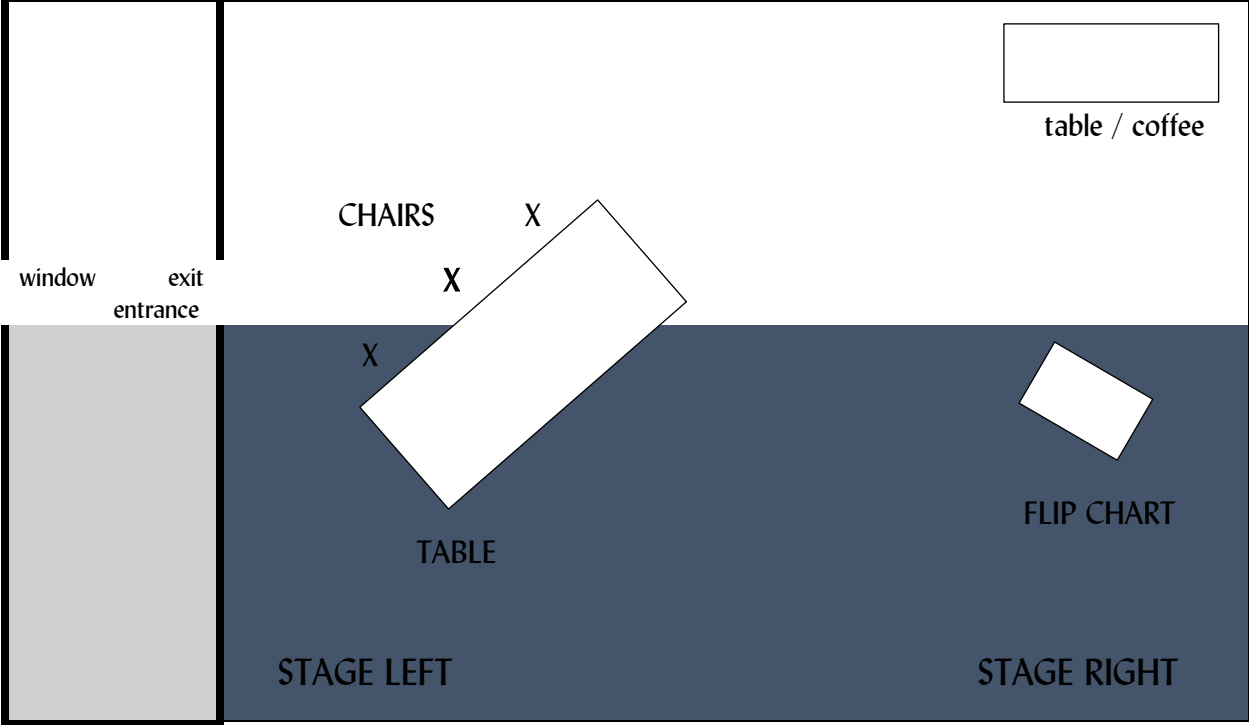


THE OMEGA ARMAGEDDON

by

Ian Brown

STAGE SET



AUDIENCE

CHARACTERS:

WAYNE: A white man in his forties or fifties

AMINA: A woman in her thirties or forties. She is wearing a hijab

CHRIS: A woman. Age: anywhere from twenties to fifties

THE OMEGA ARMAGEDDON

SCENE I:

(Low-medium volume music from 'Mars' by Gustav Holst playing on PA prior to start. LIGHTS UP. Music fades. There is a table with three chairs and a flip chart on a stand. On it are written the words 'INTERFAITH COMMITTEE'. Chris on stage alone; after a few minutes, ENTER Wayne; Chris sees him and approaches him, hand outstretched)

CHRIS: Hi, you must be Wayne.

WAYNE: *(shaking hands)* That's right, and you are ?

CHRIS: Sorry, yes I'm Chris. I understand that the last meeting got a little ...

WAYNE: Oh you mean with Amina? Oh she's entitled to her beliefs.

CHRIS: Well, there was you and Amina ... and Michael

WAYNE: That's right. Never thought I'd see a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist in the same room! and what are you?

CHRIS: Well, the InterFaith folks asked me to help out as a facilitator.

WAYNE: A facilitator huh. Hmm ... and where are the other two?

CHRIS: Er, Michael is at a Retreat which, in view of the current crises, he was under a lot of pressure to attend. And Amina ... she texted me twenty minutes ago and said she was on her way. Things are not looking good. She said there are traffic jams everywhere. I guess you heard the latest news this morning?

WAYNE: What? That Taiwan is being threatened by invasion ... again!

CHRIS: Well there's that too. No, I meant the latest on Omega.

WAYNE: What?

CHRIS: There's been the first reports of outbreaks – on both the East and West coast.

WAYNE: It's been building, hasn't it? Wars. Riots. Insurrections. Famine. Pollution, Disease. And this one's supposed to be bigger than Covid, right?

CHRIS: Yes.

WAYNE: Our pastor said this day was coming.

(ENTER Amina)

AMINA: Sorry I'm late. It's crazy out there. Traffic jams everywhere. My sister has taken the kids to the Mosque. We heard the news. If this is anything like Europe or Asia, it will spread like wildfire. The global death rate is spiralling.

CHRIS: *(giving a little bow and placing his right hand on his chest)* Amina, welcome. Glad you could make it. Er ... you know Wayne, and I am Chris. I have been asked to attend this meeting as a facilitator.

AMINA: Really? Oh ... good! That's good. Although given the latest news, I'm surprised the meeting wasn't cancelled.

WAYNE: Should have been.

AMINA: Well, we're here so ... where's Michael?

CHRIS: On retreat.

AMINA: So what's on the Agenda?

CHRIS: Well, I was about to get to that. But first why don't we take a few minutes and settle down and then we can get started. There's fresh coffee over there.

