



## PROLOGUE— DATE 2063

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**O**n the eastern coast of Tunisia, overlooking the Gulf of Hammamet and the Mediterranean Sea, sits the Great Mosque of Monastir, a place of prayer since the 9th century—but no longer. In the year 2062, a cataclysmic global war prompted the World Federation to ban all religion. Now, less than a year later, a high-level meeting was being held here in the mosque, repurposed like many former places of worship as a museum and site for Federation conferences. Ironically, the subject of this particular meeting was *religion*.

The men and women entering the cavernous hall were clearly familiar with making decisions, issuing orders and receiving respect. Some wore military dress uniforms, others wore dark suits that spoke of power. Chatting and posturing, they seated themselves in black leather chairs flanking a ridiculously long, polished ebony conference table.

In front of each chair was a name card, an agenda, a water glass and a smaller glass, which waiters filled with the attendee's choice of strong coffee or Tunisian mint tea.

As ushers gently closed the ornate doors from the

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outside, a middle-aged man with wavy black hair, a blue-grey Italian suit and Mediterranean features called the meeting to order. His deep voice echoed through the hall. “Welcome, everyone of you, to the first meeting of the Religious Directive Implementation Council.”

“Let’s hope it will also be the last,” quipped a portly gentleman in a military uniform. The group laughed, until they noticed the glare in the eyes of the chairperson.

“Continuing,” said the chairperson, “you have been asked to serve on this council because you each represent key interests of business, industry, natural resources, intelligence, security, academia, judiciary and media. Let me remind you that the directive is a done deal for the entire world—proposed by the Foremost Council and ratified by the Grand Council. Our question is not *whether* but *how*.”

Heads nodded in agreement.

“To set the stage,” said the chairperson, “as you all know, our objective is not, nor has it ever been, to obliterate religion from the memory of humankind. We are merely altering our perspective. Religion has become a useless, disease-prone appendage. It is a part of our collective history, to be sure, but the time has come for it to be de-commissioned. Unfortunately, many will insist on hanging on to dangerous superstitions. Citizens of the Safe Zones must comply. Those who choose not to comply must be resettled, yet happily, they can become a valuable resource for the Federation and for industry. A sort of win-win situation.”

Some members of the group listened attentively, while others gazed at the architecture, stealing quick glances at other attendees to note their reactions.

“Religious professionals present a challenge. Pas-

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tors, priests, prophets, imams and rabbis must be dealt with first so they don't stand in the way of our plans. We offer them—um—extensive reeducation and indoctrination in the Federation Values. A best case scenario is that they can become walking testimonials for our system and can continue to preach—but preach Federation Values. Early results have been positive. Those who don't work out are dealt with on an individualized basis.”

“Any comments so far?”

There was silence, except for a cough, that echoed through the great room.

“Fortunately,” continued the chairperson, “a majority of citizens, according to the latest polls, are soured on religion, and agree wholeheartedly with Federation policy. This, thanks to the cooperative efforts of our propaganda people and the entertainment industry. Most citizens are ready to get rid of glassy-eyed religious nincompoops and their snake-oil sales force with their ridiculous frocks and silly hats.”

Laughter reverberated and trailed off.

“Very well then,” said the chairperson. “Dr. Gantassi, can you offer some perspective from the standpoint of the Ministry of Information?”

A tall woman in a cobalt blue suit cleared her throat. “Our primary challenge here is to avoid the perception that this is some sort of pogrom—a religious cleansing—and that those who persist in their religious delusions are being sent to concentration camps or work camps against their will. While that may be accurate, it is also a destabilizing construct. Accordingly, as we implement this directive, we should at all times emphasize the freedom of choice these individuals are being offered. We all serve the World Federation, to make the planet a better home for

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humankind. These individuals, by persisting in their beliefs and practices, are freely choosing to serve the Federation in a unique and important capacity. That's the way we want everyone to think of it."

"Oh good grief!" said the portly man, as he tugged on the collar of his medal-bedecked, starch green jacket, and puffed out his chest.

"Where did you work—in a New York ad agency—a PR firm—maybe a political speechwriter? What's with all the psychology? Just let my security forces round these people up, load them into boxcars, and send them where they need to go."

"General Feki, with all due respect," said the chairperson, "we understand how your approach might seem to be more—um—*efficient*. Yet it would be preferable to accomplish this task without the Federation being perceived as jackbooted Nazis, and without multiple insurrections. It's always better if we can manipulate—or I should say *encourage*—people to cooperate voluntarily. Thank goodness we live in an age where the masses are easily brainwashed by well-crafted PR tactics, disguised as advertising and entertainment. And yes, before the war, Dr. Gantassi's services were often in demand from major American advertising agencies, PR firms and politicians—back when there *was* a USA."

Muffled guffaws swept through the room.

A small man in a black uniform addressed the chairperson.

"Secretary Bougatfa, if I may offer a brief summary of our plan for managing religious practitioners, the Council may find it helpful."

"By all means, proceed, Director Kleinschmidt," said the Secretary.

"Thank you, Secretary. This program relies heavily on surveillance, as does all law enforcement of

course. And our contractors have redoubled their efforts to provide us with drone technology to carry the plan out in each and every Autonomous Region, to peer into every citizen's living room, workplace, bedroom and more. Indeed, many of you sitting here have been under surveillance already."

The Secretary chuckled, looked around the group and winked at a couple of people. Some shuffled uncomfortably.

