

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# Finding a common theme amid diversity

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If you have the stereotype image of what it is to be a Muslim, then attend one of the annual conventions of the Islamic Society of North America, as I had the privilege of doing this past Labor Day weekend in Detroit. If you have only met a few Muslims, then you will appreciate the 10 Jewish and Christian seminary students with whom I had the opportunity to work, as we were exposed to the diversity of the thousands who attended the ISNA convention.

We met Muslims from India, Pakistan, Africa, Turkey, Canada, Great Britain and the Middle East. We heard from doctors, lawyers, professors, social workers, teachers, poets, film directors, rappers, students, Boy Scouts and highly successful



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business people. We heard multiple calls for working together for peace, as well as concerns about the growing Islamophobia that seeks to paint all Muslims in a negative light.

Shouldn't we be supporting and celebrating the vast majority who are patriotic, God-loving and peacemaking, as well as responsible and productive members of our society?

If your image of Muslim society is that it is degrading to women, you should have heard the speakers, at least half of whom were women, and the vast majority of the session moderators who were strong, articulate women. This is not to deny that worldwide there are many places where women do not have equal

rights and are in fact degraded and daily face violence.

Former President Jimmy Carter, the keynote speaker, pointed out this problem of violence against women is a global issue and exists in all countries, including the West, where thousands of women and girls are sold each year as sex slaves. Just in the city of Atlanta, between 200 and 300 children are sold each month, said Carter, author of the just published book, "A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence and Power." He also called for religious leaders of all faith traditions to speak out on these issues.

While attending the various sessions, it became clear this convention was in many ways very similar to Christian gatherings I have attended over the years. While the racial composition and clothing styles were much more diverse, the themes

echoed what I have often heard in my own community — concerns for justice, love, hope and coming closer to God.

Another convention theme similar to my own religious understanding, as well as to every other religious tradition I know, was the commitment to service. In Judaism, the term is "tikkun olam," usually translated as "repairing or healing the world." For Hindus, the concept is "seva" or selfless service. For Muslims, the concept of service is called "khidmah," and it was a major emphasis at the convention.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, instead of stereotyping others with a negative label, we would look for those concepts where we can agree and even work together in a spirit of service? I believe this is the essence of "loving your neighbor."

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