SCENE 2:

(Wayne and Amina seated at table facing Chris who is standing beside a flip chart)

CHRIS: So, given that we know now that Omega is here amongst us, obviously the situation is even more dire than before. At the inaugural meeting of the Interfaith committee a month ago, the objective was to clarify what beliefs Christianity, Islam and Buddhism

have in common. The plan was that in future meetings, we would include representatives from other faiths such as Jews, Hindus, Sikhs ... and others. According to notes sent to me, in the last meeting, you agreed on the following: *(Chris looks at papers)* belief in one God ...

WAYNE: *(interrupting)* Well yes but they ...

CHRIS: *(interrupting)* Yes, I know, Buddhists are theist and Muslims don't believe that Jesus was the son of God. They do believe, however, that Jesus lived ...

AMINA: *(interrupting)* And was a prophet, like Mohammed, *alayhi as-salam*, and will return on *Yawm ad-Din*.

CHRIS: Yes, *Yawm ad-Din*, the Day of Judgment, also a common belief of both Islam and Christianity. And, of course there is much more than that shared by your two faiths. Both religions have special places of worship with priests and imans to lead a congregation in prayer. And both religions have a moral code that says, for example, love, compassion, forgiveness are virtues, whereas envy, pride, greed etc. are ... er

WAYNE: Sins.

CHRIS: O.K. *(pause then speaking more quickly)* Yes, so ... moving along, today, due to the Omega crisis, we have a special focus. Have either of you heard of the term 'thanatophobia'? *(both Wayne and Amina shrug)*. Well, thanatophobia means fear of death. And there is another term 'apeirophobia' meaning fear of eternity. So the purpose of this meeting is to address the fears that are apparently getting out of control in both of your communities, fears about death, and specifically the day of judgment and uncertainty about one's destination in the afterlife.

WAYNE: One's 'destination' ... you mean heaven or hell.

CHRIS: Well I understand that in both Christianity and Islam, there is a belief that one's actions in life will lead to reward or punishment in the afterlife.

WAYNE: That's right. None of us are perfect. We have all committed sins in one way or another. I can't say that there aren't times that I wonder. But I don't mind telling you, I may have strayed from the path of righteousness when I was a young man, but then I was introduced to the Lord Jesus, and he washed my sins away. I was born again.

CHRIS: And for sure there are others like you Wayne. But my understanding *(looks at papers)* is that Jesus said that everyone who has died will, at the Second Coming be raised from the dead and judged - again. I have a note here. John 5: 25-29 I believe.

WAYNE: *(impressed)* That's right, John 5. Well, I can tell you that our pastor, who is a very good man, who preaches to thousands, he says Jesus will return to administer salvation to all believers. And God knows who the righteous are. *(pause)* By the way, we never did get what faith you represent?

CHRIS: I am the facilitator. I am neutral. *(writing on flip chart)* My views and beliefs are secondary. But thank you Wayne, you just identified one of the main sources of confusion. *(CHRIS finishes writing 'JUDGMENT vs COMPASSION')*

WAYNE: Fine, but you didn't ... *(WAYNE is interrupted by sound of cell phone ringing)* ... oh, that's mine, better get it. *(WAYNE gets up and wanders away from the table, at first listening)*

AMINA: I must say I was a bit curious about that too. Are you a Christian?

CHRIS: I really don't want to get into this but let's say I am a Unitarian.

AMINA: What is that?

(Any response from CHRIS is interrupted by WAYNE returning)

WAYNE: That was my pastor telling me that there are more news reports of deaths due to Omega. He is suggesting that I move to our out-of-town property as soon as possible. I don't know how much longer I can stay.

(at this, AMINA and CHRIS both pull out their cell phones: LIGHTS dim)

SCENE 3;

(CHRIS: at flip-chart – below 'JUDGMENT' and 'FORGIVENESS', he is writing the words 'JUSTICE', 'ACCOUNTABILITY', 'CRITERIA FOR ASSESSMENT')

AMINA: I just got a call from my sister. She's at our Mosque. She says that more and more people are beginning to believe that this last news about the Omega virus is the final sign that *Yawm ad-Din* has arrived. There is panic and confusion.

CHRIS: When the InterFaith Coordinator last spoke to me, he said that representatives of both your organizations had anticipated this might happen. The purpose of this meeting was to clarify expectations of *(pointing to chart)* forgiveness or judgment, and in particular what we think might be the *(pointing to chart again)* criteria of assessment. As an example, someone might be wondering what weighting would be given to theft or adultery. No-one has had to face the reality of this situation before. And as you both

know, our scriptures can be interpreted in different ways. Everyone, apparently, is confused – including some imans, priests and religious counsellors.

WAYNE: *(busy rummaging in his pockets and briefcase and putting phone, wallet, keys, bible, etc. one by one on the table)*

Well, we knew this day was coming. We are prepared. We're not confused. We've got somewhere to go.

(WAYNE checks the items on the table and then carefully repacks them in his briefcase; he starts putting on his jacket)

CHRIS: Wait a second Wayne. Before anyone leaves, can we please commit to having this meeting, we have barely started.

AMINA: I agree with Chris. If we can help in any way by giving information or advice to our brothers and sisters, we should. *(to WAYNE)* That's nice that you have an escape plan but I can't believe your property is big enough to take in hundreds of your congregation ... let alone others in need.

WAYNE: That's not the plan.

(sound of sirens from outside)

CHRIS: We'd better check that out. *(AMINA EXITS through doorway STAGE LEFT)* But actually, I have to say that Amina is raising an important point. I mean, as far as Omega is concerned, who has a place to escape to and who doesn't? How does wealth and economic inequality factor into moral accountability? I mean, what about the escape plans of the wealthy that have been in operation for some years now? Private yachts, private planes, large estates in New Zealand, private islands in the Caribbean. These are people who don't care about the well-being of the many. Is the mother who is obliged to steal a loaf of bread to feed her children – is she committing 'a sin'?

AMINA: *(who returned while CHRIS was speaking; gesturing towards EXIT)*
Police cars and a fire truck.

WAYNE: Well Chris, let me respond to what you just said. You said you were curious. Have you heard of prosperity theology? Prosperity theology - that's what we believe in. Financial blessing and physical well-being are an important part of God's will for our faith. I am not ashamed. I bear no guilt. It is no sin ...

