Amos Fortune Forum

Jaffrey Town Hall

August 12, 2016

I want to begin by giving thanks for being invited to speak at the Amos Fortune Forum… to Liz Tong for her suggestion that I speak, and for her guidance through the process, to Cassius and Anne Webb for their hospitality, to Greg and Cindy Naudascher for the stunning flowers, to all who prepared food for our reception afterwards, and to the members of the committee for their passion and their commitment to bring every summer to our beloved region such amazing forums. What a gift you are for us. *Alhamdulillah*- Thanks be to God,

A few weeks ago, at the very end of the interview with the journalist and author of *Boys in the Bunkhouse,* Dan Barry, a last question was asked: “Where do you find hope in the midst of so many tragic, horrific, heinous stories, and in the midst of such political enmity and animosity? I loved Dan’s answer. After pausing to think, he said, “Hope is here, in this time, in this meeting, in all of you.” What a beautiful answer. I was sitting behind the man who asked the question, and I felt a tug, an awareness, a connection, a glimmer of hope, or as the Qur’an would describe this thin space: “All the sounds will be hushed before the Most Gracious and thou wilt hear nothing but a faint sigh in the air” (20:108).

Ah yes, that faint sigh of hope! And so I give thanks to all of you gathered here. Imagine meetings like this happening all over the United States, in an effort to hear about the Qur’an and to understand Islam- to know our neighbors, and perhaps to have them know us, better. What we are doing is not new in America- Washington, Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, Franklin all knew about Islam- and knew that knowing Muslims (Jefferson and Adams had Qur’ans in their libraries) was important to our national endeavor.

Today we continue that endeavor because it’s part of our civic duty. It’s more than a curious desire on our part to know more about a religion. Our global well-being depends on meetings like this. Former Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright made a stunning confession in her book, *The Mighty and the Almighty*: decision makers needed to do a better job of understanding religion’s roles in the world, something “diplomats of her era were taught to avoid,” but she learned that negotiations become more treacherous by avoiding religion!!

If we are going to make progress in our relationships with Muslim-majority countries, as well as with the Muslim minority in America, we must begin, not with a geo-political-economic-social agenda, but rather with a thematic fluency of the Qur’an. This is the Text by which all Muslims center their lives, and yet it’s the pundits, the radicals and the islamaphobic commentators who have captured the airwaves and who are teaching us their uneducated, often violent, interpretation of this sacred scripture. Islam, as a critical partner in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic heritage of the West, has endowed civilization with law, art, reason, morality, and the pursuit of science, philosophy, and justice- indeed, in our Supreme Court the Prophet Muhammad is included in a frieze of historic lawgivers- he stands right next to Charlemagne.

An understanding of the Qur’an, the Document that inspires and grounds Muslims’ lives on a daily basis, gives us, and hopefully, America’s foreign policy analysts, the best access to understanding the world-view of Muslims. Through understanding and respect, we can perhaps navigate peaceful paths to engagement and enlightenment.

You are joining me, as Muslims would say, in a “good work,” our mutual *jihad* (the true meaning of the word), in our efforts to understand, to embrace each other in our differences, to walk hemmed in each other’s clothes, to risk, and to discover a mutual understanding of what values we, as global citizens, hold in common that transcend cultural and ethnic identity in order to live within the vision of respect and dignity, because as the Qur’an tells us, God “appointed a different law and way of life for all. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community, but He willed it otherwise- to make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ” (5:48). It’s our differences that bring us to a deeper understanding of each other. What an honor and privilege for me to bring my small part, inshallah, into this large and worthwhile endeavor.

As Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot told us, we don’t know much about Amos Fortune, but I like to imagine, especially within our topic this evening, that he was an African, born as a Muslim, just as the one third of those who came in slave ships were. And then like many, he converted to Christianity, a Christianity that emerged from the faith of his mother tongue, Islam, to be a pious and loving man, just as the Qur’an describes true piety: as one “who spends his substance upon his near of kin, and the orphans, and the needy and the wayfarer, and the beggars and for the freeing of human beings from bondage… who keep their promises whenever they promise, and are patient in misfortune and hardship and in time of peril” (2:177).

