

Q&A WITH SCOTT GIBBS

Author of Toward the Turning: Rethinking the Meaning of 9/11, the Clash of Civilizations, and a Postmodern World

What led you to write a book that brings together 9/11, religion, modernity, and political polarization?

Like many people, I was deeply shaken by 9/11 and felt compelled to understand how something like that could happen. My background in psychology and conflict resolution, together with my interest in religion, philosophy, theology, and, specifically, existential thought, gave me a way into that search. I began by studying Islam and Islamism, which led to an article published in *the Journal of Humanistic Psychology*. But conflict is relational, which led me toward the West and America. Pulling on the thread of why led me to identity, identification, and the systems people defend as sacred.

Why did you choose to write this book now?

The book grew out of questions I had been pursuing for years, but the urgency has become hard to ignore. We are living through a period of extraordinary instability, with political polarization intensifying, religious and secular worldviews colliding, and wars exposing deeper civilizational tensions. At the same time, many institutions that once provided coherence and meaning are losing authority. It feels like the right moment to offer a framework for understanding why these conflicts feel so personal and absolute, and why they are so difficult to resolve.

What is the central argument of *Toward the Turning*?

Toward the Turning argues that many deep conflicts are misunderstood because we focus on surface issues, grievances and blame, perpetrators and victims, while missing the deeper structures beneath them. Human beings live through spiritual and secular identity systems that tell us who we are and what reality means. When those systems are held as given rather than constructed, fear and desire can take over, and threats to them feel like matters of life and death. The result is a deadly dance of mutual provocation, defensiveness, and contempt that can lead to dehumanization and violence. The Turning begins when we see self and world as emergent, co-created, and evolving processes.

How did 9/11 influence this book?

9/11 was the event that first forced the question for me. It was a horrific act of violence, but also a window into a larger conflict that could not be understood by looking only at one side. The attacks were part of a repetitive pattern and long history of grievance, provocation, and retaliation, and the decades that followed deepened the same pattern. The “War on Terror” became part of the deadly dance, intensifying cycles of fear, blame, defensiveness, disconnection, and polarization that continue to shape our world today.

As we approach the 25th anniversary of 9/11 in 2026, what can you discuss in interviews?

As the 25th anniversary of 9/11 approaches, I can discuss why the attacks still matter as more than historical trauma or foreign policy. They reveal a recurring human pattern: identity systems harden under threat, leading to extreme, often counter-productive behavior and locking groups into absurd cycles. I can connect that pattern to American polarization, Western-Muslim conflicts, Zionism and Israeli policy, Islamism and terrorism, and the destabilizing force of modernity. Beneath it all is a deeper question: why do we mistake our constructed worlds for reality itself?

Stepping back, why do you describe both spiritual and secular identities as “faiths”?

I use “faith” broadly to describe religious and secular identity systems, such as Christian and American, that help human beings understand and evaluate themselves and the world. A faith is a tacit social compact of demand and promise. It tells us how to interpret the world, what matters, who we are, what is required of us, and what we may hope to receive in return. Its authorities, sacred or secular, hold and transmit the system’s legitimacy. These faiths help us manage the vulnerability of living in inherited, constructed worlds. Understood as reality itself, however, they can harden into extremism as people try to make absolute what no final authority can settle.

How does the book understand Judaism as a religious identity? Why does that matter in the conflict over the Land of Israel and broader Western-Muslim relations?

Judaism illustrates the book’s faith dynamic in covenantal form while helping explain why the Land is so central to the Western-Muslim conflict. The faith is a compact between God, the ultimate authority, and the Jewish people, with Torah as earthly authority, faithfulness as the demand, and divine assurances as the promised reward. The Land of Israel becomes tied to both the meaning and the credibility of that compact, both literally and conceptually, ultimately serving as the proof point of God’s promise and, therefore, the linchpin of Jewish identity. That is why conflict involving Israel is never merely political. It touches a way of being.

What about Christianity?

Christianity illustrates the book’s dynamic of faith and helps explain the moral imagination behind American rhetoric, policy, and power. In the New Covenant, faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior is the demand, while sanctification and salvation are the promise. Scripture, the institutional church, and tradition carry the authority of the compact in this life. Christianity helps animate and moralize American power, giving policy a redemptive cast of good and evil, social sanctification, sacrifice, and salvation. That moral worldview shapes support for Israel and intervention against perceived evil.

What does the book say about Islam and its role?

Islam illustrates the social compact of faith through submission: surrender to Allah and receive peace. It is an agreement between Allah, the ultimate authority, and the individual believer, extending to the Muslim community, with the *Qur’an*, *Sunnah*, and *Shari’a* carrying that authority into this world. Submission is the demand, while the promise of peace encompasses purpose, dignity, broad social order, and eternal salvation. Islam matters to the Western-Muslim conflict because it stands at the center of a Muslim way of being and provides the foundation from which Islamism emerges as a fundamentalist extreme. Modernity, Western power, and Israel have pressured this identity system, while “internal” sociopolitical struggle has tilled the soil for responses ranging from Islamic reform to radicalism, with implications for understanding 9/11 and present-day conflicts from Gaza and Lebanon to Iran.

What do Judaism, Christianity, and Islam reveal about themselves as a way of being?

