

Beyond Tolerance: Lessons on Religious Tension from Nigeria
Oludamini Ogunnaike

I usually smile when life in America reminds me of Nigeria. Even the recent heat wave made me fondly nostalgic for my childhood home, but the recent wave of hate sweeping the country is also reminding me of Nigeria, and I'm scared.

My uncle has a panic room. He is the pastor of a church in Muslim-majority Northern Nigeria, and from time to time, religious-ethnic tensions boil over into violence, and he and his family retreat into their panic room for safety. And with American anti-Muslim sentiment stronger now than it was in the fall of 2001, many American Muslims have been retreating from the public sphere into anonymity, silence, and fear. Many public celebrations of 'Eid al-Fitr, the holiday marking the end of Ramadan, have been canceled this year, and many thousands of American Muslims walk the streets in fear, not just of being profiled by their government, but of being attacked by their fellow citizens.

And with good reason. In Nigeria, you can usually tell when religious violence is about to erupt. First come the wild accusations and conspiracy theories spread by e-mail, text message, and word-of-mouth (“Christians are luring Muslim women into church and raping them” or “Muslims captured a church bus and beheaded everyone inside”). Next follow acts of symbolic provocation and desecration (burning a church, cursing a religious leader). Finally the spark of violence comes, setting off a bloody cycle of retribution.

I have seen a similar cycle on this side of the Atlantic in the irresponsible and absurd “terror baby” and “terrorist training camp” conspiracy theories thrown around by right-wing politicians and demagogues. I have seen it in the hate-fueled protests outside of mosques from Manhattan to Murfreesboro, the desecration of mosques in California and the “Burn the Koran Day” stunt in Florida. And tragically, I have seen it in the “random” acts of violence, such as the stabbing of a Muslim cab driver in New York City.

But this cycle of paranoia, provocation, and persecution is not random at all. Americans now feel comfortable and are even applauded for saying things about Islam and Muslims that would be unconscionable about any other group in this day and age. From the *New York Times* to Fox News, Western media seems to see Muslims on a continuum from “westernized” nominal Muslims, to non-threatening “moderate” Muslims who still pray and avoid beer and pork chops but are more concerned with their family lives than the global jihad, to scary “radical” or “extremist” Muslims who are plotting to blow themselves up until they destroy the civilized world and replace it with a medieval theocracy ruled by draconian laws. In this view, “radical” Muslims take their Islam too far, “moderate” Muslims are somewhere between assimilation and planning the West's annihilation, and “westernized” Muslims are “ordinary” people who just happen to have Arabic last names.

Not only is this continuum false, but it is a pernicious assumption that prevents people from understanding how the majority of American Muslims can be deeply committed to both their faith and the United States of America. Even worse, it portrays the beliefs and practices of a violent fringe element as the most “real,” “fundamental” or “non-Western” form of Islam, when in fact the popularity of these ideologies owes much to the influence of Western scientific rationalism.

The reasons for the popularity of this false continuum are manifold, but two stand out as particularly important to consider. First, in the Muslim world, Islam is such a strong and ubiquitous cultural force that it pervades everything from soccer celebrations to graffiti to political rhetoric. If you want to do anything on a large scale in the Muslim world, you need to appeal to Islam, much as in 19th-century America, people sought Biblical justification for both slavery and its emancipation. So the leaders of violent, exclusivist groups in the Muslim world look to the Qur’an for justification because if they didn’t, no one would listen to them.

This is not a uniquely Islamic issue -- Buddhist priests encouraged Japanese kamikaze missions during World War II, Israeli forces draw inspiration from Old Testament accounts of conquest and slaughter, and Christians nearly annihilated the indigenous peoples of the New World purportedly in the name of Christ. If the Muslim world were full of Marxists, then those groups who resort to violent means of addressing political and socio-economic grievances would appeal to Fanon, Mao, and Lenin for justification instead of the Qur’an. So most terrorist organizations, as well as social justice and community service organizations from Morocco to Pakistan tend to be Islamically-inspired and influenced. Bombings and beheadings make better press than cooperative societies and soup kitchens, so many in the West only hear the Qur’an and Shariah law invoked to justify acts of violence, and are unfamiliar with the incredible acts of charity, compassion, and generosity that they inspire and enjoin.

The second reason is that although the Western, non-Muslim world is increasingly plural, its primary response to its diversity is mere “tolerance.” Compared to its (largely Muslim) neighbors in the South and East, Christian Europe has had a very homogeneous ethnic and religious history. Consequently, diversity/difference has been viewed as a problem that must be either eliminated or tolerated. But diversity is much more than a problem; it can be a great source of strength and the impetus for incredible creativity and productivity.

You tolerate a toothache or a stone in your shoe, but we should treasure and take pride in our nation's religious diversity. Minorities preserve our freedoms by preventing majority tendencies from becoming law, and religious minorities in particular help safeguard that most elusive and precious of freedoms without which all other freedoms would be meaningless: the freedom of thought. Muslims and other religious minorities present the West with different ways of understanding and coming to terms with life's most important questions. And in fields as diverse as music and microbiology, fashion and physics, the confrontation of and conversation between different perspectives inevitably leads to new developments and understandings.

Mere tolerance, on the other hand, easily gives way to discomfort and mistrust, which can quickly slip into hatred. We need to cultivate the appreciation of our nation's differences and diversity. We would all do well to contemplate the hadith: "In the divergence of opinion, there is a mercy for my community."

In conclusion, if we want to keep America's religious tensions from erupting as they have in Nigeria, we need to move beyond mere tolerance and begin valuing and reaping the benefits of our nation's diverse religious landscape. We also cannot take a peaceful civil society for granted. We need to fight for peace by having civil conversations with people who disagree with us and by learning about one another's faiths, not to prove our own superiority, but to learn about and from each other. And most urgently, we need to resist the cheap demagoguery that seeks to generate and mine religious tension for short-term political advantage.

There are those who would seek to blow up our plural civil structure in the hopes that the explosion would toss them on top of the rubble. In this way, terrorists who claim to be Muslim and the politicians who see them behind every corner have much in common. This country's radical religious right is right: the greatest threat to America does lie within its borders, but it's not sleeper cells or "radical mosques"; it is home-grown ignorance and mere tolerance that prevents us from knowing and appreciating one another both for what unites us and for what divides us.

And to all those well-meaning Americans who have been deceived into thinking that protesting outside of mosques is a productive use of their time, I can only quote one of this century's greatest American Muslims, "You've been had. You've been took. You've been hoodwinked, led astray, run amok."

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A dual citizen of Nigeria and The United States, Ogunnaike has traveled widely in the Middle East and has studied in Morocco and Jordan. He has written for The Harvard Crimson and REMIX Magazine and lectured at Harvard, Howard University, and Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria. In college and since, he has been an activist around a host of issues, including HIV/AIDS, the Darfur crisis, American prison reform, and domestic human rights violations. He currently serves as an adviser on issues of diversity at Harvard College.

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