

New Book Argues Humanity Has Misunderstood the Real Cause of War, Extremism, and Division

Toward the Turning

Rethinking the Meaning of 9/11, the Clash of Civilizations, and a Post-Modern World
By Scott Gibbs

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Proposes a deeper account of extremism, polarization, and group conflict, one rooted in how we understand ourselves and the world

In a time defined by war, political and religious extremism, cultural fracture, terrorism, rising authoritarianism, and escalating distrust across societies, a provocative new book argues that humanity has fundamentally misunderstood the true source of conflict itself. In *Toward the Turning: Rethinking the Meaning of 9/11, the Clash of Civilizations, and a Post-Modern World* (Ibidem Press, July 2026), psychotherapist and independent scholar Scott Gibbs opens with a striking claim: “The source of the better part of group barbarism in human history is an apparition, spectacularly unrecognized and ignored.”

That apparition is identity. The engine of group inhumanity is not tribalism or fanaticism *per se*, but something prior and more universal: the unwitting way human beings participate in inherited identity systems – religious, national, political – and come, whether out of fear or desire, to treat those identities as absolute. It is identification and its domination that drive destruction and death. Yet these identities are contingent – constructed rather than given – and thus more fragile than they feel, their contingency concealed by the very systems that sustain them, hidden in plain sight within our own participation. That concealment is what allows identities to harden and ultimately dominate. And recognizing contingency, Gibbs argues, is the beginning of relief.

This concealment points to something more fundamental still, the ultimate source of group inhumanity. Gibbs identifies that source as an “ontological misapprehension”: the tendency to understand and experience the self as a fixed thing and the world as a container of objects, when in reality both are emergent, co-constituting, and fluid processes with no stable foundation. This misapprehension makes identity feel like bedrock reality and any threat to it feel existential. It is this misunderstanding, more than any particular ideology or pathology, that underwrites extremism and inhumanity.

Identity's capacity for inhumanity is persistently on display in the decades of conflict between the West and the Muslim world, the conflict Gibbs takes as his primary case. From the lead-up to 9/11 through the “War on Terror” and beyond, competing identity systems repeatedly collide. The typical way of understanding such conflict – assigning blame to one side and innocence to the other – is what Gibbs calls the perpetrator-victim framework. That approach fails to recognize the underlying identification because it actively participates in it, perpetuating rather than transcending the conflict, further entrenching both sides in cycles of defensiveness and contempt. As Gibbs writes, “The purpose of this work is not to participate in the toxic pattern of 'us' and 'them'”

perpetrator-victim talk as historically manifested. It is not an attempt to pick a side or win a war of words. That dead horse has been beaten with ferocity.”

Seeking to transcend the pattern, Gibbs offers an alternative construct, what he calls the “deadly dance”: a self-reinforcing cycle in which identity-bearing groups define themselves partly against one another, provoke one another, and confirm one another's worst fears. These identity systems function as tacit social compacts, orienting understanding and defining what’s meaningful in exchange for adherence. But because they are grounded only in tacit agreement, adherence hardens under threat into extremism and ultimately barbarity. The most fractured Western-Muslim relations, exemplified acutely by Israel and its neighbors and reaching a crescendo in the attacks of 9/11, are the book's stark expression of the deadly dance – a century-long “theater of the absurd” in which competing identity systems remain locked in repetitive, unresolved conflict. “We remain ensnared and disconnected,” Gibbs writes, “stuck in the suboptimal, susceptible to the tragic, and swimming still in the unresolved.”

Over eleven chapters, *Toward the Turning* examines the identity systems at work in the conflict between the West (including Israel) and the Islamic world, with particular attention to their extremist expressions. It begins with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as covenantal faith traditions before turning to the secular systems that assumed parallel roles in modernity. American Exceptionalism, including its Ethnocentric and Progressive currents, the American Dream, and Zionism each receive the same treatment. Centered on Martin Heidegger's phenomenology of self and world and Paul Tillich's ontology of anxiety and courage, Gibbs builds an existential lens capable of examining diverse identity systems to disclose what is concealed within.

The book’s examination culminates in the call for the “turning” of the title, not a turn toward another ideology or program, but toward understanding the self and the world more accurately, as contingent and fluid, co-constituting and always in process. Gibbs argues that from this recognition, and the tolerance of the anxiety it entails, resilience and reciprocity arise naturally, not as engineered solutions but as consequences of more accurately attuning to self and world. The turn speaks not in prescription but to possibility: “The quest for openness suggests this work’s surely quixotic why: to generate human connection and accord.”

Why This Book, Why Now. As books on polarization and cultural conflict multiply, most remain at the level of politics, history, or psychology, and most pick a side. *Toward the Turning* descends to the ontological, to the question of what the self and world actually are, and finds there the misapprehension that makes ideological rigidity not merely likely but, under certain conditions, nearly inevitable. Likewise, the book does not diagnose Islam, the West, or any particular tradition as the problem. It diagnoses a misapprehension shared across all of them. That move makes it relevant to scholars and general readers alike – to anyone who has wondered why modern societies, with all their resources for communication and reason, seem constitutionally incapable of escaping cycles of division and extremism. Scott Gibbs is available for interviews, review copies, and speaking engagements.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott Gibbs holds an AB in History from Princeton University, an MBA from Northwestern University, and an MA in Clinical Psychology. A California-licensed psychotherapist in private practice and a board member of the Existential-Humanistic Institute, he draws on clinical

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