CHRIS: O.K. but - sorry if I'm being ignorant here and I don't mean to stir things up, but I get confused at what seem to be mixed messages. I mean, didn't Jesus say something about it being easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God?

WAYNE: *(rattled)* Well now, excuse me if I'm being ignorant but I thought a facilitator's job was to keep things focused, stick to the agenda *(WAYNE points at the flip chart)*. We didn't come here to discuss being rich or poor.

CHRIS: Yes, but to tell you the truth, I don't see how we can avoid that if we are to discuss justice.

WAYNE: *(irritated)* Anyway, you never did answer my question about your religious persuasion.

CHRIS: I said I was a Unitarian.

WAYNE: A uni – what? O.K. simple question - do you believe in God?

(continued sounds of sirens from outside)

CHRIS: *(contained frustration)* You know what, I'm beginning to think that given all the emerging developments here ... both near and far ... maybe we should just settle for a discussion. If I discard the facilitator script, then I am free to answer your questions. So *(with a look of resignation, CHRIS mimes tearing a script in two)*. You want to know what I believe? Fair enough. I'll tell you. I am a humanist. I believe we have a responsibility to live by values that contribute to the greater good – for *everyone*. Not just one class, or one religion, or one nation. I believe in compassion, having an open mind, a kind heart ...

WAYNE *(grim)* Fine. And do you believe in God? Are you an atheist?

CHRIS: I am an agnostic.

WAYNE: *(rising to go)* O.K. Honestly, I've got better things to do. Like looking after my family and my people. So goodbye Amina, it was nice seeing you again. *(WAYNE addresses CHRIS)*. Well good luck Chris! You may need it when they tell you to step on the scales. *(WAYNE EXITS)*

SCENE 4:

CHRIS: *(rueful smile)* So much for my facilitation.

AMINA: Well, I have to say, I am a bit shocked too.

CHRIS: Amina, I am not an atheist. I can believe in a higher ... dimension. I just don't know if there is a God.

AMINA: Did you ever have a religion?

CHRIS: I was brought up as a Christian.

AMINA: And you went to church?

CHRIS: Yes

AMINA: So what happened? Why did you give it up?

CHRIS: I am a curious person. I like figuring out things for myself. The church and its doctrines just seemed too rigid. I mean, for example, and er, I don't mean to offend you ... and I would never have said this if Wayne was still here um, my younger sister got pregnant at the age of 18. She didn't want to have a baby. She wasn't ready. Anyway, it wasn't easy but she ended up having an abortion. If she had been an evangelical Christian like Wayne, or a Muslim for that matter, she wouldn't have had a choice right? She would have been obliged to have the baby.

AMINA: Hmm ... O.K. ... well, Chris, let me tell you a little story. I was born and brought up in Bosnia Herzegovina. You may recall hearing about a terrible war between the Bosniaks who were Muslim, and the Serbs and Croats who were Christian. The war broke out in 1992. I was the same age as your sister at the time – 18. One evening, Serbs broke into our house and shot my father and brother. Then they forced my mother and I into a van and took us to what later got called 'a rape motel'. They separated my mother and I ... *(pause)* ... I never saw her again.
(pause)
Then they ripped off my clothes and I was raped by three different men. After they had finished, they took me back to the van, drove it out of town and dumped me at the side of the road. I was almost unconscious. A while later, I was discovered by a local farmer and his wife. They took me in and looked after me for over a week.
(pause)
It's a long story but with help I eventually managed to escape to Germany. I was very sick. I had excessive bleeding, very high blood pressure and pain around my kidneys. A refugee helper took me to a mosque. There I was told about a Muslim doctor. I went to see him. He examined me and was very concerned. He asked me when the rape had taken place. When I told him the date, he seemed relieved. He told me that in order to ensure my survival, it would be best to terminate the pregnancy.
(pause)
I was shocked because I had understood that Islamic doctrine condemned abortion as *haram* – forbidden, a sin. The doctor told me that it was permissible if the foetus was less than 120 days. In addition, the fact that I had been raped further justified his decision.

So you see Chris, Muslims can be strict but also compassionate. Thanks to that doctor's decision, I recovered and ended up being accepted as a refugee to Sweden. I was taken in by a very kind couple. The Muslim community were very supportive. Eventually I went to Stockholm University, did an undergraduate degree in nuclear physics and then went on to complete a Ph.D. in astrophysics and cosmology.

CHRIS: Wow! That's quite a story. You have a lot of courage. And you certainly don't fit the stereotype of a Muslim woman. You're a scientist. An astrophysicist. Wow! And you never questioned your faith?

AMINA: *(surprised)* Oof! You ask me *this* question! ... *(pause)* Yes, there were times I did. Of course it has been hard to be a Muslim in the West given the acts of terrorism. People see me with my hijab and immediately make assumptions, often ignorant and biased. And it is strange, because many in my field have found reason to question their religion given the extraordinary discoveries of the last twenty years. Many astrophysicists now believe that our universe is just one of many.

CHRIS: The multiverse?

AMINA: *SubhanAllah!* You've heard of it? Yes that's right, the multiverse. For some, that is a heresy, but for me, the more I thought about it, the idea that space may be infinite and time eternal ... the more I thought about it, I realized that this possibility would only *increase* my faith in Allah.

CHRIS: Really? That's very interesting.

(sound of sirens and car horns)

What now? I'll better go and check.

(CHRIS EXITS through entrance to adjoining room facing street ... sound of window opening ... sounds get louder ... CHRIS reappears at entrance)

Looks like they're putting up barriers. *(closing the door)* Hell of a noise! *(volume of sound decreases)*

AMINA: I'll see if I can find out what's going on. *(she takes out her cell phone, turns it on and taps in some numbers – the speaker is on so the busy signal can be heard; she tries a different number – again the sound of a busy signal)*. I can't get through to my sister there or at the mosque.

(pause)

So you are interested in cosmology?

