

Muslim stereotype broken

Dr Carool Kersten, King's College London, suggests a narrow focus on political Islamist extremism misrepresents the religion. Contemporary Muslim thought is not preoccupied with "being Muslim" but includes new approaches to questions such as climate change, advances in medicine and universal human rights.

The attention paid to Islam tends to concentrate on radicalisation and politically motivated violence by Muslims. Unsurprisingly, this breeds unease among non-Muslims, feeding into the spread of Islamophobia.

Without denying the real security concerns about religious intolerance and violence, such a singular focus on political Islamist extremism gravely misrepresents what this religion stands for among most of its adherents. It also misses out on counter-narratives developed by Muslims who resist and reject narrow understandings of Islam by Muslims and non-Muslims.

My book, *Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World*, presents a survey of the varying ways in which Muslims engage with their religion. This also extends to ensuring Islam's relevance in dealing with questions facing all humanity in the 21st century, including globalisation, ecological issues, such as climate change and sustainability, and ethical concerns related to advances in medicine and biotechnology.

Based on my years researching and teaching about Islam, and with the benefit of my experiences in different parts of the Muslim world, I want to make two main points:

- I must caution against the cavalier use and conflation of terms such as Islamism, jihadism and Wahhabism. We should also avoid loaded and ambiguous designations, such as radical, liberal or moderate Islam. Instead, I propose the alternative descriptions of traditional, reactionary and progressive. These characterisations apply to ideas, not to individuals: humans cannot be pigeonholed that easily. That said, the vast majority of Muslims would identify with traditional strands of thought, subscribing to socially conservative views. While reactionary and progressive positions can be considered as outliers, they also represent bolder sets of ideas.
- *Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World* was chosen as the main title to stress that Muslims are not constantly preoccupied with "being Muslim" and concerned only with religious issues in a conventional or narrow sense of the word. This means that in addition to obvious topics, such as modern-day interpretations of the Koran as the main sacred scripture, or the spiritual dimensions of Islam, the book also addresses new approaches to politics and law. Instead of conflating state and religion, Muslims are exploring secularity and experiment with democracy while retaining some sort of "Islamic referent". Sharia is being used as a moral compass rather than just a set of what you should and should not do.

Such reflections create new opportunities for more progressive positions towards issues such as universal human rights, the role of women and LGBTIQI rights. Indeed, cases are being made not just for the equality of men and women by challenging patriarchy, but also for the acceptance of other sexual orientations by using arguments derived from traditional Islamic sources -- for example by a new reading of the Qur'anic story on the Biblical figure of Lot.

Muslims find themselves exploring uncharted territory concerning questions emerging in our increasingly interconnected 21st-century world.

There is more assertiveness towards globalisation, instead of uncritically adapting to the free-market economics driven by Western corporatism and liberal democracies.

Similarly, but more positively, in the face of steady advances in the biosciences, Muslim ethicists and legal scholars are calling for constructive engagement with developments in the field of reproductive techniques, including IVF, cloning and stem cell research; genetically modified food; and issues in medicine and ethics, such as reassignment surgery for transgender people. On these issues, in particular Shi'i jurisprudence is particularly innovative and tolerant.

The sometimes surprisingly open-minded views to these current topics are probably the most compelling examples of progressive Muslim thinking flying in the face of narrow representations of Islam. Instead it is proposed to understand Islam not merely as a religion, but as a civilization, and borrow from advances made in the humanities and social sciences in Western academia. More attention for these intellectual counter-currents can contribute substantially to challenging and breaking down stereotypical depictions of Muslims and their religion.

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