Who is My Neighbor?

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When I was 23 years old, I came to D.C. with a voluntary service organization to work at the Center for Peace Studies at Georgetown. While there, I helped create a presentation for high school students on the theme “the New Testament Basis for Peacemaking.” We presented the program to about 10,000 students in the Washington and Baltimore area — and at other schools including Christopher Dock and LMH — sometimes speaking to six or seven classes each day.

As part of our presentation, we would tell the students the story of the Good Samaritan. After the priest and church official passed by without stopping to help, we would say, a big limousine pulled over to the side of the road near the injured traveler. A man climbed out of the limo, and — speaking in a foreign accent — took pity on the injured person. He dressed his wounds, helped him into his car and took him to George Washington Hospital and made sure he was well cared for there. It turns out, the man in the limousine worked for the Soviet Embassy, we would say — this was the “Good Communist” story, of course.

And then we would discuss with the students what Jesus meant in his telling of the Good Samaritan story, how the Samaritans were the despised and outcast of society, the opposite of the in-group. We would perhaps mention how Clarence Jordan, in his Cotton Patch version of Luke, had for the “Samaritan” an African-American man, stopping to help a white person in rural Georgia.

In today's reading, we hear the two principles upon which the whole of the gospel rests: Love God and love your neighbor. But the lawyer talking to Jesus wanted to "justify himself," to declare himself righteous, as one commentator put it, by throwing back on Jesus the definition of neighbor, which the Jews interpreted very narrowly and technically, as excluding Samaritans and Gentiles.

Jesus responds with this story, which breaks down the narrow definitions and restrictive understandings of his listeners, saying to them — and to us — that those we would deem as outsiders, as the others, as a threat even — those are the very people we are called to love.

How might Jesus tell that story today?

Who are the "Samaritans" for people in our culture? Who are the despised, the outcast, the "other" for us? Who would Jesus use to exemplify our call to love those that are considered the most unlovable?

I think it's quite possible that Jesus would tell us the "good Muslim" story.

We've been told, especially since 9/11, that we are engaged in a "war on terror," but it often feels that our enemies are not just those who perpetuate violence, but Islam itself. We hear the expression "Islamic extremism" so often that, in public discourse, the two terms have become virtually conflated. Islam equals extremism. Muslims equal terrorists.

And it is true that many horrible acts have been carried out in the name of Islam. We can't sit down at our computer or pick up the paper without reading about a woman accused of adultery and sentenced to death by stoning by Sharia courts in Iran or a bomb killing dozens of worshippers at a Shia mosque in

Pakistan, or any of a number of other atrocities — all committed in the name of Islam.

So we begin by acknowledging that violent extremism is real and that such extremism is a genuine threat to innocent people.

Today I want to address three questions: 1) Where does this "violent extremism in the name of Islam" come from, and does it represent the heart of Islam? 2) How will it change? 3) How do we, as Christians, relate to all this?

1. Where does it come from? Why has radical Islam proved so appealing in so much of the world?

Samuel Huntington famously declared that we're engaged in a "clash of civilizations," the West vs. the rest. And many are convinced that Islam itself compels people to commit acts of terrorism or applaud violent extremism.

But a look at the history of relations between Europeans and the rest of the world gives a rather different perspective on the *roots of this extremism*.

A. Colonial boundary drawing

Going back to the beginning of the colonial era, European powers saw the rest of the world as the "other" that could be freely dominated, exploited and subjugated, a perspective based in large part on assumptions about racial superiority.

As part of this colonial experience, European powers sought to "Europeanize" Muslim and other societies. In doing so, the Europeans sowed seeds of conflict in two particular ways:

1. First, they fostered internal “tears” in colonized societies by creating a “new elite of natives in a European image.”[1] So, for instance, the British set up what they hoped would serve as “brown Englishmen” to rule over India, creating a cultural tear between most of the society and its rulers. The French did the same in their colonies in Algeria and elsewhere in West Africa, as did the Spanish in the Americas.

2. The second fault line that came out of colonialism came from the practice of creating new nation-state identities based on *geography*. Many of the non-European people identified themselves traditionally by tribe, language and religion. Yet colonial powers divided peoples such as the Kurds and Uzbeks among several nation-states. The Kurds were split up among modern Turkey, Iran and Iraq, which has been a source of ongoing conflict.

B. Reaction to modern secularism

A “reaction to modernity” is often named as a second root cause of Islamic fundamentalism. But it’s not really modern secularism per se that fundamentalist Muslims are reacting against.

Rather, it’s the perception among many Muslims that Western secularism is *anti-religious*. Many in the Islamic world, for instance, don’t perceive the separation of church and state as merely allowing all religions to thrive. Rather, many experience what they understand as aggressive anti-religious sentiment and actions in the West, actions that are seen not so much as respect for a secular public space but as an attack on their religious beliefs.

