

How to talk to a person who supports Donald Trump

By [Russell P. Johnson](#)

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Donald Trump's proposal to screen all Muslims in the U.S. has drawn considerable backlash from liberals and conservatives alike. Journalists, bloggers, politicians, and religious leaders have condemned Trump's plan and argued that it is inconsistent with core American values such as equality and religious freedom. They argue, rightly, that Trump's comments are definitive proof that he shouldn't be president. Really, he shouldn't be anywhere near the presidency. He shouldn't even be allowed to watch *The West Wing*.

This criticism is justified and necessary, but it is unlikely to be heard by those most drawn to Trump's rhetoric. There is something valid about the frequent comparisons made between Trump's (and others') anti-Islamism and racist analogues like Nazi anti-Semitism or Japanese internment in mid-century America. But people who are wary of Islam will dismiss them as a misunderstanding of their concerns.

Here's why: Islam is not an ethnicity. It's not a race. It's not something you're born with and stuck with for your whole life. We can argue about what a religion is, but Islam is at the very least a system of ethical commitments. Unlike being Japanese or being ethnically Jewish, being Muslim is a way of life that can voluntarily be adopted or abandoned.

Trump's supporters will be quick to insist that Islam involves ideological convictions, and these convictions could—in theory—be dangerous to American society. These Trump supporters might agree that discrimination based on skin color or nationality is wrong while maintaining that we can and ought to discriminate based on ideology. We do, after all, put revolutionary anarchists on watchlists because they hold beliefs that if acted upon could threaten America. It makes sense at some level, then, to ask whether the ethical commitments that comprise a belief system like Islam are threatening in a similar way.

These proponents of anti-Islamic rhetoric are correct in thinking that commitment to Islam—unlike ethnic Jewishness, Japanese heritage, or blackness—intrinsically

involves ideas. They are also correct in thinking that ideas have consequences, that we are responsible for our ideas, and that ideas deserve critical scrutiny rather than blanket toleration.

Where Trump and his supporters are incorrect is in failing to distinguish between different varieties of Islam. They incorrectly infer that small radical factions are representative of Islam. To put it bluntly—Trump’s comments aren’t wrong because they’re racist, they’re wrong because they’re wrong.

All I’m saying is, if we accuse those propounding anti-Islamic legislation of being racists, they will say, “You’re not listening to my point.” Even if we suspect that their anti-Islamic sentiment is rooted in anti-Arab prejudice (it might be) or that their proposed plans for screening Muslims will lead to anti-Arab discrimination (it definitely would), we ought to try to understand and engage their concerns on their own terms. Only then could we persuade them that providing a welcoming home for Muslims is a key part of making America great again.