very uncomfortable with those sorts of individuals, and there are many reasons for this sense of discomfort. For example, some of those people are quite ignorant about the nature of Islam, and when one couples such ignorance with an arrogance that is unwilling to entertain the possibility that maybe they don't know as much or understand as much about Islam as they suppose is the case, the result has truly frightening implications ... both for them as well as for others.

Yet, as problematic as this kind of ignorance and arrogance might be, what is even more worrisome is the inclination of such people to feel entitled to impose their views on other human beings ... whether these latter unfortunates be Muslim or non-Muslim. These self-proclaimed true-believers imagine themselves to be God's gift to humanity and, as such, they operate in accordance with a delusion which maintains that Divinity has assigned to them the mission to cleanse humanity of its spiritual impurities.

I have met this kind of individual in the Muslim community. I have met such people in the Christian community. I have met similar people in the Jewish community. In addition, I have met such people in other communities as well. Apparently,

ignorance, arrogance, and presumption know no community boundaries.

On the other hand, I also have met some wonderful, sincere, rigorous, compassionate, loving, considerate, kind, generous, and courageous seekers of truth in all of the foregoing communities. Such qualities are not the province of any one faith but are manifested in the lives of those who have been blessed with grace irrespective of the formal character of the spiritual path out of which they might operate.

It is a person's personal relationship with God or a person's personal relationship with the Reality which makes everything possible that matters ... not any theology. What matters is our heart and soul realized connection to the truth that lies at the center of our being and not the theological concepts and terms through which one wishes to label that truth.

In fact, more often than not, theology merely serves as a lens that introduces distortion into spiritual dynamics, and theology, more often than not, gives expression to a paradigm that filters out anything that is inconsistent with itself. In the end such paradigmatic filters frequently miss the truth as we become preoccupied with viewing life in terms of what we theologically project onto life rather than what Being has to reveal to us on its own terms ... if we would just be willing to listen to what it has to offer free from the chattering,

accusations, and machinations of our ego-driven theologies.

Having said the foregoing by way of preface, the plan for the remainder of this essay is as follows: Since Daveed Gartenstein-Ross' book *My Year Inside Radical Islam* consists largely of a series of observations, reflections, insights, and reactions to what went on during his life in the period covered by the time-frame of the book, my plan is to do something similar. More specifically, within the framework of the present essay, I intend to put forth an array of observations, reflections, reactions, and, possibly, insights with respect to the time I spent inside of the aforementioned book ... some of these thoughts and feelings will be more developed than others.

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By way of a very brief overview, the book entitled *My Year Inside Radical Islam* describes a journey that starts in Ashland, Oregon where Daveed Gartenstein-Ross grew up as the son of parents who were nominally Jewish yet had become dissatisfied with various aspects of the Jewish faith and who, as a result, went in search of a ecumenical approach to spiritual issues. Although, from time to time, a little more is said in the book about his relationship with his parents, most of *My Year Inside Radical Islam* provides an account of how he came into contact with Islam, followed by a detailed description of how he

became involved with a group of fundamentalist Muslims, and, then, an account of how and why he left Islam and made a decision to become Christian.

The purpose of this essay is not to find fault with Mr. Gartenstein-Ross's decision to become Christian. Such a decision is between God and him, and, quite frankly, I have absolutely no idea how God views such a decision.

Mr. Gartenstein-Ross made choices based on his circumstances, his understanding, and his needs at the time his decisions were made. During the present essay, I will have some things to say about various aspects of his understanding concerning different issues, but the rest is not my business.

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On page 6 of *My Year Inside Radical Islam*\_Mr. Gartenstein-Ross mentions a book by a Christian author Josh McDowell and says:

"McDowell discussed at length C.S. Lewis' claim that there were three possible things Jesus could have been: a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord .... This is because Jesus claimed to be God in the New Testament."

As is the case with many theological meanderings, certain possibilities have been left out of the foregoing set of choices. For instance,



maybe, Jesus (peace be upon him) is neither a liar, nor a lunatic, nor the Lord, but, instead, individuals – such as Lewis -- have interpreted the New Testament in accordance with the requirements of their own (i.e., Lewis') theology.

To the best of my knowledge, Jesus (peace be upon him) never claimed to be the Lord in the New Testament. What he is reported to have said in John 10: verse 30 is that:

"I and the Father are one."

However, almost every form of mysticism – not just Christianity -- touches upon this issue of oneness that seeks to reconcile our usual perceptions of multiplicity with the idea that, according to the mystics of just about every faith tradition, in some sense, creation and Creator are joined together in a unity. What the nature of this unity involves is a mystery except to those to whom the secret has been disclosed.

To say that creation is other than Divinity is to give expression to the idea that something apart from God exists, whereas to say that creation is the Creator reduces things down to some form of pantheism in which anyone or anything – not just Jesus [peace be upon him] -- might make the claim that 'I and the Father are one'.

The truth to which mystics allude is more complex and subtle than either some manner of

dualism or some form of pantheism. In a sense, all of creation is one with Divinity, but, simultaneously, Divinity transcends all of creation. Creation is dependent on Divinity, but Divinity – aside from the purposes inherent in creation – is quite independent of creation.

When Jesus (peace be upon him) taught people to pray, he is reported to have begun with: “Our Father in heaven hallowed be Thy name [John 6: verse 9]. Jesus (peace be upon him) did not say “Jesus’ Father in heaven”. Rather, Jesus (peace be upon him) made it clear that, as creation, everyone had the same kind of connection with the One Who brought forth creation and, as such, God was the ‘father’ of all being, not just Jesus.

Furthermore, in Mathew 19:17, Mark 10:18, and Luke 18:19, Jesus (peace be upon him) is reported to have said variations upon the following teaching theme:

“Why callest me good? God alone is good.”

A distinction is being made between God and creation. Whatever goodness we have – even that of Jesus (peace be upon him) or Moses (peace be upon him) or Muhammad (peace be upon him) -- is borrowed and derivative from Divinity.

Earlier in his book, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross echoes the foregoing when he says:

“I rejected the Christian idea that Jesus had been God; no matter how deep a person’s spiritual insight, there’s a fundamental difference between the Creator and his creation.”

I agree with Mr. Gartenstein-Ross on this issue. However, the point of the foregoing discussion is not meant to be a critical exegesis of certain Christian beliefs as much as it is an attempt to point toward the fact that all of us stand in the middle of the vastness of mysterious Being and try, as best we can, to make sense out of what we encounter. Some of our attempts might be better than others, but it is not human beings who are the measure of truth, but, rather, it is truth that is the measure of human beings.

C.S. Lewis stood within the vastness of being and claimed that everything could be reduced down to one of three possibilities concerning the alleged claim of Jesus (peace be upon him) to be God, the Lord. Either Jesus (peace be upon him) was a liar, or he was a madman, or he was, indeed, God. Apparently, Lewis didn’t consider it worthwhile to examine either the possibility that, perhaps, Jesus (peace be upon him) didn’t mean what Lewis believed him to mean when Jesus (peace be upon him) said what he is reported to have said [i.e., that I and the Father are one], nor did Lewis appear to examine the possibility that, maybe, Jesus (peace be upon him) didn’t claim what some people have attributed to him.

In this latter regard, there is a very interesting book by Bart D. Ehrman entitled: *Misquoting Jesus*. Ehrman began his spiritual explorations very much in lock-step with the sort of literalist fundamentalism that is taught at many Bible colleges in the United States, but as a result of some very rigorous exploration into the history of Biblical transcription and translation, Ehrman underwent tremendous transformations in his perspective concerning the nature of the New Testament.

Despite his findings, Bart Ehrman remains a very committed Christian. Nonetheless, Ehrman's aforementioned book takes the reader through a litany of hermeneutical problems concerning the reliability of, and inconsistencies among, the texts given expression through, among other things, the first four books of the New Testament.

I do not say the foregoing in order to try to cast doubt upon Christianity. Indeed, I do not believe such is the intent of Ehrman's book for, as indicated above, he remains, in his own way, a believer in, and follower of, Jesus (peace be upon him).

In any case, I am not the one who will sit in judgment of people either in this world or the next concerning their spiritual beliefs and actions. Rather, I, like others, am one of the ones who will be judged for my deeds and misdeeds ... my true beliefs and my false beliefs.

There are those, however, who would try to argue that by merely raising questions concerning the reliability or accuracy of certain textual sources – as Bart Ehrman does in his book *Misquoting Jesus* -- one is something of an apostate and, therefore, one is not deserving of the moniker: ‘Christian’ ... and similar absurdities take place within both the Muslim and Jewish communities. Indeed, there are many so-called religious leaders of all manner of theological persuasions who would have everyone believe that the truth comes directly from God’s lips to their ears. Moreover, such spiritual luminaries would seek to imbue people with the working principle that to disobey such individuals is tantamount to disobeying God and, consequently, that the wrath of God will descend on all who would deviate from the ‘teachings’ of these self-appointed spokespeople of God.

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross writes in *My Year Inside Radical Islam* that it was the dogmatic force with which some Christian fundamentalists sought to impose on him their ideas about God and, in the process, seemed intent on creating a sense of inferiority in the author’s own ideas concerning God and Jesus (peace be upon him) that actually moved the author a little further down the road toward becoming involved with the Muslim community. And, ironically, it was also this same kind of dogmatic intransigence on the part of the Muslim community with which he was involved that helped move him along a path away from that community and toward Christianity.

Mr. Gartenstein-Ross first encountered a Muslim and Islam while attending Wake Forest University in North Carolina. This Muslim encounter was in the form of al-Husein Madhany who was of South Asian ancestry and had been born in Kenya. Initially, the relationship between the two of them revolved around political issues concerning campus life as well as issues that overlapped with, but extended beyond, the horizons of the university. 14

Little by little, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross leaned about his friend's beliefs concerning Islam. According to the author, some of the things he learned were that:

"The Qur'an is God's direct, literal word. I was also interested to learn that Muslims believe that the Old and New Testaments are earlier holy books inspired by God – but those books became corrupted over time and are no longer completely reliable." (page 18 of *My Year Inside Radical Islam*)

There are a few problems inherent in the foregoing 'learnings'.

For example, what does it mean to say that the Qur'an is God's direct, literal word? Literal in what sense? Direct in what sense? In what sense is the Qur'an the word of God?

To be sure, on one level the Qur'an is manifested in the Arabic language. However, it

would be a mistake to try to reduce the Qur'an down to merely language.

The Qur'an is infused with the barakah or Grace of God. Words might be the portals through which one encounters such Divine barakah, but the barakah is quite independent of the words, and, in fact, this is why some people can read the words of the Qur'an and, yet, derive no spiritual benefit because all they have engaged is language while remaining untouched by the Divine barakah associated with those words.

As far as the Qur'an being the literal word of God is concerned, I'm not really sure what this would mean. Of course, there are those who would wish to make their literalistic interpretations of the Qur'an be what they claim is meant by the literal word of God, but I also know from the reported words of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) that:

"The Qur'an has an outward and an inward dimension, and the latter has its own inward dimension, and so on, up to seven dimensions."

In addition, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said that:

"All of the Revealed Books are contained in the Qur'an. And the meaning of the Qur'an is contained within surah al-Fatiha [that is, the opening chapter

of the Qur'an]. And, the meaning of surah al-Fatiha is contained in Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Raheem [that is, in the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful], and the meaning of Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Raheem is contained in Bismillah [that is, in the Name of], and the meaning of Bismillah is contained in the dot beneath bey [that is the Arabic letter with which Bismillah begins].”

So, what is meant by the literal word of God in all of this? There are literalist understandings of God's meaning, but God's meanings transcend all such understandings even if some -- but by no means all -- of those literal understandings might, within certain limits, give expression to part of the truth.

We might engage God's guidance through the language of the Qur'an. However, God willing, eventually understanding goes beyond mere words and gives expression to the light of God that illuminates faith, the heart, the spirit, and the entire soul of an individual.

Aside from the foregoing considerations, I would also take exception with the author of *My Year Inside Radical Islam* when he says in the excerpt quoted previously that “Muslims believe that the Old and New Testaments are earlier holy books inspired by God.” To begin with, revelation and inspiration are two different phenomena.



God did not inspire Muhammad (peace be upon him) to write the Qur'an. Rather, the Qur'an was Divine guidance that descended upon the heart of the Prophet and that he was commanded to recite to others in the manner in which it had been revealed to the Prophet.

Artists are inspired. Song writers are inspired. Poets are inspired. And according to the nature of their God-given talents and life experience, they translate the Divinely bestowed inspiration into a visible form ... such as paintings, songs, and poetry.

Revelation is Divine guidance that is disclosed to special individuals who are the recipients of such guidance and are known as a Rasul or one who proclaims to others the received revelation. These messengers do not transform the revelation as artists do with respect to inspiration, but, rather, the task of a Rasul is to relate to others the linguistic form of the revelation precisely as it was bestowed upon such an individual.

Furthermore, while some Muslims might believe, as Mr. Gartenstein-Ross claims in the quote given earlier, that the Old and New Testaments are earlier Holy books inspired by God, this might be a very problematic, if not overly-simplistic, way of looking at such matters. What is referred to as the Bible is largely a human construction that contains remnants, here and there, of what had been revealed to earlier messengers.

The books of the Old Testament and the New Testament represent choices made by human

beings concerning what they believed to be authentic spiritual scripture. Over the years, different books have been included in the Bible, and, as well, various books have been taken out of what is called the Bible because the latter books were considered, rightly or wrongly, to be apocryphal with respect to Divine guidance.

