

The following is a conversation with Imam Dr. Omar Suleiman.

He's a Muslim scholar, civil rights leader, founder and president of the Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, and he's a professor of Islamic studies at Southern Methodist University.

He's one of the most influential Muslims in the world and is a fearless, kind-hearted human being who I'm now proud to call a friend.

As a side note, allow me to say a few words about Israel and Palestine.

While this conversation with Omar Suleiman was mostly exploring the history and beauty of Islam and the Muslim community, we did delve briefly into the topic of Israel and Palestine.

This topic is an extremely challenging one and an extremely important one.

It has deep roots and implications in US politics, in global geopolitics, in military and religious conflicts,

wars and atrocities, and basic struggle of all human beings to survive, to protect their loved ones, and to flourish as individuals and as communities.

I did not want to cover this topic in a solely scholarly fashion.

Much like with the war in Ukraine, it is not simply a story of history, politics, religion and national identity.

It is also a deeply human story.

To cover this topic in the way that my gut and my heart says to do it, I have to talk to everyone, to leaders and people on all sides, Muslim and Jewish, Israeli and Palestinian, from refugees to soldiers, from scholars to extremists.

I'm not sure if that's possible or wise, but like Forrest Gump said, I'm not a smart man.

And maybe you know how the rest of that goes.

I just like to follow my heart to whatever place it leads.

I ask the Muslim and the Jewish communities for your patience and support as I explore this topic.

I will make many mistakes and I'll be listening to all voices so I can learn and do better.

I've become distinctly aware that my approach of talking to people from all walks of life with empathy and compassion,

but with backbone, can create enemies on all sides.

I don't quite yet understand why this is, but I'm learning to accept it as the reality of the world.

Hopefully, in the end, whatever happens, whatever silly thing I do has a chance of adding a bit of love to the world.

Thanks for going along with me on this journey.

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This is something I think a lot about.

Because in me wanting to work for a company, or me wanting to start a business, like a legit tech company that builds products, that delivers products into the hands of people and hopefully brings joy to their life, hopefully adds a bit of love to the world.

To do that, it's not just about the design, and the engineering, and the scaling of the computer infrastructure, and even the hiring, the hiring decisions, all that kind of stuff.

There's a bunch of stuff in the middle that's just very difficult to take care of.

And so you should use the best tools for the job.

And I have to be honest, there's a bunch of aspects of that that I don't understand as deeply as I should.

I think a lot of that you can catch up by reading books, but there's just no replacement for experience.

Like I said, you should work with the best people, but you should also use the best tools for the job.

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So I like to be a professional adult, responsible kind of human being that, you know, cares about the joy and the well-being of the guests that come over.

Yeah.

So house of macadamia nuts doesn't just make me happy.

They provide the possibility, the infinite possibility of joyous snackage for the guests that come over.

I think last time see Grimes was over, somebody that I've gotten to know more over the past few months.

She's a brilliant, brilliant artist, but just a fascinating human being.

And one of the things she kind of inspires me to do is to take care of the studio environment, of the place that people come to, to have a conversation, you know, to really create an experience.

And that's something I really haven't really invested on.

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I've used them for many, many, many, many years.

You know, it's been, I mean, I don't know what the number is.

I wonder when it gets to 10 years, because I think it's been like seven, eight years.

I've been using them.

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I love meeting people that just are extremely competent and passionate about one thing.

And they do that thing better than anybody I've ever seen.

And that sort of fills me with joy, just admiring their excellence.

And even more than that, just admiring their joy at the thing they're doing, their lifelong passion manifested in this one very specific activity.

I don't know, it's beautiful to see, and so ExpressVPN, in some way, represents that for me.

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And now, dear friends, here's Omar Salimon.

Asalaamu alaikum, Omar.

We've been trying to do this a long time.

The world tried to prevent it through the funny ways that the world does.

But here we are.

I'm a huge fan of yours.

It's a huge honor to talk to you.

I appreciate it.

Thank you for making the sacrifice and coming up, I guess, to Dallas.

I appreciate it.
It's a short flight, but a long journey.
Let's start with the biggest question.
Who is God, according to Islam?
God is the most compassionate, the most merciful, the creator of the heavens and the earth.
He is one God.
He begets not, nor has he begotten.
He's unique.
He is omnipotent.
He is beyond the limitations of man.
He is beyond the constructs of our imagination.
But he is ever accessible through sincere supplication.
When you call upon him alone, one God, he is closer to you than your regular vein, the Quran tells us.
He's known by many names and attributes, but his essence is one.
He's one God.
No human likeness.
No human imperfection can be attributed to him.
No partners.
No image of him can be constructed.
And that is God.
So God represents, he is a feeling of closeness that is accessible to every human being?
Well, God's not a feeling.
God is known by names and attributes.
We call upon God, but there is certainly a feeling of closeness when you access him.
So I think the beauty of Islam is that as perfect as God is described, he's also so accessible to the imperfect.
And so the idea of sincere supplication and connection to him, we worship him alone.
We call upon him alone.
There's no clergy.
There's no barrier between God and us.
And that encourages a sincere devotion and commitment to him alone.
And so he is certainly described supreme and God speaks to us through the Quran.
And we speak to him through sincere supplication.
And his attributes are the furthest from us in terms of their perfection.
But he is ever close to us through our supplication, through our prayers and through our connection to him.
To open the door to that connection, to have a connection with God, how difficult is that process?
How difficult was it for you?
How difficult is it for the people that, for the many, many, many Muslims that you've interacted with?
Well, I think that there are different layers of difficulty, right?
There is the personal difficulty submitting yourself to God, you know, Islam requires

a complete submission to him.

And one of the things that happens is that if we project some of our bad experiences with authority onto our relationship with God, then we immediately perceive him in a certain way that might not allow us to gain a closeness to him.

Because maybe we didn't have the best relationship with our parents growing up.

Maybe we didn't have the best relationship with authority figures in our lives.

And so this idea of an ultimate authority to whom you submit yourself can be very difficult.

You know, Malcolm X, who was one of the most prominent converts to Islam in American history, talked about the difficulty of prostration for the very first time, putting your head on the ground, putting your face on the ground and praying to God is a very humbling thing.

Submitting all of your affairs to him is very humbling.

And ultimately, you have to relinquish control.

And you can't relinquish control without trust.

So you have to learn to trust God.

To trust God, you have to know him.

And to know him is to love him.

And so for me personally, you know, growing up, going through certain difficulties, having a sick parent who struggled in her life with cancer and with strokes, dealing with racism in South Louisiana growing up, it was important for me to learn about God through my difficulties, for example, rather than let those difficulties turn me away from him.

Many times, people put a barrier between them and God because they can't make sense of the things that are happening in their own lives.

And so they project anger towards God and at the same time, deny their own belief in him and do away with this natural disposition that every one of us has to believe in him.

So there are intellectual barriers, certainly.

There are experiential barriers.

But I think that one of the beautiful things about Islam is clarity.

There's an explanation for his existence.

There's an explanation for our existence.

There's an explanation for the existence of difficulties and trial and explanation for the existence of desires and distractions.

And it all comes together so beautifully and coherently in Islam.

And so I think that for many of us, we want to be our own gods, you know, and ultimately we create and fashion gods in ways that allow us to still be the ultimate determiners of our own fates, of our own story.

And that's very unfulfilling when you fail at your own plan.

But when you realize that there is one who is all-knowing, that there is one who is all-wise, you actually find peace in submitting yourself to him.

And so submitting your will to him, submitting your desires, submitting your own fate to him becomes actually an experience of liberation because you trust the one that you're submitting to.

You trust his knowledge over yours.

You trust his wisdom over yours.

And that gives you a lot of peace.

And then you have direct access to him.
You pray to him, you call upon him, you supplicate.
And everything in your life suddenly has meaning.
You know, in our faith, everything is about intention.
And there's an intentionality even behind the most, seemingly most mundane actions.
A morsel of food in the mouth of your spouse, your family is looked at as a great charity.
The way that you enter into a place and exit out of a place, what foot you step in, what foot you step out with, there's an intentionality.
There's a word of remembrance that's spoken.
There's a word of praise before and after you engage in any action.
There are things that you say before you eat, before you sleep.
There is meaning even to your sleep.
One of the great companions of the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, he said that I seek the reward for my sleep just as I seek the reward for my prayer.
Because you sleep to refresh yourself so that you can once again do great things.
And the intentionality behind that allows even the sleep to be rewardable.
You eat to nourish yourself so that you can do great things.
You seek to be in a position of independence and of being sustained so that you can sustain others.
So the Prophet peace be upon him says, for example, that the upper hand is better than the lower hand.
The upper hand is the giving hand.
The lower hand is the receiving hand.
So to seek a position where you can help other people, everything becomes intentional.
And there's no such thing as something that is meaningless and without purpose.
So every pursuit is ultimately a pursuit of God.
And when you pursue God sincerely, then he rewards you not just with paradise and the afterlife, but he rewards you with a great sense of serenity and self-satisfaction here.
You mentioned part of the struggle growing up was having a parent, your mom, who was sick.
What do you remember about your mom?
What are some happy, pleasant memories?
So my parents were, well, my father, thank God, is still alive.
My mother was a pious woman, a beautiful woman, a righteous woman, a woman who was known for treating everyone with a great deal of love and respect.
She was a poet.
She used to write poetry about oppressed peoples around the world.
From her homeland in Palestine to the genocide in Bosnia, she followed every conflict before social media and poured her heart into it.
She was a woman of great charity.
So when I think back to my mom growing up, she was known for her smile.
My mom was always smiling.
And in fact, every picture of her, she's smiling.
And at her funeral, you know, people talked about her smile, that she would smile at everyone.

And that was kind of her thing.

So if you were left out of a gathering, she was smiling at you and she'd kind of welcome you in.

I remember my mom to be content.

She was a woman of prayer and a woman of contentment.

So I used to see her in her prayer clothes all the time.

In fact, when I think back to her growing up, I think of her more in her prayer clothes than in her normal clothes, because that's how often she was engaged in prayer.

And I think of her making sure that everyone was included in a conversation.

So she was very interesting in that she had several strokes.

And each one of those strokes impaired one of her senses to some extent.

So she was partially deaf because of one stroke.

And she'd be sitting in the gathering and she'd be pretty quiet with a big smile on her face, very serene.

And she would tell me, you know, Alhamdulillah, which means thank God, all praise be to God that I can't hear because I can tell when people are gossiping, when people are saying negative things around me about other people, because she says even the look on people's faces changes.

So it was really interesting because she was that spiritually rooted and deep that she said like you could see on the looks on people's faces when they started to speak ill about other people that their faces would change, that their demeanor would change.

And she said, I would actually praise the Lord that I couldn't engage in those conversations and that I wasn't sinful for hearing them.

And what she would do is what people said at her funeral, which was really beautiful to me and was very comforting to me, and I took it as a life mission that if you were new to a place or if you were kind of in the corner and not, not known to other people in the community and you felt left out, she was the one that literally would look around the room and she'd see who was standing in the corner and who was new to the community or new to whatever place and she'd go and try to include that person in the gathering.

So even when she had impaired speech and impaired hearing with her smile and with her warmth, she was able to welcome people wherever that was and so the amount of people that came to her funeral and the stories that I continue to hear till this day, 15 years later after her passing away of people that said, you know, no one ever treated me the way your mother treated me.

And she connected that to God.

So that was actually part of my faith journey.

When I think of great people, when I think of people of faith, she's the first person that comes to my mind because despite her challenges, she was always the greatest person that you would meet.

Anyone that met her and that knew her would say, I've never met anyone that kind.

That was her reputation and she was deeply empathetic.

She would shed tears over people that she had no connection to.

This is again, before social media, before, you know, the heavy exposure that we have to people in conflict zones.

She had to engage every single human being in her life in a deep and profound way because she had a profound connection to God and she believed that that was her calling and none of her challenges made her bitter.

In fact, they only made her more connected to God and they only made her a better person until the last breath that she took.

Do you miss her?

Yeah.

I mean, yes, absolutely, but I feel like everything I do is an extension of her.

So you try to carry what she stood for?

Absolutely.

As part of yourself?

The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, said that when a person passes away, there are only three things that continue to benefit them that continue to extend them.

A continuous charity or a piece of knowledge that continues to benefit people or a righteous child that prays for them.

And I want to be that child that prays for her, but also does charity in her name extends her charity, extends what she taught me by being the person that she was to everyone around me.

And there's sometimes where I don't feel like getting out of bed, sometimes where I don't feel like doing for myself, but I actually feel like doing for her.

So everything in my life that I try to do, I try to make it an extension of her.

And that's been my calling and I believe I'll meet her again.

I believe I'll be with her again.

I believe that everything I do that is good will be of benefit to her.

And I believe that it would make her proud.

And so as much as I miss her, as much as I am fueled to do for her.

And so I continue that and that's kind of become part of my life.

It's been my life story as a child and as an adult, it's been sort of the centerpiece of my life to do things that extend her.

And ultimately in the process, hopefully benefit me because I believe that she's a woman who I pray is destined for paradise and I want to do the things that would get me there too.

What did you learn about death, about life from losing her?

I feel like the facade of the material world was made evident to me at a very young age.

Most children grow up and their parents want to protect them from everything.

And I felt that too.

My mother wanted to downplay her own tragedy so that me and my brother could live a fruitful and fulfilling life.

My father wanted to protect us from the hardship of her life so that we could live fulfilling lives.

He'd often be the only father on a field trip, even though he was a distinguished professor.

I mean, he was a busy man.

He was a very busy man, but he tried to show up at a field trip and tried to make our lives as normal as possible.

But in the process, we always understood that there was more to life than what other children

were seeing it as.

And now I know that as an adult, there's more to life than what other adults see it as.

The material world disappointed early on so that we could see beyond it.

And I often tell people that there are many that grow up in tragedy, orphan children, refugees that grow up and do incredible things because they immediately see past the facade.

They see through all of the material promises of this world, the deception of it.

And that you can choose to be bitter as a result of that, or you can choose to be better.

And I think that for me, I had to consciously make that decision that I was going to live a life of prayer, I was going to live a life of charity, I was going to live a life of commitment.

And in that process, invest in something that's greater, invest in something that doesn't disappoint.

And so I believe in God, I believe in the hereafter, and I believe that God will not let any trial or effort in this life go to waste without it being repaid in the hereafter.

And so I work towards that.

And so life and death, I understood existence to be transcendent early on, that if I believe that there was nothing to life except for life, I would be a very bitter person.

But because I know that there is more to it than this, I'm able to exist in it without being depressed by it.

Existence is transcendence.

What happens after we die, after the material instantiation fades away?

So the Quran tells us that God brought us from the darkness of the womb into this life.

