Tackling intolerance: Muslims and the West

by Gary M. Burge in the October 19, 2010 issue

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Are Americans becoming—as *Time* magazine (August 30) suggests—Islamophobic? According to one recent poll, 46 percent of us believe that Islam is more likely than other faiths to inspire violence against nonbelievers, and 34 percent of us don't want a mosque in our neighborhood. According to an August 19 *Washington Post* poll, 30 percent of conservative Republicans who dislike Obama claim that he is a Muslim. (A *Time* poll put it at 46 percent.) Is "Muslim" the new political slur?

I travel to the Middle East at least once each year, often visiting multiple countries. I belong to an evangelical-Muslim discussion group which meets annually, and the participants include pious, brilliant, generous Muslim scholars whom I count as my friends. When a topic like "Islamophobic America" comes up, I share intense personal e-mails with them.

But I came away from my trip to the Middle East this past summer with some new concerns. In August I spoke to a group of Muslim university students who wanted to

talk about Islam and the West. Some were progressive and thoughtful, others less so. A dialogue between two young men ran like this:

"We pity you Christians."

"Why?"

"Because what Christianity teaches is wrong."

"But what do we do if some Christians say that Islam is wrong?"

"Then they are wrong."

"But two people might both claim to be right. We have to ask: can we live together and accept each other or will we destroy each other?"

"If something is wrong it must be stopped."

"So what do you propose we do to people who don't believe in Islam?"

"Eventually people who teach wrong things should be arrested."

Before I had a chance to unleash my own broadside, half of the room erupted in argument. The Arabic flew so fast and furious my translator could barely keep up. "You can't possibly mean that!" "What you say is not Islam!" "What you say is offensive!" But I could see that the target of this barrage was not persuaded. His eyes narrowed. He slouched and went silent. When the session ended, a circle of five women students cornered him for more punishing debate.

I expect to find this rigid position among those who are not educated. For instance, when I took a taxi home from Chicago's O'Hare airport recently, I had a conversation with my Pakistani driver. He spoke first:

"Where have you been?"

"The Middle East."

"I wish I lived in a Muslim country."

"Is it hard to live here in Chicago?"

"Yes. Too much wickedness."

"What's an example?"

"Bikinis."

"Anything else?"

"People don't follow Islam."

"But maybe they believe in something else."

"They're wrong."

"What should we do with people that disagree with Islam?"

"They should be punished."

But to encounter this perspective in a university setting in the Middle East was disturbing. I dashed off an e-mail to a friend, a Muslim scholar in Canada. He wrote back: "The reality is that Muslims, like members of any faith community, have a wide spectrum of backgrounds, influences, mentalities and other things that define a religious human being."

I knew that, but I needed a reminder—a reminder that every religion has people who represent only one place in the religious spectrum. And you can't judge a religion by a few extremists.

During the week of my return to the States, the furor over the mosque planned in New York was filling the headlines. Involved in the mosque project are progressive Muslims led by Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf and Daisy Khan, executive director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement. They are Sufis (think mystical Muslim Mennonites perhaps) who are working with Jewish leaders to build a community center modeled after the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan. The attacks of 9/11 were deeply troubling to them, and they wanted to do something good in response. Yet American Christians were condemning them—and some were using the same religious slogans I'd heard in the Middle East from the Muslim side.

Through these experiences and my conversations with Muslims, three ideas have become clearer to me.

First, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and intolerance may have more to do with cultural resistance against the West than with religion per se. Religion is often used

as a tool to express dislike of "the other." I doubt that when the Taliban killed medical workers in Afghanistan this past summer they were doing it because the Westerners were missionaries. The Taliban saw them as a projection of Western and American influence, and this was their barbaric way of fighting back. These Taliban have as much in common with Islam as the KKK has in common with Christianity. Muslim scholars have told me that in their view religious violence is a characteristic of postcolonial societies. People seek ways to express resistance. Sadly, many do it violently. And they use religion in doing so.

Second, like Christianity, Islam is deeply variegated. It includes fundamentalists who are shockingly intolerant, but it also includes progressives who have chosen to live alongside others peacefully. I have Muslim friends in Toronto, Amman and Beirut who would find the Muslim faith of parts of rural west Pakistan alarming.

In discussions with Muslim scholars, I've sometimes asked what to do with Qur'anic verses describing the conquering of nonbelievers. They open my Bible to the book of Joshua and pose the same question to me: "Do these texts still define how you treat nonbelievers?" Touché.

Third, tolerance and diversity are two of the good gifts the West has given the world. (Not that we in the West embrace these gifts faithfully ourselves; think of the history of Serbia, Ireland or Selma.) I yearn to hear my Muslim friends speak up for tolerance for Christians living in Muslim countries. Privately, Middle Eastern Christians will confide that they face enormous struggles in trying to build a church or school—or just in avoiding employment discrimination. But few Arab Christians will discuss these problems openly. When will Christians in the Muslim world enjoy the same freedoms Muslims in America call for today?

I am not hopeful that my Pakistani taxi driver in Chicago or narrowly educated fundamentalist students in the Middle East will appreciate these concerns. They probably think that tolerant, progressive Muslims have lost the true faith.

But I remember that circle of five young Muslim women—all proudly wearing the *hijab*—who confronted that angry young man who saw no way for people of different faiths to live together. They understood what must be done to advance this conversation, and they understood who had to do it.