An ignorance of the Qur’an, the Holy Scripture for Muslims, diminishes us all. Qur’an is the Standing Miracle for one fifth of the world’s population, 1.6 billion people. For Muslims, it is the greatest blessing for humanity, and can be a gift for all of us, only if we do not limit it to a text. Of course it is a text, with pages, words, spaces, bindings, and yet we limit its power if we think of it only as a book.

Think of someone pointing to the moon with her finger. If you only gaze at the finger, or at the words, you will miss the experience of the moon; you will miss the experience of the Qur’an.

I want to show you a very short clip from the movie *Qur’an by Heart*. Thanks to Mary Catherine Bateson for introducing me to this lovely film. Children (ages 10-18) from all over the Muslim world are convening in Cairo, Egypt to participate in the International Holy Qur’an Competition, a contest to see whom the judges will declare as the best reciter of the Qur’an. All have memorized the Qur’an. That’s a given, but they will also be judged on their pronunciation, their articulation their cadence, and their approach- rules referred to as the Science of *Tajweed*. The boy Nabiollah is only ten years old from Tajikistan, Central Asia. His feet do not reach the floor when sitting in his chair. He is overwhelmed by the technology and the solemnity of the contest’s challenge. An assistant helps him and he pushes a button on the computer in front of him and he is told to recite from a specific verse in the Qur’an and to end at a certain verse. And out of the 6,236 verses, he must register where to begin and end. This is his only clue. (show clip)

This is the Qur’an, grown men crying in hearing the beauty of its recitation.

The Qur’an is a recitation, an invitation, a love poem, an opening, an auditory portal, a way, a watering hole, a rope from heaven to earth, a miracle. It was revealed in Arabic (which defies translation) from the Ancient Heart of all Creation by Angel Gabriel (Jibra’il) to Muhammad. He was a trustworthy and sincere man, a believer in the prophets, Noah, Joseph, Moses, David, and Jesus, to name a few, a descendent of Abraham, through the line of Ishmael, the older brother of Isaac. Muhammad was deep in prayer in a cave during the month of Ramadan, burdened with sorrow and grief over the plight of the poor and the injustices of his society, and the Angel Gabriel appeared to him.

Just as Gabriel appeared to Mary with his announcement of the Incarnation, Gabriel appeared to Muhammad. Both Mary and Muhammad said Yes to delivering the Sacred Presence. Jesus, the Christ, is for Christians as the Qur’an is for Muslims. Both are the Logos, both the Living Word, both before time, uncreated, and beyond the reach of any of us.

Muslims believe in the Original Text, The Mother Book, the *Umm Kitab*, the uncreated womb of all sacred literature, the Preserved Tablet (85:22) as residing in the heavens, as the Source from the Divine of all holy books- of the Revelation on Mt. Sinai with Moses, of David’s psalter, of Jesus’ gospels, or of any holy words from any sacred text- The Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Dhammapada. These are holy words for the Universe, and for those entering into the reading experience, they are looking for guidance and hope and purpose and value. Beyond the text, they will find a companion, a guide, the way, the light: the oil is already in your lamp, as a *hadith* reminds us. Imagine, the Qur’an is imbued with this kind of pluralism.

The Angel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad in the cave of his retreat and demanded him to Read (*Iqra*).

The first word, a sound, a pattern, a thought, an idea. But do not forget the mystery behind the word. Muhammad responded that he did not know how to read. Of course he didn’t. None of us do. What does it mean to read, to think, to see, to act, to trust, to believe? How do we know what is the good and the gracious? The right way? The journey to peace and love and justice? From whence does insight originate? Our language makes a world, shapes patterns and systems and signifies our attempt to make sense of our lives and our communities, to make visible what is invisible.

And yet as the Qur’an reminds us, the power to even utter a consonant is a gift.

The greatest mystery of all. The gift to think, to imagine, to reason, to make meaning comes within, within your own interiority, your own inner landscape, which is buoyed up, blessed, and bound by the grace of God. Christians refer to this as soul. Muslims speak to *fitra*, a point of pure truth, the gift that God has given all of us, inaccessible to our own vagrancies, so that we can be free.

