

Right or Wrong? A mosque moving in

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Recently, a new structure went up in our neighborhood-a mosque. Should I fear this development?

Some would say the overall relationship between the world of Islam and the "Christian West" has been one of fear for more than 1,200 years. There have been good reasons for that-from both sides of the relationship. Neither Jihad nor Crusade makes for good neighbors.

Christians in America face some new realities, however. New immigration laws in the 1960s meant a more open-door policy that has brought millions of newcomers to our shores from lands where there has not been a strong Christian presence. Since then, the cultural, ethnic and religious mix of the United States has changed dramatically, now including people from countries with traditional religious backgrounds other than Christianity. This includes many nations from northern Africa around to southern Asia, where Islam is a dominating presence.

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Obviously, since 9/11, many Americans, Britons and others see the Muslim world as reason for heightened fear. Could the neighborhood mosque

provide cover for a militant Islamic sleeper cell? I wish someone could guarantee that such would never be the case. But while most Muslims are peaceful and law-abiding folk, there certainly could be exceptions. Of course, churches also have bred the likes of Richard Butler of the Aryan Nations and Olympics bomber Eric Rudolph. Both of these men would see their infamous projects as expressions of their Christian faith.

Should we be afraid of our Muslim neighbor, though? I don't think so. But let me suggest that we do need to be afraid of some things. We need to fear:

❑ Ignorance. Look at how well the Apostle Paul knew his audiences. Whether with Jews in the synagogues, pagans in the streets or philosophers in debate settings, Paul was able to dialogue in ways that showed his acquaintance with the beliefs of others. Christians can better follow Paul's own model if we take the time to learn even the basics of Islamic faith.

Further, we should fear ignorance of our own faith as well. Specifically, a major point of disagreement between Christianity and Islam has to do with the doctrine of God. Muslims believe the doctrine of the Trinity to be blasphemous nonsense. Christians must be better informed about this central feature of our own faith if we are to engage in meaningful dialogue with a Muslim neighbor. And yet many Christians, while they know the Trinity is basic to our faith, will admit they have little confidence in being able to discuss the doctrine in an informed manner. Pastors must help congregations become better informed concerning the significance of this vital doctrine.

❑ Failure to follow the Golden Rule. Christians appreciate respect for our beliefs from non-Christians; we should provide no less for those whose beliefs differ from our own. While respect does not mean an unwillingness to proclaim truth, it does at least mean we refuse to intimidate, persecute

or express bigotry toward those of other beliefs.

One feature of respect, though, often is missing in our context. I believe it is a sign of disrespect for the beliefs of others to refuse to take differences seriously. To assert that "all religions are ultimately saying the same thing" is to reveal a profound ignorance of world religions. Or it is to strip the different world religions of their concrete beliefs by homogenizing them in light of some ideal of what true religion is all about. Such an effort often only infuriates the Muslim who sees in that strategy a demand for cultural assimilation to Western liberalism.

✖ Cultural assimilation. Quite often, it is virtually impossible to distinguish between the cultural perspectives of Western Christians and the prevailing culture around them. If Christians truly were distinguished by their relationship with and commitment to Christ, perhaps relationships with our Muslim neighbors could be very different.

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Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to btillman@hsutx.edu.

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