You were nothing but a dirty drop of fluid, and you became this fully proportioned human being from the darkness of the womb, you come into this life, you experience it and then you go to the darkness of the grave only to be resurrected once again.

And that we are souls with bodies, not bodies with souls.

And there's a huge difference between those two things.

This is the vehicle that contains us here.

This is the material world that we encounter here, but we are not this and this is not our entire existence.

And so the soul continues.

This is a life in which we seek to worship him and seek to live in accordance with the purpose that he has set out for us.

And after we pass away, our soul continues onwards either to reward or to punishment or to a mixture of both, but it's a realm of accountability.

And hopefully it's a realm of reward should we exist in a way that he wants us to exist.

So you said that you can look to God for wisdom to make sense of the world.

There's a lot of stuff to us humans that's difficult to make sense of like you losing your mother.

There's a lot of cruelty in the world.

There's a lot of suffering in the world.

What wisdom have you been able to find from God about why there is suffering in the world?

Why there's cruelty?

You know, there's a saying that I wanted to ask God about why he allows hunger and war

and poverty, but I was afraid he might ask me the same question.

God has certainly given us enough food.

There's enough food in the world for everyone to have a 3200 calorie diet a day.

God has certainly given us enough guidance for us to not inflict on each other the cruelty that we inflict.

When we look to the world around us first and foremost, we have to have a sense of accountability.

We are accountable for our own actions.

We don't blame God for the evil of man.

That's one.

But at the same time, we understand that God and his wisdom allows for certain outcomes that we cannot encompass with our own and that to isolate these incidents and to try to make sense of them is no different than a baby in the womb that doesn't understand the world that it's coming into and trying to explain to that baby that hasn't yet developed its own senses and its own perception of this world, what is happening to it, right?

You know, I often think of the example of a child and, you know, having been at this point now through the experience of parenthood, I'm still learning.

I'm just going into having a teenager with three kids and being a softy for my kids, you know, when you have to tell your child that they can't have something, that they really, really want.

And that child thinks you hate them at some point, you know, because why are you stopping me from putting this toy in my mouth and choking myself?

They don't get it, right?

But at the same time, you prevent them out of love.

They're not in a position to understand that you're preventing them out of love.

And to isolate these incidents with God and to say, the wisdom, what's the wisdom?

You're trying to make sense of a pixel when you can't see the bigger picture.

Your mind is not at a place where you can make sense of the bigger picture.

You haven't seen the bigger picture.

And so for him to even explain to us every incident would completely defeat the purpose of putting your trust in him.

So we believe in a God that is all-encompassing in his knowledge and wisdom that gives us, and Islam is very specific, by the way, that there is what God tells us to do and there's what God allows to happen.

So what God tells us to do in terms of the roadmap towards good and then what God allows to happen in his divine wisdom, that no outcome can escape him, but at the same time, we are accountable for our own actions and our own deeds.

So when you come to someone and say, you know, why did God allow this to happen to this person? I can't rationalize that for you because my understanding is relegated to the immediate experience in front of me.

But if I know God and if I learn about God, then I don't have to make sense of the plan, but I can tell you that I trust the planner and I think that that's where peace is found.

You know, a lot of times you look for the light at the end of the tunnel.

What's the light at the end of the tunnel?

In Islam, there's emphasis on God and the hereafter because to try to make sense of

divine decree and why certain things happen in this world without the existence of a God or without the existence of a hereafter will always fail you.

So the existence of a God that is all knowing what we don't know, I know what you don't know that understands what we don't understand.

The existence of a God who is not subject to our constrictions and the existence of a hereafter where all things find recourse, where there's divine recourse, allows for this world to be situated within the existence of something greater and not treated in isolation. So when you're trying to treat an incident of this world in isolation, you're going to fail and when you try to treat existence in this world and of this world in isolation, you're also going to fail.

And so the emphasis is the belief in God, a God that is not limited like you are and a belief in the hereafter that is not limited like this life.

And so everything continues onwards and there's divine recourse for everything, each and everything.

You know, the Prophet Muhammad peace and blessings be upon him mentions that on the day of judgment,

a person who lived the most difficult of lives will be dipped into paradise one time and will be told, have you ever seen any sadness, any hardship?

Now when you think about the most difficult life, some of the commentators in Islam, they said that this is perhaps referring to the Prophet Job, a Yub, peace be upon him, because Job lived obviously a life of great difficulty, but that a person who lived a very hard life would be dipped into paradise one time and just with a dip be asked, have you ever seen any hardship, have you ever seen any misery and that person would say, what is sadness? What is hardship?

What is misery?

Now, if you don't believe in the hereafter, if you don't believe in anything beyond this life, then the recourse has to happen in this life.

And because we see so many people pass through this life without recourse of cruelty, without recourse of suffering, then we're forced to try to make sense of it.

And if you are someone who believes that this entire world came into existence through randomness, that we're just an existence of random atoms that collide with each other and that all of this comes together out of nothing, then how can you put your trust in anything that is greater?

So as a, you know, you asked me as a child of a parent who suffered, I believe that every moment that my mother suffered, that she will be rewarded, that she will be elevated, that all of that made her or contributed to the beautiful person that she was and will contribute to the beautiful reward that she receives and the recourse is certain to me as a believer in that.

So the right approach to making sense of the world, especially making sense of suffering and cruelty is that of humility that we as humans cannot possibly understand fully.

Absolutely.

In fact, in the Qur'an, it's very interesting when God creates Adam, the angels say to God, are you going to create a race or a species that will spill blood and cause corruption?

And God says to the angels in response to that question, I know that what you don't know.

So even the angels have to humble themselves for a moment.

The angels who adore God, who love God, who worship him, who obey him unconditionally, they are told by God, I know that what you don't know.

And what we extract from that, what many of the early interpretations extract from that is that God knows that there are human beings that will come out of this enterprise of humanity that make the entire existence of it worth it.

And so just as, yes, there will be criminals and corrupt ones.

There will be prophets and beautiful people that come out of this and sages and saints that come out of this that show that a human being who unlike an angel who has no choice but to worship God, an angel has no sense of will, no sense of choice, an angel is created to worship and has no desires, a human being who has the choice of desire and worship, the choice of righteousness and wickedness, that there are human beings who will choose worship and righteousness, that will choose charity over cruelty, that will choose service and choose dedication and devotion over death and destruction, that there are human beings that will in fact ascend the angels in rank because they will live lives where they choose that capacity, that part of themselves and they lean into that and worship God lovingly and obey him.

You see, in some of the sages in Islam scholars, they describe this as saying that the human being has the capacity to be anywhere from an animal to an angel or even worse to be a devil, you know, to an angel, not in the sense that we ever actually become angels or become animals, but that an animal, you know, for the most part seeks its desires over everything, doesn't really think about, you know, many of the things that we are supposed to calculate as human beings, doesn't think about which territory it's infringing upon or, you know, how much of its appetite it should fulfill, it simply exists to fulfill its appetite and that many human beings simply exist to fulfill their appetite and they choose that over worship or reason or anything that is greater, they literally take their selves as gods in that sense and their selves have no limitation on appetite, so they just keep filling that appetite and filling that appetite and filling that appetite, whereas a human being can also go to the extent of choosing something greater and disciplining their desires, disciplining their selves because they're seeking a greater reward, you know, we know many people that are to you great things in the worldly sense because they choose to study over sleep, for example, they choose to exert themselves towards their careers towards their education because they believe that ultimately the outcome of those pursuits are more rewarding than the immediate fulfillment of their desires.

So as believers, we choose that love of God and we choose that outcome that we seek and we discipline ourselves to where we can even ascend past the angels in rank.

Now, of course, I said we can go as low as an animal or as low as a devil and we have tyrants past and present and future as well that can become satanic in their nature because they allow their desires to take such control over them that they not only worship them but that every other existing being around them simply becomes a piece of their own puzzle and pursuit of their own lordship and their own satisfaction and they will kill, they will discard, not because, you know, and I always say this, it's not that tyrants necessarily like killing people, it's that people's lives pose somewhat of an, you know, an indifference to them, they're indifferent to people's existence.

And so you become either an object for or against me.

And so they're willing to discard children, discard people, discard the rights of others because they ultimately have chosen that the greatest pursuit of themselves is the maximum position of power and a place to where they can fulfill what they want to of themselves without any limits and everyone else becomes either a threat or an opportunity in that regard.

So we can be devils, we can be angelic-like, we can be animals, we're somewhere on that spectrum.

And every moment contains a set of choices you can make?

Absolutely.

Every single moment contains a set of choices.

And that's where the intentionality comes in, right?

So the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, says that I saw a person strolling in paradise because he removed something harmful from the road.

He tells us about a woman that lived the life in prostitution, but that repented to God when she was thirsty one day and she saw a dog that was also thirsty and she said that I was thirsty and God gave me water, so I'm going to choose to give water to that thirsty dog and God enters her into paradise as a result of that.

Sometimes the small moments with a small sincere deed can have a huge impact on a person's trajectory.

So every moment is a moment of choices and when we choose belief, righteousness, a pursuit of something greater, then we find ways to turn things that are otherwise mundane into miraculous acts, right, where we can choose God over ourselves and in the process choose a better fate for ourselves.

How difficult is the process of knowing, understanding what is the righteous action of knowing what it means to be a good man or a good woman?

Well the truth has consequences, so don't seek out the truth unless you're willing to abide by what you find.

So a lot of people want to mold their journey in accordance with a predetermined pursuit that they already have.

And so when they approach religion, they approach it like another product.

There was an article that was actually written by a rabbi, I've spoken about this in several sermons.

It was called The Allure of Narcissistic Spirituality, where he talks about how religion becomes just another product of your own self-adoration and worship to where you only approach religion to the extent that it gives you more happiness in the worldly sense.

You only approach of it what is therapeutic.

So it becomes just as secular in its nature as any other practice of meditation or whatever it may be or some other product.

And he kind of mentions, you know, how he took that from a person that is praying in a temple and a guy walks into the temple and bumps into him and then he curses the guy out.

So he didn't see his behavior towards that person as part of his trajectory of worship.

He just saw his being godly as the worship that he was engaged in.

The truth has consequences, the truth has circumstances that are required of you, actions that are required of you that may be somewhat inconvenient.

So you have to be willing to engage in a sincere pursuit of truth and look for truth for what it is and not simply look for comfort and convenience.

And when you engage in that journey of wanting to know, you have to engage it thoroughly and sincerely and try your best to remove any bias.

I think that's what makes the religion of Islam such a phenomenon for people that with all the Islamophobia and the bigotry towards it, it's still the fastest growing religion in the United States and the fastest growing religion in the world.

And no, that's not all birthrate.

Yeah, we have a lot of kids, but many people, you know, you met someone just before we started this interview.

People, in fact, in a post 9-11 world saw what they saw of Islam in the media and they actually, you know, went and checked out copies of the Quran and started to read about the religion and in their sincere pursuit of truth, ended up embracing a religion that they believed was the greatest source of destruction in the world and now it's the greatest source of peace for them and their own existence and their own lives.

And so you have to be willing to engage in a sincere pursuit of wanting to know.

And then be willing to engage in sincere commitment after you know, otherwise the heart rusts.

And so there's a process in the Quran talks about this of making the heart like fertile soil towards truth.

So you have a sincere pursuit, but then at some point, if you come to know and then you ignore what you come to know, then the heart rusts and it becomes harder to recognize it the second time around and the third time around.

And so when people come to me and they say, you know, I'm looking for something, I'm looking for, I'm looking for God, I'm looking for my purpose.

The first thing I tell them as I say, listen, what you need to do is, if you're really looking for God and you believe in God, and there are often people that say, I believe in God, but I don't know where to go with this, right?

I know that there's something greater and in Islam, we call that the fitrah, a natural disposition towards the belief in the existence of God.

But where do I go from here?

You know, what do I do now?

And I say, the first thing you need to do is you need to sincerely say, oh God, guide me to the truth, call upon God sincerely, say, I'm calling upon you alone and I'm asking you to guide me to the truth, show me what it is, right?

And that's the heart function.

Then you need to actually investigate and try to suspend bias, right?

Investigate the world's religions, investigate the claims to truth, investigate, use, you know, rational inquiry to the extent that the heart becomes satisfied and suspend bias and you'll be surprised.

And so for a lot of people, they come to me and they say, you know, this, this, this about Islam, I'm like, look, I'm, if you're just going to talk to me about what you've seen of Islam in the media, if you were serious about it, you know, if you're serious about

it, then you're not simply going to be satisfied with the highly edited images and distorted facts that come towards you about this religion, right?

What are you looking for?

Right?

Are you, are you looking for a scapegoat?

Islam poses a threat to many people, right?

Are you looking for a scapegoat?

Are you looking for the big, bad, scary, foreign enemy?

Or are you looking at a religion that one fourth of the world adheres to?

And if one fourth of us were bad, the world would not exist, right?

So are you looking towards this religion that one fourth of the world adheres to?

Are you going to read about the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him?

Are you going to read the Quran yourself?

Are you going to investigate for yourself what it is that this faith has to offer and find in it a great sense of wisdom, a great sense of beauty, a great sense of truth?

And I think that for a lot of people, you know, they find that Islam has such a beautiful combination of the intellectual proofs as well as the spiritual experiences that often combine what people seek in the Western and the Eastern religions.

So I had an interesting two weeks, two weeks in a row.

This was August, two weeks in a row.

I had someone who converted to Islam that started off as a Methodist, went from being a Methodist to being a Buddhist to being a Muslim.

So two weeks in a row, I had a Methodist turned Buddhist turned Muslim.

Great journey.

Yeah, I called my Methodist friends, I have a lot of Methodist pastors in the city that I work with and I said, what's going on here, man?

Sending people on to this interesting journey of Buddhism and then Islam.

But both of them had a very similar story, which is that they had sought in Buddhism, for example, the, you know, some of the meditative practices that are found, that really Western religion, which has been dominated by capitalism and dominated by, by very material things and can be very unfulfilling, they found that in some of the Eastern philosophies and the meditative practices.

And then they came to Islam and it combines, you know, their belief in sort of the Abrahamic way, it, it merged their belief in one God and the prophets like Abraham and Moses and Jesus, peace be upon them all with a deep tradition of meditative practices, of consciousness, of connection to God on a regular basis.

And they found that to be very fulfilling, both intellectually and spiritually.

And so I was like, that's interesting, you know, two people in two weeks that went through that journey.

And I think Islam is very wholesome, comprehensive when people actually approach it with humility and appreciate what it has to offer.

As you mentioned, in the minds of some Americans, after 9-11, the religion of Islam was associated with, maybe you could say evil in the world, maybe you can say terrorism, how can you respond to this association?

How does it make you feel, first of all, as a devout Muslim yourself and how can you overcome it personally?

How can you overcome it as a community and as a religious leader?