*Fitra-* infused with the breath of God, knit into the fibers of Adam and Eve, we are good; we are all bestowed with the capacity to know the good, as if the North Star, true north, non-wavering, has been set within our spirit, *ruh*, never playing false, never taking us off course. We have been given the capacity to see God’s ways of justice, mercy, compassion and love. Our work in life is to discover and live in this path of Grace and Mercy. It takes effort, good work, the true meaning of *jihad*.

Read/*Iqra*. “Read in the name of thy Sustainer, who has created- created man out of a germ-cell. Read- for the Sustainer is the Most Bountiful One who has taught the use of the pen- taught man what he did not know” (96:1-5).

This is the first revelation, and it refers to the “use of the pen,” the power to transmit our knowledge from generation to generation, including blessings and blasphemies, to give and to take as the custodians of this wild and wondrous world of ours. From whence will you read? What will you know? How will you act?

I was minding my own business on Tuesday, September 11, 2001. I woke up to a beautiful day, a bright blue sky filled with promise. Students from all over the world were arriving to Exeter’s campus. I was running the largest dorm on campus, expecting a lot of parents with their children, who would be anxious and excited. I was having my last quiet moments over a cup of coffee, when the news hit. I’m sure all of you can remember where you were and what you were doing on that fated day.

That Friday, September 14th, the school held an interfaith service to commemorate our nation’s loss. If you remember, memorial services were held all across the nation that day.

During our service, different scriptures from different religious traditions were read, and our Muslim students, small in number, but brave in conviction, recited verses from the Qur’an. And a voice behind me said, “How dare they recite their scripture…isn’t that what killed us.”

Outrageous thing to say, maybe, and yet maybe the student sitting behind me was speaking his mind and I was not. How honest was I being with myself? I became uneasy in my seat. I knew nothing about Islam, and yet I was a teacher of world religions. What was that about? I felt afraid. Hmm… strange. If people wanted to be Muslims, that was their prerogative, but I didn’t respect their choice, not really. Sitting in that chair, in that service, I realized that for me Islam, *at its best*, was the step child to the other world religions… not quite on par. And Muslims were limited in their capacity to question and explore the dynamics of their faith.

The next day, disturbed by my easy condemnation, I decided to write out what I really thought. I still have that journal entry. It reads:

“Islam, if unleashed, with no restraints, will be violent. Muslims in America are moderate only because they are influenced by democratic values. Their experience in America waters down their religious perspective, which allows them to be open-minded and free. Islam, without western constraints, conquered by the sword, and will continue to conquer by the sword. In the name of Islam, women were abused, and continue to be abused. Islam opposes the pursuit of happiness, liberty and justice. Islam desires to obliterate free speech and free thinking. Muslims must read the Qur’an literally, and if it states “kill the infidels,” then true believers need to kill those who disagree with them. And the prophet they worship was a violent leader and a womanizer.”

I was shocked at how fast these statements rolled off my pen, like facts. No wonder I was afraid. These were terrifying statements and I made them without any study of the religion.

Like many Americans, I hadn’t read one Muslim scholar, or read the Qur’an or studied the history. And yet, like breathing air, my condemnation felt so natural. I was no different than the white man who *knew* that the black man was inferior, just because, and without hesitation; and at *best*, would treat him as invisible, not worthy of recognition. Shackled by ignorance, I was afraid of Muslims, and terrified of Islam. I actually believed that if I studied the Qur’an, a force beyond my control would convert me to something other than God intended for me to be. Irrational, uninformed, frightened, I was a victim of malpractice by my own hand.

Something had to change. I began to read.

My Muslim friends with a wink and a nod, say, “of course, you began to Read- *Iqra*. God had you by your forelock and brought you to your knees, to a position of prayer and humility and wonder. The best place to begin.

And what if you don’t believe in God? The Qur’an would never want you to accept its premise that there is a Source of all Creation, without the engagement of your own thinking. Unheard of. There is no coercion of faith (2:256). There are more than thirty references in the Qur’an that say, “this revelation is for a people who think.”