C. Western support for autocrats in the Muslim world

A third cause of Muslim resentment of the West that has contributed to violent militancy has been U.S. and other Western support for authoritarian regimes ruling over Muslim populations. This includes, of course, resentment of the U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the stationing of troops in Saudi Arabia, as well as support for oppressive regimes in Iran under the Shah, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. And the deepest thorn in the side for many Muslims, of course, is U.S. support for Israel in its conflict against the mostly Muslim population in Palestine.

1b. Does extremism represent genuine Islam?

An important question in all this: Are these fundamentalist impulses at the *heart* of Islam? Does violent extremism inherently *represent* genuine Islam, or is it a subversion of authentic Islamic values?

Outsiders can easily make the mistake of seeing Islam, and the Muslim world, as monolithic. But there are profound disagreements within Islam around these issues. While all Muslims agree on a core set of beliefs and practices,[2] there are wide differences among Muslims around Islamic law,[3] the legitimacy of holy war[4] and the role of women.

Most Muslims,[5] around the world and here, are appalled by what they consider a disparaging of authentic Islam. They are as offended and aggrieved by the violence carried out in the name of their religion as we are. And they're likely frustrated that such extremists stand as the representation of their faith.

What if we took seriously Jesus' words, "Why do you look at the splinter in your neighbor's eye and never see the board in your own eye?"[6] What would we see if we looked at Christianity through the eyes of Muslims?

Muslims might point to the actions of people like the so-called Christian militias, or to "Rev." Phelps and the members of Westboro Baptist Church, the folks who bring the hateful signs and picket at funerals, and say, Do they represent authentic Christianity?

Or perhaps they would look at Christian history and point out that when the Christian faith was 1,300 to 1,400 years old — as Islam is today — we experienced the so-called "holy wars" of the Crusades, anti-Semitic massacres, and the Inquisition.

And when President Bush tried to make the case for the invasion of Iraq, he used words like "crusade" that made many Muslims feel that the war was, for the "Christian" nation of the United States, a holy war against Islam.

2. The other side of Islam: The seeds of transformation.

But if violent extremism is *not* what Islam is really about, it's still a potent destructive force, and it still seems to be the dominant reality for much of the Muslim world.

So the question is: What will change this reality? Where are the signs that transformation is not only possible, but happening?

I'd like to point to two areas that I think show that seeds of change are beginning to sprout in Islam. In fact, I'm convinced that, as some have said, "the Islamic reformation has begun."

The first area is the emergence of a distinctive *American* Islam. American Muslims such as Reza Azlan,[7] Asra Nomani, Eboo Patel,[8] Daisy Khan,[9] Irshad Manji[10] and many others are taking the core values of Islam and applying them in distinctly American ways. These people are very involved in interfaith relations, in justice and peacemaking work and in helping to shape a progressive, modern version of Islam.

Mosques here are very much influenced by American values. For example, mosques in North America commonly pick a governing board through elections. The president of the Islamic Society of North America is a woman, and there are groups such as "Muslims for Progressive Values" and the "Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equity." And there is new inclusive language, even feminist translations of the Quran.[11]

Women are central to this "reformation," both here and abroad. In May, five women "integrated" a mosque in D.C.,[12] the third protest this year at a Washington-area mosque. These protests are part of a movement, led by a former Wall Street Journal reporter named Asra Nomani, (in her words) to "reclaim women's rights and principles of tolerance in the Muslim world."[13]

This phenomena isn't limited to this country. In her new book subtitled "How Women are Transforming the Middle East," Isobel Coleman tells the story of traveling in the central highlands of Afghanistan with the health director of a local nonprofit.

Coleman described their visit to a mosque there in rural Afghanistan. They were greeted at the door by the mullah, head of the local religious community,

who shooed the chickens aside and welcomed the women into the building. They saw the one-room mosque filled with women and girls, most between the ages of nine and 16, all there to attend classes.

The mullah spoke to the group: “Education is like sun and water,” he said. “Without it, you can’t grow anything. But if girls are educated, they can change our whole society.”

In telling this story, Coleman emphasizes that not only is the school based in a mosque, and hosted by the local mullah, but that the rationale for educating girls is rooted deeply within the traditions and teachings of Islam.

Women’s education, and the advancement of women in general, Coleman says, cannot be imposed from the outside. The Soviets tried to do that during their period of occupation, figuring that if they forced rural Afghan families to send their girls to school, development would follow. But the Soviets’ approach, with co-ed classrooms and men teaching girls, was seen as subverting the country’s social codes and religious laws. Protecting Afghan girls from the “godless ways of the Soviets” became a powerful rallying cry for the mujahideen.[14]

Instead, women’s empowerment must come from within the culture and religion of the people. The mullah in Afghanistan rooted his support for the girls’ school in the teachings of Islam. “Islam,” he said, “is the religion of education, for both boys and girls. ... The Prophet says that women must be educated.”