It's interesting because 9-11 now, we're talking over 21 years ago.

You know, there's people born after 9-11 and you get to talk to them all the time.

Yeah.

So when I'm talking to young Muslims, I'm talking about post 9-11, post 9-11, they're like, I was born in 2005, what are you talking about post 9-11?

I'm like, well, you know, I remember being a teenager, I remember being in high school when this happened, right?

So a lot of us that experience 9-11 as high school lures or as college students and remember distinctly what it was like to be a Muslim pre 9-11 and post 9-11, we can relate to that experience and we could identify that juncture, you know, very clearly and talk about it and speak to the change in the perceptions of Islam that happen here in the United States and around the world.

But a lot of young people are born into that reality and are experiencing the aftermath of it.

And you know, unfortunately have to deal with the bigotry that has not just, you know, taken greater shape in media constructions of Islam, but also policies, right?

A lot of the civil liberties of the Muslim community were taken away from us.

You read about the Patriot Act, you read about the securitization of the Muslim community and some of the unfair practices that have been engaged by the Bush administration, the Obama administration, the Trump administration and continue into the Biden administration, international Islamophobia.

And so the hatred of Muslims and the bigotry that is wielded against Muslims on the basis of this idea that we are a barbaric people, not ascribed to a religion of hate and violence, has had immediate consequences for us no matter where we are in terms of our age and in terms of our experience.

We have dealt with that in different ways.

Now, the association of Islam to terrorism is a lazy association.

It's one that ignores both the history of violence as well as its everyday occurrence.

You know, we're good for how many mass shootings a year?

When's the last time you heard of a Muslim carrying out a mass shooting in America, right?

How many of those mass shootings?

If you were to scrub the social media, what 400, 500 mass shootings a year, if you were to scrub the social media of some of those that carried out those shootings, you know, we're good for one or two idiots a year, right?

It's unfortunate that you're going to have people that carry out despicable acts of violence, but when we as Muslims hear someone in the media say, terrorism has been ruled out as a possibility, while the blood is still on the floor of that Walmart, we already know that the police chief just said that that wasn't a Muslim.

Don't worry.

You know, that wasn't an Al Qaeda guy or an ISIS guy.

It was one of our own, right?

And so it's become frankly ridiculous because the association of violence with Islam is one that is used to actually carry out acts of violence against Muslims worldwide.

It justifies bad policy towards Muslims worldwide and then in the United States.

And it's just factually so lazy.

There was a study just about how the media gives more attention to acts of violence done by Muslims and immediately stamps it with Islam up to 300% more than it will with another act of violence carried out in the name of anything else.

So you don't hear about the acts of violence that are carried out by others.

You don't hear about the religion of the perpetrators.

You don't associate terrorism with actions, frankly, of state terrorism.

You know, when governments launch chemical attacks or drone weddings and do so while explicitly dehumanizing the people, just because they do so with the government apparatus doesn't make it any less terroristic than if it's a lone person that goes out and commits an act of violence trying to achieve a political goal.

So the association is lazy, historically speaking, the crusades.

I grew up in Louisiana, I saw Klan rallies, Ku Klux Klan rallies my whole life and people said, well, that's a thing of the past.

Well, guess what?

You know, we see many semblances, many acts that are carried out with the same vitriol that was generated by the Ku Klux Klan.

We have people standing in front of our mosques that belong to right wing hate militias carrying AR-15s, talking about wanting to inflict harm on Muslims.

I have been to Christchurch, New Zealand and buried the victims of a white supremacist terrorist who was inspired by the political rhetoric here in the United States in his own words as manifesto to go and kill 50 innocent people in Christchurch, New Zealand, one of the most peaceful cities in the world.

And by the way, Lex, I mean, it's really interesting like with Christchurch, you know, the man wanted and I won't even say his name, but his next target after the two mosques had not been stopped was to go to a Muslim daycare.

So what drives someone to dehumanize people to that extent that he was willing to go to a daycare and murder a bunch of kids because he saw them as a demographic threat to civilization?

So Muslims are terrorized because they are falsely depicted as terrorists.

Muslims suffer domestically and globally because of this false association.

It's a lazy association and when someone comes around and says, well, fine, not all Muslims are terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims.

I say that you clearly don't read statistics.

Whether we're talking about the 20th century and I'm a student of history and I believe you are as well, all the isms, World War One, World War Two had nothing to do with religion, certainly nothing to do with Islam, fascism, Soviet atheism, right?

Many of these systems where people were murdered in the millions, Nazism, the Holocaust, Rwanda,

Cambodia, I can go on and on, the Rohingya today, the greatest atrocity towards the Uyghurs.

Where's Islam fit in all of this?

People do horrible things.

They stamp it with religion at times, but the only group of people that seem to suffer after an act of violence is committed are Muslims because any act of violence that is committed by a Muslim will immediately be blamed on Islam and 2 billion people will have to carry the burden of the act of a single perpetrator.

And just to reiterate, in case the numbers are not known, you mentioned Christ's Church. Those are two mosque shootings with 51 people killed and 48 were injured in New Zealand. So it's hate manifesting itself and then actual human suffering and destruction.

Absolutely.

Is there similarities between anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hate?

So is there something deeper to say about hate in general here that is beyond just particularly hate towards Muslims?

Absolutely.

In Pittsburgh, the synagogue shooting, the perpetrator particularly targeted that synagogue because...

Tree of Life synagogue.

Tree of Life synagogue.

11 killed, 6 wounded in 2018.

Because he believed that they were taking in Syrian refugees or supporting Syrian Muslim refugees.

You think about that.

The San Diego synagogue shooting that took place shortly after, he went to a mosque and then he went to a synagogue.

Look the idea of scapegoating minority populations and attributing to them a disproportionate sense of power and an nefarious element where they can't be trusted.

And unless we wipe them out, then they're going to wipe us out, underlies many of the bigotries that exist.

I mean, look, after Trump announced his Muslim ban, there was a shooting in Canada, an attack in Canada on a mosque in Quebec where six people were killed.

The shooter explicitly said that the reason why he went to that mosque in Quebec and shot dead six Muslim worshipers was because he was afraid that because of the ban on Syrian refugees in the United States, they would come to Canada and he didn't want them to feel welcomed in Canada.

So there is a connection and I think it's when you are able to dehumanize large groups of people and attribute an nefarious element to them, then unfortunately in a world that's becoming more and more polarized where people are able to construct their entire world views based on an algorithm that their social media caters to, you're going to have some of these attacks happen and there's going to be an unfortunate connection between them.

So what I tell people is that, you know, I think with all of these people that shoot up synagogues and shoot up mosques and even before that actually the Charleston, South Carolina shooting at an AME church, you know, when he went there, he actually said that before he murdered nine worshipers in that church, he was taken aback by how nice they were to him.

He sat there for two hours before he turned a gun on many people who were over the age of 80 years old and murdered them in cold blood.

So this is what I talk about when I say that as human beings, we have the propensity, unfortunately, to become worse than devils or we can choose to be angelic when we choose worship and righteousness over ourselves.

So that's a spiritual crisis as well and a crisis of meaning and emptiness where I think people are willing to inflict great pain on others when they can't make sense of the pain in their own lives.

I'd like to try to figure out together with you sort of a way out to try to decrease the amount of hate in the world.

But maybe it's useful to talk about the BBC documentary that it's kind of interesting that people should check out.

It's called United States of Hate, Muslims Under Attack.

When you appear in that, you have conversations with people who are anti-Muslim and I believe most of it takes place here in Dallas.

And can you just tell me about this little documentary about that time, what it was like to interact, what was the group in the documentary and what it was like to interact with them? In the very beginning of the rise of, at that time, actually, Ted Cruz, Donald Trump, when Islamophobia was at the center of many of the presidential candidates' campaigns at the time.

So this must have been 2015.

Yes, 2015.

The mayor of Irving at the time, Beth Van Dine, who is now a congresswoman, had put out the idea that Muslims were operating a Sharia court in Irving, Texas.

And suddenly there was a hysteria because, again, there's the idea that Muslims are here to dominate, Muslims are here to overthrow everything that you have in the United States. There was a hysteria here.

And it was unfortunate because what it unleashed, especially with the national discourse at the time, again, the presidential campaign, Donald Trump says, I think Islam hates us.

When he uses those words, I think Islam hates us.

And Ted Cruz suggests that Muslim neighborhoods could be patrolled or should be patrolled.

And then you have the Irving mayor saying that one of the most populated cities with Muslims in America, they're operating under an alternative legal, an alternate legal system.

And funny enough, the year before that, she'd come to the mosque and she praised the diversity of Irving.

And she was talking about how welcome she felt in the mosque.

And the next thing we know, you have these crazy white supremacist groups, openly white supremacists that affiliate themselves with the Klan and others protesting regularly in front of our mosques with their AR-15s and telling people to go back home.

And I'm like, I'm from New Orleans.

I'm not planning to move back to New Orleans.

I'm home.

We're home.

We're good.

We're staying put.

And we refuse to be intimidated.

But then when the Syrian refugee crisis is unfolding as well, Dallas has been one of the more popular destinations, if you will, I'm not talking about it like a vacation destination, but where a lot of refugees have come to just because of the infrastructure that we have set up here to receive refugees.

And so that hysteria was an unfortunate, perfect combustion of the national discourse with the local discourse with the incoming refugees.

And we would do all sorts of welcome refugee events.

And we do that.

And we don't only do that for Muslim refugees, by the way, there are refugees from other parts of the world as well.

But we would host events at our mosques to welcome refugees, to help integrate them into the community, to do things for them.

So you have these armed protests happening, right?

And it's horrible because I think about the trauma to the children that are hearing about Tree of Life and hearing about some of these other incidents that are unfolding.

And really one of the first communities that was targeted was the Sikh community in Madison. That was one of the first shootings.

And then the AME church, Charleston.

And then you just had tons of places of worship being targeted, right?

So they're seeing this unfold and then they're seeing these guns in front of their mosques.

And the result to many is, well, I just don't want to get shot.

I don't want to go to the mosque.

I don't want to have this happen to me.

So you know, when BBC reached out and said, we want to do a documentary about this, unfortunately,

Dallas was the only place in America where you had regular armed groups in front of our mosques.

It was happening around the country infrequently, but here it was happening every week.

So the BBC reached out and said, we want to interview you.

I said, we've got this idea.

We want to take you to a park and have you meet one of the protesters who's been wielding his gun outside your mosque and talk to him.

And it was really interesting because they'd interviewed him before meeting me.

And the things that he was able to utter before meeting me and before meeting Syrian refugees was just awful.

I mean, the most dehumanizing rhetoric that you can imagine.

But then at the park, he meets me, talks to me, he meets a Syrian refugee family, one of the girls whose leg had been blown off in an airstrike, and he said, I feel like an idiot.

I mean, he expressed all sorts of regret and was teary eyed that he could dehumanize people the way that he was.

And so my whole thing was, and is, come inside the mosque, put your gun down, disarm yourself and learn.

And you'll be surprised what you'll walk away with.

And only took one meeting with him to completely shift his worldview at the time, which was made up of heroes and villains, the Muslims, unfortunately, being the villains that had to be wiped off the face of the earth so that the earth could continue.

So that was an interesting documentary and it was an interesting social experiment.

What's it feel like to have all these people that hate you and others in the community, people you love with guns, threatening violence, basically that don't want you here in this country on this earth?

It's not nice.

It's not great.

I mean, it's definitely a challenge.

But look, there are challenges that we face as Muslims being in the United States, being in a hostile climate, and there are different types of challenges.

And I think what we've had to do as a Muslim community is see beyond both the guns and the roses and think about who we are first.

Because frankly, Islamophobia exists in different forms and from different sides.

And we try to use this as an opportunity to instill in our young people, not just a sense of belonging, but a sense of purpose, do not be intimidated and in fact show them the best of your Islam, live your life because at the end of the day, the goal that is sought through intimidation is silence.

And so we have to carry ourselves as proud American Muslims.

We don't have to impress anyone.

And we don't need to relinquish an iota of our faith to coexist with anyone.

When we are satisfied with who we are, we don't see a contradiction between our place of residence and our religion, our nationality, our religion.

We don't see that as a problem.

So that's something for them to work out, not for you to work out.

That's what I would tell young Muslims that continue to live your faith fully and demonstrate the beauty of it and do not let the ugliness of the world consume you.

But for those young Muslims, what would you say how they should feel towards the people that hate them?

The natural human, there's a desire still to have anger, to have resentment, to have hate back at the people that hate you.

The Quran says, respond to that which is evil with that which is better.

And you will find that sometimes your enemy will become your close friend.

So respond with that which is better.

Doesn't mean be passive.

Sometimes there needs to be a demonstration of strength.

Sometimes there needs to be a demonstration of ignoring a people altogether.

But ultimately you can't let the way people treat you shape who you're going to be in the world.

And so that's why I say we have to look beyond the guns and the roses.

We have to look beyond the hostility of our enemies and the temporary and opportunistic embrace of some of those who claim to be our allies and be us and treat the world and treat

the people of this world in accordance with your standards, not with theirs.

So don't teach them, you know, or don't let them teach you bad character.

You teach them good character.

So live your life and live your faith beautifully.

And let people see the beauty of it through your being.

And do not let their ugliness consume you.

But at the same time, sometimes you got to give people room to express frustration, to say that this is unacceptable, to have demonstrations of strength.

And I think that those things don't have to all contradict each other.

Yeah, what do you think about these kinds of protests are not allowed in many parts of the world?

What do you think about one of the most do you directly personally painful manifestations of the First Amendment, of the people's right to freedom of speech and to protest, to say hateful things?

You've been at the receiving end of the worst of it.

But what do you feel about this particular freedom that's at the core of the founding of this country?

Look, I think that you have to take it away from the text and look at it within reality.

Let's be real.

Would Muslims be able to protest in front of churches with guns on a weekly basis in this country?

I don't think so.

So there's a deep pragmatically speaking, there's a hypocrisy to what's a lot in that. Major hypocrisy.

Free speech is an ideal that is weaponized against the Muslim community and against other communities in such a hypocritical way.

You take, for example, some countries in Europe, let's move away from this and look at the hypocrisy of a place like France where the caricaturing and the portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, in derogatory ways will be used as the hallmark of free speech, but Muslims that will caricature Macron or challenge some of the values of France, the supposed and trying values of France will end up in prison and end up deported.

And so here in the United States, there's a great hypocrisy.

I don't think that places of worship should have armed protesters in front of them.

I think that that poses a security risk.

I think that it's not okay.

And I think that free speech is weaponized against the Muslim community and often is held up as this great value, but really to attain very lowly things and is often to our detriment.

Yeah.

Just even watching that documentary, it's hard to put into words, but somehow that does not capture what maybe the founders intended, what I would see as the great ideal of the freedom of speech.