So think, ponder, question, and confront the answers that come out of your own musings. Consider your life, your world and the mystery of creation and your commitment to its making. Besides the Qur’an there are other revelatory “books” to “read”: the “Book” of Nature and the “Book” of Self. Read them. Look into the complexities of our uniqueness, the risks we take for love and country, the beauty of spring emerging out of the death of winter, the discoveries of quantum physics, the pattern of a butterfly’s wing, the perfection of the concept zero. And then ask why and how?

The last thing we need, the Qur’an asserts, is your benign acceptance of a faith without scrutiny. That would only lead to a second hand religion, one very susceptible to hypocrisy and arrogance and plays of pride and power.

Hamza Yusef, a Muslim scholar and friend, once told me that he loved to speak with atheists because they were engaging with powerful ideas and passions and morality. “And they are more than half way to accepting the *Shahadah*, “there is no god…….and with a wink and a nod……but God.”

A wink and a nod. The Qur’an is not without its humor.

Chapter 33: 72 reads, “We did offer the trust…. to the heavens and the earth and the mountains: but they refused to bear it because they were afraid of it. Yet man took it up- for verily, he has always been prone to be foolish.”

What is the trust? Will you enter into a relationship in which God does not hold all the cards, by God’s design? It might be a foolish enterprise, given humans’ capacity to wrought destruction on the earth. But here it is: you will have power to decide, to destroy, to create, to rebel, to reject, to rejoice. Do you want that power of free will? Will you accept the trust handed to you?

After studying Islam for a few years, I decided to teach an introductory course to 16 year olds. Overnight the course filled up. And we had a great time, but I must admit, it took me awhile to venture into reading and studying the Qur’an with my students, because I was shy and hesitant. I was a non-Arabic speaker, and far from a scholar of the text. Yet, how could I teach them about Islam when we were avoiding the ONE primary source, THE ONE. And so we dived in.

The students told me that their favorite homework was reading the Qur’an. They felt it beckoned them to new territory, unchartered and unexplored. They became sojourners in a new land, crossing boundaries and studying the text on its own merits, embracing the unfamiliar, and the new. This complexity dislodged their own complacency and unconscious weariness they had about scripture. Mind you, none of them were religious. Yet, they honored the Qur’an’s challenge to not put things or each other in neat boxes and dismiss them. They gained sympathy for another’s journey, rooted in reason, respect and imagination.

Early in our study, a student said that she was having trouble reading the Qur’an. “There is no narrative; I am lost. We go from Surah 96, (the first revelation), then to Surah 74, then to Surah 2, then to Surah 30. I am confused by so many ideas. My head actually hurts. I think I need scripture that has a good story, straight and linear. There is no order here, nothing chronological.”

Her classmate responded, “I think the struggle to read is the whole point. God is the Narrator, whose words were revealed by Angel Gabriel to the mouth and heart of Muhammad, but *you*….. *you* are the narrative. It’s not God’s narrative, because the narration of *that* story is out of your reach, but your story is within your reach; it’s between your hands. The text is asking you to make life decisions- about the good and the bad and the ugly. The purpose of every verse in the Qur’an is to be like a sign post which points you to yourself and your response to the mystery of God. We are not just reading stories; rather we are reading our own story.”

One of the major questions of the Qur’an is how your story will fit within the following context: God created the world as “muslim,” small m muslim, which means the world is ordered by God, the natural order: the moon rotates around the earth, the earth around the sun, the bees pollinate the flowers and make their honey, bears hibernate, cells reproduce… this is God’s natural law, God’s harmony. The moon does not get up one morning and decide whether or not it will do its thing. The only creature that has the choice to enter into God’s harmony is human. Will you surrender (submit) to the order and harmony that God has created for you? It’s yours for the taking.

Muslims believe that you will discover the nectar of your life through this surrender. We call this surrender by many names: letting go, letting God, following the Buddhists’ “small way” of emptiness, trusting in one day at a time, believing that the least and the lost and the lonely shall be first, not last. This submission is the first gesture of finding peace. This is the translation of Islam.

By surrendering into *al-ghayb*, (that which is beyond your knowledge), you believe in the unseen, that which can’t be known through empirical study- things like Forgiveness, Mercy, Time, Free Will, God, Gravity, Life after Death, Love, Unity, Nirvana, True Self- things which can’t be proved or disproved by scientific observation, yet still exist, still are real, still are true and give meaning to life (2:1-4). You decide.