As my shaykh once said to me with respect to the Book of Revelations:

“There is truth there if one knows how to look.”

So, too, with certain other portions of the Bible, both in relation to the New and Old Testaments ... there is truth there if one knows how to look, but the corruptions that have entered into the historical process of translating, transcribing, interpreting, and compiling the various books of the Bible -- while excluding various other books that some claim to possess spiritual authority -- have made differentiating the true wheat from the false chaff a very difficult process.

To give but one example of the complexities that enter into such matters, consider the writings of St. Paul that are included in the New Testament. Whatever truths and spiritual inspiration might be contained in the letters of St. Paul, those letters are not revelation. Those letters are not the spiritual equivalent of the Divine revelation that was given

to Jesus (peace be upon him), and St. Paul is not the spiritual equal of Jesus (peace be upon him).

St. Paul's letters give expression to his understanding of spiritual matters. There might be many truths contained in the text of his epistles, but while such truths might resonate with certain aspects of the teachings of the Gospel of Jesus (peace be upon him), the teachings of St. Paul cannot necessarily be considered to be coextensive with the teachings of the revelation given to Jesus (peace be upon him).

Different strains of Christianity have developed their own style of hermeneutically engaging such theological issues. While there are many themes and principles on which such different strains of Christianity might agree, there are also many themes with which they have differed and over which blood has been spilled.

Similarly, there are many themes and principles upon which Muslims and Christians might agree, but, unfortunately, there also are some themes and principles over which differences have arisen. As a result, blood has been spilled in all directions.

People – whether Muslims, Christians, or Jews ... or anyone else for that matter – who believe they have the right to play God and not only serve as arbiters of truth but, as well, to serve as judge, jury and executioner on behalf of God with respect to the identity of such truth might not have as firm a grasp of the nature of Divine Guidance as they

believe. Anybody who believes that God is in need of human beings to spill blood to serve Divine purposes might want to meditate a little more deeply and longer on Who and What God is and who and what human beings are. 20

All that has been said in conjunction with the foregoing comments concerning St. Paul and Jesus (peace be upon him) can also be applied to any number of Muslim theologians, philosophers, scientists, theoreticians, and leaders. Irrespective of whatever truths might, or might not, be contained in their writings, what such people wrote is not the Qur'an, and those people are not the spiritual equals of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) ... even though many of these same individuals would like to induce others to believe that the so-called "experts" – often self-appointed -- have somehow been authorized to speak for God and/or the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Confusion has been let loose across the surface of the Earth. The lesser is conflated with the greater; the counterfeit mingles with the real, and that which is false is treated as being synonymous with that which is true.

On page 25 of *My Year Inside Radical Islam*, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross briefly discusses the part of Houston Smith's book *The World Religions* that examines Islam. One of the quotes drawn from the latter book has to do with Houston Smith's belief that the Qur'an "does not counsel turning the other

cheek, or pacifism.” Without appropriate qualifications, the quote from Professor Smith is not correct. 21

Throughout the Qur’an one is enjoined to have patience, to do righteousness, and not transgress beyond boundaries of propriety. For example, in Surah 103, one finds the following:

“By the declining day, indeed human beings are in a state of loss except such as have faith and do righteous deeds, and join in the mutual teaching of the truth and of patience and constancy.”

Moreover, in Surah 5, verse 8, God provides this guidance:

“O ye who believe! Be steadfast witnesses for Allah with respect to fair dealing and let not the hatred of others seduce you away from doing justice. Be just: that is nearest to Piety. Remain conscious of God, verily God is aware of all that you do.”

Elsewhere in the Qur’an, one finds:

“The blame is only against those who oppress human beings with wrong-doing and insolently transgress beyond bounds through the land defying right and justice.” [The Qur’an 42:42]

And, finally:

“[But whatever they may say or do] repel the evil [which they commit] with that which is better.”  
(Qur’an, 23:96)

There are many other passages in the Qur’an beside the foregoing ones that speak about the importance of exhibiting patience in the face of adversity, doing justice, not transgressing proscribed boundaries of behaviour and approaching life through understanding and insight. In addition, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“The right and the left are both ways of error, and the straight path is the middle way.”

Sometimes pacifism is warranted, and sometimes it is not. Life is nuanced, subtle, complex, and intended by God to be a considerable challenge to all who encounter it.

One principle – such as pacifism -- does not necessarily fit all situations. Rather, the guidance of the Qur’an gives expression to an array of spiritual principles that can be combined in different ways in order to resolve problems.

Consequently, to say as Houston Smith does in his book that the Qur’an “does not counsel turning

the other cheek” is incomplete, and, as such, inaccurate. Sometimes turning one’s cheek is the best recourse, and in such circumstances one should be governed by patience and restraint. 23

On other occasions, justice and equity might require one to defend against oppression in other ways, but these other ways do not necessarily entail using force or violence. For instance, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said that:

“One performs the best kind of jihad or spiritual struggle when one stands up and speaks out against injustice in the face of tyranny and oppression.”

At one point in *My Year Inside Radical Islam*, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross talks about how he became Muslim. This occurred before coming in contact with a radicalized fundamentalist group in Ashland, Oregon.

His Muslim friend from Wake Forest, al-Husein, had told the author about a Naqshbandi group in Italy [this is a reference to a group that, correctly or not, traces its spiritual lineage to a Sufi group known as the Naqshbandi silsilah]. Therefore, when Mr. Gartenstein-Ross was in Venice, he contacted the group.

While visiting with this group in Italy, certain events went on that led the author to inquire about

becoming Muslim. The author was told by one of the members of the group that he would have to say the shahadah, or declaration of faith, in public before two witnesses. 24

Actually, neither the public part nor the two witnesses issue is a necessary requirement for becoming Muslim. In the Qur'an it says:

“The one whose breast God has expanded unto Islam enjoys a light from one's Lord.” (39:22)

Everything begins with barakah. Through barakah, intention becomes inclined toward declaring one's commit to the principle that there is no god but Allah – that is, the God – which is the literal meaning of al-lah.

Public declaration does not make one a Muslim. Two witnesses do not make one a Muslim.

God's Grace opens one's heart – or, at least, that part of the heart that is referred to as the 'breast' – to the possibility of Islam. One is called to Islam, and, then, one has the choice of responding to the Divine overture or rejecting that invitation.

Some people argue that the formal ceremony conducted by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) at Hudaibiyah in which Muslims were asked to swear their allegiance to the Prophet constitutes the form on which the public declaration of faith is based. However, most, if not all, of the individuals who took part in this



ceremony already were Muslim, and, furthermore, as the Qur'an indicates:

“Those who swear allegiance to thee [Muhammad] swear allegiance, in truth, to God. God’s hand is above their hands. So whoever breaks one’s oath breaks it only to the hurt of one’s own soul.”

Becoming Muslim is not a contract between the individual and the Muslim community. Becoming Muslim is an expression of the transition that has taken place with respect to an individual’s relationship with God.

The transition has taken place in the privacy of one’s heart. God is the witness to that transition. Indeed, God is the One Who has made such a transition possible.

I remember the process of my becoming Muslim. Through a complex set of circumstances, I had been introduced to the person who would, eventually, become my shaykh (the term “shaykh” is often used in conjunction with someone who has been properly authorized to serve as another individual’s spiritual guide ... although it should be noted that the word “shaykh” also might be used in other non-mystical contexts and, as such, tends to refer to someone who is accepted as a leader in some sense of this term).

Per the request of the shaykh, someone from the shaykh’s circle had talked to me about the basic

teachings of Islam. For two or three hours, I just sat and listened to what was being said.

At the time, what was important to me was what was being said, not who was saying it (whom I really didn't know) or how it was being said. For me, truth had entered into the chambers of my heart, and I was moved by what struck me as the truth that was flowing through whatever words were being spoken.

After the session, I was asked what I thought about things and whether I wanted to speak with the shaykh. I indicated that I had liked what I had heard, and, yes, I would like to meet the shaykh.

A meeting was arranged. As I recall, the first time I met my future shaykh was at his apartment where I was invited to eat with his family. After the meal and some discussion, a further meeting was arranged.

The next meeting took place at the local mosque. It was Christmas Eve in the Christian world and Ramadan in the Muslim world.

It was during the last ten days of the month of fasting, and some of the initiates of the shaykh were staying at the mosque during this ten-day period. I was introduced to one of them, and, then, the shaykh took me to a space in the middle of the mosque and taught me how to say a zikr or special chant.

At the time, I wasn't fasting, or saying prayers, or doing any of the other basic pillars of Islam, and,

moreover, I had made no public declarations in front of witnesses. Yet, almost immediately upon beginning to say the zikr, I underwent an opening of sorts. 27

After that evening, I began to spend more and more time with the shaykh and his circle. I attended the Thursday evening sessions and was invited to all of the spiritual anniversaries of the passing away of different great shaykhs within the Chishti Order of Sufis.

From time to time, there were people who were initiated into the Order, and these often were done during one of the celebrations. I began to feel that because I had not been initiated in any public way that I was not worthy of being a member of the Sufi circle, and, if truth be known, I probably wasn't worthy, but that is another story.

Eventually, after a year or so, my shaykh told me that I was to be initiated during our group's observance of the anniversary, or date of passing away from this world, of my shaykh's own spiritual guide. I told him about my concerns and fears that, perhaps, I was never going to be initiated.

He smiled and said: "I have always considered you part of the group. What is about to take place was just a formal way of acknowledging what already is the case.

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Daveed Gartenstein-Ross's initial encounter with fundamentalists took place in his hometown of Ashland, Oregon. He had invited his friend, al-Hussein, to visit with him in Ashland and to meet his parents. 28

During this visit, the Daveed and al-Husein discovered the existence of a mosque in the city. The two of them attended the Friday noon-day prayers.

The sermon or khutbah that is delivered prior to the actual ritual prayers was given by a Saudi who was living in northern California. This individual talked about the alleged duty of Muslims to immigrate to a country ruled by Muslims. More specifically, according to the speaker's perspective:

"The Holy Qur'an says: 'Verily, those who believed, and emigrated and strove hard and fought with their property and their lives in the cause of Allah, as well as those who give asylum and help - these are allies to one another. And to those who believed but did not emigrate, you owe no duty of protection to them until they emigrate.' So as Muslims we too must emigrate. We are living in the land ruled by the kufur [unbelievers]. This is not the way of Muhammad, he said."

Prior to hijra, or emigration, the Prophet lived for 13 years among the unbelievers. He emigrated to Yathrib, later known as Medina, because a plot to

assassinate him had been uncovered by the Muslims and, therefore, staying in Mecca was no longer a viable option. In other words, the Prophet did not leave Mecca because it was a land ruled by unbelievers, but, instead, the Prophet left because he had run out of options with respect to being able to live safely in that city.

Initially, there were only two who emigrated to Yathrib – namely, Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with him) and the Prophet. All the other Muslim residents of Mecca stayed behind.

Gradually, over time, more Muslims from Mecca emigrated to Yathrib. However, there were other Muslims that were experiencing financial or life circumstances that prevented them from being able to emigrate.

The only permission that the Prophet had received from God to engage in fighting was for purely defensive purposes. To say that the Prophet was not under any obligation to protect the believers who remained behind in Mecca until they emigrated did not establish a precedent with respect to the need of Muslims to emigrate but, rather, was a reflection of the Divine permissions concerning rules of engagement with the non-believers that had been established by God.

If the believers in Mecca emigrated, then, those individuals could be defensively protected if the Muslims happened to be attacked. However, as long as the believers remained in Mecca, then, the Prophet did not have any Divine authorization and

concomitant duty or obligation to attack Mecca in order to protect the believers who were continuing to live there. 30

According to Mr. Gartenstein-Ross, the Saudi speaker went on to say:

“Prophet Muhammad [upon him be blessings and peace] described the risks of living among the kufur. Our beloved Prophet said: “Anybody who meets, gathers together, lives, and stays with a Mushrik -- a polytheist or disbeliever in the oneness of Allah – and agrees to his ways and opinions and enjoys living with him, then he is like the Mushrik.” So when you live among the kufur, and act like the kufur, and like to live with the kufur, then, brothers, you may become just like the kufur. If you do not take the duty of emigration seriously, your faith is in danger.”

There are many problems with how the Saudi speaker is interpreting things in the foregoing quote. First of all, there is a difference between, on the one hand, outlining the nature of certain risks of living about people who are unbelievers and, on the other hand, trying to claim that such risks implies a duty to emigrate.

The Prophet never said that people have a duty to emigrate. He said that if people lived among unbelievers and came to agree with their opinions

and their ways of living, then, obviously, one runs the risk of becoming like such people.

The Prophet lived with unbelievers for 13 years and, by the Grace of Allah, did not come to agree with their opinions about things or agree with their ways of living or enjoy living in their midst. Other Muslims, by God's Grace, were able to manage this as well.

Were there risks involved in such arrangements? Yes, there were, but Muslims did not become unbelievers merely by living among the unbelievers.

The Prophet was warning Muslims against opening themselves up to the opinions and ways of the unbelievers to such an extent that one not only came to agree with those ways of believing and doing things but enjoyed doing so. When one did this, then, one's faith was at risk.

Warning people about risks to their faith is one thing. Saying that one has a duty to emigrate because of such risks is quite another thing ... something foreign that is being added to, or projected onto, what the Prophet actually said.