I don't know what the solution to that is.

I think taking it outside of words, maybe that requires a community, a cultural pressure

to be better.

So it's not about the law, it's more about just the cultural pressure.

What is and isn't okay.

Because there's something deeply wrong about that kind of hate.

Yeah.

Because it was dehumanizing other people that are here in America, that they're Americans.

Yeah.

I mean, we have to interrogate the foundations of our country when our country is in such turmoil and such chaos.

No country in the world has the mass shootings that we have.

No country in the world has some of the polarization that we have.

We have to interrogate that and say, what it is that we're doing wrong that's leading to that.

And I think, again, that it's reaching a point where it's unsustainable.

If we don't do better and try to solve some of the rifts right now that exist in our society, then we're going to end up in a place where we may not be able to climb out of this.

What do you think about, you mentioned the Muslim ban, what do you think about executive order 13769, title protecting the nation from foreign terrorist entry into the United States.

Often referred to as the Muslim ban or the Trump travel ban.

It was an executive order by President Trump that was in effect from January 27th, 2017, for just a few months until March 6th, 2017.

What was this executive order and what was it's effect on your life and on the life of the Muslim community and just the life of Americans?

Well, it was disgraceful.

It was a tactic that was used at the time, very similar to the whole build the wall rhetoric to play to a particular political sloganeering and carrying out those types of acts against the Muslim community.

You're not going to face much opposition typically in any meaningful way that would be politically costly.

When he rolled it out at the time, there were people in flight on their way to the United States that were held in airports around the country, children, elderly people that were held in these small rooms and treated awfully before being put back on a plane and sent to where there were families that had medical needs that were never able to come together. He specifically targeted Muslim countries to play to that idea of a complete ban of Muslims, which he knew was not feasible at the time.

Now, personally, Dallas had the largest amount, the largest number of detainees in the airport. We have one of the largest airports in America and we took to the airport and we stayed there for a few days, stayed overnight.

It was one of the New York Times pictures of the year when we did our prayer because when we had to do our prayer, it wasn't just Muslims that came to the airport.

It was many people that came to the airport of different faiths that were outraged by what they had seen.

When we do our prayer, there was a protest chant that, you pray, we stay.

The airport had to make room for us because like a thousand people that needed to have

our five daily prayers.

We would do our prayers in the airport.

We waited.

We continued until the detainees were freed, at least temporarily.

Unfortunately, some elements of that legislation remained and it was an ongoing struggle.

Look, what I'll say is that those are some of the more obvious manifestations of anti-Muslim bigotry, but again, there is hypocrisy on all sides of the political aisle here in the United States.

There is Islamophobia of different flavors.

I think even the term Islamophobia can become contentious because there are people that attack us in different ways and that might not be as overtly bigoted, but nonetheless are infringing on our rights to be full American Muslims and Muslims find themselves in a very strange political place where you've got one side that seemingly wants to annihilate you and another side that only accepts you if you're willing to assimilate, but no one really allows you to be a full-on American Muslim and so Muslims find themselves in a very strange place right now with all of the political sides, with the political parties.

Where do Muslims sit politically?

Are they politically engaged in the function of the United States?

Where do they find themselves politically as a community?

Muslims find themselves in an awkward place politically.

That's the best way to put it.

We are a religious community and so we don't find ourselves welcomed by the left which has a hostility towards religion in most left spaces and most liberal spaces.

In general, because religion has many conservative elements.

Right.

So the Muslim community is in its nature conservative for what that's worth, right?

It's a conservative community.

It's a community that has certain orthodoxies and practices that would make it disagreeable in its nature and its practice to many on the left and many on the right just see us as a group of foreigners and a threat in that regard.

So we find ourselves in this awkward place.

There's also the presence of sort of the pro-Israel dominance of both parties.

The foreign policy of both parties is detrimental to Muslims globally.

The securitization of the Muslim community and the name of countering by an extremism.

Unfortunately, the Muslim community has had both Republican and Democratic administrations just run over to rights.

So we find ourselves kind of in this awkward space, right?

We are a religious community that's also a minority.

The racialization of the Muslim community sort of robs us of who we are and how we get to engage them with different platforms and different peoples around us.

So we find ourselves in a very awkward place.

Is there in general a lack of representation in places of power and in politics?

I don't think representation is everything.

I think that representation can actually be detrimental sometimes because you can have

people that represent you but that don't actually represent your priorities as a community, as a faith community.

So we don't want to be tokenized as a community, right?

We want to be engaged and engaged fully as Muslims and be respected as American Muslims.

You know, I wrote something at the time actually of Muslim ban.

I wrote an article for CNN called, I am not your American Muslim.

I am not your American Muslim.

Because we are not a tool of liberals against conservatives nor are we simply to be made out to be your villain or your victim.

We're a people of faith.

We're people that have values.

We're people that want to see our places of worship thrive.

We're people that have something to offer to this country, to the people around us of good.

But ultimately we want to engage and be engaged with on the basis of who we actually are, not who you need us to be right now.

And that's been the problem that we've had.

So it's not a lack of representation as much as a lack of authentic engagement.

You mentioned daily prayer and if I may, looking at the time, this might be time.

And if it's okay, I would love it if you allowed me to follow along at least in movement as you pray.

Sure.

Absolutely.

Thank you for allowing me to join you in that.

Can you maybe describe what does the prayer represent?

What is the actual practice of prayer like?

What is the process like?

Sure.

So prayer is the central pillar, if you will, of Islam.

It is the life of the believer encapsulated into a very specific act of devotion that's done at least five times a day.

So there are different types of prayer.

There's prayer, there's supplication.

So the five daily prayers are called salah, which is the obligatory prayers.

And then beyond that, there are voluntary prayers that are done throughout the day as well.

So you can pray before and after the obligatory prayers.

And then there are other times of the day that you can pray also.

And the best prayer, voluntary prayer is at night, in the middle of the night, because it's the time that you're closest to God, sincere, away from the eyes of people just in the still of the night.

And you'd pray in a similar way with the standing and the bowing and the prostration, reciting the Qur'an.

And then you have supplication and words of remembrance that you are to do throughout

the day between all of that.

So when people say, do you pray five times a day?

I say at least five times a day.

What are the words of supplication?

Do they come from the Qur'an or do they come from your own heart or do they, where do they come from?

So basically you say, Allah akbar, which means I'm going to kill you, right?

Or so they say, right?

God is greater.

You start off with that, an expression of God's greatness.

And then you recite the opening chapter of the Qur'an, which is known as al-Fatiha.

It's the first chapter of the Qur'an in the name of God, the most compassionate, the most merciful.

All praises be to God, the Lord of all the worlds, most compassionate, most merciful.

Master of the day of judgment, you alone we worship and from you alone we seek help.

Guide us to the straight path, the path of those who have earned your favor, not those who have earned your wrath, nor those who have gone astray.

So that's a translation of the first chapter, the opening chapter of the Qur'an, which is known as al-Fatiha.

So we recite that in every one of the units of prayer.

And then after that, we recite something else from the Qur'an, so some other portion of the Qur'an.

And then we say, Allah akbar, once again.

God is greater.

We go into bowing.

And in bowing, we say, Subhana rabbia al-Azim, which means glory be to God the Almighty.

Glory be to God the Almighty.

Glory be to God the Almighty.

And then you come back up and you say, Semiallahu liman hamida.

God has heard the one who has praised him.

And then the response is, Rabbana walakal hamd.

And to you, O Lord, belongs all praise.

And then we go into prostration.

And prostration is at the heart of the prayer.

And it is the most beautiful portion of the prayer.

And it is the most beloved position for a servant of God and that which is most pleasing to God.

It's when you say at that point, Subhana rabbia al-A'la, all glory be to God the Most High.

All glory be to God the Most High.

So while you put yourself in the lowest position, you acknowledge God being the Most High.

And the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said that the closest that a person is to God is when they are in prostration.

That is the time that your supplications are most precious and beloved.

That is the time that you can cry your heart out.

That is the time that you really feel a sense of great closeness and devotion to God. And as I was telling you earlier, it's a time that your mind is under your heart for a change, right?

The only position, physical position that your mind is actually under your heart.

And you really have a chance to pour your emotions out and to connect deeply to God.

It's the prayer of all of the prophets.

Jesus, peace be upon him, is described even biblically as falling on his face in prayer.

And so it really is, I think, the most intimate moment that you get with God and the deepest part of the prayer.

The word masjid, which is mosque in Arabic, means place of suju, place of prostration.

So think of the rest of prayer as an introduction to that particular part of the prayer where you really immerse yourself.

Not that you shouldn't be immersed in your prayer throughout, but when you're in suju, when you're in prostration, that's where you're really closest and most connected to God.

So we do that.

And so some prayers are two units.

Well, the first prayer of the day, which is before sunrise, the earliest prayer, is two units.

The second prayer, which is around noon, is four units.

And then afternoon, another four units.

And then the sunset prayer is three units.

And then the evening prayer is four units.

So each prayer has a different number of units to it and some voluntary prayers that surround it.

When you come back up, you express also a form of greeting towards God and channeling your prayers and your blessings towards God.

You reiterate the shahada, which is the first pillar of Islam.

I testify that there's only one God and that Muhammad is his servant and messenger.

And then you read what's called salat Ibrahimiyah, which is the Abrahamic prayer.

So you send peace and blessings upon Muhammad and his family and Abraham and his family.

Abraham, peace be upon him, is really at the core of this religion.

And so at the end of the prayer, you send peace and blessings and prayers upon, again, both Muhammad and his family and Abraham and his family.

And then you have another chance to make some of your own personal prayers.

And then you say, as-salamu alaikum wa rahmatullah, peace be on to you and the mercy of God to your right, peace be on to you and the mercy of God to your left.

And that means everything and everyone to your right, everyone and everything to your left.

Imagine a congregation, when you're in worship, right?

You're sending that to the angels and the human beings next to you, your fellow worshipers next to you.

And you'll even say, you'll seek forgiveness from God afterwards.

There are supplications that surround the prayer.

And you will say, Allahumma anta as-salam wa minka as-salam, that O Allah, O God, you

are peace and from you is peace.

And to you belongs all glory and all praise.

Just to say that you received something in this prayer, that you receive a great sense of inner peace.

And now you're spreading that, right?

So as it really comes into you, then you can give to the world around you, what you generate in your own heart.

And in prayer, you generate a great sense of tranquility, a great sense of peace.

The Qur'an says, verily, in the remembrance of God, do hearts find contentment.

And prayer is an exercise in the remembrance of God.

That is again, obligatory five times a day, no matter where you are.

And you are in the world, anywhere you find yourself in your life, in different life circumstances, anywhere.

Yeah.

So outside coffee shop in the grass, outside of the coffee shop.

As we did a few days ago.

So anywhere at all.

And that means...

Airports included.

And in the context of our previous conversation of hatred towards people of Muslim faith, that means you probably, through the practice of prayer, it attracts people that hate...

I've attracted curiosity.

I've attracted hate.

I've had people walk up to me like, hey man, you okay?

You know, in the air?

Everything.

So most probably is conversations of curiosity and the opportunity to actually talk about the values that you're upset.

And I try to make it a point to tell people if I'm about to pray in front of them.

So like in an airport, let's say for example, I'll go to the corner next to a gate.

And if there are people sitting there like, hey, I'm about to engage in a prayer, I hope you don't mind.

They'll really appreciate the courtesy most of the time.

But no, I mean, when those five times come in and they're kind of windows, right?

We have to pray.

And that means at work, that means at school, that means when you're traveling, although there are some concessions that allow you to combine prayers at certain times when you're traveling, for example.

But even then, you're going to have to pray.

And I think that what that does to bring you back to God, no matter what you're doing, it's actually, you know, you think of it this way, you're in a meeting, you're engaged in something, you're really stressed out.

And you also have the evolution before the prayer where you wash up, wash your face, wash your limbs and engage in prayer.

What it does for you in anchoring you in something more meaningful when you are in the turmoil of a lot of times what's not so meaningful is incredible.

And so it's a gift from God.

And it is an obligation.

It's something that we have to do as Muslims.

But if you actually learn its essence, then it can feel more like a joy than it is an obligation.

And then you're called to at night, especially again, the night prayer is a big part of who we are as Muslims, waking up in the last part of the night.

The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, said that the best prayer and the best fasting was of that of David, peace be upon him.

So we think of David, the Prophet David, he's a prophet in Islam as well.

I'm sure you'll ask me about the whole concept of prophethood.

You're hearing Abraham and David and others, right?

So David, peace be upon him, he said that David used to fast every other day and he used to pray the last third of the night.

He'd stand up and pray in the last third of the night.

So fasting is a big part of who we are and praying in the last third of the night, meaning before that early morning prayer, you know, waking up, if you can at 4am, 430am, 5am and praying even for a few minutes, there's something in the serenity of the night that can unlock in you a sense of inner joy and peace that nothing else in the world can give you.

And again, that pulls you away from all the turmoil of day to day life.

If it's little things or if it's big things, it just pulls you out of it to remember what is more important than life.

So when we think about access, in the last third of the night, we're taught that God says, is there anyone seeking forgiveness that I may forgive them?

Is there anyone seeking refuge that I may grant it to them?

Is there anyone asking for anything that I may give it to them?

So whatever you're calling upon him with at that time, he's responding to you in a way that befits him.

And so it's closeness as well, and you would think that you sleep less, so you're probably more cranky, but the happiest people in the world are the people that stand up in that last third of the night and pray.

I mean, there's a deeply meditative, contemplative aspect to it that I think probably strengthens your sleep of anything else once you return to it.

There you go.

See, people underestimate that.

There's a great sage in Islam.

He was asked, he said, how come the people who pray at night are the most beautiful of people and they're fresh in the day?

It doesn't make sense.

And he said, because they secluded themselves with the most merciful and he dressed them in his light.

And so there's a beauty that it generates.

And that's why we're to aspire to that really as believers.

That's kind of your highest thing, like don't just pray the five prayers.

If you can pray at night, pray at night and connect at that time.

Well, a good friend of mine, Andrew Huberman, who's in your scientist from Stanford.

He's a big, he's upset.

He has an amazing podcast called Huberman Lab, but he's also a scholar of sleep among many other things.

And so I would love him to, he probably knows the science on this too.

There's probably good science that actually studies practicing Muslims to see what the benefits to sleep.

I would love to actually see what that says.

We have amazing.

I don't want to cut you off.

We have amazing hygiene because of how much we have to wash up for prayer.

And it's great for our limbs as well, right?

You know, and that's one of the added benefits, right?

It's good for us.

Worship that we do is not torturous.

It's actually good for us.

However, the core objective of worship has to remain that it's something you do out of worship and something you do out of an, a sense of obligation, gratitude to God, not because of those things.