If you decide Yes, here the meaning-making begins. The journey. Begin with prayer at dawn, salat. The darkest time of night is immediately before the dawn. How will the new day break open? How will light pull away the mantle of darkness? In the darkness, our original and ultimate companion of death is near, is a close to us as our jugular vein. But then so is God (50:16).

One of my students, who was studying Surah 89, *Al Fajr*, “Consider the Daybreak,” began his paper with these words:

“Daybreak. The reddened sky fills with a silent restlessness, an eagerness to begin. The morning air quivers with anticipation as a dormant world starts to awaken in a slow, prayer-like process. All is quiet, and then you see it. After the long and arduous night, the golden flame splits the horizon, ushering in hope. Earth and everything on it is reborn. Consider again the night; the loneliness and despair of the darkness; the cold hopelessness of a world without light. Then “Consider the Daybreak.” Think of the relief the daybreak brings to the insomniac, the relief Allah brings to us- the sight of God’s beauty, in His sunrise.”

I had assumed that when reading the Qur’an, I would find the five pillars of faith, rules of religious conduct outlined, a breviary of prayers, a simple catechism of beliefs. Far from it. Within the 114 chapters (*surahs*) and the 6,236 verses (*ayat*) only a handful, 6 to be exact, describe the prescribed, *the haraam*, with accompanying penalty

Everything else is guidance, open to interpretation, a dialogue between you and God.

For example only two verses offer guidance on “modest dress” for both men and women. Yes, you are allowed to go to war, but only to defend your values. If we are to apply the ethics of the Qur’an, then the US entering into WWII was acceptable; we were attacked. Bombing Baghdad was illegal and unacceptable, an unjust war.

The “infidel,” an inaccurate translation of *kafir,* is not referring to non-Muslims. The *kafir* is one who covers up the truth of dignity, peace, equanimity and forgiveness. The *kafir* is committed to violence, control, hypocrisy, greed, and arrogance- an “over-weaning” self-sufficiency that believes you are in charge of the world because the world revolves around you. (Hmm…. This sounds like a well-known politician; I’ll let you draw your own conclusions). And yet, even if you are in combat with those who want to destroy your way of life, if they put down their arms, then by all means, you must as well. Mercy and forgiveness echo throughout the Qur’an as the closest route to God-consciousness.

Many of the verses of the Qur’an are allegorical, metaphorical, and philosophical; we are warned by the Qur’an itself about “those who hearts are given to swerving from the truth go after that part of the divine writ which has been expressed in allegory, seeking out what is bound to create confusion, and seeking to arrive at its final meaning in an arbitrary manner; but none save God knows its final meaning” (3:7). Entering into the Qur’an is like rafting through white waters; the only way out is to go through and let the words and the stream carry you.

The Qur’an holds up a mirror. Over and over again, asking you to consider, to think, to use your faculty of discernment, to imagine, to mourn, to love justice, to reject hypocrisy and arrogance and greed, to define the good, to not live the Lie of your false self, to define peace, dignity and humility, to care for the earth, to explore nature, to welcome the stranger, and to defend the helpless.

By the way, this is *Shari’ah*. Always aspirational, *Shari’ah’s* purpose is to guide you to the path of the life giving watering hole, the “most trustworthy handhold.” When you think of *Shari’ah*, think of the Declaration of Independence- respect, unalienable rights, duty, peace, life, hospitality, and liberty.

Islamic Law (man-made laws) is called *fiqh* and is derived through interpretation by fallible jurists, over the centuries, who attempt to discern God’s will, just as our jurists have tried to discern intent from our Constitution. The members of our Supreme Court do not interpret the Declaration of Independence. They differ in how they interpret the Constitution. And we know what kind of interpretive differences we see between Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsburg!

Over time interpretations from all jurists of all persuasions have often limited woman, supported racism, isolated minorities, and leveraged the rich over the poor, but those man made laws can always be challenged. They can be challenged in Islam as well.

