

Do All Muslims Want to Kill Us?

People in the West are very curious about the differences among Muslims. They see that some Muslims join radical groups and attack innocent people but others live quiet lives as business owners in the West. They find it hard to imagine that their nice Muslim neighbors or co-workers believe all the teachings of the Quran and support Muhammad's practice of jihad.

There are between 6 million and 8 million Muslims living in the United States. Most of these are immigrants from Middle Eastern countries. The next largest Muslim group is black American converts. The smallest group is white American converts.

Outside the United States, there are 1.2 billion more Muslims. From my observations and experience—both in the United States and other countries—Muslims can be divided into three main groups.

Ordinary Muslims. Ordinary Muslims practice some of the teachings of Islam, but they don't want to do anything difficult, such as participate in jihad. They are more interested in having nice lives, providing for their children and running their businesses. They are Muslims because of their culture and tradition rather than because of strong religious beliefs.

Most of the Muslims in the United States are ordinary Muslims. Some even send their children to Christian schools. Even in the Middle East there are more ordinary Muslims than committed Muslims. It would take time and motivation to turn ordinary Muslims into committed Muslims.

From the point of view of a committed Muslim, this group

should be referred to as secular Muslims because they are not submitting wholly to Islam.

Committed Muslims. Committed Muslims are those who make great efforts to live according to Islam. They pray five times a day, give alms and fast during Ramadan. A committed Muslim may not be in a radical group such as Hamas, but he could choose to cross that line any time he thinks his religion or people are being threatened.

Orthodox Muslims. A subset of committed Muslims, orthodox Muslims want to follow the requirements of Islam in the same way Muhammad did in the seventh century. They spend much time reading the Quran and Islamic books. Following the Quran and Hadith, they may put severe restrictions on women. In Islamic countries, orthodox Muslims may choose to grow out their beards, but in the West they may not look different from other Muslims.

Sufites. This is the first sect in Islam that tried to change the meaning of jihad from “spreading Islam with the sword” to “a spiritual struggle to fight evil within oneself.” Sufism started six centuries after Muhammad’s death. Only 2 percent to 3 percent of Muslims worldwide are Sufites.

Orthodox Muslims and fanatic Muslims reject them and do not consider them to be true Muslims.

Fanatic Muslims. Fanatic Muslims are committed Muslims who put their words into action. They are the types of people who join groups such as Hamas or work with al-Qaida. They are ready to practice jihad (to kill or be killed in the name of Islam).

How do you know who’s who? After the September 11 attacks, you could identify the different types of Muslims according to their reactions. The ordinary Muslims were pretty quiet. In the United States, they were even hanging American flags on their houses and showing support for the United States.

The committed Muslims in the Middle East were demonstrating in the streets in support of al-Qaida.

The fanatic Muslims were thrilled with the victory and were initiating new attacks, such as the kidnapping and murder of journalist Daniel Pearl and other attacks that are still continuing.

Another way to differentiate one group from another is to discern their attitudes toward the state of Israel and the Jewish people. The ordinary Muslim has negative feelings toward Jews because of both his culture and his religion. He would never receive a Jewish person in his house, trust a Jew in business or think of being friends with a Jewish person. Ordinary Muslims truly believe that Jews are evil people who should be avoided.

This was demonstrated by a Gallup poll taken in nine Muslim countries during December 2001 and January 2002. Almost 10,000 personal interviews were conducted. One question was about the identities of the hijackers.

Although U.S. officials say all 19 of the September 11 hijackers were Arab men, only 18 percent of those polled in six Islamic countries say they believe Arabs carried out the attacks; 61 percent say Arabs were not responsible; and 21 percent say they don't know.

If these people do not think Arabs were responsible, then who do they think did it? One persistent rumor is that Jews were somehow behind it all. The rumor said that 4,000 Jewish workers at the World Trade Center called in sick on September 11 because they had been warned in advance of the attack.

A committed Muslim holds all these same prejudices against Jews. He also understands his religious beliefs in a deeper way and therefore knows the teachings in the Quran against the Jews.

The fanatic Muslim justifies many of his actions based on the fact that the Jewish state exists. He blames his terrorist activity on the Jews. He makes Jews his target. In the videotaped murder of journalist Daniel Pearl, his killers forced him to begin with a brief, factually correct description of his roots: "My father's Jewish. My mother's Jewish. I'm Jewish."

Clearly, not all Muslims have the same level of knowledge and commitment. Some ordinary Muslims may not even know the reason for the antagonism between Muslims and Jews. They have a general idea that Jews persecuted Muhammad and wanted to destroy his revelation, but they don't know the details. Committed and fanatic Muslims, on the other hand, know these stories and use them to shape their beliefs.

Knowing something about the different groups will stand you in good stead when your friends, neighbors, co-workers and acquaintances who are Muslims express their opinions or discuss the teachings of Islam with you. On first consideration, some of these teachings seem more like Christianity than Islam, and Westerners who hear or read erroneous explanations of them may tend to unwittingly propagate the misconceptions. But the two faiths couldn't be more opposite. Remembering that truth will help you to avoid any confusion that might develop when the subject of Islam comes up.

Mark A. Gabriel, Ph.D., is an authority on Muslim life and faith. Born into a Muslim family in Egypt and educated in Muslim schools, he earned a doctorate in Islamic history and culture from Al-Azhar University, the source of spiritual authority for the Islamic world. His book is *Islam and the Jews* (Charisma House), from which this article is adapted and was originally published in 2003.