

Ground-zero fear

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The first time I taught an introductory world religions class, one of the students was a quiet Afghan named Mohammed. When it came time for oral presentations, Mohammed talked about Jesus. As a devout Muslim, he knew a lot about his subject.

This was a few years before 9/11 — before “Islamic extremism” and “jihad” entered the cultural lexicon; before conservative media began regularly exploiting their audiences’ ignorance of orthodox Islam; before suspicion of all things Muslim became the order of the day in America.

The world religions class was part of a night-school curriculum for professional adults working on a first or second bachelor’s degree. The students were IBMers and local police officers, insurance agents and small-business owners. They ranged in age from mid-20s to late-50s.

When Mohammed gave his presentation on the life and teaching of Jesus, most of the students quickly realized that he knew more about Christianity than they did. They pumped him with questions; he patiently answered them all. They expressed their gratitude; he received their warmth with his own unassuming charm.

The gift of a young Afghan named Mohammed in a room full of mostly Southern Baptists and northern Catholics didn’t present itself again. But I soon began taking these groups to the local Islamic Center where we would observe Muslims at prayer and listen to a presentation on the basics of Islam with a lengthy Q and A session afterward. Our hosts were always hospitable and good-humored. I especially remember a husband-and-wife team — he a Pakistani with strict beliefs and perfect comic timing; she a former Catholic from Chicago named Debbie who wore a hijab and called herself a feminist. They were delightful, and they

dispelled many a stereotype about Islam and those who practice it.

In the years since 9/11 Americans generally have failed to avail themselves of the kinds of encounters with Muslims that would make the current controversy about a mosque at ground zero a more informed debate. It's old news that almost a decade after the terrorist attacks, Islam is grossly misunderstood by most westerners.

Textbook information is useful in situations like this (some serious cramming wouldn't hurt) but even better is real live human connection. But sadly the flawed doctrine of American exceptionalism has schooled generations in the idea that we don't need to know much about the rest of the world. We're Americans after all — doesn't everybody want to be like us?

Because we live now in such a climate of fear – economic insecurity, anxiety about our children's futures, basic distrust of anyone unlike us – we reflexively act with alarm whenever an idea challenges the narratives that given our lives stability and comfort. One of the primary objections to building an Islamic community center near the former site of the twin towers (it's not actually a mosque and it's not exactly at ground zero) is that it will somehow diminish the sacrifice of those who died that September day.

But the problem is that, in order to make the deaths of 3000 innocents tolerable, we have invested them with a moral significance that they cannot bear. Their deaths were tragic but they are not martyrs. They died horribly but not for a cause.

What will it take for us to desire truthfulness more than sentimentality? What has to change for fear to be overruled by love? When will Christians be known for practicing the kind of hospitality and neighborliness toward strangers (and enemies) that puts them profoundly at odds with American civil piety and its perversions of the gospel of Jesus?

Speaking of Jesus, Christians and Muslims have honest differences about him. My students learned this all those years ago from Mohammed. What would Jesus have us do about that? Have contempt for them? Live in

fear of them? Some would say that Jesus would want us to save them — to bring them over to the winning side. But it's hard to see what such would-be converts would find appealing about the offer, rooted as it is in — what else? — fear.

Instead of fear, how about friendship? How about encouraging the small gestures of hospitality — in others, in ourselves — that might lead to a lasting relationship with a Muslim neighbor, co-worker, or classmate? It's clear from the hysteria surrounding the proposed plans for ground zero that baby steps are all we're capable of right now. So let's turn off the cable news fear-mongers and get moving.

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