Coleman’s book describes what she sees as an emerging global movement of Islamic feminism, part of a broader reform movement within Islam. Islamic feminism is led by many distinguished scholars, women and men, who

argue that Islam was radically egalitarian for its time and remains so in many of its texts. They contend that Islamic law evolved in ways hostile to women because of selective interpretation by patriarchal leaders. They argue that the worst practices toward women, like those of the Taliban, in fact represent a *subversion* of Islamic teaching, its corruption by tribal customs and traditions sustained in the name of Islam.

Because it works within the values of Islam, not against them, Islamic feminism has the potential to be embraced by local leaders — most importantly, by religious leaders, like the mullah in Afghanistan. Muslim feminism is a potentially powerful force for women's rights throughout the Islamic world, since it undercuts the argument that feminism is an illegitimate Western influence.

This is a transformative moment for Islam, a competition between two opposing worldviews — the extreme, puritanical Islam and the moderate even progressive Islam whose birth pangs we're seeing around the globe.[15]

3. What's our role as Christians?

So what can we do as Christians to support this transformation?

First, we should not allow either our own preconceptions or media images to determine what we think and say about Islam, and we shouldn't automatically equate Islam with "radical" or "extremist." Muslims are as varied as Christians, with "roughly the same proportion of saints to rogues,"[16] and our actions should reflect that.

Second, we need to learn more about Islam. In a national poll last year, 55 percent of the respondents said they lacked a basic understanding of Islam, and

most said they don't know anyone who is Muslim. Those who have some knowledge of Islamic teachings tend to view the religion more favorably, and are more likely to see Islam as peaceful.[17]

So part of our peacemaking task is simply to get to know Islam better — and beyond that, to build relationships and alliances with Muslims.[18]

Interfaith dialogue[19] can be an important part of this process. I've been part of an interfaith dialogue group for the past four years, which has involved meetings in Canada, the United States and Libya in North Africa, where Muslim scholars and evangelical Christians have engaged in conversation and built relationships. Another example is EMU's new program called Abraham's Tent: A center for Interfaith Engagement. They've hosted Islamic scholars, sponsored interfaith peace camps and helped to build interfaith awareness and dialogue — seeing this as a way to live out our commitment to peace.

Conclusion

The U.S. government has taken one approach to extremism, placing itself in armed opposition to Muslim fundamentalists around the world. Whenever a Predator drone strikes a village in Afghanistan or Pakistan, the local population is further convinced it's under attack from America, and a nationalist backlash results. A few al Qaeda operatives die — and support for extremism increases.[20]

We're called as peacemakers to model another approach. Karen Armstrong said that the only way forward is the "cultivation of mutual respect."[21] Jesus' story in today's gospel helps us understand that being a loving neighbor — to those around us and across the globe — requires that we leave our comfort

zone, change our ways of thinking, and cross boundaries as we seek to follow his invitation to "go and do likewise."

Amen.

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[1] Feisal Abdul Rauf, "What's Right with Islam, a New Vision for Muslims and the West" (HarperSanFrancisco, 2004)
[2] from monotheism, to Muhammad as God's messenger, to praying five times a day
[3] sharia
[4] jihad
[5] The puritanical interpretation of Islam, and the support for terrorism by groups like al Qaeda, have mostly come from one branch of Islam, Wahhabism, which was founded in the 18th century in Arabia and revived in the 20th century.
[6] Matthew 7:1-5
7 See "The Islamic Reformation Has Begun," an interview with Reza Aslan, by Asra Nomani (Sojourners, Jan. 2006)
[8] "Islam adapts and integrates exceptionally well. Where would Islam be today without Turkish poetry, without Persian cuisine, without Indian architecture? Islam in India is Indian. Islam in Indonesia is Indonesian. Islam in China is Chinese. Islam in America is becoming American." Eboo Patel (Sojourners, Feb. 2009)
[9] "I firmly believe that the core values of Islam—faith in and obedience to the Divine, reverence for individual rights *and* communal well-being, compassion and justice, respect for pluralism and diversity—are entirely resonant with American values."—Daisy Khan, "Balancing Tradition and Pluralism" (Sojourners, Feb. 2009). Khan is the founder of Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equity (WISE).
[10] See Irshad Manji, "The Trouble with Islam Today: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith" (St. Martin's Griffin, 2003)
[11] Laleh Bakhtiar, trans. "The Sublime Quran" (Library of Islam, 2009)
[12] "Mosque pray-ins against segregation of sexes are springing up," Washington Post, May 22, 2010
[13] http://www.asranomani.com/Biography.aspx
[14] Ibid, xv
[15] Khaled Abou El Fadl, "The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists" (HarperCollins, 2005)
[16] George Dardess, "Meeting Islam: A Guide for Christians" (Paraclete Press, 2205)
[17] Washington Post/ABC News poll, 2009
[18] Peter Kreeft, "Between Allah and Jesus: What Christians Can Learn from Muslims" (IVP Books, 2010)
[19] See, "A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor" (Eerdmans, 2010)
[20] Zakaria, op cit.
[21] In her introduction to Rauf, p.xv.