What About Islam?
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He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" (Mark 4:40)

No religion is more controversial in America these days than Islam, for at least two reasons. The first and most obvious reason has to do with all the violence carried out in the name of Islam, catastrophically in the attacks of September 11, 2001, and then in a whole series of wars and terrorist acts around the world down to the present day.

A second reason is that the number of Muslims in America has been quite small historically, and still amounts to between one and two percent of our population, around 3.3 million people, according to the Pew Research Center last year. That means a great many Americans simply don't know any Muslims personally, as friends or neighbors or coworkers. As a result, many of us know little or nothing about Islam except the most terrible things done in the name of that religion, and the negative stereotypes get reinforced every time there's another atrocity somewhere in the world.

To put all this into perspective, let's begin with a few facts and then talk about how faithful Christians might respond.

First, there are something like 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, or about 23% of the people on the planet. That makes Islam the second largest religion, after 2.2 billion Christians. Among other things, this means that Christians and Muslims need to get along with one another, because together we make up more than half of the world's population.

Second, since the attacks of September 11 and the major homeland security efforts they prompted, the average number of people killed by Islamist terrorists on American soil each year has been about six individuals. Of course every one of the roughly 16,000 murders that occur annually in America is a terrible crime, but people who are *not* Muslim terrorists commit over 99.9% of those crimes. By way of another comparison, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, some 55,000 Americans died of flu or pneumonia in a recent year. In other words, based on our experience of the last sixteen years, you and I are about 9,000 times more likely to die of flu or pneumonia this year than to be killed by an Islamic terrorist.

Why, then, are so many Americans afraid of Muslims? Part of the reason has to do with what psychologists call "salience." Salience is the degree to which something stands out in our minds, even if our preoccupation with that thing is altogether disproportionate to the impact it's likely to have on us in real life. Terrorism is salient because it scares people, and we pay attention to things that frighten us. That's part of the point of terrorism, of course—to get people's attention. But then again, because relatively few Americans have a personal relationship with any Muslims, Islam itself seems alien to many, so the very foreignness of Islam only compounds the scary salience of Islamist terrorism.

On top of all this, some people in our society have made a virtual shibboleth, a kind of verbal identity marker, out of repeating phrases like "radical Islamic terrorism." Often they imply that if anyone is reluctant to use such phrases it's a sign that they're soft on terrorism, or don't

take the threat seriously. But the great irony here is that so many experts in diplomacy and senior leaders in our military point out how that kind of language can actually *weaken* our national security instead of strengthening it. The reason is that many Muslims around the world believe the United States is waging war on Islam itself. They interpret actions like the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the drone attacks in recent years that have killed some innocent civilians, including children, as evidence that America fundamentally hates the Muslim faith.

We know that's not true, but it's why President George W. Bush, President Barack Obama, and so many American generals have indicated that it's simply counterproductive to keep repeating phrases like "radical Islamic terrorism." Of course there are some Muslims who hate America and want to harm us, and we should strongly resist terrorism from any source. But constantly linking the words "Islamic" and "terrorism" only reinforces the anti-Muslim stereotypes of some Americans and feeds the terrorists' propaganda that the United States is essentially at war with Islam. We have to rely on the vast majority of Muslims who are nonviolent to monitor, discourage, and report on the extremists in their own communities, and it doesn't help them do that if we keep sounding like we identify Islam itself with terrorism. Then again, when some Americans go around harassing Muslims and vandalizing mosques because of all the stereotypes they listen to, that only makes everyone, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, less secure.

So what should we do about all this as American Christians, as people who love our country and also claim to be followers of Jesus Christ?

Naturally, we want to protect our country. Three weeks ago, right here at Westminster, about 200 of us heard Professor Stephen Biddle, one of our nation's leading authorities on the Middle East and an advisor to generals, describe what we're already doing in response to terrorism, and what the costs and consequences of other options might be. If you missed the talk, or if you want to hear it again, the recording is on our church's website, or you can get a copy from the church office.

We all want to protect our country and keep it strong, but what makes a nation great is the character of its people, not just the size of its arsenal or the forcefulness of its response to real or imagined threats. What we believe shapes the kind of people we are, and if we truly believe in the God we know in Jesus Christ, then our lives will be shaped by God's own love and justice. A nation that sacrifices character in the name of security will become, sooner or later, a people who are neither great nor safe.

