

Signs of the Times: Islam and the West

by Michael Calabria, OFM | February 3, 2016 |



Men praying during Ramadan at the Shrine of Hazrat Ali or “Blue Mosque” in Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia)

The essay below is the fourth in a series of “Franciscan Response” reflections by friars and partners-in-ministry about issues facing our culture. The series is part of Holy Name Province’s response to the call to revitalize Franciscan life and ministry in the United States — a key objective of the leaders of the American OFM provinces, who are evaluating ways to reconfigure Franciscan life in the U.S.

These essays are meant to provide social analysis as part of the many considerations involved with creating a preferred future for the Franciscans of the United States. It is hoped that this initiative generates dialogue among friars; all friars are encouraged to provide comments about the content of this and all essays in this series. These essays do not represent the official policy of Holy Name Province.

Since its advent in the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century, Islam has become a truly global faith. With an estimated 1.6 billion Muslims around the world — roughly 23 percent of the world’s population — Islam is the world’s second-largest religious tradition after Christianity.

Muslims have been a part of American society for well over a century. They were among the African slaves brought forcibly to the United States, and then among the many different immigrants who came in the late 19th and early 20th century seeking freedom from injustice, gainful employment and a better life. They worked in the textile mills of the Northeast, owned and operated businesses, and farmed the land in the Great Plains. Today, several millions of American Muslims, both native-born and naturalized, continue to be part of the rich fabric of American cultural and religious diversity, as well as active participants in every profession and walk of life.

For some people, this religious and cultural pluralism is an expression of the beautiful diversity created by God, a sentiment echoed in the Qu’ran: “(God) made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other” (49.13). For others, however, it is seen as a threat to “Western civilization,” and characterized by fanaticism and violence.

Muslims Often Victims

There is no doubt that terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, the “Islamic Caliphate” (ISIS), Boko Haram, and others that *claim* a Muslim identity continue to pose a serious threat to life and liberty, and have seriously damaged attitudes toward Muslims and the Islamic faith. What is often overlooked, however, is that it is Muslims themselves who are most often the victims of terrorism. Muslim scholars, activists, political leaders, and clergy from 100 countries have condemned such violence, yet this often goes unreported by American media, according to *The Bridge Initiative*, published by the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University.

Faithful, law-abiding Muslims suffer not only the effects of violence and unrest in Africa and Asia, but also the effects of prejudice and discrimination here in the United States. Sadly, “Islamophobia” has been added to the list of other “phobias” plaguing our society and world. *The Bridge Initiative*’s website contains FBI statistics on hate crimes perpetrated against American Muslims.

Franciscans Exhibit Reverential Presence

Particularly since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church and Franciscan Order have worked to correct age-old sectarian tensions. *Nostra Aetate* (1965) articulated the common Abrahamic roots of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and the noted common beliefs and devotions. Franciscans point to the historic encounter between Francis and the Egyptian Sultan during the Fifth Crusade as a model for respectful and peaceful engagement with Muslims. We look to Francis’ words “not to engage in arguments or disputes but to be subject to every human creature for God’s sake” (*Regula Non Bullata*, Ch. 16). Moreover, the *General Constitutions* exhort friars to exhibit a “*reverential presence*” among believers of other religions (95.2).

Given the tragic reality of sectarian violence in our world today, it is tempting simply to blame Islam and its adherents. To do this, however, is to overlook the complexity of geo-politics and the various underlying causes of sectarian violence, and thus unwittingly perpetuate discrimination, prejudices and worse. Moreover, it perpetuates a great injustice against the vast majority of Muslims in the world and in our country who aspire to lives of true faith, freedom and lasting peace.



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