

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT



Afghan Muslim boys read the Quran, Islam's holy book, at a mosque in Kabul, Afghanistan. A Calvin College professor says religion can incite people to violence, just as it can inspire them to great acts of altruism and humanity. (AP files)

Is Islam a violent religion or is it being hijacked by extremists?

# Ideology vs. religion

By **Frans van Liere**

Professor of History, Calvin College

When teaching about Islam, as a professor of History at Calvin College, I often hear the above question asked by my students.

I always point out religions are not inherently violent or nonviolent. It is people who are violent.

To be sure, religion can incite people to violence, just as it can inspire them to great acts of altruism and humanity. Some religions are centered on a strong imperative to proselytize and make converts, which easily can turn into forcible conversion and violent conquest. This is not unique to Islam.

The spread of Christianity and Islam was marked by periods of military conquest as well as times of peaceful conversion. You cannot just compare violent episodes in the history of Islam with peaceful periods in the history of Christianity.

**Why do we not hear more Muslims protest against terrorism?**

We do hear Muslims protest terrorism. Millions of Muslims from Iraq and Syria are protesting with their feet and fleeing the terrorist regime of ISIS.

Muslim and Jewish leaders stood side by side with France's President Francois Hollande, in their condemnation of the Paris attacks in November.

In 2014, 126 Muslim scholars wrote an open letter to the ruler of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the fighters of the Islamic State, refuting their claim to political and religious authority, and condemning the policies and practices of ISIS, on the basis of the Quran and the Islamic religious tradition.



Van Liere



Protesters in Lebanon march during a 2012 rally denouncing an anti-Islam film that provoked unrest in Muslim countries worldwide. Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, called for protests, saying the U.S. must be held accountable for the film because it was produced in America. Questions about violence and Islam keep popping up. (AP files)

It is important for non-Muslims to take note of these arguments, for they represent the views of the majority of Muslims.

**Then why is it that so many of the terrorist actions in the world are committed by Muslims? Does that not tell us something about Islam?**

Religious terrorism is a recent historical phenomenon. It is the political circumstances in the Near East and Africa that have given birth to the monster we see in ISIS.

There is no denying religion is an important ingredient in the ugly mixture of what is called "Islamic extremism." However, it is important to characterize this set of ideas as an ideology, rather than a religion.

**Where does this ideology come from?**

One answer is the Islamic fundamentalism known as Salafism. Followers of this 18th-century sect grew frustrated with the power the Saudi royal family exerted over the politics of the Middle East in the 20th century, and embraced the idea of violent Jihad.

The ideology also is espoused by Muslims who are disillusioned with the failure of Marxism and pan-Arabic nationalism in the 1960s, second-generation immigrants in Europe (and perhaps the U.S.) who are disappointed with the empty promises of Western materialism, and young Muslims in the Middle East who feel economically disempowered and see Israel as an insult to their pride and resent the U.S. for its support of Israel.

One common element to all these various streams feeding into Islamic extremism is disillusionment, disappointment, alienation, frustration and hatred. It creates an ideology that promises the certainty of a political solution, which will solve all problems listed above.

It offers a clear identity, found in the embrace of fundamentalist Islam. All this translates into a hatred of the de-humanized other, who is deemed "un-Islamic," and therefore does not deserve to live. To identify this poisonous ideology as the true Islam is an offense to Islam.

**How do we prevent this ideology from appealing to disillusioned Muslim youths?**

That is a hard question. But ostracizing the Muslim community is not the answer. Violent extremism forms a major challenge for the Muslim community. Let's not abandon them, but support them in the struggle against it. We do not stand as Christians against Muslims, but as Christians and Muslims against terrorism.