What can’t be challenged is the belief in liberty, justice and freedom for all. Islam, in fulfillment of the promise of the Qur’an is not monolithic but rather is a living body that encompasses Muslim communities of different ideologies and locations, culture and traditions. Whether Sunnis, Shites, Sufis, Ibadhis, Muslims are united, not by race, ethnicity, tribe or country.

They are united by an idea: There is one God, Muhammad is the final prophet, and peace comes when one surrenders one’s life to the Source of all Life.

*Shari’ah* is not something that one can pinpoint. *Shari’ah* is something that must be *felt.* The “right” *Shari’ah* is not one individual interpretation but all of the interpretations existing at once. The *fact* of them simultaneously existing is the point. It’s the community that matters. Standing back, squinting one’s eyes, one can feelthe wholeness of *Shari’ah* spanning time and place and semantics, the pulse that beats at the center of this vast, complex body. It’s the human endeavor to discover how we can belong to each other and still protect the rights of each and every one of us, with love, grace and dignity.

Or as the Qur’an would put it, “Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the most righteous. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware” (49:13).

Our Unity (*taweed*) can only come when we respect and welcome and encourage our diversity. God planned it that way.

And yet, as we well know, men and women throughout the ages have fallen short of living into these challenges and aspirations of liberty and justice and freedom for all.

Islam, as in so many other traditions, has for centuries been driven by patriarchy, power and privilege more than by theology and this is what we are witnessing today.

In the name of God, under the hand of Islam, women have been marginalized and battered, the poor have been neglected, slavery has been justified, killings vindicated as righteous, and abusive hierarchy blessed. All too often, not just jurists, but ordinary people read the Qur’an selectively, taking phrases out of context, and using them to justify whatever point they want to make, using verses to confirm what they want to hear.

Much like the members of the Ku Klux Klan who defended their reign of terror through verses in the Bible, groups like the Taliban, ISIS, and Boko Haram have banned as un-Islamic kites, nail polish, swimming, the public display of women’s faces and women’s education, citing that they wanted to return to the time of the prophet and live as he did- not knowing, or not understanding, that indeed in the time of the Prophet women had rights, the poor were cared for and the struggle for survival was both physical and spiritual.

What would they say about Ummal-Darda, a seventh century jurist and scholar who taught jurisprudence in the mosques of Damascus and Jerusalem? “Her students were men, women and even the caliph,” cites Sheikh Mohammad Akram Nadwi, an Islamic scholar from India. When pushed he says, “I wouldn’t call myself a feminist, just a man who has read his Qur’an.” Yet, members of radical groups are not listening to reason, history or scripture, the three legged stool on which all religious traditions must rely on if equanimity and knowledge are to be advanced.

Don’t think women are taking this lying down. Muslim women were Prime Ministers and Presidents long before Hillary Clinton got the democratic nomination. Global organizations, like Musawah and Sisters of Islam, are gaining influence as they work to reform Islamic family laws.

They have leverage because they have the Qur’an on their side. Rather than think of these organizations as aberrations against an inherently sexist Islam, we must recognize that for many Muslim-majority countries, it takes time to recover from the rages of poverty, war, lack of education and post-colonial domination. In the midst of chaos and uncertainty, true and tried traditions, even if they are un-Islamic, lend stability. But things, they are a changin’ and Muslims who are relying on reason, history and scripture, need our support in trusting in them and in their faith; Islam is worthy of being safe-guarded.

Scholar and Swedish Bishop Krister Stendahl outlined three rules when learning about another’s religion: (1) You should ask and learn from adherents of the religion, and not its enemies; (2) Don’t compare your best to their worst; and (3) Leave room for Holy Envy.

There is much to be envious of in Islam and in the Qur’an. I would like to close with one of my favorite stories of a woman from Iraq, that comes from the 8th century…. and I am a bit envious:

Rabia, a mystic from Basra, was known to carry a torch and a bucket of water through town, saying, “I want to pour water into Hell and set fire to Paradise so that these two veils will disappear and nobody will worship God out of fear of hell or for profit of Paradise, but only for the sake of His Eternal Beauty and Love.”

May we all have the courage to seek Beauty and Love.

(the Rev.) Jamie L. Hamilton