The Abrahamic traditions reveal a way of being ordered toward a transcendent entity, God, as ultimate authority. Their aim is to make human life meaningful, morally grounded, and ultimately secure by placing the self and community in right relation to this authority. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam each offer a compact of demand and promise: live faithfully, and understand what to think and what matters, personally and collectively. The danger is that these systems ultimately deny their own contingency. When threatened by modernity (e.g., science, nationalism, capitalism) or one another, they can harden into their fundamentalist form.

Why is modernity so central to the conflicts you describe?

Modernity changed both where authority lives and what human life is for. In broad terms, God gave way to man as the ultimate authority and aim. Revelation, tradition, and inherited hierarchy gave way to reason, science, individual freedom, self-determination, and progress. That shift produced extraordinary gains, but it also destabilized older religious worlds and created new secular faiths, including democracy, capitalism, fascism, and communism. Modernity liberates and unsettles. It gives people new power and possibilities while exposing them to uncertainty, fragmentation, lost meaning, and, ultimately, the absence of any final authority. Those conditions make spiritual and secular fundamentalism more likely, as threatened people and groups seek certainty, order, and control.

What is American Exceptionalism, and why is it important to understanding America's response to terrorism and the Muslim world?

American Exceptionalism is the secular faith of American liberal democracy arising with modernity. It tells Americans that the United States is not merely a nation with interests, but a nation with a special mission: to defend and extend freedom, equality, rights, and self-government. That faith has inspired real progress and sacrifice, but it also shapes how America sees others. In the Western-Muslim conflict, Islamism and terrorism appear not only as threats to security but as forms of tyranny and evil opposed to freedom itself. That framing can clarify moral stakes, but it can also justify violence and self-righteousness.

How do America's political extremes—Ethnocentrism and Progressivism, you call them—grow out of American Exceptionalism?

American Exceptionalism contains powerful tensions: freedom and order, individual rights and national unity, progress and tradition, universal ideals and particular loyalty. American Ethnocentrism and Progressivism embody interdependent poles in those tensions. Ethnocentrism, expressed today in MAGA, seeks restoration, order, loyalty, self-reliance, and national strength. Progressivism seeks transformation, inclusion, equity, and justice. Each begins with real concerns. But at the extremes, each turns a partial understanding of America into the whole truth.

How does that help explain political polarization in America today?

Polarization is not simply policy disagreement. It is an interlocking pattern between rival political faiths, each defending a different interpretation of America. Ethnocentrism sees progressivism as disorder, weakness, and betrayal. Progressivism sees ethnocentrism as exclusion, domination, and oppression. Each side sees something real, but threat makes each more rigid and self-justifying. The result is accusation, defensiveness, contempt, and dehumanization rather than problem-solving. The same pattern mirrors and feeds the larger conflict between the West and the Muslim world.

Why do you treat the American Dream as a kind of secular faith, and why does it matter?

The American Dream is one of America's most powerful secular faiths. It is an informal covenant that says: work hard, achieve, and you will succeed. In its capitalist form, success is measured through wealth, status, power, and fame. At its best, the Dream inspires effort, creativity, responsibility, and hope. But it can also turn desire into addiction, achievement into moral worth, and failure into personal defect. In the Western-Muslim conflict, the faith helps shape American policy through self-interest, markets, oil, growth, and global expansion, while also appearing in Islamist rhetoric as a symbol of Western corruption, greed, emptiness, and moral decay.

Given your idea of secular faiths, what is Zionism, and why is it so central to the Western-Muslim conflict?

Zionism is the modern secular faith of Jewish national revival. It joins ancient Jewish peoplehood to modern nationalism, turning longing for the Land into a project of safety, dignity, and renewal. At its best, Zionism answers real historical vulnerability, especially exile and antisemitism. But when Land, survival, entitlement, and dignity fuse, threats feel existential, feeding fundamentalist potential. At its extremes, like other fundamentalisms—religious, national, or class-based—Zionism can become a threatened identity seeking certainty and control. In the Western-Muslim conflict, that mission and mindset collide with Palestinian self-determination and, more broadly, with Muslim discontent with social stagnation and decline and domestic political oppression, making Israel a lightning rod for justice, humiliation, and power.

What is "The Turning"?

The Turning is a fundamental shift in how we understand ourselves and the worlds we live in. We usually experience the self as an entity and our worlds as given realities, “the way things are.” The book argues that they are better understood as living, contingent processes, fluid and interdependent. That recognition, and the courage to tolerate the anxiety it exposes, loosens the fear and desire that harden identity systems into fundamentalism and fuel the deadly dances that mark our world. The Turning is not a new ideology. It is a new way of seeing that makes resilience, reciprocity, and genuine connection possible.

What is new about this book? What will readers learn that they haven't encountered elsewhere?

The book’s differentiating claim is that conflict is not finally driven by beliefs, grievances, or interests, though all matter at one level. It is driven by how human beings live through identity systems and mistake them for reality itself, rather than seeing them as constructed ways of understanding and responding to the world. That obliviousness makes us vulnerable to being consumed by the system’s promises, especially when threat pushes identity toward fundamentalism. Readers may come for an explanation of conflict, but they may leave having learned something about themselves.

What do you hope readers take away from Toward the Turning?

I hope readers come away seeing conflict differently, and maybe seeing themselves differently. The book asks us to look beyond blame and “the other side” and notice how all of us live through identity systems that shape what we see, fear, desire, and defend. If we can recognize that participation, we gain a little distance from the hardened defensiveness and dehumanization that divide us. The hope is not that conflict disappears, but that we become more capable of humility, responsibility, reciprocity, problem-solving, and genuine connection.