Like I'm not going to fast because it's good for my health, but I know it's good for my health to fast, but it's pretty cool when you walk into, I'll share this with you.

There was a man, he was a scholar from Turkey, an Islamic scholar from Turkey.

And he had visited us in Dallas and he was 108 years old and he could still pray bowing and prostrating.

I mean, his limbs and you think about that, like someone at that age still being able to do that.

So I'm sure it's good for your limbs, it's good for your health, good for your gut, good for your sleep, good for your mind.

I think the mind one is, is the really one we've been talking about and that's really, really the, really the big one.

And in the, in the small day-to-day psychological sense and in the big philosophical sense of what it means to be a human being.

We should also mention that during the prayer, as you've explained, you should face Mecca.

So what is Mecca and what's the experience of visiting Mecca like?

So Mecca is the home that Abraham, peace be upon him, built along with his son Ishmael, peace be upon him.

And it gives the Muslims a unified direction of prayer.

It's sort of at the center geographically of who we are.

And when we pray towards it, it's not that, it's not that, that's the only place that you can supplicate, turn towards, but it gives us a unified sense of direction.

It gives us a unified sense of prayer.

So Mecca is our Kibla.

It's our place of direction when we are alive and when we are dead.

So actually we pray facing towards it.

When we die, we are also faced towards it in our graves.

And it kind of gives us that unifying spirit.

So this is the Valley of Mecca also in the Bible, spoken about the Valley of Mecca.

And where other biblical scholars would also mention Mount Peron.

And it is the place that Adam, in the Quran, Adam, peace be upon him, first had a place constructed there as a place of worship from the angels towards God.

And then when Abraham settles Hagar and Ishmael in Mecca, they build this house of worship.

And that is where the gushing springs of Zemzem are mentioned, where God sends an angel to give a miracle to Hagar and Ishmael that they can sustain themselves from as they're not left in the desert.

So Ishmael being the firstborn son of Abraham is given a place and there's a story and a history that's going to unfold from that place of Mecca.

And then Isaac is born, peace be upon him, 13 years later, and there's a story and a history that comes from that.

But ultimately Mecca is the center, Mecca is where we turn towards, for prayer, Mecca is where we perform the pilgrimage, the Hajj pilgrimage.

Once in our lives, at least if we can physically and financially, if we find ourselves capable, we at least perform the Hajj pilgrimage once in our lifetimes.

But there are other pilgrimages throughout the year you can go.

At any time of the day, any time of the year, you will find people that will be performing the pilgrimage and iteration of the pilgrimage in Mecca.

And it's an incredible practice.

It really is a place where you feel like you're no longer in this world.

I mean, it's incredible.

So we all go there, donning what's known as the Ihram garb.

So the men will wear just these white garments, which are resembling, or they resemble the garments that we will be buried in.

And whether you're a king or a prince or a peasant in, you know, in classical terms, whoever you are, whatever distinction you have, you're all the same.

And the women will wear a simple garment as well.

So you go there, you relinquish all of the pretensions and concerns and superficial barriers and distinctions that exist in this life.

And we do what's called Tawaf, circle around the Ka'aba, symbolically putting God at the center of our lives.

We do seven rounds between Safa and Marwah, the two mountains where Hagar, when she once ran between those two mountains with her baby Ishmael, looking for water, trusting God was provided for.

We too go between the two mountains of Safa and Marwah to express that trust in God and to follow in that way.

And these are ultimately, these are the rituals that Abraham himself engaged in, in our tradition and the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, engaged in.

And so we engage in the exact same rituals and there are divine wisdoms to them that we may not even be able to unpack and reflect upon.

But it really is in that place where you find the most beautiful global expression of Islam.

You see people from all over the world, people that don't speak the same languages, people from all sorts of backgrounds, and they're all doing the exact same thing.

And in a matter of seconds, when the call of prayer comes, in a matter of seconds, two, three million people get arranged in perfect rows for prayer, right?

And it just, it looks like this perfect optical, you know, vision of just beauty when you see people in unison, standing, bowing, prostrating, and you don't know who the person next to you is.

And that's where, you know, you, you know, Malcolm X, you read about the history of Malcolm X when he went to Hajj, that's where his entire world do shifts.

Not just his previous baggage, but the dream that he then had, the possibilities that he saw for people to be able to overcome some of the false distinctions that we have, race and class, and to see God as one and to come together and worship him alone and also seeing each other, equal participants in that worship.

If you can just linger on it a little bit, I think you've mentioned that Malcolm X has been in part misunderstood.

What are some aspects of him that are misunderstood?

I think reading his autobiography is extremely important for anyone that wants to understand him, right?

So you read him his own words.

Malcolm lived the tragedy of being a young disenfranchised black man in America who went through all of the difficulties that were posed in a 1950s America towards him.

I mean, he went through the system and it was awful for him and he had to pull himself out of that and make himself into an incredible orator and incredible leader that suddenly had a pretty empowering vision and a calm and nonetheless courageous, but a calm presence to him and was able to bring together people, especially uplift black people in America to believe in themselves.

Young men in America, in prisons in particular, will read the autobiography of Malcolm X and see hope for themselves to come out of the darkness of being imprisoned, not just by the bars in front of them, but also by what they thought to be their own worth prior to that moment.

And so Malcolm climbs out of that and he goes through multiple phases.

So Malcolm dies as an Orthodox Muslim who does not believe in the superiority of one race over the other, finds great tranquility in the practice of the Hajj, great clarity.

And I think you read his letters from Mecca and he talks about his change, his transformation in particular.

And it was a process.

It's a process for him, but he inspires the likes of Muhammad Ali to become the person that he becomes and inspires many other people till today to really see themselves and see the world differently in light of that understanding of monotheism.

So he was deeply a man of faith and throughout his life, the nature of that faith has changed as he grew, as he interacted with, I would say, a cruel society that he was living.

Right.

You mentioned he inspired Muhammad Ali, who I don't think is an overstatement to say is probably the most, quite possibly the most famous Muslim from America, because you may make a few comments as an athlete yourself.

What impact did Islam have on Muhammad Ali's life and vice versa?

What impact did he have as a leader, as a religious figure on the Muslim community?

I think Muhammad Ali, his quotes on Islam are precious because he talks about how he sought the wealth of this world and he found that in Islam, he found a greater meaning and he attributes everything that he became to his faith, his sense of strength and commitment, the willingness to take a stand for the truth when it was extremely unpopular on the basis of his faith and on the basis of his integrity.

I think that he inspired people with his confidence and his coherence.

I mean, he was incredibly eloquent, I mean, poetic and just unwavering, seemed unbreakable.

So as relentless as he was in the ring, he was even more so outside of the ring.

The man could not be broken and everything was stacked up against him, but he perseveres and he does so then through Parkinson's and chooses to live a life of giving, a life of justice, a life of using his platform to bring up issues of importance and to champion the rights of others.

So he wasn't satisfied at any point in his life with simply being a boxing great, a boxing champion.

He uses it for so much more.

And so he goes down as one of the most famous Americans period of the 20th century, one of the most transformative Americans period of the 20th century, not just American Muslims. And a lot of people that loved him when he died would not have loved him if they were around in the 1960s and the 1970s.

They said they loved him when he couldn't speak anymore.

Many of those who celebrated him at the time of his death would have been his greatest opponents at the peak of his career and when he was taking the stance that he was taking.

Yeah, he was fearless and part of this, his faith was helping him take the fearless stance.

But throughout all of it, given the strength, I think he's also a symbol of compassion.

Through all the fun kind of, yeah, the poetic nature of who he was and the fearless nature of who he was.

There's always like a deep love for the sport and for humanity.

Absolutely.

And that's the thing, right?

It was so obvious that despite everything that had happened to him, he never loses himself neither to the fame nor to the fear.

He always stays himself.

He's authentic.

And you know, I went to his funeral and it was one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen because everyone in Louisville, Kentucky had a story with Muhammad Ali, right?

The guy that he saves from committing suicide, the school kids, the hotel shuttle driver, the gas station worker, everyone has a story of Muhammad Ali in Louisville, Kentucky.

And when he passes away, everybody comes out and stands in front of their homes and they

take the casket and they drive around the streets of Louisville.
And he had this dream, I'm very close to some of his children, incredible people by the way, just incredible human beings.
And he had this dream that he shared with them that he was jogging around the streets of Louisville, Kentucky, and everyone had come out to wave to him.
And so he's running around jogging and waving to everybody in the streets of Louisville, Kentucky.
Then he gets to the cemetery and he says he flies into the heavens.
So his dream, and he had this dream years ago, I mean, if you look at his funeral, it's such a beautiful, you can't make it up.
It's such a beautiful moment where it seems to come to reality because everybody in Louisville just comes out and just waves by his casket.
And then when he gets to the cemetery, the gates close and he goes off to be with his Lord and we pray that it's a good place for him.
So Muhammad Ali is probably one of the great 20th century representatives of Islam.
For me personally, at least, hopefully I'm not showing my bias, one of the great modern representatives is Khabib Narmangimadov, who's a great fighter and a great human being.
So you've gotten a chance to meet him.
I should also say you're friends, you're good friends with a lot of really interesting Muslim people.
I mean, it's such a widespread religion.
There's just so much variety of different people that are practicing Muslims.
So what does Khabib represent?
What do you like about him as a Muslim?
What do you like about him as a person, as representative of the religion?
I think Khabib, first of all, he is a great person, humble person.
He's shown, and now Islam as well, kind of following in that they're really showing the beauty of faith in their lives, their culture, their values.
Everything from the way that he carried himself in a principled way, like every Muslim kid grew up in a public school cafeteria before Islamic schools were a thing in the United States, not eating pork, for example, and kind of being the odd person out.
So when you got a fighter in the UFC scene and doesn't drink alcohol, kind of maintains like a very consistent principled attachment to his religion, it really is inspiring.
Turn up, we had Hakim Al-Ajwan in the 1990s, basketball who was fasting in the NBA.
I think Khabib is that for a lot of people, a lot of young people today, and people in general.
And I think beyond that, the values, how he honored his father and how he honors his mother and how he continues to put family first.
That's a beautiful part of Islam.
That's a beautiful part of our value system.
We have a lot of emphasis on family.
Family is central to Islam.
And his honoring of his father was so beautiful.
And again, what he's willing to do for his mother, it's just so beautiful.

And I think that we saw it, frankly, even with Morocco and the World Cup.

There is a lot of Islamophobia in this recent World Cup episode, a lot of the criticism of Qatar while no government is beyond reproach.

Generally no government is beyond reproach, but had very obvious blight into Islamophobic undertones.

And then with Morocco rising, being the first African Muslim Arab team to get that far in the World Cup, what did you see?

Beyond the consistent honoring of Palestine, you also saw the honoring of the mothers.

Every single time the game would end, they go into a prostration of gratitude.

So just like we prostrate in prayer, a prostration of gratitude, and then they go and they kiss their mothers' foreheads, dance with their mothers on the field, hug their moms and honor their moms.

That's Islam for you.

Habib, after his fight, what does he do?

He prostrates.

He points up to the heavens.

It's God.

And then he prostrates.

The whole Moroccan team beautifully prostrates, even when they lost, they prostrated out of gratitude.

They honored their mothers.

So I think sometimes athletes are able to demonstrate some of these beautiful values of Islam in a way that the world can maybe see them in a different light.

Values of humility and the values of love, love broadly, but love for family.

And look how everyone around Habib talks about him, right?

No one ever says he's a jerk.

No one ever says he's mistreated them.

They've all got stories, right?

And that's what a beautiful Muslim does, a beautiful human being.

You treat the people in such a way that all these stories come out later of how good you were to everyone that came into contact with you.

And Habib was that person.

He is that person.

He does a great job of treating people with a lot of respect.

Obviously, no one is perfect, right?

I mean, imperfections are for everybody, but I definitely think that he did a beautiful job representing his faith in those moments, you know, beyond punching people in the face.

That's kind of a different subject.

Smashing faces, not the smashing faces part, the prostration part and the humility.

I tell you, man, he's not humble in the ring, right?

He would maul his opponents, right?

I mean, as a practitioner, as a fan of the sport, of all grappling sports for me, there's also a beauty to the art of grappling and the fighting sports, but yes.

I think his, again, humility, his honor outside the cage is exemplary.

And the money, the fame, the power hasn't changed the man.

No, not at all.

And that's actually, I think, the most beautiful part.

When I met him, I found him to be as humble as he is on screen.

And that's always very endearing and all of the stories of the people that have been around him for a much longer time.

Very humble man.

I pray for him.

Honestly, I pray for Islam.

I pray for that family that God keeps them grounded and protected and together and that they maintain that beautiful spirit.

Because even if you just watch the lead up to the last fight with Islam, just the way they carry themselves, their day to day, they never relinquish their prayers.

They never relinquish their family ties, the things that make them who they are to be better fighters because they don't see that they have to let go of those things.

In fact, they attribute all of their worldly success to that faith.

And so, you know, beautiful examples.

And I think that it's good for young Muslims to see themselves in that and it's good for other people to see Islam through that as well.

When you mentioned the prophets, you often say peace and blessings be upon them.

Yes.

What does that phrase mean?

Why do you say it?

Is it to celebrate the people?

Is it as a constant reminder that these are figures that should be celebrated?

Absolutely.

So it's part of our tradition that when we say the name of a prophet, at least the first time in the conversation, we say peace be upon him.

And then afterwards, it's still praiseworthy to say peace be upon him.

So if you're reading an Islamic article and you see in parentheses, P-B-U-H, peace be on to him or peace be upon him.

When I was in high school, I often tell this story, I wrote an article about Jesus, peace be upon him in Islam and Christianity.

And my teacher comes up to me and she says, you can't do that.

And I said, what?

And she like slams the paper on the desk.

She says, you can't say Jesus.

I said, no, no, P-B-U-H, peace be upon him.

So that's what it means and something that we reserve for the prophets of God and we honor them with.

So who is Muhammad?

So the prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, is the descendant of Abraham, peace be upon him through Ishmael.

God promises Hagar and Ishmael that he will make of him a great nation.

And so there are prophets that are descended from Isaac and then from the brothers of Isaac comes the prophet Muhammad.

And he is the final prophet of a long line of prophets and we do not distinguish between the prophets in regards to their role.

And so Islam has a very accessible theology, it's something that resonates with a professor at an Ivy League university and a person who may be even illiterate, this idea of one God that sent many prophets and all of the prophets had a singular message, worship one God and respond to the messages of that one God through his messengers.

So Adam through Muhammad, you have many of the prophets that are mentioned in the Old Testament, Moses, peace be upon him, being the most spoken about prophet in the Quran.

In fact, Abraham, Jesus, peace be upon him, many of these prophets that are familiar to people, all of them are considered prophets and Islam, the prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, being the last of them.