CHRIS: *(smiling)* Well I'm still trying to understand $e = mc^2$... but yes, I'm fascinated by what science is discovering. The James Webb telescope! The clarity of the images coming through. It's incredible. At my school, with my kids, I try to simplify things as much as I can ... *(pause)*
I have this one boy, George. He's 12 and really a special ed. kid ... on the autistic spectrum ... very sensitive ... gets bullied ... but such a sweet guy ... and he's only interested in one thing ...

AMINA: *(interested)* What's that?

CHRIS: Rockets and space travel. He can tell you the exact facts about how far it is to the moon, the history of the Apollo program and every NASA project since, even the thrust generated by the Saturn rockets at launch. The only fact I can remember is ... um, he told me the weight of a Saturn V rocket was the equivalent of ... what was it again? 400 elephants!! God knows what the weight of the new Artemis rocket is.

(lights flicker off and on again)

SCENE 5

(sound of heavy footsteps approaching – ENTER WAYNE)

WAYNE: *(breathing rapidly, flustered)* They wouldn't let me drive anywhere. Police everywhere. They're blocking off all the routes. Crisis response instructions. Everyone has to stay indoors. I got a call from my wife. She made it out of town in time. She's going up to our property ... *(WAYNE takes a big breath)* ... with our son. I told her I'd packed emergency supplies just in case. But I can't get there now. I'm stuck here. We're stuck here ... *(long pause while WAYNE thinks)* ... maybe the day really has finally come.

AMINA: *Yawm ad-Din?*

WAYNE: What!?

AMINA: You think that Judgment Day has come?

CHRIS: *(trying to steer the conversation to a different focus)* Look! We know that there's a crisis because of the Omega virus. We know it's here and that it spreads quickly. That doesn't mean that it is 'Judgment Day' – whatever that is.

WAYNE: *(angry)* Oh man, trapped in here with a non-believer. You know something? You know something? You're in the minority. I know the facts. Here are the numbers? Christians make up 31% of the world's population; Muslims, 25%; non religious secular atheists

and agnostics, 15%. (*tapping the Bible which is on the table*) God's holy word says there's going to be a Judgment Day. (*gesturing towards Amina*) Their holy book says there's going to be a Judgment Day. Let me 'facilitate' that for you. That's 31 plus 25, at least 56% of the world's population believe there's going to be a Judgment Day.

AMINA: Let me say something. Two things. First, Chris may be right. The first priority is the fact is that there is a terrible pandemic spreading on a global scale. That's a fact. Worse than Covid with no vaccine yet. That's a fact. Many people are dying. We hoped it wouldn't come here. It has. According to the reports, that is a fact. (*AMINA takes a small Quran out of her handbag*) Second, it is true that the Quran (*she taps it*) talks about a Judgement Day, but not all Muslims take everything (*tapping again*) literally. There are many factions, many different interpretations. However, I admit that belief in Judgment Day is a fundamental tenet of faith in Islam. We believe that all persons will be called to account (*pause ... AMINA points to the word 'accountability' on the flip chart*) for their deeds and their faith during their life in earth. But when that day will come? That is a different matter. The sirens out there are not because the police and hospitals believe this is Judgment Day. It's because they know for a fact there is a serious health crisis.

WAYNE: Yes the Omega Armageddon!

CHRIS: (*conciliatory*) Listen, Wayne is right about one thing. We *are* stuck here together. So we need to figure out how to deal with the situation as best we can. Cooperation guys!

(*Lights out*)

CHRIS: Oh shit! (*to Wayne and Amina*) Sorry!

AMINA: My cell phone has a flashlight. Just a minute. (*AMINA pulls out her cell phone, fumbling*) I haven't used this before. How do I?

CHRIS: Here, let me show you. (*CHRIS manages to turn on flashlight*)

WAYNE: (*thinking*) You know, maybe I can sneak outside while the power is off and get the emergency supplies out of the car. There's a blanket, some food, water ... and I believe I packed some candles.

CHRIS: Are you sure?

AMINA: (*smiling*) That would be great Wayne!

WAYNE: Yes, O.K. Back in a few minutes. (*WAYNE turns on his cell phone flashlight and EXITS*)

SCENE 6:

(sound of heavy footsteps approaching – ENTER WAYNE carrying two bags)

WAYNE: Praise Jesus! Got ‘em.

AMINA: Mashallah!

CHRIS: Good for you!

(AMINA holds her cell phone flashlight over bag on table as WAYNE rummages around)

WAYNE: Ha! A bag of cookies! *(lights come on)* That helps. *(taking things out of bag)* Water, paper cups, paper towels ah, there we go ... candles! *(fumbling in pocket)* I know I’ve got a lighter somewhere. Here ... *(finds lighter and hands it to CHRIS)* ... might as well be prepared ... can you ...?

CHRIS: *(lighting several candles) (renewed sound of sirens)*

AMINA: I just checked the news. They’re warning that online connections may be affected.

WAYNE: Just keep your fingers crossed and pray. Anyone want a cookie? *(lights flicker and out)*

CHRIS: Oh ... there we go ... *(pause)*... er, listen ... let’s take a moment to check in with how we are all doing. This is a lot of stress, one thing after another. Amina?

AMINA: I am worried about my children and my sister ... and what it will be like at the mosque with this power cut.

CHRIS: Why don’t you try to call them while you have a chance. Maybe you too, Wayne.

(AMINA and WAYNE both enter numbers on their cell phone and after a minute or two, they both shake their heads)

WAYNE: Nope. Nothing.

CHRIS: O.K. ... well I think we are all somewhat in a bit of a state of shock. We don’t know when the power is coming back, or when we’ll be able to leave. It’s 6 p.m. and we may well be here all evening and maybe overnight. I suggest we all take some time for ourselves.

AMINA: That sounds good to me. I haven't done *Asr* or *Maghrib*.

(AMINA kneels, WAYNE puts elbows on table and opens his Bible, CHRIS waits a few moments and then sits cross legged in a meditation pose, back to wall; stage lighting dims and then out)

SCENE 7:

(by candlelight; minimal stage lighting)

CHRIS: What do we know about this Omega virus?

