

# one world

BY PETER NICHOLS

“We need to get away from stereotypes, generalizations and preconceptions and take care not to let crimes committed by individuals or small groups dictate our image of an entire people, an entire region or an entire religion.”

The words were spoken last fall by former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan. He was in Istanbul to accept the report, “Alliance of Civilizations,” from the High-Level Group he appointed the year before to look into clashes between Muslim and Western societies. “The anxiety and confusion caused by the ‘clash of civilizations’ theory regrettably has distorted ... the real nature of the predicament the world is facing,” the group wrote. “The history of relations between cultures is not only one of wars and confrontation. It is also based on centuries of constructive exchanges, cross-fertilization and peaceful co-existence.”

Jamal Elias agrees. “The notion that there are clear civilizational lines is absurd,” he contends. “How can there be a ‘clash of civilizations’ when in every Muslim country huge numbers of people are carrying cell phones or have Internet access, and given the chance, they want to learn English — and all the youth are going to McDonald’s?”

Elias is the Class of 1965 Term Professor of Religious Studies. He came to Penn from Amherst College last fall. A scholar of Islam, he specializes in Sufi thought and literature as well as art and

perception in the Islamic context. His books include *Death Before Dying: The Sufi Poems of Sultan Bahu* and *The Throne Carrier of God: The Life and Thought of ‘Ala’ ad-dawla as-Simnani*. He also wrote the primer *Islam*.

Elias grew up in Pakistan. An immigrant from a Muslim society, he has written, “I have come to realize that the lack I have felt most deeply ... is the absence of a sound, that of the Islamic call to prayer, or *adhan*,” which issues from the local mosque five times a day. He was an “army brat” and “science geek” and in his education was tracking toward a career in applied science. It wasn’t until he went to Stanford as an undergrad that he discovered the “wonders, the richness and the vastness” of Islamic history and heritage. “I saw that it was so complicated as a civilization, as systems of thought — it’s not just one monolith.” Only then did he decide to change course and study Islam.

Elias is not an active practitioner but considers himself “a participant observer.” “My own values are entirely politically secular,” he emphasizes, “and I don’t consider myself an apologist for one side or the other.” Still, on research trips to Muslim cities, he savors the morning *adhan* that rouses him from sleep. “I find the sound reassuring and emotionally evocative.”

Islam is the majority religion in countries as diverse as Morocco, Indonesia and Kazakhstan. It is the second-largest religion in the world

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# A SCHOLAR OF ISLAM REFLECTS ON RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

after Christianity, which claims nearly twice as many believers. “Islam is a religion of well over a billion people on every inhabited continent of the world, from more cultures than I can begin to count,” he explains. “They come in all economic shapes and sizes, with all the different interests and concerns that human beings can possibly have.”

That kaleidoscope of cultures and classes and concerns gives Islam a different look in different times and places. When he teaches courses on Islam, Elias tries to present a “complicated body of data” that is the heritage of Muslim peoples. Although Islam’s distinguishing belief holds that God sent a revelation called the Qur’an through the prophet Muhammad, he explains, “there is no ritual or cultural behavior that applies monolithically to all Muslims, including the most central doctrines. They understand them differently.” There is an Islamic civilization, but it’s not defined by a uniform ideology or a single way of life, much less a single-minded enmity for the West.

In fact, Elias insists, Muslims in other parts of the world are more like us than the caricatures of our television programming and political discourse suggest. Especially in a globalized world where eating falafel and hummus here is as “foreign” as wearing Nike high-tops and listening to hip-hop there. He considers a representative demographic from one of the most populous Muslim countries:

a middle-class teenage girl in an Indonesian prep school. “To think that her concerns are not something like getting an iPod and what her peers think about, but are something about her fight with the West; or that her parents’ concerns are not making sure that she behaves in school and doesn’t get into trouble with boys, but are focused on fighting against the West — this is absurd. ... If they are concerned with a global conflict, it’s because it’s hyped in the media and by their government for its own reasons — as it is here.”