The process of twisting the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet to lend support to ideas that were never being espoused by the Qur'an or the Prophet is a trademark tactic of the very sorts of people with whom Mr. Gartenstein-Ross began to become involved when he visited the mosque in Ashland, Oregon. Such teachings sow the seeds of

ignorance and arrogance that have so decimated the landscape of many Muslim and non-Muslim communities around the world – even in Saudi Arabia from which the person giving the Friday sermon came. 32

The irony of all this is that such would-be saviours of the Muslim community are actually among the very forces that place a sincere Muslim's faith at risk. If one emigrates toward such individuals and comes to agree with their opinions and their way of doing things and enjoys living with them, then, one stands a very good chance of losing whatever legitimate faith one might have had.

To his credit, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross didn't necessarily accept the concepts being espoused by the Saudi speaker. However, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross also admitted that he had no reliable understanding of Islam through which to combat those ideas.

Initially, he was able to keep his distance from the undertow of such a theological maelstrom. However, in time, he found himself being pulled under by the currents emanating out from such a perspective.

I know just how seductive and powerful those currents can be for I have encountered them on a variety of occasions within the Muslim community. Fortunately, at the time of the encounters I had a Sufi shaykh who -- because of, by the Grace of Allah, his tremendous insight and understanding of Islam -- could explain to me in considerable detail the



numerous logical, doctrinal, and historical defects contained within the structure of the theological arguments of such people. I was never left unsatisfied by the explanations I was given by my shaykh concerning such matters.

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On pages 51-52 of *My Year Inside Radical Islam*, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross describes how the Muslim activities in Ashland, Oregon were being subsidized by a Saudi Arabian charitable institution known as al-Haramain Islamic Foundation. One of the proposed programmes of the Muslim group in Ashland was called the 'Medina Project'.

According to the leader of the Ashland Muslim group, the idea at the heart of the Medina Project involved building an Islamic village in the United States. More specifically:

"The village would be run by sharia to the extent that U.S. laws allowed. While there wouldn't be any beheadings and amputations, the women would be veiled, pork would be banned, and so would alcohol."

Almost everywhere one hears 'shari'ah, shari'ah, shari'ah' from the lips of Muslim fundamentalists, mullahs, imams, theologians, and would-be revolutionaries. Yet, rather ironically, the

Qur'an apparently mentions the term shari'ah just once.

In Surah 45, verse 18 one finds:

“O Prophet, We have put you on the Right Way (Shari'ah) concerning the religion, so follow it, and do not yield to the desires of ignorant people;”

All of the fundamentalists assume they know what the 'right way' is even as they engage one another in hostilities so that they might gain control and impose their own interpretations and theories concerning the precise nature of that 'right way'. Furthermore, such individuals also seem to assume they have God's permission to impose that way on just about anyone they like.

As far as the first assumption is concerned, everyone has the right to form his or her opinion – whether such opinions be correct or incorrect -- concerning what one believes the nature and purpose of one's relationship with God to be. However, as far as the second assumption is concerned – that is, the presumed right to impose their opinions on others -- I do not believe such individuals can point to any aspect of the Qur'an that indisputably demonstrates that God has arrogated to them the right to impose their opinions concerning spirituality or life upon others.

In fact, even with respect to the Prophet, the Qur'an indicates:

"The guiding of them is not thy duty (O Muhammad), but Allah guideth whom He will."  
[Qur'an 2: 272].

The actual etymology of the verb 'shari'ah' is related to a process of travelling -- or being led -- toward, finding, and drinking from a place that contains water. So, the questions are: What is the nature of the path/way? What is the nature of leading? What is the nature of water? What is the nature of the drinking? Finally, do the answers to any of the foregoing questions provide evidence in support of the idea that shari'ah is meant to indicate a process that is to be imposed upon people in the sense of a code of law or conduct to which everyone must adhere and for which any wavering from that path should be met with the force of a body of social/public law that is considered to be the guardian and protector against such a 'way/path' being corrupted, undermined, compromised or not obeyed?

I find it strange that a term -- namely, shari'ah - which, as far as I can determine, is used only once in the Qur'an should have been propelled into the pre-eminent status it not only currently assumes in many discussions but that it has 'enjoyed' for hundreds of years in the Muslim community -- at

least within circles of jurisprudence, fatwa, qazis, muftis, imams, and books of fiqh.

Moreover, if one peruses the Qur'an in search of the 'right way', one actually finds a multiplicity of Arabic words (for example, deen, tariqa, sirat-ul mustaqueem, taqwa, and so on). Unfortunately, all of these terms are taken by many, if not most, fundamentalists and reduced down to just one way of thinking and understanding – that is, in a legalistic/legislative sense -- yet none of these terms should necessarily be construed in such a narrowly conceived, reductionistic fashion.

The Qur'an does not refer to itself as a book of jurisprudence but as a book of guidance, wisdom, and discernment. Yet, there has been a centuries-long attempt by all too many individuals to force-fit the Qur'an into becoming little more than a source document to serve the interests of jurisprudential and legalistic theologies.

If one wishes to use the term 'Divine Law' in conjunction with the Qur'an, one would be, I believe, closer to the truth of the matter if one were to think about the idea of law in terms that refer to 'the natural order of creation'. That is, Divine law refers to the nature of manifested existence and the principles (both spiritual and otherwise) that are operative within that natural order of things. This is consistent with another sense of the same Arabic root from that shari'ah comes that concerns the sort of lawgiver or legislator who has established

the order of things and how those things operate in a given realm ... in the present case, creation.

For example, the law of gravity does not say that one must obey gravity or that one has a duty or obligation to observe gravity. Rather, through experience, reflection, and the guidance of those who have some wisdom in such matters, one becomes aware of gravity's existence and properties. Moreover, one comes to understand that as one goes about one's life one might run into problems if one does not pay attention to the principle of gravity, and, in addition, one learns that there are consequences that follow upon a failure to observe such a principle – unless one can devise ways of defying (within certain limits) the presence of gravity through propellers, wings, rockets, jet engines, and the like.

Some people might like to look at what occurs when someone fails to pay close enough attention to the presence of gravity as some kind of 'punishment' for swaying from the path of reality. Nevertheless, once again, I feel it would be closer to the truth to say that actions – both spiritual and physical -- have consequences and, therefore, caveat emptor (let the buyer beware). In other words, there is a rigor to life – both spiritual and physical -- about which one pays heed, or not, to one's own benefit or risk.

Shari'ah is not about beheadings, amputations, lashings, corporal punishment, legal courts, banning alcohol, the length and shape of a beard,

marriage, divorce, inheritance, dietary restrictions, dress codes, and the like. Shari'ah is about realizing the purpose of life by drawing upon the whole of the Qur'an as one struggles toward acquiring the Divine guidance that will assist one to fulfil one's spiritual capacity and recognize the nature of one's essential identity so that one will come to give expression to the process of ibadat or worship as God has intended.

To be sure, there are verses in the Qur'an that touch upon issues of punishment, alcohol, inheritance, diet, dress, marriage, apostasy, fighting, and so on. Yet, there are many, many more verses in the Qur'an (at a ratio of about 13 or 14 to 1) which explore issues of equity, fairness, balance, harmony, peace, forgiveness, patience, God-consciousness, remembrance, repentance, kindness, love, restraint, compassion, tolerance, insight, generosity, knowledge, wisdom, understanding, humility, purification of the heart, and honesty.

Why is it that the former legalisms have come to assume dominance and pre-eminence over the development of spiritual character? Or, why do so many people seem to assume that punitive measures are the only road to spiritual purification? Or, why do so many people appear to automatically assume that the principles inherent in the development of spiritual character cannot or should not be applied to issues of jurisprudence?

There was a man who once came to the Prophet and confessed that he had broken the fast of Ramadan. The man wanted to know what would be necessary to set things right with respect to his mistake. 39

The Prophet informed the man that in such circumstances the Qur'an indicated that one should fast for two consecutive months. Upon hearing this, the man replied by saying that if he could not even fast for one month, how would he be able to fast for two months?

The Prophet then responded by saying that the Qur'an also indicated that one could also satisfy the conditions of the fast if one were to feed the poor. The man said that he had no money with which to feed the poor.

The Prophet called someone and told them to have food taken from the storehouse and brought to the Prophet. When this task had been completed, the Prophet gave the food to the man and said the man should distribute the food to the poor.

Upon receiving this instruction, the man commented that in the entire valley, there was no one poorer than he and his family. In reply, the Prophet said that the man should, then, take the food and feed his family, and that act would constitute expiation for the man's having broken the fast.

Among other things, Quranic principles of equity, compassion, generosity, and kindness were

used by the Prophet in conjunction with the Quranic provisions concerning fasting to arrive at a manner of handling the situation that gave expression to shari'ah. Muslims as well as non-Muslims to whom I have recounted the foregoing hadith are moved by the obvious display of spiritual wisdom that is present in the interchange between the Prophet and the man who came to him seeking advice. 40

So, what is the moral, so to speak, of the story? The Qur'an is a book of spiritual principles, not a book of legal rules. Basic Quranic principles concerning fasting were taken by the Prophet and, then, were modulated in accordance with existing life contingencies and other principles of the Qur'an.

Shari'ah gives expression to an indefinitely large set of spiritual principles that can be combined together in different ways to assist individuals to realize life's purpose and a person's essential identity. However, one of the limiting factors in all of this, has to do with the depth of insight and understanding in the individual who is seeking to engage Quranic guidance in order to resolve any given issue or problem, and this is true both on an individual as well as a collective or social level.

As previously cited:



“O Prophet, We have put you on the Right Way (Shari’ah) concerning the religion, so follow it, and do not yield to the desires of ignorant people;” (Qur’an 45:18) 41

but, unfortunately, now that the Prophet is no longer with us physically, the desires of all too many ignorant people have come to dominate many communities. When such people do this only in relation to their own lives, then, although such applied ignorance tends to lead to problematic ramifications, those problems are likely to be far, far fewer and more contained or isolated than when such ignorance seeks to legalistically and legislatively impose itself on everyone else.

When Muhammad (peace be upon him) was first called to the tasks of being God’s rasul (messenger) and nabi (prophet), the society in and around Mecca was often crude, rude, lewd, and brutal. Infant girls were buried alive. Women were treated as third, fourth and fifth class citizens. Orphans were marginalized and neglected. Blood-feuds were the rule of the day. Punishment for transgressions was severe. Financial and material inequities pervaded and divided society. Slavery existed, and those who were unlucky enough to be slaves were used and abused in any way that pleased their slave masters. Tribal alliances and antipathies structured society from top to bottom. Tribes or clans were not run in accordance with principles of justice but in accordance with the

authoritarian rule of a leader or small group of such leaders who were only interested in protecting their vested interests. The excessive drinking of alcohol was rampant, as were the problems that arise out of such excesses. Public nudity in and around the Kaaba was not uncommon. 42

While there are some similarities between the social, economic, and historical conditions that prevailed during the pre-Islamic days of Meccan society and the conditions existing today, the times, circumstances, history, problems, and needs of the people during the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) were, in many ways, very, very different than what is the case today – and vice versa. If the Prophet were physically with us today, can anyone claim with certainty that she or he knows that the Prophet would approach the problems of today in exactly in the same way as he did during his lifetime more than 1400 years ago?

In ecology there is a guideline known as the 'Cautionary Principle'. In essence, this indicates that when one does not have demonstrative proof that some, say, industrial process will not harm people and/or the environment, then, one should proceed with caution.

This principle also applies in the case of spiritual matters. If one cannot clearly demonstrate that, ultimately, a given application of a spiritual principle is not likely to have adverse consequences for the spiritual well-being of either

individuals within that society or the group as a whole, then one should exercise considerable caution before applying such Quranic principles to the ecology of society. 43

Just as every medicine has a use and a value, this does not mean that using a given medicine without any consideration for the illness that needs to be remedied or the needs and condition of the patient will lead to successful results. So, too, just because every spiritual principle in the Qur'an has a use and value, this does not mean that using any given Quranic principle without consideration for the illness that needs to be remedied or the needs and conditions of the individual or society to which it is being applied will necessarily lead to successful results.

Although there are ayats or verses in the Qur'an that are stated in specific, detailed form, this does not automatically mean that such verses must take precedence over all the other principles of guidance in the Qur'an. Patience, forgiveness, tolerance, love, humility, equitability, peace, compassion, remembrance, generosity, nobility, God-consciousness, and restraint are also specified in the Qur'an, and these latter spiritual principles are mentioned many more times and given far more emphasis than are the verses that fundamental legalists like to cite as being the principles that must govern public and private life.

The process of creating a public space within which individuals might pursue shari'ah according

to their capacity and inclinations has been confused with the process of shari'ah that focuses on the development of character. In a sense, many Muslims have confused or conflated the frame (i.e., the process of creating a safe and stable social space) with the picture (i.e., the process of shari'ah, which is an individual and private activity rather than a public one).

Similarly, the punishments that are mentioned in the Qur'an are not shari'ah per se. Rather, such punishments were the specific guidance provided by Divinity to help society during the time of the Prophet to be able to establish a safe and stable space within which to pursue shari'ah – something that is entirely separate from, and not to be confused with, the process of structuring the public space that surrounds the activities of shari'ah.

However, there are different ways of creating the kind of public space within which people will be able to pursue shari'ah. As pointed out previously, in the Qur'an God did provide some specific examples of how Muslims might go about creating the sort of safe and stable public space through which individuals could privately pursue, each in his or her own way, the development of character traits that is at the heart of the process of shari'ah. Nevertheless, God also provided many general spiritual principles in the Qur'an that also could be used to help create the kind of safe, stable public space through which individuals could privately pursue the purpose of shari'ah.