AMINA: It was first reported in Nigeria. Within a few days, it had spread both East and West. Last week it was said to be in Europe and Australia ... and, well, now we know it's reached North America. The symptoms are severe – pain in the chest and abdomen, internal hemorrhaging, as well as nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. The virus has been likened to both the Marburg and Ebola viruses. Death usually occurs within 48 hours.

WAYNE: How is it transmitted?

AMINA: Apparently either by contact or airborne.

CHRIS: So it's like Covid. People have to wear masks again.

WAYNE: I never wore a mask. Very few of us did and very few were affected.

AMINA: You were lucky.

WAYNE: It wasn't luck. It was faith. We were protected by our faith in Jesus.

AMINA: Well believe me, Muslims don't lack faith, but we also believe in science. We investigated the vaccines and decided they were safe. We encouraged everyone to get vaccinated.

(awkward silence as AMINA and WAYNE exchange cool glances; WAYNE is about to say something when CHRIS speaks)

CHRIS: Er ... changing the subject for a moment. Do you know why I became a teacher?

(AMINA and WAYNE shrug)

It's not so much about teaching as learning. There's so much we don't know. That's why I'm an agnostic. I just don't know. But I'm curious. I'm willing to learn.

AMINA: I am curious too, Chris. That is why I am a scientist. In Islam, we believe in asking questions.

WAYNE: Like Sharia?

AMINA: *(ignoring WAYNE'S sarcasm)* Faith is beyond reason. You get to know Allah by experiencing him.

CHRIS: Yes and I do remain open to experience. For example, I meditate. I *know* meditation is good for me. And so I trust it. I believe in it. I could even say I have faith in meditation.

WAYNE: Prayer and the Bible. That's all you need.

(lights on)

(laughing) See what I mean!

CHRIS: *(becoming irritated)* But that's what bothers me about religion. Your mind seems to be closed to new things. It's like you feel there's nothing more to learn.

WAYNE: *(appearing non-defensive)* My mind is open to reputable science. But interesting you should say that. My daughter got her mind 'opened' at College. Now she's into yoga, and vegan foods. She gave away her leather boots. Yes, and I think she meditates too. She talks about Buddhism being *the* thing. And there's a kind of superior attitude with those guys, like *they've* got all the answers.

CHRIS: *(conceding)* Well, I know what you mean. The New Age world can definitely get cliquy, hierarchical, that's a fact. But I mean, during Covid, you felt *you* knew better than the country's top scientists.

WAYNE: Who's 'you'? Anti-vaxxers?

CHRIS: Er ... some fundamentalist Christians.

WAYNE: How about the New Age anti-vaxxers? My daughter was one.

CHRIS: O.K. that's true... there's lots of New Agers *(smiling)* ... mainly Old Agers who think they know best ... I should know, my parents are Baby Boomers! ... *(becoming serious again)* but *you* guys! ... you even question Evolution! I mean you say you are open to Science but you still question evolution for goodness sake. In my school district, we've

had pressure to teach creationism – that’s not creationism *and* Darwinism, but creationism *instead of* evolution.

WAYNE: It’s like Amina said, ‘faith is beyond reason’. Science only goes so far.

CHRIS: Look, I believe in spirituality. Doesn’t mean I have to believe in religion.

AMINA: Which brings us back to the after-life. *(to CHRIS)* Do you believe you have a soul?

CHRIS: Good question. The word soul means something to me, that’s for sure. It’s like our innermost essence. But does it survive death? I don’t know. Our consciousness? Does that survive death? I don’t know.

WAYNE: *(exasperated, muttering to himself)* ‘The sheep and the goats’ ... now how does that Parable go? It’s in Matthew. *(opens Bible ... pauses ... closes it again)*
Anyway ... I need a break. Thank God there’s a bathroom.

(WAYNE walks towards left stage entrance to adjoining room, then turns around, comes back, picks up his Bible, walks back and EXITS) (stage lights dim)

SCENE 8:

WAYNE: *(WAYNE ENTERS)* Here’s what I was looking for. *(addressing Chris)* Let me read this to you: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.” ... um, continued on verse 41: “then he will say to those on his left, ‘depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’” Matthew 25: 31-46.

CHRIS: So you think I’m a goat, and I guess you’re a sheep. You know what gets me Wayne, it’s the hypocrisy! You said you were a property manager. When did you ever feed the poor? No, you were out collecting rent. You were a landlord. A lord of the land. All this archaic language. Jesus is your *Lord* and he sits on a *throne* at the right hand of God in the *kingdom* of heaven.

WAYNE: Yes, and he is here now ... amongst us. He has arrived. I feel it. I know it. I had a vision. And maybe, just maybe, it's not too late for you. Repent, ask for forgiveness and you may receive his grace.

(lights OFF)

CHRIS: Ha! ... listen, I am going to tell you what I believe and what I don't believe. I believe that your religion is full of mixed messages. Didn't Jesus also say: 'it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven'. Isn't that in Matthew as well?

WAYNE: *(defensive)* There's nothing wrong with being wealthy.

CHRIS: Oh right, the 'Prosperity Gospel'. I forgot. Yes, I've read about it. God will bless his favoured ones with material wealth. So if you have faith, you can be forgiven your 'sins', and made wealthy, and get a free ticket to Paradise. And then there's the myth that 'I'm wealthy because I worked for it'. The people I know who work hardest are nurses and teachers. They're doing really worthwhile work, but they don't make much money and often aren't even appreciated. So who are the people who make money? Well that's where we get to the three 'I's ... that's what I call it: investment, interest and inheritance. Money creating more money – not labor. I have a wealthy friend. He got a big inheritance in his 20's; he bought a house; invested money in renovations; made a ton of money by renting out the basement, Air B and B and all that; and he bought mutual funds at a high rate of interest. He's in his 40's, has get-away property in Costa Rica, goes on cruises, plans to retire soon. He's not a Christian though ... Buddhist I think.

