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Muslims suffering from identity crisis

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OPINION*"And if thy Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind one people"**Qur'an 11: 118*

It was roundly denounced. The e-mail sent out by a local mosque equating those who wish their Christian friends a Merry Christmas to those indulging in such acts as wine drinking and murder drew immediate fire from the Muslim community. And rightfully so. Such a diatribe has no place in Islam. It was later withdrawn, but by then the e-mail had hurt the already bruised and battered community.

The episode is revealing. First, it points to an intellectual and identity crisis among Muslims that leads some not only to reduce Islam to a religion of mere rites and rituals, but also to ghettoize Islam through a simplistic and warped interpretation of its tenets.

Yet it also makes a stronger case that such Islamists and the Islamophobes are in the same boat, morally and intellectually. It would be worthwhile for Muslims to try to reclaim their cultural heritage from both these extremes. But there's not much point to rebuilding the Muslim world unless it is an enlightened version.

Most Muslims are simply struggling to live a religious life, as they see it, in a world that seems increasingly inimical to their faith.

Many conscious Muslims, however, are trying to reach out beyond their own community for the common good of all. Our attempt to set a common agenda for Muslims and non-Muslims is not meant to suggest that "there will be no peace among nations unless there is peace among religions," or that "wars in the name of religion are wars against religions." The challenge before us is to confront the issues and challenges of our times together.

Those who committed themselves to dialogue saw the beginning of a new understanding based on a reciprocal willingness to listen. They also became aware of the requirement of being willing to question one's own self-understanding and being open to understanding others on their own terms.

A number of churches have taken the initiative of promoting the knowledge of Islam and Muslims. Similar efforts have recently been undertaken in some Muslim institutions. These have not developed without difficulties. Some of these arise from the limits and ambiguities involved in educating each other about Christianity/Islam in a way that speaks to the other side and does justice to the plurality of ideas and approaches within the two communities.

Christians who know Islam and Muslims who know Christianity, through scholarship and dialogue, need to enlarge the sphere of this understanding.

Today, the assumption that we live in an increasingly secularized world is not universally accepted. Many scholars believe that today's world, with some exceptions, is as religious as it ever was and in some places more so.

In the Muslim world, the West is often represented as selfish, materialistic and hegemonic. In the West, Islam is regularly portrayed as irrational, fanatical and expansionist. In the age of global communication and migration, these ideologies, in the variety of their subtle and not-so-subtle expressions, foster antagonism rather than promoting mutual understanding.

In seeking greater understanding, Muslims and Christians learn that these faiths are not two monolithic blocks confronting each other. In dialogue with each other, they understand justice to be a universal value grounded in their faiths and are called upon to take sides with the oppressed and marginalized, irrespective of their religious identity. Muslims and Christians uphold their own religious ideals when they take a common stand in solidarity with, or in defence of, victims of oppression and exclusion.

When people hold traditional religious education responsible for spreading a culture of hatred, they fail to see it's not the traditional religious values that lead people to violence, but the loss of it.

The real debate is not going to be between belief and secularism. The conflict now is between cynicism and hope. The principal vocation of religious communities in the public sphere is not to bring their dogma, but to bring the one thing you must have if you're going to change your neighborhood, your city, your nation, or your world — the dynamics of empowerment, promise and hope.

What we all must be striving for, whether religious or secular, is the compassion our Abrahamic religions teach us and that Canadians prize so highly.

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