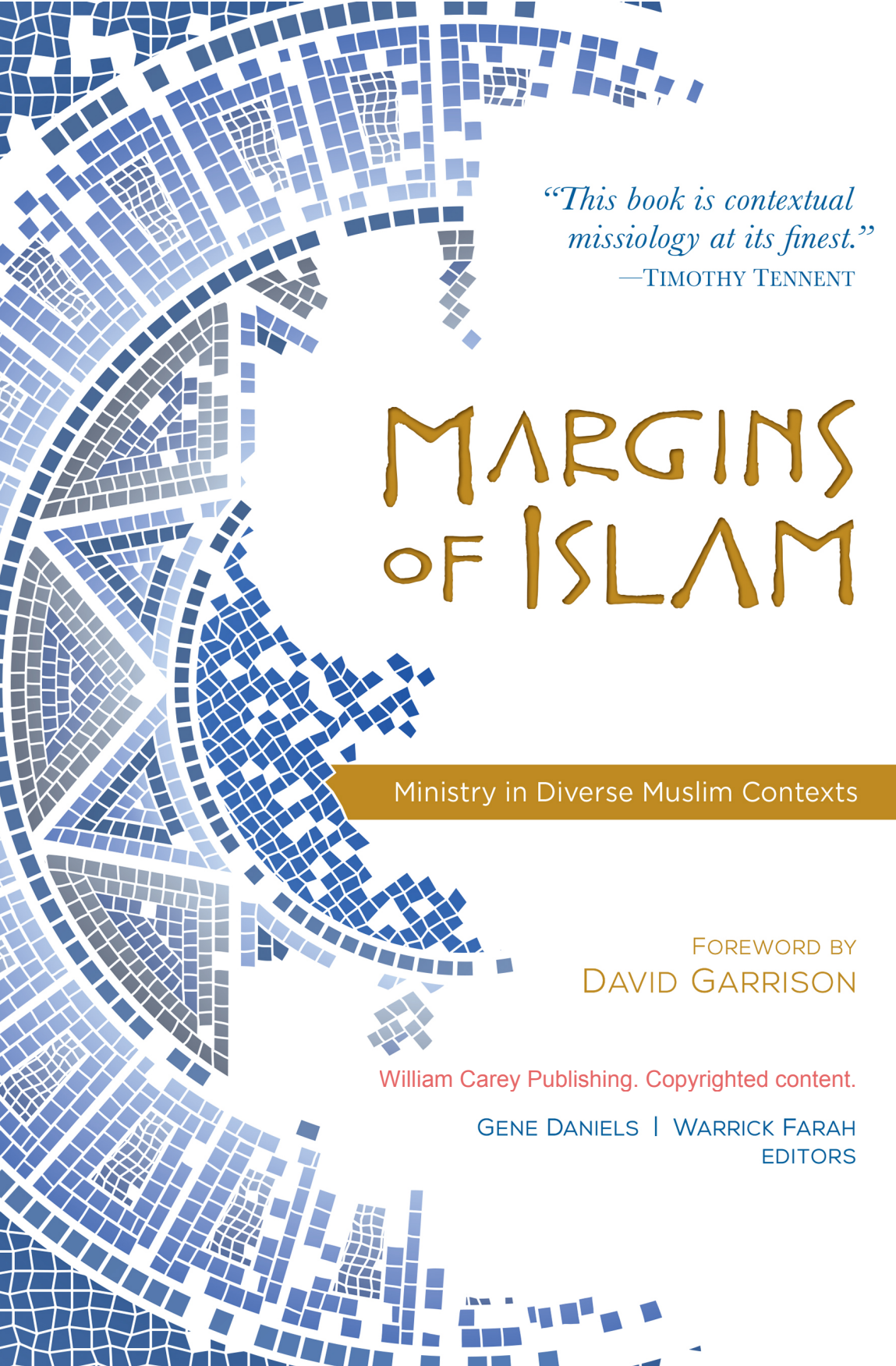


"This book is contextual missiology at its finest."
—Timothy Tennent

Margins of Islam

Ministry in Diverse Muslim Contexts

Foreword by
David Garrison

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Gene Daniels | Warrick Farah
editors