When, God willing, character traits are developed and perfected, they possess the potential for having a constructive and positive influence on helping to maintain the peace and stability of the public sphere. When such traits become widespread, then, in effect, the process of pursuing shari'ah also becomes the means through which public space is constantly renewed in a safe and stable manner entirely without legalisms or legislative mandates.

One cannot legislate or make legal rules that force people to become loving human beings. However, once a person becomes a loving person, then, the constructive impact such a person has upon the quality of public life is incalculable.

One cannot legislate or make legal rules or apply punishments that will cause people to pursue shari'ah. However, once shari'ah -- in the sense of an individual's development of character traits and purification of his or her nafs/ego takes place -- then, legislation, rules, and punishments become largely peripheral issues.

Many fundamentalists want to return to the past in order to engage the Qur'an. The Qur'an doesn't exist in the past. It exists in the eternal now as always has been the case.

To filter the present through the times of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is a fundamental [as well as a typical, fundamentalist] mistake. To demand that the Qur'an be engaged and understood through the filter of the

circumstances, problems, and conditions of 1400 years ago is, I believe, to introduce substantial distortion into one's attempt to understand the nature of Quranic guidance. 46

All of the Qur'an is guidance. Nonetheless, not all of the guidance is necessarily intended for everyone.

For example, Alaf Lam Meem is guidance. Ha Meem is guidance. Ta Ha is guidance. Ya Seen is guidance. Yet, such guidance does not necessarily apply to anyone except those for whom God intended it.

People have made an assumption that injunctions in the Qur'an dealing with, say, punishment are incumbent for all peoples, circumstances, societies, and historical times, but these injunctions concerning punishment might not have been intended to apply to everyone any more than the series of Arabic letters at the beginning of certain surahs are necessarily intended for everyone. Rather, in each case, the guidance might be intended only for certain historical and social circumstances.

This distinction might be especially important when it comes to differentiating between the private sphere and the public sphere. Although there often is a public context in which the basic pillars and beliefs of Islam are embraced, the fact of the matter is that all of these pillars and beliefs are largely a matter of individual observance and responsibility.

This is also the case with respect to those aspects of character development that extend beyond the basic pillars and beliefs. One might seek to practice love, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, tolerance, patience, and so on in relation to other people, but the development of such traits is a function of an individual's solitary struggle. One might observe the five daily prayers with other people, but each individual carries the responsibility of paying attention during prayers and applying as much of her or his spiritual capacity to the observance of prayers as one is individually able to do – nobody else can do this for a person.

Shari'ah is a matter of individual aspiration and not of public imposition. The Prophet is reported to have said: "I have been given all the Names and have been sent to perfect good character." He did not say that he has been sent to establish a good system of jurisprudence or corporal punishment.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is also reported to have said:

"Muslims are brothers and sisters in Deen, and they must not oppress one another, nor abandon assisting each other, nor hold one another in contempt. The seat of righteousness is the heart. Therefore, that heart which is righteous does not hold a Muslim in contempt."

Yet, many of those with a fundamentalist inclination do seek to oppress others through the exercise of public power. Moreover, they do tend to harbour contempt for anyone who does not act or believe as such fundamentalists believe should be the case.

Moreover, the foregoing hadith indicates that the seat of righteousness is the heart. The hadith says nothing about the seat of righteousness being in government or the public sphere of power or a particular system of imposed punishment.

Through the Qur'an, Allah guided the people in the time of the Prophet in a way that they could understand and in a manner that fit in with their life styles, social conventions, history, ways of doing things, and sensibilities. In other words, during the time of the Prophet and under certain circumstances best understood by the Prophet, the process of beheading a person, or amputating a limb, or flogging an individual, or stoning a person were all expressions of following a portion of the guidance that had been given to the Prophet by God in order to establish order and security in an Arabian society that was used to dealing with certain aspects of life through the law of retribution and that is why God proscribed that sort of law for such a people so they would understand.



Nonetheless, through the Qur'an, God also provided guidance for people who would live in subsequent times that were different in many ways from those that existed during the life of the Prophet. Furthermore, these other dimensions of guidance were expressed in a manner that could be understood by, and that fit in with, the life-style, conventions, history, practices, and sensibilities of the people who would live in those later times. 49

This does not mean that people of subsequent generations were free to do whatever they liked. However, part of the beauty, generosity, and depth of the Qur'an is that it is filled with principles of guidance that are appropriate for all manner of circumstances and conditions, and, as such, the Qur'an has degrees of freedom contained within which are capable of assisting individuals in a variety of circumstances and situations – even if there are people today, unfortunately, who are unwilling to acknowledge these other dimensions of Quranic guidance.

Shari'ah has always remained what it is – the personal, private process of struggling to purify oneself, develop constructive character traits, realize spiritual capacity, and gain insight into the nature of one's essential relationship with God. The Qur'an says: "I have not created human beings nor jinn except that they may worship Me [that is, Divinity]." (Qur'an 51:56-57), and shari'ah, when properly pursued, is the key, God willing, to

fulfilling the purpose for which human beings and jinn have been created – that is, ibadat or worship. 50

Is there a need for maintaining a safe and stable environment so that people might be free to pursue the real meaning of shari'ah in their own individual way? Yes, there is, but there also are alternative Quranic means of establishing and securing such an environment without necessarily having to resort to executions, amputations, floggings, stonings, oppressions, and so on. Moreover, we live in times when the latter sort of approach to establishing a public space that is conducive to spiritual pursuits is no longer appropriate, constructive, practical, or capable of encouraging spirituality.

Furthermore, all of the foregoing can be said without, for a moment, implying that what took place in the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was in any way immoral, cruel, incorrect, uncivilized, or barbaric. God knew the people who lived in the time of the Prophet better than we do, and Divinity proscribed for those people what was necessary to help them create -- in their social, economic, historical, and spiritual circumstances -- a safe, secure, stable public sphere that could assist such individuals to begin to make the transition from what had been in pre-Islamic times to what might be through the degrees of freedom contained in the Divine guidance of the Qur'an.

In fact, the inclination of the Prophet was to discourage people coming to him and making their sins and transgressions public. The Prophet encouraged people to seek repentance from God directly rather than having things mediated through public procedures. 51

Nevertheless, if people insisted on confessing their sins to the Prophet or insisted on making a public issue of such matters, then, the Prophet was obligated to settle those matters in accordance with his duties as a Prophet of God and in accordance with the specific guidance given by Divinity for maintaining social order in those times. However, given that the Prophet is no longer physically present among us, there really is no one who currently exists who has the spiritual authority [despite the fact that many try to arrogate to themselves such authority] to carry out the same function as was performed by the Prophet in those earlier days, nor is there anyone currently available in the public sphere who has the depth of wisdom to verify that the specific rules contained in the Qur'an concerning, say, forms of punishment, are applicable to anyone beyond that portion of the community of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) that existed more than 1400 years ago.

In the days of the Prophet, when corporal forms of punishment came into play – and such was not the case all that frequently – those forms of punishment were understood as a way of having one's spiritual slate wiped clean with respect to

what one would be held responsible for in the life to come. Today, those same forms of punishment have been stripped clean of what had been – at one time – their spiritual function and, instead, are frequently used as tools of oppression to control people and forcibly impose some invented theology upon a population that takes issue with the spiritual corruption, economic inequities, and social injustices being perpetrated by such governments as they try to hide behind the ruse of merely wishing to establish shari’ah as the law of the land, when, in point of fact, shari’ah was never intended to be a law that people were compelled to obey and has always been the right way for an individual to seek and realize God’s purpose for that individual.

Earlier, the etymology of shari’ah had been noted as a path that leads one to water. The nature of this water entails the sort of thirst-quenching experience that occurs when, God willing, an individual realizes her or his unique spiritual capacity and essential identity. This is the sort of water to which shari’ah leads a person, and this is why the Qur’an indicates that in such matters there is no compulsion (Qur’an 2:256), and this is why people make a mistake when they treat shari’ah as something that can be imposed on others.

On page 53-54 of Daveed Gartenstein-Ross’s book *My Year Inside Radical Islam*, the author writes:

“I had known from the first time I encountered Ashland’s Muslims and saw al-Husein debate with Sheikh Hassan that there was a name for the kind of Islam practised by the community’s leaders: Wahhabism. The Wahhabis are a Sunni sect founded by Muhammad ibn-Abdul Wahhab, an eighteenth-century theologian who lived in what is now Saudi Arabia. Abdul Wahhab was obsessed with returning Islam to the puritanical norms that he thought were practised in Prophet Muhammad’s time. He had a severe and strict interpretation of the faith. 53

“In accord with Abdul Wahhab’s teachings, the Wahhabis have an absolutist vision for Islam that holds that the Qur’an and Prophet Muhammad’s example (the Sunnah) are the only permissible guides for the laws of the state and the conduct of an individual. They resent Muslims whose norms differ from theirs ... the Sufis are also particularly despised. The Sufis ... tend to be more free-form in interpreting the Qur’an.”

Starting with the last sentence first, the fact of the matter is that interpretation of the Qur’an – whether by Sufis or others – is not a part of shari’ah. In Surah 3, verse 7, one finds:

“He [that is, God] it is Who hath revealed unto thee (Muhammad) the Scripture wherein are clear revelations -- They are the substance of the Book--

and others (which are) allegorical. But those in whose hearts is doubt pursue, forsooth, that which is allegorical seeking (to cause) dissension by seeking to explain it. None knoweth its explanation save Allah. And those who are of sound instruction say: We believe therein; the whole is from our Lord; but only men of understanding really heed.” 54

Moreover, in another part of the Qur’an, Allah provides the following guidance:

“He granteth wisdom to whom He pleaseth; and he to whom wisdom is granted receiveth indeed a benefit overflowing; but none will grasp the message but men of understanding.” (2:269)

Interpretation is not an expression of the wisdom that God grants but is the antithesis of that wisdom. Interpretations are projected onto Divine guidance, whereas wisdom concerning that guidance is a gift of God.

Contrary to what Mr. Gartenstein-Ross claims, Sufis don’t have a more ‘free-form way’ of interpreting the Qur’an. Rather, they try to refrain from interpreting the Qur’an and seek, instead, to struggle to be in a spiritual condition that, if God wishes, such an individual will receive wisdom from God concerning those Quranic verses that are not clear and straightforward.

Interpretations are invented explanations that are a function of ignorance and presumption. Wisdom is a received understanding that has been granted by God and is a function of, among other features, Divine grace/barakah and an individual's taqwa or God-consciousness. 55

According to the author of *My Year Inside Radical Islam* – and as previously noted – “Abdul Wahhab was obsessed with returning Islam to the puritanical norms that he thought were practised in Prophet Muhammad’s time. He had a severe and strict interpretation of the faith.”

However, what was practised by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was not some form of puritanical doctrine but, rather, a way, or deen, or tariqa, or shari’ah, or sirat-ul-mustaqueen that helped individuals learn, God willing, how to become a person of understanding and wisdom concerning the nature and purpose of Quranic guidance. In contrast to what Abdul-Wahhab and others of fundamentalist leanings believe, this way of Allah was not meant to be imposed on anyone and, consequently, it could not become the law through which the state governed people.

As noted previously, the function of the state is different from the function of shari’ah. Shari’ah is intended to govern the realm of private spiritual aspiration according to one’s capacity as well as in accordance with Divinely granted understanding. The state is intended to create the sort of public space within which people would be able to freely

and safely pursue shari'ah according to their understanding of things as long as that understanding did not spill over into compelling others to live in accordance with such a perspective. 56

The puritanical system to which Abdul-Wahhab wished to return people was a figment of his imagination. The puritanical system that he invented was the result of a revisionist history that Abdul-Wahhab constructed concerning the nature of Divine revelation and the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

The severe and strict interpretation of faith that was held and promulgated by Abdul Wahhab was a projection of his own spiritual pathology onto both the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The system envisioned by Abdul Wahhab was not a process of returning Islam to its roots but a failure to understand the nature of those roots altogether and as such laid the foundations for a system of theological oppression that has, like a virulent pathogen, spread to many parts of the world.

The foregoing comments actually lead to an observation concerning the title of the book by Daveed Gartenstein-Ross. More specifically, *My Year Inside Radical Islam*, is something of a misnomer.

If a person spent a year with a group that counterfeited money and, then, wrote a book about his or her experiences during that period calling



the memoir: *My Year Inside the Federal Treasury*, the people who read the book might object because they clearly understand that the counterfeiting outfit has nothing to do with the Federal Treasury Department except in relation to the counterfeiting group's attempt to pass off its product as a legitimate form of legal, monetary tender. 57

However, a similar sort of objection can be made with respect to the experiences of Mr. Gartenstein-Ross. He didn't really spend a year inside of radical Islam. Rather, he spent a year with a group of radical spiritual counterfeiters who did their best to try to convince Mr. Gartenstein-Ross that their product was the equivalent of Islam, which it wasn't.

To put forth such an observation concerning the problem with the title of Mr. Gartenstein-Ross' book doesn't undermine the importance of much of what the author has to say about the group in question since I would agree with many aspects of his critical commentary concerning the teachings of that group that are recounted in his book. I merely wish to place those critical observations in a proper context by saying that although the group in question might have been radical, and although that same group parasitically sought to usurp the name Islam and, in the process, the group attempted to create the impression that its radical philosophy was part and parcel of Islam, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross actually spent time inside a group

of counterfeiters rather than having spent time inside an Islamic group.

