

FREQUENT MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT ISLAM AND HOW TO COUNTER THEM

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Probably the most common misconception is that all Muslims are the same. They are indeed united with respect to certain core doctrines and the practice of the five pillars, but that's as far as it goes. If you're a Christian, you will realize that there are all kinds of Christians in this world ranging from raving fundamentalists to rank liberals. The same is true for Islam. There is folk Islam that is usually syncretistically entwined with local religions and cultures and then there is the Islam of the serious cleric or academic. There are fundamentalists, militants, pious, secular, tolerant and intolerant, moderates, mystical and political Muslims. And since Muslims are reared in many different cultures, Pakistani and Nigerian Muslims are again different from each other. There are many "denominations" even, with the main split being between Sunni and Shi'ite. There are five main legal traditions, all of them considered equally orthodox. Some wear clothes we explicitly associate with Islam, while others follow Western fashions. So, when you talk of Muslims (the people) or of Islam (the religion), which people or which Islam are you referring to?

In view of this confusion, how can you know your Muslim neighbour or colleague? You can do so only to a certain extent by socializing with her, him or them. You can to some extent know a specific Muslim or a specific community of Muslims by personal interaction. That still does not mean you know Muslims in general.

An added difficulty in the West is that militant Muslims tend to hide themselves among the moderates. Even the moderate Muslims may not always realize that a specific person is a militant, perhaps a member of a sleeper group that can be

called into militant action at any time and is prepared to do so at any cost to himself.

Some Westerners have a good Muslim neighbour, colleague or friend and conclude from this relationship that all Muslims are peaceful, to be completely accepted at all levels of society and to be fully trusted. Others are more influenced by the negative images they pick up from the media or from hysterical writings published by certain anti-Muslim groups. They may consider all Muslims dangerous and think of Islam as a threat to Western society.

Like stereotypes, all these misconceptions are based on distorted truths. There are reasons for them to develop; they are not altogether wrong. What *is* wrong is their generalization. There are peaceful Muslims and militant Muslims; friendly Muslims and hostile Muslims, but no generalization covers them all. *The cure for our various misconceptions is to get realistic.* We must be aware of all these differences and react appropriately to the various Muslim individuals and groups we encounter.

That said—and, because of its political incorrectness, I hesitate to state what's coming!—, we must beware of ever thinking we understand Muslims fully, especially if they have been brought up in a Muslim country or ghetto. Though I keep trying, I find it very difficult to establish genuine friendship with Muslims and Muslims often tend to resist it. Deep down there always seems to be a degree of mutual suspicion. It is impossible to predict what their reaction will be to a critical event between the West and Islam. Many moderates the world over unexpectedly rejoiced over 9/11. What is needed here is unending patience and then some more.

Many people fear Muslim challenges to secular society and consider them illegitimate. The generation that brought Dutch Calvinism to Canada in the 1950s also challenged Canadian secularism. They did not mean to threaten Canada but to

bless it. Many Canadians were offended by this challenge, but these Calvinists persisted and scored some amazing victories that still bless Canadians today. Many Muslims similarly challenge Canadian secularism. Some people feel threatened by this Muslim challenge. The Reformed community should remember that Muslims have the same right to challenge Canadian culture in our pluralistic society as did those early Reformed. “Father” Abraham (Kuyper) himself would have defended their right to challenge the established order.

We should counter them not by repressing their efforts, for we are not here to defend secularism, but by reviving and updating our own Christian principles and once again challenge secularism with the weapons of “*our*” Spirit. Muslims badly need to see a wholistic Christianity in action in our secular context. And who knows, in the course of our simultaneous challenges we could rub shoulders with each other as allies in some common causes, without ignoring or erasing the core differences that will keep us separated.