WAYNE: So you're an atheist and a socialist ... and no doubt a renter.

CHRIS: Yes, how did you know? No, like I said before, I'm an agnostic. There may well be a higher power. And as far as socialism, I don't really identify with any one label but you could say I am a democratic socialist. Actually, if we're getting real specific, I'm kind of a 'Georgist' – I believe land should be taxed. It's all about land. What was colonialism all about? Land acquisition. What was the war in Ukraine about? Land acquisition. Greed for more property. Bigger is better. More profit potential.

WAYNE: You're an angry woman, Chris. You should do your meditation more often. I'll say a prayer for you.

AMINA: O.K. My turn. Here's what I believe. First of all, let's get this one out of the way, I *don't* believe in aggression. I have experienced how violence begets violence. Sure, I have felt anger and a desire for revenge at all the examples of persecution: the Greco-Turkish war, the massacre of thousands of Azerbaijani Muslims by Armenian forces,

the indescribable treatment of Palestinians, the Yugoslav wars, the Uyghurs in China, the ongoing Rohingya genocide in Myanmar. I could go on. I got angry at the Islamophobia that followed 9:11 where every Muslim was suspected of being a terrorist. Bombings of mosques, arson, shootings, stabbings, crowd attacks, forced detentions, burning of Qurans, racial profiling, registration systems, government surveillance. I could go on. Almost every day, I personally am confronted with anything from fear and distrust to outright hatred when people see me in my hijab, and that's a hijab not a niqab or burqa! So what am I supposed to do? Hate Christians, become violent in return? I mean, Wayne, no-one knows you are 'a Christian' by your outer appearance. But on the other hand, some will see you as 'a white man' ...

WAYNE: *(WAYNE grunts)*

AMINA: Yes, not too popular with certain sections of the population, right?

WAYNE: Well, I'm going to steer well clear of that one!

AMINA: And you, Chris. Honestly, I feel sorry for you. I think you are lonely. You don't know where to fit in.

(CHRIS is silent. Uncomfortable silence from all three. Stage lights dim)

SCENE 9:

(lights up to low level as in previous scene; several moments of continuation of uncomfortable silene)

WAYNE: Hmm ... so you think life should be fair eh, Chris?

CHRIS: I believe in equality of opportunity. A level playing field. Same rules for everyone.

WAYNE: O.K. Well let me ask you something. You said you were a teacher?

CHRIS: Yes

WAYNE: Elementary or High School?

CHRIS: Elementary, Grades 1 to 7. And you know what Wayne? I know what you're going to ask me next. Whether we teach evolution or creationism? Well, I am happy to say we teach evolution. We try to teach facts. Evolution is a fact, at least according to

biologists, paleontologists, molecular biologists, geneticists, anthropologists ... and others.

WAYNE: *(sarcastic)* So I guess you spend quite a bit of time on pronouns as well.

CHRIS: What do you mean?

WAYNE: Well how are you 'factual' with a girl who thinks she is a boy? They / them for she / her?

CHRIS: We haven't sorted that one out yet.

(lights ON)

AMINA: Yes, this is a hard one. We accept that gender identity is not written in stone. We must be compassionate to those wrestling with this problem.

(CHRIS has stood up and is pacing looking agitated)

CHRIS: *(moving close to WAYNE and addressing him)* So you don't believe in fairness?

WAYNE: Well, it's like your guy says: 'survival of the fittest'. If I have some nice property in the country, if I take my family to Mexico in the winter, if I know how to handle my taxes, it's because I'm smart, I know how to play the game.

CHRIS: You make your own rules, right? ... O.K. Wayne. You've been asking tough questions. Let me tell you the real reason that I am an agnostic, the real reason that I don't believe in your God. Do you remember the tsunami in Indonesia in ... I think it was around 2004?

(WAYNE sighs and leans back)

Do you know how many people died? 230,000! And half of those were under the age of 18. 33,000 innocent children lost one or both parents. Is that fair? And if not, why ... why does God allow that to happen? Or how about this. You've got a psychopath on death row. He's been convicted of raping and killing children. In your religion, if he suddenly sees the light and repents to Jesus and asks for forgiveness, he gets into heaven.

(WAYNE shakes his head)

Meanwhile, in India, there are over one billion Hindus ... one *billion!* And they don't believe in Jesus, or the resurrection, or just *one* God. They've got *lots* of Gods. So is it fair that the born again psychopath gets to heaven and one billion Hindus are sent to

hell, along with all the Muslims and ... oh, let's not forget the atheists and agnostics?
Do you guys survive in the afterlife because you are the fittest?

(WAYNE stands up)

Your philosophy doesn't make sense. Mother Teresa makes it but Gandhi doesn't!?

WAYNE: You know what bothers me with you guys?

CHRIS: No

WAYNE: Do you want me to tell you?

CHRIS: Do I have a choice?

WAYNE: You think you know it all. But it's all in your head. Talk, talk, talk, You remind me of the nerds at school. We used to call them eggheads back then. You know, their brains so stuffed full of information. Outsize heads perched on scrawny bodies, the juiciness of spirit and soul somehow squeezed out of them by all those ideas going round and round. Think, think, think. Stuff in the info. Expand your knowledge who's the guy who sold his soul to the devil for knowledge?

CHRIS: Faust

WAYNE: Right. Faust. Sells his soul to the devil for knowledge. Bad move!

CHRIS: Better having fresh ideas than stale beliefs.

WAYNE: What you don't see on those guys' faces is awe, wonder, silent reverence.

CHRIS: Well I don't know about 'those guys' but I'll tell you what fills me with awe – the nature of our consciousness, the capacity to be mindful, the goodness in people's hearts to reach out to others. I have faith in our ability to look inward for answers. When I look out there. I see we are creating hell on earth. It's sad. It's depressing.