On page 71 of his book, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross writes:

“When I was a campus activist at Wake Forest, I was always eager to speak against injustice, and often considered myself courageous when I did. But my approach to Al-Haramain [i.e., the Muslim group in Ashland, Oregon] was the opposite. I recognized that disagreeing with prevailing religious sentiments could stigmatize me. My approach, starting with my first week on the job, was to avoid making waves, to try to understand where the others were coming from, and to emphasize our religious commonality rather than argue over differences.”

Not wishing to create controversies or wanting to emphasize commonalities rather than argue about differences or trying to understand someone else’s perspective are all important and commendable intentions. Nonetheless, I believe that the search for truth as well as Mr. Gartenstein-Ross’s personal situation would have been better served if he had stuck with his tendency to speak out against injustice and give voice to the problems he saw rather than, due to a fear of being stigmatized, remain silent.

In a sense, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross became his own worst enemy with respect to being pulled into the spiritual quagmire represented by the Ashland group because, for a time, he seemed to have suspended the very tools with which God had equipped him – namely, an inherent dislike of injustice as well as a critical capacity for detecting when things don't make sense. In short, for a time, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross ceded his intellectual and moral authority to the group or leaders of the group in Ashland, when he would have been much better off if he listened to the counsel of his own heart ... which in many cases -- at least with respect to the things about which he wrote in his book -- was a better source of understanding concerning the nature of Islam than anything he was hearing from the Muslim group with which he was associating.

I say the foregoing not as someone who seeks to stand in judgment of Mr. Gartenstein-Ross but as someone who, so to speak, has been there and done that. There have been times in my own life when I should have listened to the counsel of my own heart but, instead, gave preference to the views and ideas of someone else out of a desire to not stir up controversy or disturb the peace and, in the process, ceded to someone else the very intellectual and moral authority for which God had given me responsibility with respect to the exercise thereof.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said that one should:

“Seek the guidance of your heart (istaftii qalbaka: ask for the fatwa), whatever opinion others may give.”

To be sure, there are some dangers associated with such counsel because one can easily mistake the musings of one’s own ego or nafs for the guidance of one’s heart. However, if one is sincere in seeking the truth, then, if God wishes, Divinity will help move the heart in the correct spiritual direction.

The question that arises here, of course, is how does one know one is being sincere? In relation to this issue, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“All people are doomed to perish except those of action, and all people of action will perish except for the sincere, and the sincere are at great risk.”

Why are the sincere at such risk? Because, among other things, there are many who are seeking to sway the sincere from the counsel of their heart – the very counsel to which the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the previously

noted hadith is encouraging such sincere ones to listen to.

When one does not listen to the counsel or fatwa of one's heart, the vacuum that is created thereby becomes filled with the musings of whoever happens to be present and who is prepared, legitimately or illegitimately, to exploit another person's abdication of her or his spiritual responsibilities with respect to his or her own heart.

This is what happened to Mr. Gartenstein-Ross when he became inclined to remain silent amidst the radicalized propaganda, biases, and prejudices of the Ashland group. Through his own decision to remain relatively silent concerning the problems he encountered within the group, he unintentionally opened himself up to the malignant forces that would begin to work on him through the theological machinations of the Wahhabi-influenced group with which the author had, for a time, chosen to associate in Ashland, Oregon.

One of the first things the group tried to do was undermine Mr. Gartenstein-Ross' God-given right to try to ascertain, for himself, the truth with respect to an array of issues. For instance, at one point in his book, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross describes how, when working in the office of the Ashland group, he wrote an e-mail in response to a university student who was inquiring about the practice of infibulation, a process of genital mutilation that is forced upon women within

various Muslim communities in different parts of the world.

Very reasonably, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross wrote to the student and explained that one had to distinguish between the teachings of Islam and cultural practices that had nothing to do with such teachings but which, unfortunately, had been conflated with those teachings by people of mischief and those who had vested theological interests. The author clearly, and correctly, indicated to the student that the practice of infibulation has nothing to do with Islam.

One of the consequences that ensued from the e-mail was that the other members of the Ashland group were very upset with Mr. Gartenstein-Ross for having written such an e-mail. The author was told that he did not have the right to issue a fatwa, and there were numerous scholars in Saudi Arabia who were far more qualified than was Mr. Gartenstein-Ross and who were prepared to answer such complex questions of Islamic law.

Despite all too many facets of the Muslim community operating for some 1100-1200 years under the contrary delusion (since the rise of various schools of jurisprudence within the Muslim community), there is no such thing as Islamic law. While there are legal systems that have been generated by Muslims, and while, sometimes, these legal systems do seek to incorporate this or that understanding concerning what certain people

believe Islam to be about, the result is not Islamic law but, rather, Muslim law.

A whole cacophony of religious scholars, imams, qazis, muftis, and theologians have arrogated to themselves the right to make pronouncements – called fatwas -- which they believe to be binding on others. They have developed arcane, obscure, irrelevant, and deeply flawed methodologies for generating torturous explanations that attempt to justify such practices as female mutilation, or that seek to justify: why women should be completely covered, or why women should be deprived of the rights that the Qur'an clearly gives them, or why men should be beaten if they don't grow a beard, or why a woman who is raped should be executed for fornication, or why honour killings are okay, or why not belonging to a given madhab or school of jurisprudence is a heinous crime and renders one an unbeliever, and other similar iniquities.

The practice of infibulation or female mutilation is not a matter of complex Islamic law. It is a matter of a complex pathology.

There is nothing of a reliable nature in the Qur'an to support such a practice. There is nothing of a reliable nature in the sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad to support such a practice.

However, the fundamentalist mind-set seeks to induce one to believe that life is real only when one submits to the beliefs and teachings of certain acceptable – to the fundamentalists -- religious

scholar. According to that mind-set, if one doesn't operate out of a given madhab's (school of jurisprudence) book of fiqh or application of law based on such a school's interpretation of the Qur'an, Hadith, and subsequent legal commentary, then, one is leading an invalid, haramic life. 64

For such a mind-set, validity is not a matter of whether a given understanding can be shown to conform to the guidance of the Qur'an. Rather, validity is purely a function of whether a given understanding conforms to a certain theological paradigm.

If one conforms, then, one is a brother or sister. If one dissents, then, one is likely to lose one's family affiliation and become branded as a kafir or unbeliever.

On page 94 of *My Year Inside Radical Islam*, one reads:

"As I was walking toward the red Tercel, a dark-haired woman who looked to be in her late thirties greeted me. She wasn't wearing a hijab, the head scarf worn by Muslim women. I was surprised to see her. It took me a second to realize the reason for my surprise: it had been weeks since I'd had any real contact with a woman. And, to my dismay, I had begun to internalize the dress code of the Musalla. Her lack of hijab struck me as wrong."



What Mr. Gartenstein-Ross is describing when he talks about having begun to internalize the dress code of the Musalla or Muslim center in Ashland is, actually, an expression of Pavlovian classical conditioning. In some of the early experiments conducted by Pavlov, a dog would be presented with an unconditioned stimulus, such as food, and, the presentation of the food would automatically induce the dog to salivate, that was referred to as an unconditioned response. In the next stage of the experiment, a tone would be sounded at the same time as the food was presented, and when the tone and sight of the food were paired enough times, the sounding of the tone was enough to induce salivation in the dog even if no food was present.

The process through which the dress code was being internalized within Mr. Gartenstein-Ross is not exactly the same as the previously described experiment of Pavlov, but there are some important similarities. When most men who have grown up in North America meet a woman – such as the situation described by Mr. Gartenstein-Ross - there is no inherent sense that there is anything wrong with the way such a woman is dressed as long as her clothes fall within certain broad parameters of aesthetics and decency.

In such a case, the unconditioned stimulus is the woman and her clothing. However, under normal circumstances, there is not necessarily any particular unconditioned response that is likely to

be displayed by someone like Mr. Gartenstein-Ross in relation to such an encounter.

Yet, if one works and spends time within an environment like the fundamentalist-leaning group of Muslims in Ashland as Mr. Gartenstein-Ross did, then, what happens is that every time a woman appears on the scene, certain behaviours, comments, or body language are given expression through the male hierarchy of the group. Having spent considerable time in such environments, I am well aware of the things that are said, or the behaviours that are encouraged and discouraged, or the kind of body language and facial expressions that are used to induce people – both men and women -- to conform to a specific way of doing things.

One of the chants of the fundamentalist mindset is that women must be kept out of sight. Women should not participate in mosque activities – unless it is to cook food. Women should be herded into little rooms in the basement or to some other room away from the main focus of activity. Women should be dressed in a particular way. Women should observe hijab. Women need to be kept separate from men.

After enough pairings of the foregoing sort of theological perspective and the presence of women, then, in a relatively short period of time, the presence of a woman in and of herself -- unaccompanied by the presence of a fundamentalist-oriented commentator -- is enough

to elicit the mind-set that has been conditioning the thoughts and feelings of someone who is in a position like that of Mr. Gartenstein-Ross. Consequently, a person who is in a position similar to that of Mr. Gartenstein-Ross begins to automatically disapprove of a given woman if she does not conform to the theological mind-set that is in place.

One does not think about what is going on. One merely feels what one has been conditioned to feel such that the unconditioned stimulus – the presence of a woman without hijab – is enough to elicit feelings of disapproval ... that is, the conditioned response.

Although both Muslim men and women are enjoined to be modest in their manner of dress, the Quranic verse that indicates that women should cover themselves does not stipulate that no part of a woman should be visible to the world. This extended notion of covering up is someone's interpretation of what God meant. If covering up is for the sake of modesty, and men are required to be modest in their dress, then, why is it that women are required to be so much more modest and so much more covered up in this respect than men?

Why aren't men the ones who are stuffed into small rooms in the basement or up in the cramped quarters of the balconies? Why aren't men the ones who are kept away from the main center of activities within a mosque? Why aren't men the ones who are discouraged from taking part in

mosque activities? Why aren't men the ones who are told that they cannot use the main entrance to enter the mosque? Why is it okay to listen to the sound of a male voice in the mosque, but listening to the sound of a woman's voice somehow threatens to shake the foundations of all that is true and just? 68

In all too many mosques and Muslim centers, none of the foregoing questions are really open for discussion. Everyone – both men and women – has been conditioned to accept the status quo without engaging in any rigorous, critical exploration of whether such is the way things need to be or should be.

Almost everyone is on auto-pilot, operating in conjunction with classically conditioned responses. Reason, insight, critical inquiry, dialogue, rigorous examination, and wisdom concerning such issues are almost nowhere to be found.

As pointed out by Mr. Gartenstein-Ross, if one has objections to any of the foregoing, one is chastised and criticized for the weakness of one's faith, or one is given a book to read that is written by someone with the "right kind" of theological orientation, or one is recited a litany of obscure names residing in this or that Muslim country whom one is enjoined to treat as authoritative icons whose words are not to be disputed.

After all, those people are scholars. They are experts. They know Arabic.

Don't think! Don't reflect! Don't question! Just blindly accept what one is being told, and if one is not prepared to do this, then, you, my friend, are likely to be accused of being an unbeliever ... or a minion of Satan.

In fundamentalist-leaning groups [and what is being said here applies as much to fundamentalist Christian and Jewish communities as it does to Muslim groups] there is tremendous pressure – both spoken and unspoken – that is imposed upon people – both men and women – to submit to the theology being promulgated by the group. One is encouraged to internalize the idea that obedience to what the theological leaders are saying is the only acceptable form of adab or spiritual etiquette.

If one objects to the idea of being required to show blind obedience to human beings, and, instead, one humbly expresses the opinion that 'I thought we were supposed to submit only to God', one is told that what these leaders are saying is precisely the same as what God is saying. From their perspective, what they are promulgating is what God meant even if what they claim God meant is not necessarily what God actually said in the Qur'an.

According to the fundamentalist orientation, one should be ashamed for even considering the possibility that God might have meant something other than what the leaders are telling one is the case. Creating such controversy is described by those with vested theological interests as being

tantamount to fitna or creating discord in the community

Furthermore, one is “informed” by this same fundamentalist orientation to keep in mind that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) condemned the practice of fitna. But, while it is true that the Prophet is reported to have spoken against the practice of fitna – that is, the sowing of discord in the community – nevertheless, what, precisely, the Prophet meant by, or had in mind with respect to, the term of ‘fitna’ and what the fundamentalist mean when referring to such a term are not necessarily the same.

In other words, if you don’t agree with them, then, you are the source of fitna. To suggest that such people might be the source of fitna for introducing problematic ideas and understandings in the first place does not appear anywhere on their theological radar except as a hostile invader seeking to destroy Islam.

For the fundamentalist mind-set, the only way to achieve group and community harmony is if everyone submits to their theology. Thus, the fundamentalists have set up the game plan to be something of a fait accompli ... keep one’s mouth shut and do things their way or be labelled as an unbeliever and as one who creates fitna in the community.

The fundamentalist strategy often tends to consist of bullying, intimidation, indoctrination, control, and oppression. Sincere dialogue and

rigorous exploration of the issues are not compatible with such a strategy as Mr. Gartenstein-Ross indicates was his experience on many occasions during the course of his interaction with the Muslim group in Ashland, Oregon.