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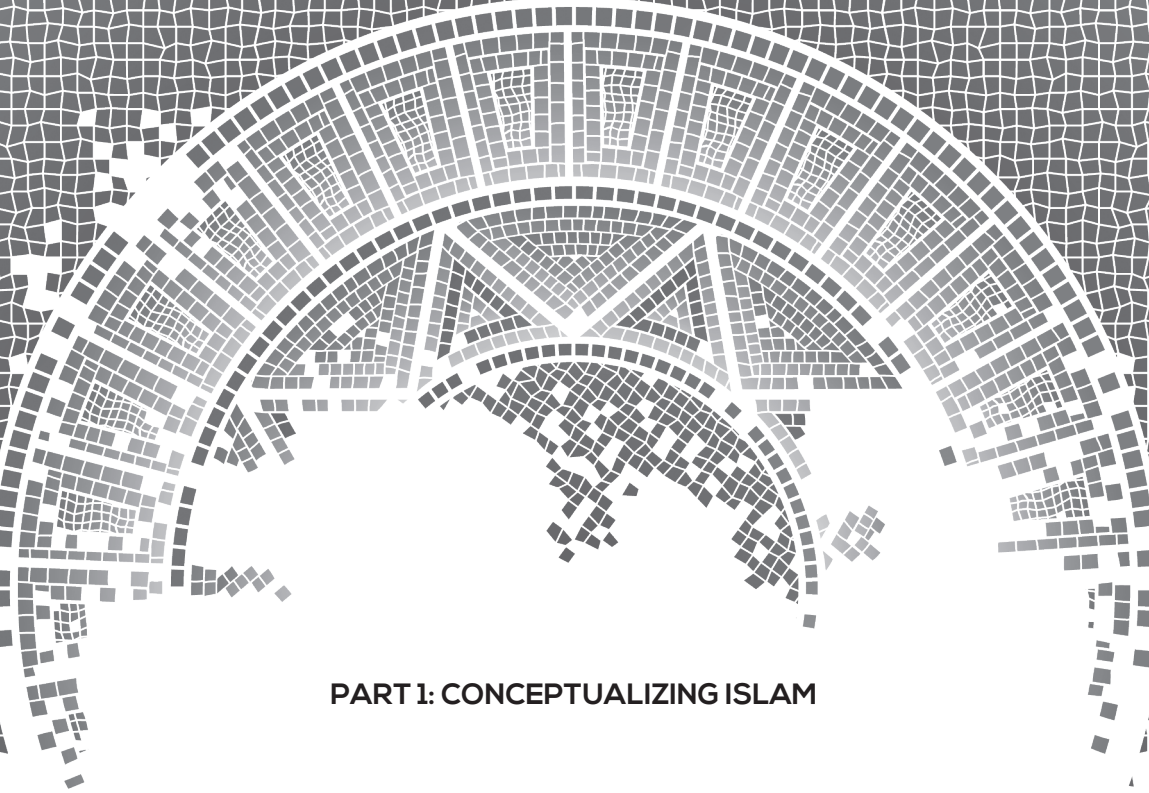
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PART 1: CONCEPTUALIZING ISLAM

CHAPTER

1

Who Represents Islam?

Evelyne A. Reisacher

The other day I had coffee with friends from church when one of them, Ryan, asked me urgently, "Evelyne, I thought I had a decent understanding of Islam, but I am now increasingly skeptical about what I know." He explained his confusion at encountering a multiplicity of Muslim voices and customs during his travels. For example, he did not know how to integrate narratives about a peaceful Islam when confronted with violent jihad in the news. He also wondered why, in Saudi Arabia, women do not drive, while in Pakistan they do and even pilot planes. He was also puzzled to see Muslims worship through songs and dances in some parts of the world, while others fiercely condemn such practices. He ended with, "Could you please tell me who represents Islam?"

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My first reaction was to say that it is impossible to respond to this question in a few sentences—Islam spans fourteen centuries and is now found everywhere in the world. But I understand Ryan. I had the same desire when I started engaging with Muslims several decades ago. I searched for *the* book or teaching that would reveal the true essence of Islam. I signed up for Muslim-awareness seminars in churches. In a few sessions they taught me the articles of faith and rituals of Islam, with occasional references to the *sharia*.[1] I trusted I had found the "real" Islam—that is, until I started interacting with Muslims in my own neighborhood and then around the world. I eventually came to the same conclusion as Ryan: How could all those various expressions of Islam I encountered neatly fit in one representation of Islam?

But working through Ryan's question is a necessary exercise for everyone engaging with Muslims. Indeed, I believe that his question is timely and highly relevant. First, because my friend Ryan is not the only one confused. Christian leader Steve Bell contends that Christians today "are deeply unsettled and divided—to say the least—about what Islam is" (2011, 250). It is, therefore, important to provide the church with resources to help its members sharpen their thoughts on this issue.

Second, scholars and religious leaders have debated this question since the beginning of Islam without reaching a consensus.[2] Some claim there is a universal Islam, and others believe Muslims are so diverse that it is impossible to find a definition that would satisfy everyone. Christians who want to engage Muslims with the gospel must therefore learn to appreciate the many nuances portrayed in this book.