(WAYNE deep in thought at CHRIS's last comment. He stands up and walks back and forth a few times. He seems agitated)

WAYNE: Ah yes, depression hmm I have a little story for you which might explain my faith. *(lights dim)*

SCENE 10:

(lights up)

WAYNE: I've told you I have a daughter. I had a son too but he died ... in a car accident. I was real busy at the time. The property market was hot. It's not that my son and I were that close. He liked to read. Didn't do much sports. I guess I had trouble understanding him. So I would get irritated and ... anyway, I couldn't deal with the fact that he was gone. I started blaming myself. I started drinking. Some of my clients began to notice. Then someone complained. I didn't know what to do. I was having trouble sleeping. I wasn't taking care of my appearance. My wife and friends were concerned. But it was like I didn't care. I just let myself go. And I was going down. Into darkness. I couldn't see. I couldn't hear. I didn't want to hear ... their voices or the voices in my head ... I withdrew ... didn't talk to anyone ... watched TV ... down, down, down ... everything was painful ... the day was endless, so was the night ... even though I wasn't doing anything, I didn't know how to get through the day. I didn't know who 'I' was ... except whatever or whoever that was didn't amount to anything ... I felt people would be better off without me ... it was too painful ... I started thinking how I could end it ... make the hurting stop. I had one friend that had previously been through a depression. One day, I told him I was thinking of ending it. And ... *(WAYNE looks at CHRIS and AMINA distraught)* ... and he said something that *(WAYNE gestures lost for words)* ... he said "think of the pain that would cause you daughter ... and your wife." I hadn't thought of that. I was so lost that I had turned that round somehow and got into this obsessive thought that I would be lessening their pain as well as my own.

AMINA: It's easy to think that when you're depressed. I mean the truth is you're not a very nice person anymore. It's not just your imagination. You start seeing that people want to avoid you.

WAYNE: So you've been there.

AMINA: Oh yes.

WAYNE: So that was the start of becoming unstuck ... taking back my life ... and then one day, I was in the library and I came across this book 'Letters of a Scattered Brotherhood'. ...

CHRIS *(with sarcasm)* And you saw the light ...

WAYNE: Well yes I did. I started to believe that it wasn't just my family would wouldn't want me to kill myself ... but also Jesus didn't want that it was like he was saying to me 'I will take on your pain' ... and then I understood ... I thought of my son and how if I'd

been more in touch with my love for him, I would have been prepared to take his place in that car ... if somehow that were possible.

CHRIS: I know this story, Wayne. I've heard it before.

AMINA: Why are you so cynical Chris?

CHRIS: Because these stories of redemption are all on a personal level. They don't change society as a whole. The inequalities remain.

AMINA: But that's it, isn't it? You live in resentment because things aren't fair. Things aren't fair in the animal kingdom. Was it fair that I got raped or Wayne lost his son? Was society being fair? Was God being fair? Should raindrops only fall on bad people? How can you love people with bitterness in your heart? You have to accept things the way they are. Let me ask you something. Do you feel you are owed something?

CHRIS: Not me. Society owes people who are disadvantaged.

AMINA: But don't you see, that's why poor, disadvantaged people need religion in the first place. To get the advantage of community resources and support. And in Islam, that includes financial support. You know what? Poor people can't afford to be atheists. They need all the material and spiritual help they can get ... and it's not governments that supply that.

CHRIS: Yes but ...

(There is suddenly the sound of high winds blowing with a whistling, battering ... the sound grows to a crescendo and then slowly dies down and it becomes quiet again; it catches everyone's attention; then a few moments later, there are 'beeping' sounds on all three cell phones)

WAYNE: *(alarmed)* What the hell is going on here? Is this a signal? *(suddenly the lights come back on)* Jesus, my Lord Jesus. Are you here? Have you returned?

CHRIS: My cell phone's working. I'm going to see if I can get some news ... *(looking at news item on cell phone)* ... yes, there's something here on CNN about power being restored. Wow! Apparently this power out affected the whole country, everywhere ... but ... they're saying that no-one knows how it happened ... why it went in the first place. And apparently, they're now allowing limited travel, so long as you can prove who you are and where you're going.

WAYNE: O.K. That's it. That's all I need to hear. I'm going. These are signs folks - signals. I need to be with my people.

(WAYNE gathers his things together).

I wish you both luck. No, sincerely I do. So long.

(WAYNE EXITS: lights dim; sound of wind returns)

SCENE 11:

AMINA: I'm going to call my sister.

(as AMINA taps in the numbers, CHRIS gets up slowly and slowly and methodically blows out each candle, as AMINA chats briefly ... N.B. ideally in Arabic!)

They're shaken up but they seem O.K. They want me to join them as soon as I can. Have you spoken to anyone? Friends? Family?

CHRIS: No. No I haven't.

AMINA: Oh ... er, do you live alone?

CHRIS: Yes I do. Well, with my cat.

AMINA: Hmm ... do you get lonely?

CHRIS: *(pursing her lips)* Sometimes. But actually I like solitude. I do. A lot of people got prolonged cabin fever during Covid. Anxiety, depression, frustration. I know three couples that broke up during that time. But for me, in some ways I liked it. A chance to read, meditate, think, reset.

AMINA: Having a faith, a religion helps when you are on your own.

CHRIS: Yes, I understand that. In some ways I am envious of you and Wayne. You are connected to a meaningful network of like-minded people. You have order. You can predict what will happen ... well ... *(shrugs)*

AMINA: *(smiling)* You're smart. Do you know anything about quantum mechanics?

CHRIS: Not really.

AMINA: Einstein said “reality is merely an illusion, although a very persistent one.” (*knocking on the table*) We think this table is solid but it isn’t. We think we understand cause and effect. Then along comes quantum mechanics and it tell us that (*knocks on table again*) that this is a bunch of particles and waves. *Nothing* is solid. *Everything* is energy which is why electrons are capable of being in different places at the same time. (*CHRIS looks quizzical*) And things are not neatly divided into objects and subjects. What you see is affected by your seeing. (*CHRIS raises eyebrows*) It’s called the observer effect. In physics, the observer effect is the disturbance of an observed system by the act of observation.

CHRIS: Can you give me an example?