Just to create a suicide bomber, Elias points out, recruiters have to convince people like this that everything they want, everything their families and friends are concerned about, is bad. This can’t happen in mainstream Islamic society, he argues. “So it’s not actually just about the West: It’s about creating a separate, cultic identity.”

A clash-of-civilizations outlook provides a potent slogan for terrorist groups “to attract and motivate a loosely knit network of operatives and supporters,” observes the Alliance of Civilizations report. It goes on to state that many of the “self-proclaimed religious figures” who lead these groups propagate “narrow, distorted interpretations of Islamic teachings.”

According to Elias, respected Islamic scholars and clerics from around the world have held that a careful reading of Islamic scriptures and history shows that

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the teachings of many current groups advocating *jihad* and martyrdom have no sound religious foundation. He writes, “For many Muslims ... the overarching characteristics of God are His nurturing mercy and compassion,” which are seen primarily “in everything from the wondrous complexity of the universe to the very fact of human existence.” Western scholarship on Islam has sometimes portrayed Allah as stern and wrathful, but Elias stresses that one of the most commonly invoked names for the God of Islam is “The Merciful.” Islamic ethical ideals of racial and class equality, the redistribution of wealth and a custodial attitude toward creation — and by extension toward human beings — and other precepts provide guidance to Muslims striving to submit to the law of a benevolent deity. “The ideals may not be realized, but they are articulated” in the Qur’an and the wider tradition, he says. “Obviously, we don’t live in a perfect world, and these are pressing issues for us.”

The concept of *jihad* — which means “striving in the path of God” — plays an important part in bringing the self and the world to greater perfection. “*Jihad* doesn’t really have a root meaning that has anything to do with war,” Elias explains. “The Islamic tradition considers the struggle for self-



Shrine at Golra Sharif, Pakistan

improvement against one's baser self to be the Greater *Jihad*." In addition to this spiritual struggle, the term has been used (and abused) to characterize participation in worldly conflict that is thought to be justifiable. He compares it to just-war theory in Christianity, which imposes constraints on killing — the exhaustion of peaceful means, the declaration of war by a legitimate authority, the just and proportional use of force, and other stringent checks. *Jihad* impresses similar limits on those who wield violence, but like the chronicle of Christendom, the Islamic world too has exhibited historical moments of zealotry when believers have too quickly or too

recklessly resorted to violence. Speaking of contemporary Islamic militants, he notes, "They use *jihad* ideology in some kind of watered-down pop sense that plays well in the newspaper. When someone like Osama bin Laden declares a *jihad*, he's not using the term in a traditional manner."

Beyond a globalized culture shared by most of the world's inhabitants, Elias points to a more basic kind of sharing. "Most people, Muslim or non-Muslim, really have remarkably similar concerns," he observes. "We all care about the same kinds of ultimately very trivial things." They are the ordinary, everyday preoccupations with living — getting that iPod, putting a meal on the table,

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going to a movie with friends, picking up the kids after school. "This is trivial stuff," he comments, "but also very significant."

Elias recalls a photo he had seen a few days before on the BBC News Web site. There was a report on a mortar shell that exploded in a girls' school in Baghdad. Five students had been killed and at least 20 wounded. The photo was part of a slideshow of images. Unlike the others, it showed little of the pain and destruction, but it disturbed him the most. The photo was of a young girl in a blue-and-white uniform. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail. She was neat and clean, well cared for and worried over. The girl was leaving the school, carrying her satchel and stepping over a puddle of blood that had run down the front of a stone step.

Her parents want her to have a decent education, and they wait for her to come home from school at the end of the day. It's the trivial things we all share, Elias says, not some clash of civilizations. "Think about your own 9-year-old daughter living in a place like that. ... It's not just that, 'We're all human,' as a moral principle; it's that in fact we *are* all human, you know? Her parents want the same stuff for her that a 9-year-old's parents want over here. Ultimately, exactly the same stuff." ■

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