There are several junctures in Mr. Gartenstein-Ross' book when the issue of apostasy is, to a degree, discussed. This topic, of course, is of particular interest to the author of *My Year Inside of Radical Islam* because toward the end of his book he provides an account of how he left the Muslim community to become Christian.

Prior to the foregoing point, however, the issue of apostasy is explored within a period of time when Mr. Gartenstein-Ross still considered himself to be a Muslim. For example, on pages 153-154 of his book, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross relates the words of someone -- a fellow by the name of Abdul-Qadir -- for whom the author had respect on the basis of other conversations that they had engaged in previously.

Mr. Gartenstein-Ross wanted to know if such people should be killed. His friend said:

“The reason a lot of people are uncomfortable with this is because they don't understand the notion of apostasy in Islam. ... They hear that you can be killed for leaving Islam, and their reaction is 'Huh?' What they're not considering is that religion and politics aren't separable in Islam the way they are

in the West. When you take the Shahadah, you aren't just pledging your allegiance to Allah, you're aligning yourself with the Muslim state. Leaving Islam isn't just converting from one faith to another. It's more properly understood as treason." 72

Mr. Gartenstein-Ross reports that his response to the foregoing was: "That makes sense." Actually, the fact of the matter is that such a perspective makes no sense at all.

To say that religion and politics aren't separable in Islam is to propagate a myth. As the Qur'an points out, and as has previously been noted, when Muslims pledged their oath of allegiance to the Prophet at Hudaibiyah, not only was their oath given to Muhammad (peace be upon him) as the Prophet of God, but via revelation, Allah clarified the matter and said that the oath of allegiance given by Muslims was really to God for God's hand was above the hand of the Prophet.

There was no Muslim state at the time. There was a community in Yathrib whose people – both Muslim and non-Muslim – had, for the most part, agreed to accept the Prophet as leader of that community and who were prepared to accept his rulings in certain matters.

A constitution was established in order to formalize the nature of the relationship that had been agreed to between the Muslims in Yathrib and certain non-Muslim tribes. As such, this



constitutional understanding did not bind the non-Muslim tribes to a Muslim state but, instead, outlined the duties and rights of the respective signatories and in this sense was more like a treaty among different peoples than a document that created a political state. 73

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

“Leave me alone so long as I leave you alone.” He did not encourage people to make requests that he lay down further spiritual precepts beyond what was given in the Qur’an, nor did he encourage them to question him minutely about deen for fear that people would burden themselves in such matters beyond what God had intended and beyond what they were able to do.

Certainly, the Prophet was not someone who busied himself with setting up a political, state apparatus. He did what was necessary in order to establish a judicious, safe, stable public sphere, but this was done not for the purposes of politics or creating a state but, instead, was done in order to develop an atmosphere that was conducive to people pursuing shari’ah according to their individual capacities and inclinations.

When the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) passed away, a convention was established in which certain people in the community gave oaths

of allegiance to whomever was elected to be Caliph of the community. The taking of such an oath did not bind the individual to an Islamic state but was, rather, a contract between the leader and those who acceded to being led by such a person. 74

As Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with him) indicated upon becoming Caliph:

“Obey me as long as I obey Allah and His Prophet, when I disobey Him and His Prophet, then obey me not.”

The issue of the relationship between a leader and those who came to be aligned with that leader through an oath was not a function of politics or membership in a state, but, rather, this was a matter of a person’s understanding concerning the truth. When all parties involved in such an arrangement were on the same page with respect to their respective understanding of the nature of truth under a given set of circumstances, then, all such parties worked together, and when there were differences entailed by their respective understandings of the truth, then, allegiance no longer bound the two parties together.

Shortly after the Prophet passed away and prior to becoming Caliph, Hazrat Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him) said:

"Listen to me, ye people. Those of you who worshipped Muhammad (peace be upon him) know that he is dead like any other mortal. But those of you who worship the God of Muhammad (peace be upon him) know that He is alive and would live forever." 75

Then he repeated a passage from the Qur'an:

"Muhammad is but a messenger, Messengers of God have passed away before him; What if he dies or is killed? Will you turn back upon your heels? And whosoever turns back upon his heels will by no means do harm to Allah, and Allah will reward the thankful."

A Muslim's primary allegiance is to Allah. Messengers pass away, and Caliphs pass away, and leaders pass away, but Allah is ever-lasting, and, ultimately, it is one's relationship with God that is of essential importance – not one's relationship with a state or government ... Muslim or otherwise.

With respect to those who accept Islam and then turn away from it, the Qur'an says:

"Those who turn back to unbelief after the guidance has become clear are seduced by Shaitan who gives them false hopes." [47:25]

There is nothing in this ayat that alludes, either directly or indirectly, to the idea that such a person has committed treason with respect to the Muslim community. Moreover, there is a question concerning exactly what it means to “turn back to unbelief”.

If someone becomes a Muslim and, then, due to various circumstances, leaves the Muslim community but still retains many of the same beliefs, values, and commitments, can one necessarily and categorically state that such a person has turned back to unbelief? If such a person believes in God, and the Prophets, and the life here-after, and the Day of Judgment, and the angels, and has respect and love for Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and prays to God (but not necessarily in the prescribed format), and remembers God, and seeks to do good for the sake of God, and engages in charitable works, and is committed to fighting against injustice, and seeks, for the sake of God, to exercise qualities of patience, humility, honesty, love, compassion, kindness, forgiveness, and tolerance – can one say that such a person has turned back to unbelief? If one does not pray the five daily prayers or does not fast during the month of Ramazan or one does not go on Hajj even though one is physically and financially able to do so, but one believes in the oneness of God and gives zakat or charity, can one conclude that such a person has turned back to unbelief?

If someone comes to Islam accepting all the basic beliefs as well as observing the pillars of Islam, but, then, because of spending time with certain Muslims who are authoritarian, dogmatic, oppressive, arrogant, intolerant, misogynistic, and ignorant, then decides that he or she does not want to turn into that kind of Muslim yet is led to believe, through the use of undue influence in a cult-like set of circumstances, that anything which does not reflect such oppressive, arrogant dogmatism is not the true Islam, and, as a result, such a person wishes not be considered a Muslim anymore, can this kind of individual really have been said to have returned to unbelief? Isn't it much closer to the truth to argue that leaving behind the ignorance of such a group is actually moving toward Islam and not away from it ... that leaving such a group is an act of belief in support of truth and a rejection of falsehood?

If a person gravitates toward Islam because she or he has been led to believe that the way of Divinity is about the sort of love, compassion, remembrance, piety, character, justice, kindness, tolerance, patience, friendship, and integrity that shatters the heart due to its breathtaking beauty and majesty, and, then, one is instead shown through people's words and actions that some Muslims actually promote having contempt for others, judging others, talking behind their backs, maligning people, harbouring enmity toward Muslims and non-Muslims alike, killing whomever disagrees with you, terrorizing humanity, being

obsessed with harshly punishing others, oppressing people, and being intolerant toward one and all, why would anyone wish to stay mired in such a spiritual cesspool? Would not anyone with the least bit of understanding counsel such a person to leave the latter group of Muslims and return to her or his original understanding concerning Islam?

One begins to descend a very slippery slope when one starts to arrogate to oneself the right to decide who is, and who is not, a Muslim. A person treads on very dangerous spiritual ground when he or she assumes that God has appointed her or him to not only determine whose faith and deed constitutes the 'real Islam' but that God has, as well, authorized one to kill such individuals or punish them in any way.

Whatever might, or might not, have been the practices of the Prophet in relation to the issue of apostasy, this does not necessitate that such a practice must be observed in the present day. Just because the Prophet might have had, by the Grace of Allah, the spiritual wisdom and insight to make determinations in such matters, it does not, therefore, follow that anyone in today's world enjoys the same kind of spiritual wisdom and insight or that anyone in today's world has the same duties and responsibilities that accrue to a Prophet of God but that do not necessarily accrue to the rest of us.

According to some individuals, there is a reported hadith of the Prophet Muhammad in which he indicated that 'Whoever accepts Islam and then renounces that faith should be killed.' On the other hand, there also are reported hadiths that indicate that the Prophet told people to destroy their collections of hadith. 79

First of all, it is not clear what the Prophet meant – if he actually did say what he is reported to have said in this regard – when he allegedly indicated that anyone who commits apostasy should be killed. There are people who claim that they know what he meant, but I'm not quite sure why I should believe that such individuals actually know the mind and intentions of the Prophet.

Secondly, the Qur'an says:

"O believers! Obey Allah, obey the Rasul and those charged with authority among you. Should you have a dispute in anything, refer it to Allah and His Rasul, if you truly believe in Allah and the Last Day. This course of action will be better and more suitable." (Qur'an 4:59)

Now, if the Prophet ordered that collections of hadith were to be destroyed, I'm rather uneasy with the spiritual appropriateness of following something – namely, collections of Hadith -- which has reached me in apparent contradiction to such guidance. This is especially so since the alleged

saying concerning apostasy does not just require me to do something that affects only my own, individual life but, rather, is requiring me to do that which has serious ramifications for other human beings and their being able to continue to live.

The Qur'an indicates I might refer any such quandaries or disputes to Allah and His Rasul, and I have done this. The counsel of my heart that arises from this process of referral tells me something quite different than what the alleged hadith concerning apostasy indicates. Moreover, since the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said, as previously indicated, that I should follow the counsel or fatwa of my heart no matter what others might say, then, this too would seem to mitigate against following the -- I repeat -- alleged hadith concerning apostasy.

Of course, there will be those who will point out that when the Prophet said one should listen to the fatwa of one's heart no matter what others might say, the Prophet was not suggesting that this gives people permission to act in contravention to spiritual principles. I tend to agree with such a perspective while simultaneously noting that there is both considerable ambiguity as well as quite a few degrees of freedom concerning the nature of what, precisely, is entailed by such principles.

In addition, although the previously noted ayat of the Qur'an does indicate that one also should obey those who are charged with authority among us, there are quite a few questions that arise with



respect to the issue of precisely who it is that has been charged with such authority. There are many people who have usurped authority in illegitimate ways. There are many people who have arrogated to themselves the power to oppress the lives of others. Yet, I have a sense that those among us who actually have been charged by Divinity with true spiritual authority are few and far between.

Many people confuse power with authority. Just because God has granted one power, this does not mean that God also has granted one authority.

There are many pretenders who seek to use their power to leverage such authority or use their power to act as a pseudo-substitute for such authority, but, in reality, there are precious few people who have been charged with authentic authority. Furthermore, I am not at all convinced that such legitimate authority is necessarily given expression through the head of any specific political state or nation or that being charged with valid spiritual authority necessarily entails membership in the circles of religious scholars, imams, muftis, jurists, mullahs, or theologians.

On pages 177-178 of *My Year Inside Radical Islam*, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross writes:

“... my spiritual needs are irrelevant if Allah exists. If Allah exists, none of our spiritual needs will be fulfilled if our relationship with Him is based on falsehood. If Allah exists, we don't forge a

relationship with Him. Instead, He dictates a relationship with us. Salafism led me to comprehend this in a way that I never did before. The scientific methodology espoused by Bilal Philips and others like him was an effort to ensure that our understanding and actions accord with Allah's will.

“Salafis carefully interpret the Qu’ran and Sunna because they believe that the best way of interpreting Allah’s will is going back to the earlier understanding of Islam. The earliest generation of Muslims is a pious example because if Muhammad were truly a prophet, those who were closest to him and experienced life under his rule would best understand the principles on which an ideal society should be built.”

While one might agree that a person’s spiritual needs might not be fulfilled if the individual’s relationship with Divinity is based on falsehood rather than truth, this still leaves the problem of determining what is truth and what is falsehood. According to the quoted passage, those who are under the influence of the Salafi approach to things believe they are capable of differentiating truth and falsehood, but is this necessarily the case?

The Salafis claim to have a methodology that will bring one back to the earliest understanding of Islam ... the one that existed at the time of the Prophet and his Companions. The Salafis contend that the ones who were closest to the Prophet had

the best understanding of the principles on which an ideal society should be built, and, therefore if one can understand what they understood, then, one will have what one needs to be able to build an ideal society.

Leaving aside the issue of whether, or not, the point of Divine guidance actually is to help people establish an ideal society, there are a few other potential problems with the Salafi perspective as outlined in the earlier quote. First of all, why should one be expected to permit one's relationship with God to be filtered through someone else's understanding (for example, that of the Salafis) of, in turn, another individual's understanding (for example, that of the Companions of the Prophet) of God's guidance?

Furthermore, what guarantee does one have that the manner in which Salafis go about interpreting the earliest sources is correct or leads to valid conclusions? Why should I suppose that the Salafis have correctly understood the intentions, meanings, and purposes of such earliest sources?

When someone says something, all one has to go on are the words. One does not have direct access to what is going on in the mind, heart, and soul of the person who utters such words, but, rather, one must try, as best one can, to try to deduce the condition of a person's mind, heart, and soul based on analyzing the words.

One might, or might not, also have a concrete context out of which words are spoken to assist

one, somewhat, with deciphering what might have been meant by certain words in such a context. However, here again, one must not only deal with the problem of trying to determine whether, or not, one actually understands such a context in all of its historical, social, personal, and spiritual complexities, but as well, one still must deal with the problem of whether, or not, one accurately understands that context as the person making the statement understood such a context. 84

The truth of the matter is that most of us have difficulty trying to figure out what people mean when they speak in contexts going on today. Consequently, I have my doubts about how accurately someone will be able to render what was going on inside of the minds, hearts, and souls of people more than 1400 years ago.

