

## Is a Closed View of Islam a Characteristic of a Closed Heart?

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One of the characteristics of Islamophobia is a so-called *closed view of Islam*. This means that Islam is seen as monolithic and static rather than diverse and dynamic. People with closed views of Islam are insensitive to the differences and variations within Islam. This often results in fear, prejudice, and often stereotyping. A closed view of Islam makes fundamentalist Muslims representative of the whole of Islam. On the other hand, an *open view of Islam* emphasizes the differences among Muslims. Someone with an open view of Islam relates to Muslims as people and individuals, as communities, and how Islam is practiced in daily life, rather than simply learning about ideal Islam. Those with an open view of Islam seek to study Islam seriously and sympathetically, and try to understand Islam at its best. A person who has an open view of Islam wants to read what Muslims say and write about their own faith.

I often meet Christians or read books written by Christians that express a closed view of Islam. This particularly comes out in the absence of an adjective, e.g., saying or writing that “*Muslims* are not willing to abstain from violence,” or “*Muslims* are unwilling to integrate,” or “*Muslims* totally refuse to be self-critical,” etc. In such expressions, I miss an adjective, such as ‘some,’ ‘a minority of,’ ‘a majority of,’ ‘many,’ ‘most,’ or ‘few.’ It makes a huge difference when we say: “*Some Muslims* use violence to impose their point of view,” “*A certain percentage of Muslims* interpret the Qu’ran in such a way that they believe they can marry four women,” “*A few Muslims* believe they cannot be friends with Christians,” “*Most Muslims* would be offended when Muhammad is insulted,” or “*Several Muslims* interpret Jihad as a psychological war.” Without an adjective our speaking or writing about Muslims comes close to stereotyping, which is a wrong way of dealing with people.

This predominantly closed view of Islam that dominates many discussions about Islam

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in Europe after the Paris attacks, stimulated Naima Ajouaau and four of her Muslim friends to create a Facebook page called *NietmijnIslam* (NotmyIslam). After one week, the page had more than 25.000 likes. In their statement they expressed what kind of Islam they believe in.

Can there be more than one Islam? Do Muslims who join ISIS, Boko Haram, Taliban, or Sharia4Holland believe in a different Islam than our Muslim neighbors, classmates, or colleagues?

Tariq Ali, a British-Pakistani journalist, writes:

I think that in order to understand what Islam is, one has to stop talking about a single Islam as a stereotype. Think of a palette on which painters put all the colors they are going to use –I would suggest that Islam, like Christianity.....has many different colors on its palette.<sup>1</sup>

In its 2012 survey *The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity*, the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life states:

The world's 1.6 billion Muslims are united in their belief in God and the Prophet Muhammad and are bound together by such religious practices as fasting during the holy month of Ramadan and almsgiving to assist people in need. But they have widely differing views about many other aspects of their faith, including how important religion is to their lives, who counts as a Muslim and what practices are acceptable in Islam.

I heard Christians and others say that the terrorist attacks by Muslim extremists, show the real Islam, the Islam of the Qu'ran, and of Muhammad himself. As an outsider, I don't want to presume that I know what real Islam is or who the true Muslim is.

I agree with missiologist Johan Bavinck who said: "I am never in contact with Islam, but with a Muslim and his Mohammedanism..."

Dr. Peter Mandaville, professor of international affairs and director of the Ali Vural Ak Center for Global Islamic Studies at George Mason University, near Washington DC, writes:

Although the classical texts are important, we learn very little about Islam as a lived experience by going straight to the books; we learn a great deal, however, if we go to the texts through the people who read them. My plea is for less concentration on Islam per se, and more on Muslims who, on a daily basis, negotiate the complex, ambiguous circumstances of their lives through Islam.<sup>2</sup>

When we follow his suggestions and begin to listen to Muslims, we learn that there are a variety of ways of being Muslim in Europe. There are *angry Muslims*, who renounce

modern society and want to return to the golden age of Muhammad and his followers. Europe also is home to *converted Muslims*, people who at a certain point in their lives voluntarily have decided to become Muslims. We also find *exMuslims*, who have renounced their Islamic faith, sometimes converting to something else, or becoming atheist or agnostic. Across Europe, we come across *cool Muslims*, who combine Islamic religious values with Western youth culture. We learn about *critical Muslims*, who are skeptical of received ideas, promote critical thought, embracing humanism and pluralism. In Europe there are thousands of *folk Muslims* who hold on to old traditions and practices. We read and hear of *fundamentalist Muslims*, revivalists, puritans. Among them we find those who are missionaries, or pietists or political islamists, who seek to restore Islam through politics. Others want to be known as *liberal Muslims*, who strive for freedom of thought, democracy, and a liberal interpretation of the Qur'an. *Mystical Muslims* represent the inward-looking, mystical dimension of Islam. *Progressive Muslims*, sometimes referred to as modernist Muslims, reject conservative interpretations of the Qur'an and Sunnah, and they reject Jihadism; they believe in the separation of church and state, and gender equality. *Reformist Muslims* seek to reform Islamic theology, Islamic law and Islamic practice. *Secular Muslims*, sometimes referred to as Mino's (Muslims in Name Only) might constitute the biggest group of Muslims in Europe:

Persons of Muslim origin living in Europe do not all practice their faith with anything like the same level of intensity. Some people of Muslim origin have opted to follow the path of agnosticism or religious indifference. Others continue to be Muslim in a cultural sense, while paying little if any attention to associated religious beliefs. These are considered as a sort of lay Muslim population. There are no studies of any depth on the matter, but on the basis of a partial examination of the subject it appears that approximately two-thirds of the Muslim population falls into one of these two categories (non-practicing or agnostic, etc.) of Muslim self-identification. Only about a third . . . has so to speak made there self-reference to the Islamic faith active.<sup>3</sup>

Those that have a closed view of Islam seem to miss all the different expressions of Islam that are seen in Europe. Are their eyes blurred by the dark side of terrorism carried out in name of Islam? A well-known expression is: "Love is blind." But, I want to argue that a lack of love can also make one blind. I am reminded of what John Chrysostom, an Early Church Father, Archbishop of Constantinople, said: "People who love interpret the facts about the one they love much more accurately than those who do not love. Because our eyes have seen badly we have

only noticed the darker aspects.”

As Christians we are not called to love Islam, but we are called to love Muslims. When we develop an open view of Islam and begin to see Islam, through the words and deeds of our Muslim friends, we learn of their struggles, their pain, their traumas, their hopes and aspirations. And, if we listen carefully, we will also often notice a genuine desire to have an intimate relationship with God. This is a desire we recognize and can identify with. Perhaps God has called you to help your Muslim friend become reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. But before his or her heart becomes open for such an intimate relationship with our Holy and Loving Father, it might be necessary that you grow into an open view of Islam and an open heart for your Muslim neighbors.

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<sup>1</sup> Tariq Ali, “Why are we so obsessed by Islam?” In *Islam and Europe—Challenges and Opportunities*, edited by Marie-Claire Foblets (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2008), 164.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Mandaville, *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma* (London: Routledge, 2000), preface, xii.

<sup>3</sup> F. Dassetto, S. Ferrari, and B. Marechal, *Islam in the European Union: What’s at stake in the future?* (Strasbourg: European Parliament, 2007), 6-7.