AMINA: Sure. Fluorescent lighting. Your mobile phoner. Migration by birds. GPS systems. Google any of those and you’ll get an explanation of the role quantum mechanics plays.

CHRIS: I find this fascinating. But I don’t understand. You scientists tell us that you know, for a fact, that our universe is 13 billion years old.

AMINA: 13.7

CHRIS: O.K. 13.7! You tell us for a fact that it all started with a big bang. You tell us that far in the future our sun will burn out and long before that life on earth will have ceased. But what was there before the Big Bang? God? Allah?

AMINA: Maybe. Maybe nothing. Maybe an infinity of other universes.

CHRIS: And science hasn’t lessened your faith?

AMINA: No. The possibility of a multiverse, concepts of infinity and eternity, in some ways, like I think I said before, it all increases my faith in

CHRIS: (*interrupting*) a higher power?

AMINA: If you like.

CHRIS: Hmm ...

AMINA: I would love to continue this but I must go. And I want to say Chris, that you would be most welcome to come with me if you like. You would be welcome. The holy Qu’ran does not prohibit anyone from visiting a mosque.

CHRIS: Well, thank you. I appreciate the offer. I really do. But, I think I’ll stay here for a while and try to digest everything that’s happening. I’ll probably meditate before I leave.

AMINA: As you wish. It was nice to meet you. Take care. Ma'a salaama.

(EXIT AMINA. CHRIS sees the Quran she has left on the table. He approaches it and moves his hand towards it as if to open ... LIGHTS OUT)

SCENE 12:

(Low level lights UP. CHRIS in meditation posture against wall. Candles are lit. Slowly CHRIS opens her eyes, gets up and turns ON the lights. He sits on a chair at the table and taps in a number on his cell phone.

CHRIS: *(on phone)* Hi Jamie no, they left well, not too wonderful, I'll tell you about it later no, I'm still hereyes I've heard I'm OK, how about you? listen, could you do me a favour and feed Merlin? yup OKthanksno no OK yes, I'll be back in twenty or thirty minutes, just want to spend a little more time here that's right OK, bye

(CHRIS turns off phone. Sound of footsteps approaching. ENTER AMINA)

CHRIS: Amina! What are you doing back here?

AMINA: I tried to call you but it went to your voice mail. I was concerned about you. You seemed a bit depressed.

CHRIS: Did you go to the Mosque?

AMINA: Yes. They are OK. I thought you might still be here. I brought you some food. *(AMINA opens a grocery bag and takes out a couple of plastic containers)* Somun and Begova Corba. They are both Bosnian dishes, very delicious. Somun is a kind of flatbread and Begova Corba is like a chicken stew with sour cream.

CHRIS: Gee, that's very kind of you, Amina! Really. Thank you! I am leaving soon so I will take them home with me,

AMINA: Sure, sure. So er ... you can get back OK?

CHRIS: I live close by, five or six blocks from here.

AMINA: OK ... well I'm glad I checked in on you. *Liakun Allah Maeak. Ma'a salaama.*

(as AMINA is about to leave, footsteps are heard approaching. ENTER WAYNE)

Hello, I didn't expect to see you.

WAYNE: Um, yes ... are you leaving?

AMINA: Yes ... have to go, 'bye. *(EXIT AMINA)*

WAYNE: You know, I went a mile or two. And I was thinking about my parents. How were they dealing with all of this? They are both old. He had a heart attack last year and my mom has dementia. Anyway, I pulled over and called them. Dad answered. He said he had just got back. I said, "what!?! Are you saying you'd been out of the house?" And he said, "your mother was nearly out of her medications. I couldn't leave it. I had to go to the Pharmacy.

Well, I hardly knew what to say, We talked a bit more and he reassured me that they were both OK. After we said goodbye, I sat there in the car for at least ten minutes. For some reason I kept recalling one of my Dad's favourite expressions. If he felt a family member or a close friend was being mean in some way, he would say 'have a heart' ... you know, meaning 'show some compassion'. And then I flashed on how that was what you had printed on the flip chart. *(WAYNE points to the words JUDGMENT versus COMPASSION)*

And then I thought of you and how it seemed to me that I had been mean, well not very understanding or kind towards you. And suddenly I was struck with how stupid it all seemed.

CHRIS: What?

WAYNE: Well, we all have different beliefs and in the case of Amina and I, there are some strong beliefs about what will happen the future. And I know if someone believes something different, I can get quite critical ... and, yes judgmental. So there I was in the car, thinking about my Dad and how he had nearly died from a heart attack and this expression of his 'have a heart' ... and it was cold and raining and the wind was blowing hard ... and *(WAYNE looks emotional)*

CHRIS: Go on.

WAYNE: I guess what I'm saying is that we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. But we do know what's happening in the present ... and well, I just felt compassion in my heart for both of you. Things didn't end well and well, I'm sorry for my part in that. When we got talking about Judgment Day, I kept remembering what our pastor had said about 'the end days', and how before Jesus returned the anti-Christ would spread doubt and fear and undermine truth and reality through fake claims and deception.

He's always talking about apostasy, the parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew.

And so while I was listening to you, for a while I began wondering if you were ... how can I say this ... somehow aligned with the forces of darkness. So er, I'm sorry because in my heart I can tell that you are a kind person ... whatever your beliefs, you mean well. And I'm not a bad guy, Chris.

So anyway, I came back to check on things. So er ... can I give you a ride back to your place?

CHRIS: Thank you Wayne. I appreciate the offer. And I appreciate what you had to say. But I'm OK. I live close by. It's just a short walk. And I know you want to get to your wife and daughter.

WAYNE: Are you sure? I mean ... well, if you're sure. So, I'll get going then. You take care, OK?

CHRIS: Thanks Wayne. See you. (EXIT WAYNE)

(Lights dim. Candles still alight. Lights OUT. Volume up on 'This Little Light of Mine' as sung by The Soweto Gospel Choir. This could merge into the version by 'Sweet Honey on The Rock – up to Director)

THE END