Those of us who follow Jesus need to practice something like what the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr called Christian Realism during the Cold War. Niebuhr's perspective was realistic because it took seriously the flaws in human nature, including our tendency toward violence as a result of insecurity, and our vain inclination to see ourselves as pure children of light and whoever we fear as the evil children of darkness. But Niebuhr's realism was also deeply Christian, because he believed that God will

ultimately prevail, and in the meantime God is working through the imperfect efforts of every human being who seeks God's justice and love. Niebuhr thought we Christians ought to live with what he called "the pessimism of nature and the optimism of grace"—a realistic awareness of our natural limitations, but also a deep and abiding trust in the power and goodness of God.

The first letter of Peter in the New Testament says, "Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse, but on the contrary, repay with a blessing." That's not a call to be soft on crime or terrorism, but a reminder to do what is right in God's eyes, in ways that will be recognized and respected by people of every faith who sincerely want to know and serve God.

The Bible tells us to seek peace and pursue it. To seek peace is not weakness. Peace may come through strength, but the greatest strength is moral and spiritual. Without moral and spiritual strength, mere physical strength and power always tend to be abused. We Christians ought to be strong in every way, starting with the strength of our devotion to God and the ways that God would have us live. With regard to our Muslim neighbors in this country, and those around the world, that means a number of things.

It means we need to treat Muslims, and everybody else, the way we ourselves want to be treated. It means we mustn't stereotype 1.6 billion Muslims according to the atrocities committed by some violent jihadists, any more than we want 2.2 billion Christians to be stereotyped by the Crusades, or the Ku Klux Klan, or Abu Ghraib.

It means we will defend ourselves against the most hateful people and impulses within any nation or religion, while reaching out in friendship to people of goodwill within every nation and religion as well. It means we should acknowledge our differences honestly, while working through dialogue toward mutual understanding, remembering how St. Paul said that if we have all faith and all knowledge, but have not love, we are nothing. Jesus' Great Commandment, after all, is not merely to be right, but to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Christianity and Islam have many roots and beliefs in common, but we also have some important differences. These are the two largest religions in the world because Christianity and Islam are both missionary religions, actively inviting other people into their respective communities of faith—which means that we will always need to pay attention to the things that make for peace, rather than feeding our baser human impulses toward conflict and hostility.

It's quite possible for all of us to live together in peace, and in various times and places people of different faiths have done just that—including those from the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

We would do well to remember that even within Christianity there have been long periods of hostility and violence. In the early years of the Reformation, Catholics and Protestants went to war against each other and treated each other viciously in Europe, for example. And in the nineteenth century many Protestants thought Catholics could never be good Americans because they owed allegiance to a foreign ruler, the Pope, and because they thought the

nature of the Catholic faith was incompatible with democracy itself—a fear that lingered in some circles all the way down to the election of our first Roman Catholic President, John F. Kennedy, in 1960.

Now so many of those fears look overblown and foolish in retrospect, and the violence they caused was tragic. Protestants, Catholics, and Jews have all become a vibrant part of American democracy, and there are lots of reasons to believe that the Muslim experience in America will turn out that way too. In fact, millions of Muslims in America are already contributing to our society in valuable ways, and they will continue to do that, as long as they are treated with respect and find the same opportunities and incentives to enjoy and promote the blessings of our nation that all sorts of other religious groups have found here.

There's a story in the gospel about a storm that blows up and threatens the boat that Jesus and his disciples are sailing in. The disciples are terrified, but Jesus calms the storm, and then he asks, "Why are you afraid? Do you still have so little faith?" It's a question we ought to be asking ourselves today, whenever the storms of life rage all around us.

Why are we so afraid? Do we have so little faith in God? If we believe that Jesus Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, shouldn't we trust him, and shouldn't we be about the work he calls us to share, where God is in Christ reconciling the world to himself? If we really do believe that, what do we fundamentally have to fear? God calls us to the work of loving our neighbors—all of our neighbors—and the Bible itself tells us that perfect love casts out fear.

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