Third, the response to the question of who represents Islam has significant impact on Muslim-Christian relations. In effect, if Christians do not take this question seriously, they may misrepresent Islam and Muslim societies. This could negatively impact their capacity to understand Muslims and respectfully witness to them. It could even lead to communication breakup, mistrust, and conflicts between Christians and Muslims.

Given the weight of these issues, I feel even more compelled to respond to Ryan. In this chapter, I will answer his query by addressing three questions that usually frame the debate around who represents Islam: (1) Is it good enough to state that there is one Islam? (2) How does one address the diversity of Muslim societies? (3) Who decides who is an authentic Muslim?

In my discussion, I will briefly introduce a number of theories and concepts proposed by scholars of Islam who have dealt with those questions, hoping that my readers will then be better equipped to minister in the diverse world of Islam today.

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[1] *Sharia* is Islamic canonical law based on the teachings of the Koran and the traditions of the Prophet, that is the Hadith and Sunna.

[2] Professor of Jewish Studies and Islamicist, Aaron W. Hughes (2013), writes, "The struggle to define the real Islam is not just a modern phenomenon carried out by Western interpreters of the religion. It is a phenomenon that dates back to the earliest sources of the tradition as various groups struggled to understand Muhammad and his message in the light of various legal, religious, and intellectual paradigms that they themselves both inherited and created" (3).

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One Islam?

Since Muslims share common symbols, beliefs, and practices, it is common to hear believers and scholars of Islam say that there is only "one Islam." Introductory books on Islam provide examples of what universally binds Muslims together. As an illustration, let us briefly consider the first two tenets of Islam, the oneness of Allah (*tawhid*) and the prophetic legacy of Muhammad. These two beliefs are summarized in the *shahada*, or Muslim confession of faith, which is a two-phrase sentence stating that there is no other divinity than Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger. Every Muslim must say the shahada to be considered Muslim. It serves as the password[3] to Islam for those who convert. It is also an identity marker that helps differentiate between Muslims and non-Muslims.[4] Swiss Muslim scholar Tariq Ramadan talks about "the *shahada* that every Muslim, in order to be recognized as such, must pronounce before God and the whole of humankind, and by which he establishes his identity" (2003, 73). This confession of faith unites all Muslims. It is on the basis of those commonalities that some scholars, such as the anthropologist Akbar Ahmed, argue that there is only "one Islam" (1986, 58).

But can there be such a straightforward response? Perhaps we could unpack this a bit by looking at some of the different ways Muslims understand the shahada that they recite. First there is the issue of wording. The two-part shahada, as currently spoken, is not recorded in the Qur'an but in the Hadith.[5] In early Islam, other variants of the shahada included confession of both Muhammad and Isa.[6] Given these nuances, it is quite possible that early Muslims did not all share the same fundamental confession. Would they all have been considered authentic Muslims?

Second, there is the issue of meaning. It is well attested that words can have several meanings depending on the context in which they are used. This raises the issue of the many debates about the nature of Allah (Cumming 2012) and the identity and role of Muhammad. Volume after volume have been written by Muslims about the meanings of these critical terms. Not only do Islamic theological schools hold diverging views, many individual Muslims do not align with any "official" view as they connect with Allah in their own unique experience. Which of these diverse views of Allah and Muhammad, while pronouncing the shahada, represents real Islam?

[3] One author calls it the "key to Islam, as well as its cornerstone" (Selim 2015, 83).

[4] In times of conflict, for example, some Muslim groups have used it to differentiate between non-Muslim enemies (who do not know how to recite the shahada) and the kin in religion who, when asked, can recite the confession of faith and are freed.

[5] See Qur'an 3:18 for an example of a verse containing only the first phrase. Likewise, in the Hadith there are examples of the first phrase standing on its own (Sunan an-Nasa'i, The Book of Forgetfulness, Book 13, Hadith 175).

[6] *Isa* is the Qur'anic name for Jesus. See for example Ṣaḥiḥ al-Bukhari, book 60, Hadith 106, "The Prophet said, 'If anyone testifies that None has the right to be worshipped but Allah Alone Who has no partners, and that Muhammad is His Slave and His Apostle, and that Jesus is Allah's Slave and His Apostle and His Word which He bestowed on Mary and a Spirit created by Him, and that Paradise is true, and Hell is true, Allah will admit him into Paradise with the deeds which he had done even if those deeds were few.'"

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Third, what if reciting the shahada alone is not sufficient to define who is a Muslim and who is not? This confession only refers to two articles of the faith (regarding God and the last prophet of Islam). What of the Muslims who say it but do not believe the other ones?[7] Or what about still other Muslims who may recite the shahada but don't follow the other four prescribed rituals.[8] Would they still be considered Muslims? Or inversely, would Muslims who follow other rituals but do not recite the shahada represent Islam?