He comes at a time where there was still a lot of confusion about what the world had just encountered in Christ and Jesus Christ, peace be upon him.

So you got to think about it this way, that this is still, you know, he's born in the 6th century, there is still great debate about who Jesus was, the Council of Nicaea happens in the 4th century, where you kind of have a standardizing of Western Christianity.

But then you have Eastern Christians that are still maintaining very different theologies and very different conceptions of Christ.

There's no Arabic Bible at the time and he kind of brings together the message and the mission of all of those prophets and it fits perfectly into a singular string of thought where you don't have to reject Jesus, peace be upon him, but Islam also is staunchly opposed to the idea of a trinity, the idea of a begotten Son of God, that all of the conceptions of the Messiah and there were many claimants of the Messiah prior to Christ, peace be upon him, none of them included an idea of a trinity or of him actually being a part of God himself, a begotten Son of God, but rather a great and mighty prophet that would restore glory on earth.

So he really captures theologically or rather we would say God captures through him theologically a coherence and a unifying message of all of the prophets that there's only one God and that that God has sent messages and scriptures to ultimately guide people back towards him and that all of the prophets are equal in the sight of God and there's no distinction between them and that we are to live our lives in accordance with the message as best manifested by the messenger and so the prophets are exemplary human beings and this is where we kind of sometimes maybe have a difference, you know, someone will say, well, you know, Noah did this and David did this as Muslims, we don't believe, we don't hold many of the stories that have been attributed to these prophets to be true.

We don't believe that the prophets are capable of major sins.

We believe they're exemplary human beings and that they kind of give us a manifestation of the scriptures that they were sent with of how to live noble lives and the most documented human being in history is the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him.

We know everything about him, his family life, his day to day, the way he would greet you, the way he'd look at you, everything about his physical appearance, it's documented in immaculate detail and Muslims have a standard that they then seek to live up to with how

to treat your family, how to be in your community, how to be in your worship, how to be in your social interactions, how to carry yourself with your neighbors.

It's a full, complete guidebook through his example where we have the Quran, which is the word of God.

And then you have the biography of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him, which is a living manifestation of that word that has been documented for us to live by until the end of time.

So Muhammad, if I may peace be upon him, is really the, like you said, the manifestation, the thing to be, the example of a good man.

Yes, example of a good human being.

Is the Quran the word of God?

So the Quran, and this is what distinguishes the Quran in many ways from other scriptures.

Because Muslims, we do believe that God has sent divine revelation prior.

We believe that the original scriptures prior to the multiple versions and the changes and revisions throughout history, the original scriptures that were given to the prophets, whether it was the Torah to Moses or the Gospels, were all original divine revelations.

But they've been changed over time, the Quran is the word of God with a promise that he will guard it for all of time.

And it's probably one of the greatest miracles because in 1400 years, we have the Quran preserved through oral transmission and through written transmission.

And there are almost 2 billion Muslims in the world and they all recite this book the exact same way.

And there's only one version of it.

And so when I'm reciting the Quran, if I say U or E or A differently, an Ethiopian Muslim, a Chinese Muslim, a Yemeni Muslim can correct me, an eight-year-old kid in any one of those countries can correct me because they will know that this is not how it's memorized.

And so it was memorized from the start, committed to memory in the time of the Prophet Muhammad

peace be upon him and preserved in writing and passed down and memorized by millions and millions of people around the world.

And it's 600 pages.

And you can't go to a city in America, a city in the United States of America and not find at least one person or a group of people that memorize it, that have committed it to memory.

And so there's an emphasis on committing it to memory, as well as understanding it and applying it and practicing it as much as we can.

What are some maybe deep or insightful differences between the Quran, the Torah and the Bible?

Well, like I said, so you've got the original revelations of those scriptures, but there are so many versions of those scriptures and there are times throughout history where there have been changes just from an objective perspective, right?

What is the original scripture that was given to Moses peace be upon him and what was initially communicated to Jesus peace be upon him, those things have changed over time.

However, there's still some truth that remains even in those scriptures.

And so there are still things that line up, especially with the Old Testament and Islam.

There are still many things that line up between the two, the Bible as well, the New Testament.

Now, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, it's different because these are not original scriptures.

These are testimonies that were obviously collected around the entire phenomenon of the coming of Christ.

The authors themselves, the biographies, the documentation, even of those original testimonies and gospels, what made the cut in terms of being included within the gospels and what didn't because there are many gospels at the time in that sense is different from what we believe was scripture communicated to Jesus peace be upon him.

The Quran is different in several ways, but it confirms what came before it, but it's the documented and preserved word of God to be recited throughout time.

So it confirms much of what came before it and it resides amongst us and within us for the rest of time.

And through it, we honor those revelations that came through the prophets of old because the essence, the core of what came through those revelations is preserved in the Quran and with us.

I tell people this all the time that the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him introduced Jesus peace be upon him and even Moses peace be upon him to much of the world.

There are Muslims around the world that are named Isa that are named Jesus.

There are Muslims around the world that are named Ibrahim, Abraham, Muslims around the world named Musa.

And they learned of these figures through the revelation that came to the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him Noah, Mariam, one of the most popular names in Islam, Mary peace be upon her whole chapter in the Quran named after Mariam, which is actually what I was reciting in the prayer was the chapter of Mariam, the chapter of the story of Mary peace be upon her.

So the Quran contains the stories.

It contains legislation and law, but primarily it was revealed over 23 years.

So it actually was coming in accordance with some of the events that were unfolding in the life of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him.

The first 13 years of that was primarily belief in God, belief in the hereafter and things that surrounded the core creed of Islam.

And then legislation, law, stories of the prophets came down in accordance with the unfolding events as well as prophesizing some of the things that were to come and speaking about some of the things that just happened and it is completed in the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him memorized and then communicated to generation after generation after generation so that we have it in its pristine fashion.

Now billions of people just all across the world, all the different cultures, all memorizing the same words.

One of the pillars or maybe I should say one of the central practices is the month of Ramadan.

What is the importance of this month?

What does the process of it entail also?

So Islam has, I think it'd be good to maybe lay this out for people, the articles of faith in the pillar of Islam.

So the articles of faith or six articles of faith in this kind of lays the foundation for the creed of Islam.

So belief in God, belief in the angels, belief in the messages, belief in the messengers,

okay, belief in the day of judgment and belief in divine decree.

So these are the six articles of faith, belief in God, belief in the angels, belief in the messages being the scriptures, belief in the messengers being the prophets, belief in the day of judgment and belief in divine decree.

That's what you have to believe to be a Muslim, you have to believe in those six things, right?

And then you go to the pillars of faith, the five pillars of faith are sort of, or they make up the structure of those articles of faith, the practice of the Muslim.

So to be a Muslim, you testify that there's only one God worthy of worship and unconditional obedience.

And then you testify that Muhammad is the final messenger of God.

That's the first pillar, it's the actual testimony entering into Islam.

Then it's the five daily prayers, practicing the five daily prayers at least as a bare minimum obligation, the mandatory charity, which is called the zakat that Muslims have to give at least 2.5% of their retained earnings to specific categories of charity.

Then it is the fasting of the month of Ramadan, the mandatory fasting of the month of Ramadan.

And then it's the Hajj, if you can do so, the pilgrimage, if you can do so once in your lifetime.

The five pillars of Islam.

So Ramadan is a month in which Muslims engage in this incredible spiritual boot camp.

Now fasting can mean different things to different people.

When we fast, we fast from before sunrise to sunset for an entire month, and there's no food or water period and no intimacy as well.

So you would abstain from intimacy with your spouse as well in that time.

No food or water, no bread, no nothing.

You don't eat or drink, even if you live in Texas, where you get these long, hot days in the summer.

And of course, Islam is on a lunar calendar, so it moves every year about 10 days earlier.

During that time, you restrict the intake to the body so that you can focus on the intake of the soul.

So instead of being focused on consumption, constant consumption, you are consuming words of remembrance, words of prayer, you're to be hyper conscious of not doing anything that would spiritually validate your fast, just as you would physically.

So just like you won't eat or drink, you certainly won't engage in sin, though you shouldn't engage in sins throughout the year, but you know, you're not going to speak words of evil.

You're not going to gossip or slander.

You try to fast with your eyes, not look at things that are not praise worthy.

So you try to engage in a wholesome act of disciplining yourself with a consciousness of God, but then channel that into engaging the soul instead, exercising the soul instead.

And what you'll find with Muslims in this act of God consciousness, where they reduce the consumption, is they become far more grateful for the blessings of God because throughout our lives we just take sips of water, we eat what we can, we snack.

When you're abstaining from that, you become so much more grateful for that sip of water, so much more grateful for that bite of food, so much more aware of the one who provided

those blessings to you, so much more aware of those that don't have the same access to those blessings that you have.

So you also develop a sense of empathy for the poor that don't have access to those blessings on a regular basis that can't help but fast.

And on top of that again, spiritually you are engaged in extra reading, at that time people are listening to more lectures, people are engaged in extra acts of devotion, extra acts of charity.

Muslims are most charitable in the month of Ramadan, so you just feel great.

And it's hard to explain to someone that doesn't do it because it sounds like torture to people, right?

What in the world are you doing, you know, four o'clock on a hot Texas day, not eating or drinking, you're probably dehydrated and cranky, have a caffeine headache, and you probably can't wait for this month to be over.

But in reality, you talk to Muslims, their favorite time of the year is Ramadan.

You feel amazing, you feel absolutely incredible because you taste a different type of consumption. You feed your soul for a change.

And in that process, you connect with God in a way that you simply could not without the distractions of the day to day throughout the year.

Now, it's good that it's one month of the year because it's honestly physically taxing, right?

So it gives you a chance to experience it for that one month, but then you're encouraged to fast a few days of the year as well outside of the month of Ramadan to keep that connection.

What are the hardest parts that maybe for people outside of the Muslim faith, yeah, that we'll be curious about?

Well, I think the hardest part is physically- Is it physical or is it the spiritual?

So as Ramadan goes on, your acts of worship increase.

So in the last 10 nights of Ramadan, there is an intense period of prayer throughout the night.

So every night in Ramadan, we have something called the Tadawih prayers.

The Tadawih prayers are about an hour, hour and a half of prayer outside of the five daily prayers.

So the mosques are packed every night in Ramadan.

The last 10 nights of Ramadan, people will engage in prayer throughout the entire night.

So the only sleep that you're probably getting is actually a couple of hours in the morning before you go to work.

So it's everything sort of put together, the disruption of schedule, the disruption of diet, the physically exerting yourself.

But the way you feel is unmatched.

I mean, you feel so fulfilled through that deprivation.

And it's actually the point, you know, it all ties back together when you talk about even tests and trials, that God does not deprive us of anything except that he gives us something greater in return.

And you do not deprive yourself of anything for the sake of God, except that he gives you something greater in return.

And so fasting is an exercise in patience that unlocks an infinite sense of gratitude and a greater connection to God.

So many people predict that Islam will surpass Christianity as the largest religion by the end of the century, by the number of its adherents and practitioners.

What responsibility does that place on people like you, who is a religious leader, who is somebody who teaches, who grows, who cares for the community, for the Muslim community, but actually for all people?

Well, I think what that means is that we have a responsibility to teach and live our faith in the most beautiful of ways that its values and ideals are not just expressed by you, but experienced by everyone around you.

And so what I often teach my community is that look at the Muslims in the area, what are your neighbors experiencing of you?

What are people experiencing of you?

And there's statistics to Muslims being the most charitable communities in America.

We're a community of great service, a community of volunteering, a community that greatly enriches the world around us.

I think that oftentimes people forget the history of Muslims being at the forefront of contributing in the areas of medicine and science and all sorts of ways, education really changing the world through their commitment to faith.

But on a deeply personal level, it's important for us to be representatives of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, in a way that makes Islamophobia impossible.

I tell people this, that it's very hard.

You mentioned the United States of hate, the documentary and the one man, the protester who met me and sort of changed his world view.

It's very hard for people to believe what they hear about Islam, if they see you live it.

Now, that does not excuse bigotry, that doesn't excuse the prejudice against Muslims, but it's important for us to sort of take it as a responsibility as Muslims to channel our faith in the most beautiful of ways.

God describes faith in the Quran in the chapter of Abraham, peace be upon him, as a tree with firm foundations, the firm foundation being the testimony of faith, the oneness of God, so the tree of monotheism with firm foundations, and then branches high in the sky, providing shade to everything and everyone around you, and producing fruit at all times.

The tree of faith of a Muslim is not seasonal, so you should be producing with your faith at all times, good works and things that people can actually experience.

And I think that Muslims have historically contributed to the world around them.

And I think that Muslims today are still contributing to the world around them, but I think that we can never do enough of holding ourselves accountable to the message that we hold dear to our hearts and trying to be the best representatives of that message and of that messenger to the world around us.

So not only are you a religious leader in the Muslim community, but you have a lot of friends who are from different religions, you have a lot of Jewish friends.

As we've talked about a lot offline, and we'll probably hopefully get a chance to talk to as well here, but on that topic, let me bring up another tragic event that was just a little

bit less than a year ago in this very community here in Dallas, there was a synagogue hostage crisis.

Can you describe what happened and what was your experience like through it and afterwards and what were the bad things you saw and what are the good things you saw in the community?

The Collyville synagogue situation, it's kind of surreal that we're coming up on a year of that, but I'll actually tell you exactly what happened that morning.

I was out with the family and that morning, I kid you not, that very morning I was telling my kids the story of Muhammad Ali talking that man out of committing suicide off the roof and I showed them the YouTube video, my wife pulled it up on her phone, kids were sitting in the backseat.

We talked about that video and talked about that importance of helping people.

We also went to visit a loved one in the cemetery that day and we went to breakfast.

So we're out as a family that day, right?

And there's a lot of meaning that's sort of coming together for us and a lot of discussion, deep discussion we're having as a family.

And then some of our community groups, we get this message that there is a synagogue that's been taken hostage, a rabbi and his congregation taken as hostages and go to this Facebook link and it was the feed of the synagogue and you could hear the gunman shouting. And it became apparent very early on that it was a man that was claiming to be Muslim that was holding them hostage.

Now all these synagogue massacres, all these places of worship were not attacked by Muslims, right?

They were a different type of situation, but my first instinct was like all that happened this morning was not random.

So I told my wife and I told my kids I'm going to go down there to Collyville.

She was very supportive.

Obviously, there was a moment of shock and like kids were like, wait, what?

And I said, look, remember what we talked about this morning?

We can't be indifferent to the stuff.

We still go back and revisit that day, you know, like it's crazy how it was all falling into place.

It's not an accident, right?

So I dropped them off at home and I started to drive to Collyville.

I called the Irving Police Department and I asked them to call the Collyville Police Department so that they could kind of know that I'm coming down there.

