

Differentiate 'Muslim' from 'terrorist' scholars say

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Kashmiri activists belonging to Tehreek-e-Wahdat-e-Islami outfit burn a U.S. flag during a protest against Israeli attacks on Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. Similar images from the Middle East present an unfair characterization of Islam in the minds of Americans, some Muslims in the United States insist. (REUTERS photo by Danish Ismail)

Differentiate 'Muslim' from 'terrorist' scholars say

By Ken Camp

Managing Editor

DALLAS—Flag-burning radical Muslims represent mainstream American

Islam about as accurately as cross-burning Ku Klux Klansmen represent Baptists, a Texas Baptist theology professor believes.

“Most American Muslims are not sympathetic to radical Islam, and they are not interested in being identified with the extremists. They just want to be able to do their jobs, raise their children and be good neighbors,” said [Ron Smith](#), senior professor of theology at Hardin-Simmons University’s [Logsdon School of Theology](#).

“The assumption among many seems to be that radical Islam is characteristic of Muslims as a whole. As Baptists, we would not be happy to be characterized as being associated with the [Ku Klux Klan](#), but there was a time in the South when most members of the Klan probably were identified as Baptists. Let’s not make the same mistake and paint with broad brushes when it comes to Muslims.”

[Chris van Gorder](#), an associate professor in the [Baylor University religion department](#) who wrote his dissertation on Christian/Muslim relations, and is author of [*No God but God: A Path to Muslim-Christian Dialogue on God's Nature*](#), also emphasized the importance of not judging American Muslims by radicals who claim to speak for Islam.



Judging Muslims by the actions of radical fundamentalists is comparable to judging Baptists in the South by the Ku Klux Klan, Hardin-Simmons University Professor Ron Smith says. (1957 File Photo by William Pike/Newhouse News Service)

“It’s true there’s plenty within Islamic fundamentalism and extremism to be alarmed about. It creates a dangerous and hostile situation in our world,” he said “But there’s a world of difference between Islamic extremists and the local Pakistani gas station owner who happens to be Muslim.”

[Imam Yusuf Kavakci](#) of the [Dallas Central Mosque](#) in Richardson stressed American Muslims should not be judged by radicals in the Middle East—nor should more than 1.2 billion followers of Islam be viewed as speaking with one voice.

“We have nothing like a Pope. We don’t have any one spokesman,” he said. “Confusion and misunderstanding comes from people mixing up what happens in the Middle East with what it means to be Muslim. ... Our congregation is mainly Sunni, but we have Shi’a members here. Saddam Hussein said he was Sunni, but we are not that kind of Sunni.”

Islam worldwide has no mechanism for validating any individual or group as legitimately Muslim, Kavakci said.

Consequently, people as widely different as the [Shiite cleric Ayatollah Khomeini](#) of Iran and the Sunni [Saddam Hussein](#) in Iraq—as well as [Hezbollah](#) in Lebanon, which claims to be the “party of God,” and [Osama bin Laden](#) of al-Qaida—can claim to speak for Islam.

Alif Raham, who teaches an outreach class about Islam at the Dallas Central Mosque, stressed neither terrorists nor political figures who cloak themselves in Islam truly represent the faith.

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“People use religion for different political purposes,” he said. “Terrorists act independently of our faith. You cannot equate the whole of our religion with them. They are trying to promote their own cause.”

To equate radical Muslim fundamentalists with mainstream Islam would be like judging all Christians by the Irish Republican Army or by American-bred extremists like [Timothy McVeigh](#), who bombed the Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City, said Al Siddiq, president of the Islamic Community of Waco.

“There is no doubt in my mind [Islam](#) is a religion of peace,” he said.

A recent declaration against terrorism and religious extremism published by the [Islamic Society of North America](#) makes the same point.

“It is unfortunate that both extremists and detractors of Islam who distort the meaning of jihad propagate a false concept of jihad through expressions such as ‘jihadists,’ ‘Islamic terrorism’ or references by terrorists to jihad. Such stereotyping and the use of terms such as ‘Islamic terrorist’ are as unfair as referring to Timothy McVeigh as a ‘Christian terrorist’ or claiming that abortion clinic bombers committed acts of ‘Christian terrorism,’” the statement said.

The Islamic Society’s declaration stresses terrorists act contrary to the teachings of Islam—including its teachings about jihad.

“Jihad is not to be equated with terrorism,” the declaration states, stressing that jihad means “to strive or exert effort.”

But radical fundamentalist Muslims have hijacked the language of jihad and other elements of the Islamic faith for their own purposes, said [Mark Long](#), director of the Middle Eastern studies program at Baylor University.

“Fundamentalists have distorted it and made the religion into something

other than a religion of peace,” he said. “Jihad is the effort to conform one’s life to the will of God. But for fundamentalists, jihad is war conducted on the part of God against unbelief, which would be anything that challenges the supremacy of Allah alone.”

Radicals who use and abuse Islam present a genuine threat, said Long, a former Middle East analyst for the U.S. Air Force.

“We must speak out against the violence of Islamic radicals. We are right to take steps to defend ourselves against radicalism and the radicals who have misappropriated the Islamic faith,” he said.

Long, a Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary graduate who now attends an Episcopal church in Waco, stressed Islam is not inherently a violent religion—any more than Christianity.

“The majority of Muslims make it a religion of peace. They put verses from the Quran into historical context, and they interpret the Quran in context,” he said. “Is Islam a religion of peace? It is what its followers make of it—just like Christianity.”

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