"Now you may ask," continued Director Kleinschmidt, "How can you surveil someone's faith?" Well, I suppose it is *possible* to keep one's faith internal. Yet in my experience, religion almost always exudes visible components—icons, books, rituals, trinkets, clothing, silly hats, food, bizarre habits and customs—it goes on and on. There's always something.

"In any case, when our surveillance teams have gathered sufficient evidence that a subject is practicing religion, they will transmit it to the Compliance Division, which will issue a series of notices to the subject. If the notices are not acted upon, we send a final notice of relocation, followed by a visit from an agent, who secures the subject for relocation."

"Quite smooth," commented the Secretary.

"And," continued Kleinschmidt, "in keeping with Dr. Gantassi's excellent advice and directives, we never use the words *arrest, violation, enforcement, crime* or *prison*. We treat subjects in a courteous, businesslike manner. If subjects are reluctant or need convincing, our agents are trained to reassure them and further sell them on the program. Our prototypical tests in Charlotte, formerly North Carolina—with a higher than average Christian population—have yielded 91.3 percent compliance. Likewise, Varanasi, India, on the Ganges, a traditional center of religious activity, has

yielded 85.2 percent compliance.”

“*Sell* them on the program?” scoffed General Feki. “And what if they *don’t* comply? What then?”

“As I was about to clarify,” said Director Kleinschmidt, “armed security officers accompany each agent, which of course encourages compliance. Non-compliant subjects are quietly and efficiently dealt with through other procedures. I will not elaborate on those at this time.”

General Feki sighed, his chubby fingers drumming the table, his eyes staring upward at the fresh paint covering the old Koran passages on the ceiling. “Mmm-hmm. People will see right through the nonsense. They will comply because they *have* to. Not because they are *sold*.”

Secretary Bougatfa pretended to ignore General Feki’s comments. “Thank you, Director Kleinschmidt. A wonderful plan. Ms. Stavros, your agency is handling processing?”

“Yes, Secretary. Upon the issuance of the second notice to a subject, our systems have identified their abilities and determined how they would be most useful to the Federation. On their arrival at a processing center, we do a medical scan, issue uniforms, rescan for contraband, give a brief orientation, and place them on a bus or train to their destination facility. And of course in the process we weed out the remaining non-compliants.”

“Excellent!” smiled Secretary Bougatfa. “This should reassure those of you here who represent industry. Thousands of work camps around the world are under construction as joint projects of the Federation and private enterprise. We will provide the finest, problem-free labor. A well-oiled machine! And of course the Federation will direct and manage the labor force, while

private enterprise reaps the benefits. Not entirely dissimilar to the exploitation of inmates under the privatized American prison system in the 21st century. A remarkably good deal, I would say.”

Business representatives smiled broadly and nodded. A couple of them applauded.

“Now, on the academic side, Dr. Zhao, can you give us a quick perspective?”

“Certainly, sir. We are producing a series of holoseminars for educators who teach social sciences and history at the university level. Elementary and secondary school educators will follow. New textbooks are in the works. We are also planning a coordinated effort with our media associates across the table here. Finally, we are working with municipalities and local scholars to transform houses of worship and temples into museums, where we will offer programs to educate the public and orient them toward the Values.”

“A massive undertaking! Splendid work! You know,” mused the Secretary, “if we are to be truthful with ourselves, we are actually doing away with superstitious metaphysical religion, and replacing it with the one and only pragmatic religion that has successfully improved the condition of humankind, and to which all, both small and great, rich and poor, bow the knee—good old-fashioned, unbridled, materialistic *capitalism!*”

Attendees grinned and laughed. A couple of the business and banking representatives applauded.

“And finally, General Feki,” said the Secretary, “I know you have been *anxiously* waiting to grace us with a word about the removal and disposal of religious texts.”

“I thought you’d never ask. I will grace you with *two* words: *nearly done*. We have covered all the safe zones

and almost all Wilderness areas worldwide. Bibles, Korans, Upanishads, Talmuds, whatever—we detect them and disintegrate them on the spot. Of course we will have to continue our vigilance for decades, but the initial phase is almost complete.”

“Marvelous,” beamed the Secretary. “Well, that should give you a brief overview of the program as it now stands, and...”

A man at the far end of the table spoke up. “Secretary, it seems as if this is all a *fait accompli*. Can we not make suggestions at this point? While we certainly all agree that religion should be abolished, considering its role in the war, there are significant issues here involving due process and compliance with Federation law...”

“A very, very fine question, Justice Daya. Your suggestions are welcome at any time. Just send me a holovideo. But please know that hundreds of thousands of hours—perhaps millions of hours—of work, planning and testing have already gone into this system, not to mention the fact that major parts of the world economy are predicated on the forthcoming labor force.”

Justice Daya nodded and raised the palm of his hand in assent. “I certainly appreciate that, but I...”

“Justice Daya,” interrupted the Secretary, “you are here for the express purpose of seeing to it that the Great Court and the judicial branch of government in general *interpret* the law where necessary to make this all happen. If you feel we need to tweak the law or constitution in some way, let me know and we will take the appropriate measures in the Grand Council.”

The room was uncomfortably quiet for a moment. Scanning the whole group, the Secretary added, “And really, all of us are here to learn about the system so that

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the various agencies and enterprises we each represent can fall into line and give it full and enthusiastic support." He smiled. "Do we all understand?"

All heads nodded in agreement.