I called some of the faith leaders in the community to see if they could put me in touch with those on the ground so that I wouldn't get shot when I showed up there.

And eventually I had to wait outside until I got clearance to come through and to just offer whatever support I could, pastoral support, support with trying to free the hostages of the synagogue at the time.

It was operating out of a church right across the street from the synagogue, a day long just wondering, you know, what was going to happen, looking at the family of the rabbi at the time, wondering what was going to happen and trying to just be as supportive as I possibly could at that time.

Thankfully, they all got out in the evening.

I think that, you know, looking back on that day, like my wife actually asked me, so would you have done it differently?

And I said, no, I really wouldn't because I think that things happen sometimes, you've got to act on your good instincts sometimes, right?

When you talk about like being calculated, I think sometimes we're calculated when we shouldn't be and that's when that good instinct comes in, where you're called to do something else.

What did it feel like to be a Muslim in a situation like that?

I mean, was there, were you a human being, were you a religious practitioner?

I don't see, I can't separate anything about myself in that situation, right?

So when I had to pray, I had to pray to help people out, to give people words of comfort, to try to appeal to the senses of whoever I could at the time.

I didn't see myself as like a guy trying to, trying to show a particular part of Islam in there.

I just saw myself as someone that was trying to help a family get their husband and father back, right?

And so it was more of just like that part of me was there, you know, you can kind of see yourself, right?

And this is the irony of it.

When Christ's church in New Zealand happened, that was kind of our worst nightmare as Texas Muslims because we've had armed groups in front of our mosques threatening to do what that man did in Christ's church.

And so when you see a wife and kids wondering if they're going to get their dad back, you kind of see yourself there.

And so I just saw myself in that situation.

What would I want people to be doing for me in that moment?

What would I want people to be telling my family in that moment?

So that's really where I went to and that's really where I dug into and I prayed a lot that day, a lot, a lot for the right words, for the right actions, what I could do to just help.

What are the lessons now a year later that you take away from that day and the days?

So many lessons just don't be indifferent.

Don't be indifferent to the suffering around you or even that's distant from you because it's somehow related to you.

So just don't be indifferent.

So you're proud that you stepped up and you went there and then...

Yeah, look, I don't think I did much.

I'm being really honest.

This is not me trying to be humble here.

I don't think I did much.

I think I did what I was called to do.

I wish that it never happened as a whole, but I'm glad that the relationships that have been built over time came into being in that day, where we could call upon people that

we knew, call upon each other, and as a community really come together, Dallas has been through a lot, a lot of pain, but we've come together through a lot of pain as well.

So it's kind of one of those things where we're united in our pain and when you suffer together, you build certain bonds together.

So Dallas has been through a lot as a community, but we've come together through a lot as a community.

Yeah, the thing about violence and war, it destroys, it caused so much suffering, but it also sort of brings out some of the best aspects of human nature and unites people.

It's an interesting way how our human civilization functions.

Well, that's the beauty that you don't just want to see, but you also want to be.

We're living in a climate where there's a lot of that, right?

So how do you actually get through that and actually not allow yourself to succumb to that and be another voice in that polarization?

It seems that throughout history and still in the world today, religion has been a source of a lot of polarization, a lot of conflict, even war.

Why do you think that is?

Listen, I think at the essence of it is always some sort of political instability that leaves behind a brutalized population and vulnerabilities that can be exploited.

As I said in the 20th century, with the bloodiest century that we've had to date, where does religion fall in any of that?

Where does religion fall in the isms?

Where does religion fall in the world wars?

Where does religion fall in much of that?

Even when we talk about things like the crusades, remove the Islamic framing, the crusades, the crusades, were they really about religion?

The Mongols and the destruction of the Mongols.

Was it about religion?

Myanmar and the Rohingya today, is it about Buddhism?

I think that these are essentially political issues, political causes where you have people that rise up and that use religion to disguise things that are far, far, far from religion.

If you want to manipulate a religious scripture, you could turn any book, any scripture into a violent scripture if you have a violent aim.

So I think that that's where you find people manipulating versus manipulating religion to justify sick ideologies that are based and thrive in political instability.

So these are fundamentally political geopolitical conflicts, not religious conflicts?

Absolutely.

Look, when you talk about a group like ISIS, Islam has been in Iraq for a very, very long time.

Iraq has been bombed by now five consecutive presidents or four.

It's been bombed into the stone ages.

There is no political infrastructure.

It's devastation and destruction and desperation as a result of that.

Many of the old Saddam loyalists and Saddam's regime was a secularist regime, are now heads of ISIS.

It just moved into that.

When you create that type of chaos, you generate an environment where groups like ISIS are bound to rise out of.

Islam did not cause this.

People didn't wake up in Iraq one day and say, hey, let's create a group called ISIS because Islam tells us to.

Iraq was bombed into this place and we have to not just free religion from the responsibility, from having to bear the responsibility of much of the hatred and violence, but we have to interrogate the political instability that was caused where we justified as Americans. These are our taxpayer dollars where we justified with what was done in Iraq.

Do we even know what was done in Iraq and Afghanistan?

These drones that drop using our tax dollars under democratic and republican regimes and kill thousands of innocent people in weddings in Yemen and Somalia, are these justified?

When you think about dehumanization.

Can the average American name a single victim of the Iraq war?

Is there a picture that comes to your mind?

Is there a person?

Absolutely not because that's the dehumanization.

Now I often talk about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., his progression as a faith leader in America, as a political leader in America, Dr. King was deeply unpopular when he took a stand on Vietnam and he mentions how first he had to see Vietnam through the lens of the soldiers because many of the soldiers that were lost American soldiers, that was a crime that they were sent to fight a war that they should not have been sent to fight and there was an injustice that was done towards them.

He said, but things really changed when he started to see it from the other side of the bullet, when he started to see the world through Vietnam, through the Vietnamese child.

That's where he resorted to breaking the silence.

That's where he changed his tune because we dehumanize our victims so much that they're not even relevant to our discourse until they become able villains to our story and then now they're attacking us because they hate us.

Now they're blowing us up because they hate us.

Their religion tells them to do this to us.

What have we allowed to be done to them using our tax dollars in our name?

I think that we have to interrogate the political chaos that was caused, not just free religion from the groups that were created, but what was done to those countries and what continues to be done in many of these places.

Yeah.

When the pride that people had about America where everybody came together after 9-11 and there was all the American flags, that was beautiful to see, but then you have to transfer that and I wish all of us Americans could go and see the daughters that would lose their parents, the parents that would lose their daughters and sons because bombs dropped, the thousands, the tens of thousands of civilians that died in Afghanistan and in Iraq because of the decisions made in the name of politics.

If we just met those families and if we empathize with them and just put ourselves in their

place, it's impossible not to feel hate for America, for everybody.

I visited Ukraine and spoke to a lot of Ukrainians and they said, there's loved ones that are Russians before the war, but now all they have is hate.

If you ask many of them, will they ever forgive, not the regime, not the soldiers, will they ever forgive Russians?

They many of them say never and that never feels like it's a generational never.

I mean, look, you think about this, if your grandparents were wiped out in a drone attack, your parents, your brothers, your sisters, all of your loved ones and you're missing a leg in an eye and the world does not take you into consideration, you'll never be seen or considered in the halls of Congress or discussed.

What are you going to grow up with?

But the thing is, is that we should not be speaking about this only from the standpoint of, oh shoot, they're going to grow up and hate us.

We should be thinking about what was done to them and hate that, despise that, that it's ugly.

You see, when people carry out a terrorist attack, they're not considering the lives of the civilians in these places.

So those that perpetrate the 9-11 attacks are not seeing the thousands of people that they killed, the human beings, the lives, many of whom are Muslim, by the way, actually know, one of them was a very active Muslim in the Islamic circle of North America.

I mean, they didn't see those stories, right?

When you drop a bomb on this many people, when you drone people and you say, oops, collateral damage, we were looking for one person, killed 40 people and there's no count, no names, nothing that can be recalled in the American memory.

That's a problem, a fundamental issue with how we treat the rest of the world, right?

So I'm an American, I think that I'm responsible to the extent that I have to critique these policies and I have to try to challenge America to deal with the world differently.

And when I go overseas, when I'm around Muslims in the Muslim world, right, in the Middle East and in the Muslim world, you know, I have to, I'm speaking as a Palestinian American Muslim who grew up in South Louisiana.

I've got a complex background here, right?

A lot of experiences here that I'm grateful for because they all contribute to who I am and what I know and what I've been, I think they're all enriching.

I wouldn't relinquish the Palestinian part.

I wouldn't relinquish the American part and I certainly wouldn't relinquish the Muslim part but it's helping people consider what they're not seeing and when you can dehumanize entire groups of people to where you can reduce them to chalk, casualty counts and not be able to recall a single story, then you have to take a step back and ask yourself, what are we becoming, right?

What are we becoming?

Not a single victim of Afghanistan or Iraq.

Millions of people, not a single person can the average American conjure in their head.

If you apply this to a very difficult topic of Israel and Palestine.

Speaking of which, right?

You have been critical of the policies of the state of Israel, but as we've mentioned very supportive of Jewish people, you have a lot of friends, rabbis and Jews in general here in Dallas and across the world.

What is the difference to you in that part of the world between politics and religion?

So in this case, Zionism and Judaism, both terms broadly defined.

Both terms broadly defined.

So I say that because those terms, there's technical definitions and there's how they're popularly used and so you have to be kind of, just like we said with Islamophobia, these terms are, they become politicized.

So just generally speaking, I think Zionism has to do with politics and Judaism has to do with religion.

Yes.

It's the great complexity like to a lot of people like, wait a minute, right?

And you got to take a step back and wonder why there are so many Zionist anti-Semites in America and there are so many anti-Zionists who are far from being anti-Semites, anti-Zionism that are opposed to the ideology that are opposed to the implications of it.

Look, I think that it's fundamentally secular.

When you think about it, there is an ethno supremacism.

There is, I am the child of Palestinians that were forcibly displaced from their land.

I've never been able to go to where my parents, my grandparents are from.

I've never been able to see that land.

I've never been able to access that.

I have cousins that I'll never be, well, I shouldn't say never, inshallah, God willing,

I will meet them, but that I've only been able to speak through a phone, FaceTime, Zoom.

I think that it's important for us to separate criticism of Israel's policies from anti-Semitism.

In fact, it's an injustice.

It cheapens anti-Semitism when you throw every person who is opposed to Zionism or opposed to Israel's policies in the bucket of being anti-Semites.

It's wrong.

It cheapens it.

It doesn't do justice to it.

I think it's important for us to have a meaningful conversation about America's support for Israel.

Listen, there are terms that are important here, so I'm going to throw out these big terms, right, apartheid, occupation, ethnic cleansing.

These are terms that are legal terms.

There are objective thresholds here for apartheid, occupation, ethnic cleansing.

The threshold of apartheid has been crossed according to the most respectable human rights organizations in the world.

These are the organizations that you will champion and that you will use in every single other conflict to justify your own policies, but that threshold of apartheid has been passed.

According to Human Rights Watch, according to Amnesty International, according to the Harvard Law Review, the threshold of apartheid has been crossed.

There's a legal terminology there, two sets of laws for two separate people.

You have a displaced people that are forcibly being removed, that are being treated differently,

that are stateless, that are undergoing daily humiliation, that live behind an apartheid wall, that live under a different set of policies, that are routinely bombarded, that have lost their ability to free movement, that have lost their ability to access to basic necessities of human life.

There are legal definitions here.

I don't see how any objective human being can read those reports on apartheid and the threshold crossed for apartheid and walk away from that and say that this is just Jews and Muslims that don't like each other.

There's a legal definition here, occupation.

When Israel was created in 1948, you will find many Jews who are opposed to Zionism.

I think this is important to talk to Jews who are opposed to Zionism, and they are many that will say that we were told that it was a land without a people, for a people without a land.

The problem with that was there were people there, our ancestors, 750,000 Palestinians expelled in the Nakba, and many Palestinians that have been removed and harassed and that are treated in horrific ways, and the occupation is expanding.

It is an illegal occupation, the settlements are still expanding, and the United States enables that occupation with its funding, with its unconditional support, unwavering support of Israel, and it does so in a way that completely undermines any of its claims to being a beacon of freedom in the world, because it is in plain sight now that the world can see what is happening in Sheikh Jarrah, what is happening in Jerusalem, what is happening with these expanding settlements, everything that flies in the face of any claim to wanting a peaceful solution.

The children in Gaza, when I talk about dehumanization, the children that were on the face of the New York Times, which is historically one of the most anti-Palestinian newspapers in America, the faces of the children of Gaza, America and many parts of the world are now seeing it.

We have been saying for a very long time, this is apartheid, this is an occupation, this is an injustice, the world needs to check it, hold it accountable.

South Africa, which experienced apartheid, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, all of those that fought apartheid in South Africa, said that Palestinians are living under apartheid and that the same strategies that check the apartheid in South Africa need to be used to hold Israel accountable for apartheid with the Palestinians.

It's impossible for us as Palestinians to simply say that we should give up on this cause because all the odds are stacked against us.

But when you have videos coming out of the Israeli armies spewing skunk water, sewage water on worshipers leaving Al-Aqsa, far-right leaders now taking the government and the so-called only democracy in the Middle East prohibiting a Palestinian flag being raised anywhere around.

Palestinian reporters, Shireen Abu-Aqla, Palestinian American Christian reporter, one of the most prominent journalists in the Middle East, shot in the face, plain sight, and all America could say was, all the American government could say was, if it turns out that it's indeed Israel, that Israel is responsible for the death of an American journalist, then we will hold them accountable.

Nothing.

Not a peep.

It was a shame to see that happen and it just solidified to us that whether it's a Democratic president or a Republican president, unfortunately, the support for Israel is enabling it to continue to wipe out the Palestinian population from its historic land.

And so, we see that happening and I'll say this as well.

People ask me about the Abraham Accords.

They say, you are talking about peace between communities of faith and protecting communities of faith.

Why are you opposed to the Abraham Accords?

I think that the name of Abraham should not be used and I wrote an article called Why I Opposed the Abraham Accords.

The name of Abraham should not be used to justify arms deals that only further disenfranchise the abused population of the Palestinians, where you have, quote unquote, Muslim regimes making peace with Israel and that's being used against the Palestinian people who are only further disenfranchised from having a voice in their own fate for the sake of American arms deals and security and economic benefits.

It's despicable.

It's repulsive.

Talk to the people, speak to people on the ground there, see what's happening with your own two eyes and think about the injustice where our tax payer dollars are being used to suppress a people and what legally meets the definition by every objective standard of apartheid, of occupation, of ethnic cleansing and it's ongoing and it's happening in real time and it's becoming more blatant with a regime now that's unapologetic of even expressing what the policies have already done and that is the removal of a people, a forcible removal of a people because the government knows that the United States support is unconditional. Do you have hope that Jews, Muslims and Christians on this land will live in peace one day together?