Even if one were to agree with the idea that some of the people who lived in the time of the Prophet might have had the best and most intimate insight concerning the nature of Divine Revelation or the behaviour of the Prophet, nevertheless, one must jump a huge historical and experiential chasm to be able to go on to claim with any degree of validity that one understands things in precisely the way that people understood things some 1400 years ago. What is more, there is no way in which one can prove such claims.

The Salafi methodology and mode of approaching the problem of how does one differentiate truth from falsehood is unnecessarily

circuitous, indirect, and complicated. God's guidance was meant to be engaged by individuals who depend on God's help to arrive at a correct understanding of revelation rather than seeking to have one's understanding of Divine guidance filtered through someone else's understanding of someone else's understanding.

Each individual has her or his own responsibility to struggle with the task and challenge of working toward ascertaining the nature and meaning of Divine guidance for himself or herself. My spiritual duty is to seek and to surrender to God's truth. My duty is not to seek and submit to someone else's version of that truth.

Unfortunately, shari'ah has been made a public issue when, in fact, it is a private matter. Shari'ah has been subordinated to a system of religious leadership and power struggles that demand obedience to the leadership and its perspective. Guidance is not a demand for obedience but is an attempt to draw one's attention to a path that leads toward, through, and by means of truth, justice, identity and purpose

Spirituality has been "legalized" in the sense that the former has been reduced to being a function of legal dogmas and rules that are an oppressor of spirituality not the means of realizing and unleashing spirituality. Spirituality has been made a matter of obedience when, in truth, spirituality lies entirely at the opposite end of the spectrum from matters of obedience.

Spirituality is about honoring – through realizing and fulfilling – the amana or trust that has been bequeathed to us. Spirituality is not about ceding moral or intellectual authority to others. Spirituality is about what it means to be a servant of God who creatively serves the responsibilities of being God’s Khalifa, or vice-regent, on earth and, and as such, all of life becomes an expression of worship.

It is not possible to realize the amana or trust through obedience to authority in and of itself. Mere obedience to authority removes the active and dynamic element of personal responsibility, commitment, and on-going intellectual and moral choice that is necessary for the struggle toward spirituality.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said that: “the one who knows one’s soul, knows one’s Lord”. One can’t come to know one’s soul by abdicating one’s spiritual responsibilities and ceding them to another person’s understanding of things – even if the latter understanding is correct.

The Qur’an gives expression to wisdom. Nonetheless, as the Prophet is reported to have indicated: “What good is the Qur’an without understanding?” Consequently, the understanding one must have is one’s own understanding instead of mere obedience to another individual’s way of understanding things.

All too often, obedience qua obedience entails a desire on the part of an individual to get out from beneath the felt existential burden of having to constantly and rigorously search for truth and justice. As a result, all too many people shy away from embracing the struggle that the Qur'an indicated that God intended life to be for human beings.

“And surely We shall test you with some fear and hunger and loss of wealth and lives and crops.”  
(Qur'an, 2:155)

The struggle of life requires us to constantly seek that which is more true, just, and essential and to leave behind that which is less true, less just and less essential. The intention with which one pursues spirituality should not be to submit to and satisfy someone else's theological likes and dislikes but, instead, to seek the truth concerning oneself and one's relationship with Being and to do justice in accordance with that truth and in accordance with one's capacity for both truth and justice.

One must stand alone before God and affirm [through understanding and action] one's relationship with God - 'Am I not your Lord?' As the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “Every one of you is a guardian, and every one of you shall be questioned about that which you are guarding.”

The aforementioned affirmation is not out of obedience qua obedience. Instead, the indicated affirmation is an expression of one's recognition of the way things are with respect to the Divine order of creation and Allah's purpose for creation. 88

First comes understanding ... however limited this might be. Obedience without understanding is an empty form, and when the mind, heart, and soul have a proper insight into the nature of creation, then, intentions arise, God willing, which conform with the nature of truth and justice. This conformity between, on the one hand, intention, and, on the other hand, truth and justice is not obedience per se but, rather, the conformity constitutes action rooted in one's knowledge concerning the nature of one's being and its relation to Divinity.

Mr. Gartenstein-Ross lends credence to what is said above when his book described how he abdicated his own moral and intellectual authority and proceeded to cede them to the Salafi perspective. On page 154, he says:

"I didn't want to be racked by doubts and uncertainty. ... I wanted to live a life of conviction – like Abdul-Qaadir, like al-Husein [both imbued with the Salafi perspective]. I wanted a clear guide for telling right from wrong."



In exchange for what Mr. Gartenstein-Ross was led to believe would be a mental clarity free from doubts and uncertainty, all the author had to do was cede his intellectual, moral, and spiritual authority to the Salafi leaders. They would tell him what was true and what was false. He needn't worry about anything except submitting to what he was told. 89

As the author of *My Year Inside Radical Islam* wrote just prior to the above quotation:

“Now, when I heard a new fatwa or an unfamiliar point of Islamic law ... I no longer asked if it was moral. Rather, I asked whether this was a proper interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunna.” (page 154)

The meaning of what constituted a “proper interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunna” would be provided by the Salafi leaders in their literature, audio recordings, DVDs, lectures, sermons, and everyday interactions.

If one bowed down to Salafi theology, then all doubts and uncertainty would disappear amidst the absolutist -- albeit rather arrogant, self-satisfied and unproven -- pronouncements of the Salafi leadership. One didn't have to struggle with anything except the demand to submit to the theology being propagated by the Salafi brotherhood.

Mr. Gartenstein-Ross's original idea of seeking God and seeking to please God became lost amidst the theological musings of the Salafis. The author, by his own admission, became more preoccupied with not wanting "to be regarded as a heretic by my brothers and sisters in faith,"(page 154) and in the process he ceded his intellectual, moral, and spiritual authority to people who did not have his best spiritual interests at heart.

Later, in reference to himself, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross writes:

"When you became Muslim, you thought that the moderate interpretation was clearly right. You thought that extremists were either ignorant or manipulating the faith for their own gain. Your time at al-Haramain (the Ashland Muslim group) has made you question this. As your cherished vision of Islam collapsed, you're left feeling depressed, helpless, and confused."

The truth of the matter is that Mr. Gartenstein-Ross' cherished vision of Islam collapsed because he permitted spiritual vampires to come into his life and suck that vision from him. Of course, just as is the case in the movies, when Mr. Gartenstein-Ross decided to go to work at al-Haramain, he didn't realize he would be associating with such spiritual vampires, but, unfortunately, we don't always exercise due diligence under such

circumstances and, as a result, we often have to scramble just to be able to stay sufficiently alive, in a spiritual sense, to be able to protect ourselves against those who would rob us of our God-given birthright to seek out, and live in accordance with, the truth.

Mr. Gartenstein-Ross' cherished vision of Islam collapsed because he ceded his intellectual, moral, and spiritual authority to someone else so that he wouldn't be "regarded as a heretic by his brothers and sisters." He permitted concerns about how others would perceive him – which is a worry of the ego and not a spiritual principle -- to cloud his judgment and to undermine his spirituality.

Mr. Gartenstein-Ross' cherished vision of Islam was ripped from his heart through a process of undue influence exercised on him by the people involved with the cult-like Ashland Muslim group that was associated with the allegedly charitable al-Haramain Foundation. Having been exposed to similar people and situations, I know the incredibly relentless, stifling, and oppressive pressure that can be placed on a person to induce him or her to submit to the theological propaganda being espoused by such fundamentalist-leaning self-proclaimed leaders.

Perhaps, the biggest difference between Mr. Gartenstein-Ross and myself is that I had someone whom I could trust to help me, by God's Grace, to resist permitting my understanding of, and love for, Islam to become corrupted. By his own admission

(which was noted previously), Mr. Gartenstein-Ross had no one whom he could trust to help him protect his cherished view of Islam, and, consequently, he became “depressed, helpless, and confused” ... just the sort of psychological and emotional condition that people of unscrupulous spiritual nature – such as the leaders of the Ashland Group -- love to take advantage of because a person who is drowning doesn’t tend to consider what the cost might be when someone of questionable spiritual integrity throws one what seems to be a life line.

Mr. Gartenstein-Ross’ experience was with a group that had a Salafi orientation. However, there are other fundamentalist-oriented groups within the Muslim community with whom he might have become entangled.

Moreover, although Mr. Gartenstein-Ross generally has good things to say about the Sufis throughout his book, the sad fact of the matter is that not all groups and teachers who refer to themselves as Sufi are necessarily authentic. We live in truly precarious spiritual times when spiritual counterfeiters are virtually everywhere and are busily engaged in trying to pass off what is ultimately worthless as legitimate spiritual tender.

Actually, on the one hand, given the obvious warmth that Mr. Gartenstein-Ross felt toward the Sufis, and given that it was his friend at Wake Forest who introduced him to Islam through ideas and teachings that were Sufi-oriented, and given

that Mr. Gartenstein-Ross even took Shahadah with a Sufi group in Italy, one might ask the question of why the author of *My Year Inside Radical Islam* didn't communicate, in some way, with his Sufi connections in order to find a way of trying to counter what the Salafi group at the Ashland al-Haramain meeting place were doing as that group pulled the author deeper into the depths of the latter group's world view. On the other hand, the fact of the matter is that his friend at Wake Forest had himself come under the influence of a fundamentalist group and had largely distanced himself from the Sufi perspective. Furthermore, once these sort of fundamentalist groups are successful in creating a sense of vulnerability in a person such that the individual begins to have doubts about how to go about seeking spiritual truth, and, as a result, the individual begins to cede more and more of her or his intellectual, moral, and spiritual authority to the leaders of the fundamentalist group, then, a person becomes less and less inclined to consider any source of understanding as being reliable except that which one is told is authentic by the fundamentalist group. In short, one begins to exist in an almost hermetically sealed environment in which seeking access to information and behaviours other than what the fundamentalist group are espousing doesn't tend to enter one's mind or heart.

In effect, one begins to self-censor one's own thoughts, feelings and behaviours in order to try to fit in with what is going on around one and to be

accepted by the group. Moreover, whenever one says or does something that runs counter to the worldview of the fundamentalist group with which one is associating, one undergoes a new round of criticism, censorship, and indoctrination by the other group members ... which, in time, leads to further forms of self-censorship.

Little by little, one is emptied of oneself and replaced by the worldview of the group. The pressure applied to the individual is somewhat like what happens when a boa constrictor wraps its body around, say, a human being.

The person seeks to take in new air. However, at some point, the individual also has to exhale. When the individual does this, the boa constrictor wraps more tightly around the individual that, in turn, restricts the ability of the individual to take in new air with the next round of breathing.

This cyclical process of increasing constriction continues until the person is unable to take in any new air at all and/or the person's bones begin to break. What happens within fundamentalist groups as well as within inauthentic Sufi groups is similar to the interaction between a boa constrictor and its prey, except that in the case of such groups, it is the mind, heart, and soul of the individual that is broken, and as well the individual becomes less and less willing – because of the group pressure that is being applied -- to take in new information and possibilities concerning the nature of truth and justice.

Toward the latter part of his book, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross describes some of the factors that played a role in his leaving what he believed to be Islam and converting to Christianity. Let us leave aside the issue that, perhaps, what Mr. Gartenstein-Ross left was not Islam but, instead, was someone's theological invention that the fundamentalist group in question referred to as Islam and, thereby, helped confuse people like Mr. Gartenstein-Ross who, while being very interested in learning about Islam, unfortunately, took up associating with the wrong people ... people who led him further away from Islam rather than deeper into it.

On pages 231 through 233 of *My Year Inside Radical Islam*, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross writes:

[Beginning of a long quotation] "In church the next Sunday, the sermon was about God's love. For months, I was sure that I couldn't possibly be worthy of God's love. ... The sermon had an angle I didn't expect: that we weren't really worthy of God's love." Nobody deserves salvation," the preacher said. "We're all tarred with sin; we are all dead in our own sinfulness. None of us is worthy of standing before God on the Day of Judgment."

"Long pause. "But He loves us anyway. He loves us with a perfect divine love. The only way we can be worthy of standing before God is through the sacrifice of the perfect embodiment of humankind, the sacrifice of one without sin. That is

why God gave us the ultimate sacrifice, the sacrifice of His only begotten son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

“This was the first time that I had considered that God might love me even though it was a love that I didn’t deserve. The idea appealed to me deeply on an emotional level. But was it the truth?”

He goes on to write:

“I found that Islam and Christianity had two very different accounts of what became of Jesus. Christianity holds that Jesus was crucified, died, was buried, and rose from the dead. ... Verse 4:157 [of the Qur’an] addressed the crucifixion: “That they said (in boast), ‘We killed Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah’; -- but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ, therein are full of doubts.” Which one was right?

“What principle could distinguish between the two accounts? I thought of the persecution that Jesus’ disciples suffered because of their belief in the crucifixion and resurrection. They didn’t die for a set of ideals – it was for a set of facts. Do people die for a set of facts that they know to be false?

“I felt that I was on to something. Slowly, with each layer that I pulled back, I felt my ideas about God shifting.” [End of long quotation]



I should start by saying that the point of the comments that are to follow has nothing to do with trying to establish who is right and who is wrong with respect to the life of Jesus (peace be upon him). We all have responsibility for the spiritual choices we make concerning beliefs and behaviours, and both Christians and Muslims believe that each of us will be held accountable for such choices on the Day of Judgment.