Fourth, non-Muslims may also weigh in on the definition of who represents Islam. Unfortunately, many non-Muslims today seem to identify "authentic Muslims" as people who practice violent jihad and want to go back to seventh-century Islamic laws. Yet this would mean that Muslims with a different view are not "true" Muslims and therefore do not represent Islam. But this begs the question, "Do non-Muslims even have the right to decide who is and who is not a Muslim?"

Finally, there are those who never recite the shahada and still claim they are Muslims. We may call them cultural Muslims, or nonpracticing Muslims. They still feel part of the Muslim community, but their self-identification as Muslims is not based on their piety. Does their lack of religious practice give us the right to say that they are not valid representatives of Islam?

For brevity's sake, this discussion has only highlighted one well-known Islamic practice, the shahada. But the same discussion could be undertaken concerning other aspects of Muslim faith or practice, such as the belief in angels, fasting, or the giving of alms. Under every seemingly common term or practice in the Muslim world lurks great contextual diversity, and thus the reason for this volume. For those who wish to share the good news of Jesus with Muslims, it is simply not enough to say there is "one Islam" and let it go at that. We have to be willing to explore the multiple shades of meaning and different facets of expression within Islam. In the next section, I will introduce a scholarly debate which will help us do exactly that.

What Kind of Diversity?

Beyond question, Islam has generated a plethora of theological debates (as all religions do). These in turn have created many different interpretations of the Qur'an, the Hadith, and other important texts. For those who doubt the diversity of Islam, it would suffice to take them on a stroll between miles of bookshelves in libraries that specialize in Islamic studies. You will discover countless commentaries, with sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting views on Islamic texts. Esposito and Mogahed are right to say that "While many people commonly speak of Islam and Muslims in broad, all-encompassing terms, there are many *interpretations* of Islam

[7] For example, the beliefs in angels, holy books, the day of judgment, or predestination.
[8] The other rituals besides the *shahada* (confession of faith) are *ṣalat* (prayer), *ṣawm* (fasting), *zakat* (almsgiving), and *hajj* (pilgrimage).

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(emphasis added)" (2007, 1). We could also add to this all the individual opinions that have not been reported in scholarly works and circulate daily in mosques, families, and the public sphere of the Muslim world.

Other reasons for this diversity are related to the wide range of social, cultural, and political contexts Muslims live in. In the later pages of this volume you will read of settings as widely divergent as the secular Muslims of Bosnia to Sufis in Africa whose practice is infused with African traditional religions. If someone were to take one snapshot of the worldwide Muslim population, it would not come as a uniform portrayal but rather a collage of kaleidoscopic diversity. This leaves us with a real challenge of how to find terminology that will best express diversity without denying common beliefs. The rather eclectic listing of words and phrases below demonstrates some of how scholars have wrestled with this, and will hopefully convince my friend Ryan that no one can respond, in a single sentence, to the question of who represents Islam.

Let us start with the prominent Islamicist Ignaz Goldziher, who did not believe in a monolithic Islam. He claimed it was a mistake to look at Islam as a monolithic whole and believed that the dynamics of its diversity were evident in Islam from its earliest history (Lukens-Bull 2014, 1073). Then we have Professors Herbert L. Bodman and Nayereh Esfahiani Tohidi, who entitled their book *Diversity within Unity* (1998) to recognize the diverse cultural and social processes that shape the lives of women in Muslim societies in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Another noted scholar, Hughes (previously quoted), uses the phrase "version of Islam" and talks about "various constructions of Muslim belief and practice" (2013, 247). He later adds, "It is more appropriate to speak of an overlapping set of Islams that run the gamut from the mystical to the militant or from the so-called orthodox to the so-called heterodox" (407). We could also look to Professor of International Politics, Raymond William Baker, who talks about the "many incarnations of Islam" in his latest book, entitled *One Islam, Many Muslim Worlds* (2015, 195). Yet another scholar, Vartan Gregorian, uses his own imagery when he titles his book *Islam: A Mosaic, Not a Monolith* (2003).

Of course, this list could go on and on since every scholar of Islam must eventually come to terms with this question of diversity. While most highlight diversity without denying common beliefs and practices, some have even dared to claim that there is not one single Islam but several. Anthropologist Abdul Hamid El-Zein, for example, suggested "that the term *Islam* be replaced by *islams*" (1977, 228).

This brief review has highlighted the fact that scholars are well aware that one cannot talk about one Islam without emphasizing at the same time the great diversity that exists in Muslim societies. It is impossible to talk about oneness without mentioning diversity. These two aspects are essential when we describe the Muslim world. We have seen that scholars express this diversity in manifold ways. They talk about many versions, incarnations, constructions, and worlds of Islam. They identify

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