I have a basic respect for each other's humanity.

This isn't a religious conflict.

I think that's fundamentally one of the problems.

So even the question is not the correct question?

It's not the correct question.

This is not a religious conflict.

Yes, religion is invoked.

Yes, there are religious elements but there are many Jews that are opposed to what is happening right now towards the Palestinians, many.

And I would recommend a serious discussion with even people whose perspectives have grown, Peter Bynert being an example, Rabbi Simone Zimmerman started, if not now, Betis Lim, an Israeli human rights organization that also classed it as apartheid recently.

There are many Jews that are opposed to what is happening right now.

Palestinians are also not exclusively a Muslim population.

There are many Palestinian Christians that are also being denied entry into their historic churches and that are completely bewildered or absolutely lost in regards to why American evangelicals have this ironclad support for the occupation and have ignored the plight

of Palestinian Christians.

Of course, I believe Muslims, Christians and Jews can coexist.

Of course, I have hope because I have to have hope as a person of faith.

But as much hope as I have, I think there's a great sense of urgency for people to open their eyes, learn what's actually happening on the ground, read the reports, stop letting these commentators and these companies that are able to generate propaganda, own the narrative. There are objective standards here.

There are objective measures of oppression that need to be considered here.

What's happening to Gaza is one of the greatest atrocities of our time.

Learn about it.

I'd tell people to just watch the vice documentaries, for example, the mini documentaries.

I'd sent them to you as well inside the battle for Jerusalem.

Think about it.

A guy from Long Island, New York can fly to Israel.

Fly in the Tel Aviv and walk into a home that's been occupied by families for generations and throw the people out under the full protection of the military there and spit on them. Historic homes.

When people come up to me and say, we're a post-Islamophobia, we're a post-Islamophobia, but they support that.

I tell you, you're not a post-Islamophobia.

How can you be a post-Islamophobia when you traffic in the same framings and dehumanization that enables the viciousness towards Muslims here and Palestinians over there that they do not deserve to be treated like equal human beings, like full human beings and that based on historic claims, a guy can fly from New York into a historic neighborhood in Jerusalem and kick out generational families with military guns next to them.

What does that sound like?

How is that normal?

I think that if people take the time to read, people take the time to investigate, then they come to this conclusion themselves that this is unacceptable and that you can't put, and this is one of the problems with the framing of Israel-Palestine, is that you're equating occupier and occupied.

You're equating the two sides of the conflict, and it's not a conflict, it's an occupation.

There is such a disparity of power here that you cannot equate the two sides.

Malcolm X would say, you clip the bird's wing and then blame it for not flying as high as you do.

You can't do that to a people and just equate them with their occupier.

It's an atrocity.

It requires us to challenge it.

I am hopeful at the current movement of Muslims, Christians, and Jews and people of all faiths that are saying enough is enough, that thresholds have been crossed here, that this is an atrocity that cannot continue.

This is very personal to me because this is happening now.

What I anticipate, and this is what America did, this is what Nelson Mandela actually predicted with the United States.

What I anticipate is that 10 years from now, 20 years from now, every American will say, how could we have supported this?

This was terrible.

We'll pay symbolic homage to the Palestinian cause.

There are people now that are clinging on for dear life, access to their places of worship, access to their generational homes.

Right now, there are children that are in detention, and there's a bill in Congress to just stop wherever you stand on this issue.

Child detainment, child detainment, child detention should be a red line.

Congresswoman Betty McCullum has put this bill on the floor of Congress.

She can't even get that passed, just to at least censure child detainment by the IDF.

People need to look into this deeper.

They need to consider the human element of this, and consider the urgency of it as well.

With this new regime, it's only going to, unfortunately, get much worse in the immediate term, and so we have to do something about it.

If I may ask you for some advice, for a reason I'll explain maybe in a little bit, or maybe I should just explain now, which is, I think, because you've talked about Islamophobia, because you've been at the center of so many catastrophic events, because you jump into the fire to try to help people, you've been attacked a lot.

Just in general, you've been under stress, you're not immune to stress, so a part of me wants to ask just how psychologically difficult it's been, and where you draw strength.

Would you advise if the opportunity is there for a person like me, for silly kid in a suit, to go to that part of the world and take seriously conversations?

I would divide it into two categories.

There's leaders and there's people.

The leaders are sort of these political entities that have their interests, but they also have power, and they want to hold on to power.

And people are just regular people that have families that just want to have basic rights and freedoms and continue to love their families, to pursue different jobs and careers and lives that they can flourish and so on.

Those are very different dynamics at play.

And if given the opportunity to speak to leaders for me, would you advise I do it or not?

And when I say leaders, I mean leaders that would make the case, the pro-Zionist case and the anti-Zionist case, and in both cases, I would make it a very challenging conversations for both of them.

Unlike today, our conversation today, you're an inspiring, incredible person.

I'm a huge fan of yours.

You've spread so much love to the Muslim community here, to the Jewish community, just everybody loves you.

Not everybody.

Yes, that's true.

Not everybody.

That's true.

But a lot of people love you, yes.

But this was kind of an inspiring and a positive conversation, it wasn't very challenging. Although we did touch challenging topics, and you did exceptionally well there, but I would do very challenging conversation with those leaders in that part of the world.

Is that a bad idea?

All right.

Well, let me tell you from now.

First and foremost, the first part, because I don't want to lose the first part of your conversation.

Is it psychologically stressful?

Very, very.

But when you're a person of faith, and you believe that good work will always be rewarded, and that doing the right thing will always be rewarded eventually, you're able to weather that storm, quite a bit.

So your wife told you, Holly Bill was okay, right?

That's the second thing I was going to mention is honestly supportive, a supportive family.

You know, my dad's 80 men, and he's been through a lot.

He was born in 1943, five years before Israel was even created.

He was born in Palestine.

He suffered displacement.

He has been around the world and somehow built himself up to be a distinguished professor of chemistry, an author, an inventor.

You know, grew up taking on some of the most difficult challenges and was just always a man of principle.

I always admired my dad being a man of principle, and like he just tells me, man, stay the course. Stay the course.

Don't be afraid.

Don't back down.

I have a supportive family.

I have a supportive wife.

I've got supportive kids.

So I have amazing people around me that keep me grounded for sure.

And ultimately, obviously faith.

And also I'll say this, slander doesn't stand.

What do you mean by that?

When people slander you, and it kind of comes with the territory of a public figure, it's not going to stand throughout time because eventually any sincere person will find the truth.

And the only people that will regurgitate that will continue to do so.

So when I get portrayed as an anti-Semite because of my strong takes on Israel and challenging Israel, and I will continue to do so, it takes just people in doubt, like, we know him.

What are you talking about?

So slander doesn't stand, at least with the people that are important to you.

It might reside on the internet.

It might have great rankings and social media bots that give it traction.

But is that psychologically difficult to you to have that?

Of course.

Yes, it is difficult.

It's very difficult and it's hurtful, especially when it comes from quarters that you would hope that it doesn't come from.

But you take a step back, you reevaluate, you lean into your faith, and you lean on the people that are closest to you, and then you keep going.

You learn the lessons.

Could I be doing something better?

Could I be doing something different?

Could I be saying something better?

Could I be saying something different?

Are the noble causes that I want to achieve, am I doing justice by those causes?

How do I grow out of this?

You become wiser through these things as well.

The second part of your question, though, about what you should do, if you're going to talk to people, talk to people from a place of inquiry, I would say talk to people more so than leaders, and especially some of those who have been erased from the media commentary. Benjamin Netanyahu gets a lot of airtime here in the United States.

He's well-spoken.

He speaks perfect English.

He's an American as well.

I would challenge him on some of the things that he has said and done.

He has an ongoing corruption case.

I think he's a fascist.

I think that he's a person who has done much evil.

I think that he has a lot of blood on his hands, and I think that one day he will be prosecuted for that.

But I'd say talk to people on the ground and people that have been erased.

Talk to the families that are being displaced, Sheikh Jarrah.

I don't care about the political leadership, but much rather you talk to the people on the ground in East Jerusalem that have been displaced, the families.

Talk to Palestinian Christians.

Talk to the sister of Shireen Abu Aqla, who was extremely disappointed and let down when Joe Biden went to the region and did not take her calls, did not meet her, which was an absolutely disgraceful move he should have met with her.

She's the sister of an American journalist who was murdered in cold blood.

Talk to Lena Abu Aqla.

Talk to Mitri Rahib, Mitri, an interesting person, for example, he's a Lutheran, he's the head of the Lutheran church in Palestine.

He comes to Dallas sometimes and talks about the plight of Palestinian Christians.

I think if you're talking to people in leadership, obviously there are some that will be able to represent themselves in English.

I don't know if you're going to have any luck getting into Gaza, but I'll pray for you if

you do.

But obviously, if you want to talk to everybody, you've got to talk to everybody, man.

Well, and I also want to say, this is very important when you say whitewashing, because I've heard this a lot, so also with Ukraine and Russia, there's an interesting line between whitewashing, which is something you definitely should not do, and a deep empathy for a large number of human beings.

It's a really tricky line to walk.

And I also disagree with you about, well, I think, I don't know if it's a disagreement, but I think I disagree about leaders.

I think I agree 100% that the most important people are the people on the ground.

But I think those are extremely important people to understand, not just as leaders, but as human beings too.

And in many cases, to have a challenging conversation, but from a place of empathy, from understanding

a human being.

So, if you plan to talk to right wing, the current leadership of Israel, my only request to you is talk to the victims themselves, not the Palestinian Authority, talk to the victim.

I know you want to, right?

So, I appreciate them.

But the victims, yes.

The victims, yes.

Talk to the victims themselves.

Talk to those people that are being thrown out of their homes and subjected to the daily humiliation.

Go to a checkpoint and walk through the checkpoint the way that a Palestinian walks through a checkpoint, and tell me that's not apartheid.

Walk through that checkpoint, crammed in in cages, and tell me it's not apartheid.

So I think you're a very sincere person.

I think you're going to do your best.

I'll be praying for you.

Some of these things are harder than others.

But yes, I feel like we're in the middle of a negotiation, and we've come to a point where we're both agreed.

Everyone deserves to be, not everyone deserves to be, but I think there's great value and benefit.

Let me say I agree with you in hearing people, even tyrants, hearing them so that you can properly deconstruct and decipher what you're hearing.

But just think of the voices that don't get heard.

And a lot of times what's been done to the Muslim world is, and what's being done right now in the name of the Abraham Accords, what's wrong with the Palestinians?

The other Arabs are making peace with them.

Let me tell you something.

Those regimes that are signing onto the Abraham Accords, the people are not happy, but they're

terrified of challenging those regimes.

So if you go talk to the leaders of some of these countries that have signed onto the Abraham Accords, and that are in some twisted way, making this about religion and peace, you can greatly skew the narrative to where Palestinians are just an inherently disagreeable people that don't want peace.

They just want to live in their homes.

They just want to live as full equal human beings.

They want the things that everybody wants.

And they're only being further disenfranchised in the name of peace now, because voices are being amplified in the name of peace that are suffocating voices for justice.

You said hope as a man of faith, you have hope.

What gives you hope about this part of the world and our world in general?

When you look across and see so much conflict, so much division happening, what gives you hope?

I think that if you look through history, we have been through points as a world where we almost were not going to exist anymore.

If you lived in the time of the Crusades, if you lived in some of these darker moments of history, World War I, World War II, you probably thought you weren't going to come out of this as a world.

I have hope in God, and I have hope that godly people, people that are devoted to God and people of righteousness can shift things with His help.

I also believe that younger people, I hope they'll be different.

I think younger people, hopefully, or using the word hope a lot, you might hear God willing, we'll see the path that we're heading and we'll seek to disrupt this bleak trajectory and bring it back to something else.

Here's the thing.

We live in a time of hyperexposure.

That hyperexposure could paralyze you or it could empower you.

It could make you completely shut down and say, what's the point of even trying to help these people out?

Why even talk about the Palestinians?

Well, you got these people here, the Uyghurs, the Rohingya, you got what's happening in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Brazil, South America, Africa, Ethiopia, Somalia.

It's so much and it can be overwhelming to a person who cares.

But you ultimately realize that the difference that you can make can become a much greater difference even if it's after your lifetime.

I'll tell you actually a story that I remember the first time when I went to Syria, Syrian refugee camps, and you deal with people in this deeply human way.

For me, the most clarifying parts of the world are the refugee camps.

It's where I feel the most clarity in life about what I'm supposed to be doing in life.

You go to the refugee camps and then after you interacting with these people and maybe giving a few people some trailer homes and some food and something to sustain themselves, some coats and blankets, you drive out of the refugee camps back to where you're staying and the camps get bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger and the people get smaller and

smaller and smaller and smaller.

But then you realize that it might be that that small section that I touched is going to be the change that affects all of them.

What's going to happen to that 12-year-old boy that has seen the horrors of this world and that is absolutely committed to uplifting his people and bringing about a change, being responsible for the plight of his people.

So when I look at any section of devastation in the world, you never know which part of it that you're going to touch that's going to change everything by the grace of God, by the help of God.

So you keep trying to do your part.

The Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him said that the most beloved of deeds to God are the consistent ones even if they're small, that small act of charity, that small smile, that small act of kindness, that small prayer might go a long way if he blesses it.

So keep chipping away, chipping away, chipping away.

So do not be paralyzed by the scale of the division.

Just chip away at it, one small step at a time.

I suppose all of us can do that.

Young people can do that.

Just one person at a time.

Try to help.

Yes.

Absolutely.

Absolutely.

Omar, you're an incredible person.

You're an inspiration.

You know, I think you mentioned you came to Dallas for a podcast and instead you got a friend.

There you go.

So it's an honor to be your new friend and I think it's time to go pray.

Absolutely.

I hope it's okay that I join you at least in movement in prayer.

Thank you so much.

I appreciate you coming down.

It's been an absolute pleasure.

It's amazing to be able to do that.

And peace be upon me the day I was born and the day I die and the day I am resurrected.

Allah, Allah, Allah, Allah.

Peace be upon you and the mercy of Allah.

Peace be upon you and the mercy of Allah.

Peace be upon you.

Peace be upon you and the mercy of Allah.

Thanks for listening to this conversation with Omar Suleiman. To support this podcast, please check out our sponsors in the description.

And now, let me leave you with some words from Muhammad Ali.

Impossible is just the big word thrown around by small men who find it easier to live in a world they've been given than to explore the power they have to change it.

Impossible is not a fact. It's an opinion.

Impossible is not a declaration. It's a dare.

Thank you for listening and hope to see you next time.