My focus is, instead, on a style of argument that is being used by Mr. Gartenstein-Ross. In fact, it is almost as if Mr. Gartenstein-Ross doesn't seem to understand that the manner in which he talks in his book about the kind of considerations that led to his conversion to Christianity tends to indicate that he appears to be committing many of the same kinds of mistakes he made with respect to his interaction with the Salafi-oriented group in Ashland, Oregon.

Other than referring to themselves, respectively, as Christian and Muslim, what is the difference between the Christian preacher to whom Mr. Gartenstein-Ross refers and the Salafi shaykhs or preachers whom he mentioned? They both are espousing their worldviews and seeking to influence the people who are listening to their respective sermons. They both believe themselves to be correct and to have a sound understanding about what the relationship is between God and creation.

According to the Christian preacher whom Mr. Gartenstein-Ross quotes, none of us is worthy of God's love. Well, maybe, but on what empirical evidence is such a claim based? How does one go about proving such a statement? 98

Isn't it conceivable that precisely because we are God's creation that such a fact, in and of itself, renders us worthy of Divine love not necessarily because of us, per se, but because human beings give expression, in part, to God's handiwork. Creation is worthy of God's love because creation comes from God. Why assume that God would create something that Divinity would find unworthy rather than create something that God loved and cherished?

Indeed, in the Qur'an one finds:

"Behold thy Lord said to the angels: "I will create a vicegerent on earth." They said "Wilt thou place there one who will make mischief therein and shed blood? Whilst we do celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy (name)?" He said: "I know what ye know not." (Qur'an 2:30)

Allah has placed within each of us a potential for worthiness – a worthiness that was hidden from the understanding of the angels. Unworthiness is rooted only in the failure to nurture and develop the spiritual potential that God placed within us.

According to the Christian preacher cited by Mr. Gartenstein-Ross: “We’re all tarred with sin; we are all dead in our own sinfulness. None of us is worthy of standing before God on the Day of Judgment.”

One might agree that we are all tarred in sin of one kind or another. Most of us are aware of our individual faults, the mistakes we make, and the people we hurt through our deeds and misdeeds. The empirical proof of such a claim is in our daily lives.

However, the further contention that “we are all dead in our own sinfulness” might be quite another matter. This is an expression of a theological position for which proof is much harder to come by, if one can demonstrate it at all.

One might believe that such is the case. Nevertheless, having such a belief and proving that such a belief is true is not necessarily one and the same thing even though many people do suppose that because they believe something, then, somehow, merely having the belief means that the belief must be true.

Furthermore, when the Christian preacher mentioned by Mr. Gartenstein-Ross also claims that “None of us is worthy of standing before God on the Day of Judgment,” such a statement tends to generate a sense of dissonance with certain facets of both Christian and Islamic understandings. According to both religious traditions, the Day of Judgment is something that most of us will have to

face irrespective of whether we are worthy or not and irrespective of whether we are ready or not. We don't get any choice in the matter.

Then, the Christian preacher goes on to say: "The only way we can be worthy of standing before God is through the sacrifice of the perfect embodiment of human kind, the sacrifice of one without sin. That is why God gave us the ultimate sacrifice, the sacrifice of His only begotten son, the Lord Jesus Christ." First, the preacher says that none of us is worthy to stand before God on the Day of Judgment, and, then, it turns out that there is, after all, a way of being worthy of standing before God – namely, through Jesus (peace be upon him) who is described as being one that is without sin and who is the perfect embodiment of human kind.

I am willing to accept that Jesus (peace be upon him) is a perfect embodiment of human kind, and I am even willing to accept the idea that the life of Jesus (peace be upon him) was without sin. I also am willing to accept the idea that Jesus (peace be upon him) dedicated his whole life to God, and, in this sense sacrificed his life for the sake of God.

Nonetheless, saying all of the foregoing does not in any way require me to conclude that Jesus (peace be upon him) was the only perfect embodiment of human kind or that he was the only human being who was without sin or that he was the only person who willingly sacrificed his life for the sake of God. There have been many examples of

perfection, sinlessness, and sacrifice in the prophetic tradition.

So, if it is the case that what renders one worthy of standing before God on the Day of Judgement is because of the perfection, sinlessness, and sacrifice of a servant of God, then, perhaps there are many individuals from among God's prophets and messengers whose quality of life renders their followers worthy of standing before God on the Day of Judgment. One cannot simply take Jesus (peace be upon him), remove him from the context of spiritual history, and conclude, with any persuasiveness, that Jesus (peace be upon him) is the only one capable of making us worthy.

One also might raise a question about whether, or not, what renders someone worthy to stand before God on the Day of Judgement is a function of what someone else did quite independently of the choices we make as individuals. According to the theological perspective being espoused by the Christian preacher to whom Mr. Gartenstein-Ross alludes, the sacrifice of Jesus (peace be upon him) only renders us worthy of standing before God on the Day of Judgment if one believes in Jesus (peace be upon him) and the sacrifice that he is alleged to have made.

Therefore, the sacrifice of Jesus (peace be upon him), in and of itself, is not sufficient to render someone worthy of standing before God on the Day of Judgment. A person must make the

decision to accept and believe in that sacrifice, and it is the making of such a choice that is said to be necessary if the sacrifice of Jesus (peace be upon him) is to be effective in the life of that person. According to such a theology, Jesus (peace be upon him) is purported to have done his part, but individuals must also do their part – that is, to accept and believe in Jesus (peace be upon him) in accordance with the dictates of the theology being espoused.

With respect to the foregoing, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross says: “This was the first time that I had considered that God might love me even though it was a love that I didn’t deserve. The idea appealed to me deeply on an emotional level.”

The fact that an idea appeals to one on a deeply emotional level doesn’t necessarily make such an idea true. There were many ideas described by Mr. Gartenstein-Ross in his book that allude to his being touched on a deeply emotional level ... ideas that had to do with certain aspects of Islam, including its mystical, Sufi dimension, and, ideas that were sufficiently intense and deep to induce him to become a Muslim, and, yet, that, apparently, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross has decided to cast aside in favour of a certain kind of Christian theological argument. If both positions are rooted in something that touched him on a deeply emotional level, then, obviously, emotional considerations, in and of themselves, are not

necessarily capable of settling the matter of what is true and what is not true.

Furthermore, there is certain ambiguity entailed by the perspective that Mr. Gartenstein-Ross is putting forth at this point. If the perfection, sinlessness, and sacrifice of Jesus (peace be upon him) only has efficacy if a person chooses to accept and believe in those dimensions of the life of Jesus (peace be upon him), then, clearly, there is something that renders one worthy of standing before God apart from, but related to, the issue of Jesus (peace be upon him) – namely, the choice or decision one makes concerning Jesus (peace be upon him).

In Islam one is required to make certain choices for which one will be held accountable on the Day of Judgment. In Christianity one is required to make certain choices for which one will be held accountable on the Day of Judgment.

Theologies have arisen among both Muslims and Christians concerning what the nature of such choices should be. There is nothing new in what Mr. Gartenstein-Ross is doing in conjunction with his move toward Christianity that he wasn't previously engaged in when a Muslim – that is, he is caught up in theology, and he is being influenced by what others are saying rather than thinking for himself or examining any of these issues in a critically rigorous manner.

Of course, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross believes there is a huge difference between the two theologies. He

believes that the Christian theology is correct and that the Muslim theology is incorrect.

In support of his conclusions he says – as noted previously:

“What principle could distinguish between the two accounts? I thought of the persecution that Jesus’ disciples suffered because of their belief in the crucifixion and resurrection. They didn’t die for a set of ideals – it was for a set of facts. Do people die for a set of facts that they know to be false?”

This is not a very good argument. It is saturated with problems.

For example, he mentions how the disciples of Jesus (peace be upon him) suffered because of their willingness to believe the crucifixion and resurrection, but this, in and of itself, proves nothing except that they were committed to their beliefs. There were many Companions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) who suffered, who were tortured, and who lost their lives because of their commitment to their belief in the Prophet and the Qur’an.

If willingness to endure suffering as a result of belief in something is the measure of truth, then, why make reference to only the disciples of Jesus (peace be upon him)? Should one not suppose that if one is to abide by the logic of the argument being put forth by Mr. Gartenstein-Ross at this point,



then, the fact that if a person suffers as a result of the beliefs they hold, then, this is an indication that what they believe is true? 105

Consider the following set of cases. One person believes in the existence of God and undergoes suffering as a result of that belief. Another person does not believe in the existence of God and undergoes suffering as a result of that belief.

Both of the aforementioned cases involve suffering. According to Mr. Gartenstein-Ross, the presence of willingness to suffer for what one believes is an indication that what is believed must be true, and, yet, what the believer in God holds and what the disbeliever in God holds cannot simultaneously be true.

At this juncture, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross asks what he appears to believe is a rhetorical question: "Do people die for a set of facts that they know to be false?" The implied answer is "No! People do not die for a set of facts that they know to be false, and, therefore, according to Mr. Gartenstein-Ross, one must conclude that the set of facts for which the disciples were willing to die were and are true.

However, while one might agree with Mr. Gartenstein-Ross that people are not likely to be willing to suffer or die for a set of facts that they know to be false, this is not the situation with which any of us really is confronted. We have beliefs, and one of those beliefs is that there is truth, and we hope that the other beliefs we have accurately reflect the nature of truth or reality, but,

the fact of the matter is that in many cases we don't know whether, or not, the beliefs we hold are true. 106

People might not be willing to suffer or die for something that they know isn't true. Nonetheless, people often are willing to undergo suffering or to die for something that they believe to be true even if, ultimately, what they believe might turn out to be false.

The fact that certain people who claimed to be following Jesus (peace be upon him) were willing to suffer and die for what they believed with respect to the crucifixion and resurrection proves absolutely nothing about the truth of that in which they believed. The fact that certain people of a Salafi-orientation claim to be following the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and are willing to suffer and die for what they believe in this respect proves absolutely nothing about the truth of that in which they believe.

When he was a Muslim, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross ceded his intellectual, moral, and spiritual authority to a group of fundamentalist Muslims who followed Salafi teachings. When he became a Christian, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross ceded his intellectual, moral, and spiritual authority to another set of theological teachings.

Mr. Gartenstein-Ross might feel that everything has changed with his rejection of Islam and his conversion to Christianity. And, of course, in certain ways this is true, but in an essential sense, nothing really has changed in his

methodological approach to developing a spiritual world view.

In both cases he seems to have made choices on the basis of emotional considerations as well as on the basis of problematic theological thinking, rather than having made decisions due to any essential spiritual understanding. In both cases, he had a tendency to cede his intellectual, moral, and spiritual authority to other people rather than try to establish what the truth might be in terms that were rooted in his own spiritual capabilities.

When Mr. Gartenstein-Ross was inclined to ask lots of questions and engage in critical reflections concerning issues of morality, values, and justice, whether with respect to Christianity or Islam, then, in my opinion, he came a lot closer to the truth of things, than when he was inclined to cede away his intellectual, moral, and spiritual authority to others. Moreover, this is so irrespective of whether one is talking about Christian or Muslim theology.

As Mr. Gartenstein-Ross said when he was at an existential point that was sort of in between Islam and Christianity:

“For months, I was sure that I couldn’t possibly be worthy of God’s love. How could I be? Here I was racked with doubts, unable to trust myself to do the right thing or to follow basic rules.” (page 231)

Earlier in his book, Mr. Gartenstein-Ross said almost exactly the same thing as he hovered at a sort of spiritual fail safe point at the edge of the Salafi sphere of influence – namely, “I didn’t want to be racked by doubts and uncertainty ... I wanted a clear guide for telling right from wrong.” (page 154)

In the latter case, he permitted himself to be drawn into the Salafi theology. In the former case, he permitted himself to be drawn into the sphere of influence of Christian theology. In both cases he abdicated his spiritual responsibilities and ceded his intellectual, moral, and spiritual authority to someone else and permitted those people to establish the criteria for differentiating right from wrong and the true from the false.

Should one infer from the foregoing that I am saying that one should be the decider of truth? The answer to this question is: “No!”

God has given each of us spiritual sensibilities, faculties and capacities. These sensibilities, faculties, and capacities function best when we open ourselves up to be taught directly by God through the truth inherent in authentic revelation, through the truth that is manifested in the lives of the servants of Divinity, through the truth that is inherent in the nature of creation, as well as through the truth that is inherent in our unique spiritual capacity and essential identity.

The process of permitting oneself to be opened up to truth as it is manifested on different

levels of being is a long, difficult struggle. During this process one must go through a great deal of purification with respect to the different aspects of the soul and, as well, one must undergo many spiritual transformations across states and stations in order, God willing, to acquire the character traits that tend to be reflective of a mind, heart, soul, and spirit that has committed itself to learning how to let God teach one to travel along the spiritual path.

In this spiritual quest, people who are spiritually knowledgeable can play very important catalytic and supportive roles in assisting one, God willing, to travel along the path. However, at every point along this journey, one has responsibility for properly exercising one's God-given intellectual, moral, and spiritual authority. When this authority is ceded to others, one is extremely likely to encounter significant problems on the spiritual path.

I learned a great deal from my shaykh. However, at no point did he ever ask me to cede away my intellectual, moral, or spiritual authority to him. Rather, he focused on helping me learn how to exercise such responsibilities in a way that would lead me toward realizing my own personal relationship with Divinity rather than a relationship that was being mediated through, and filtered by, someone else.