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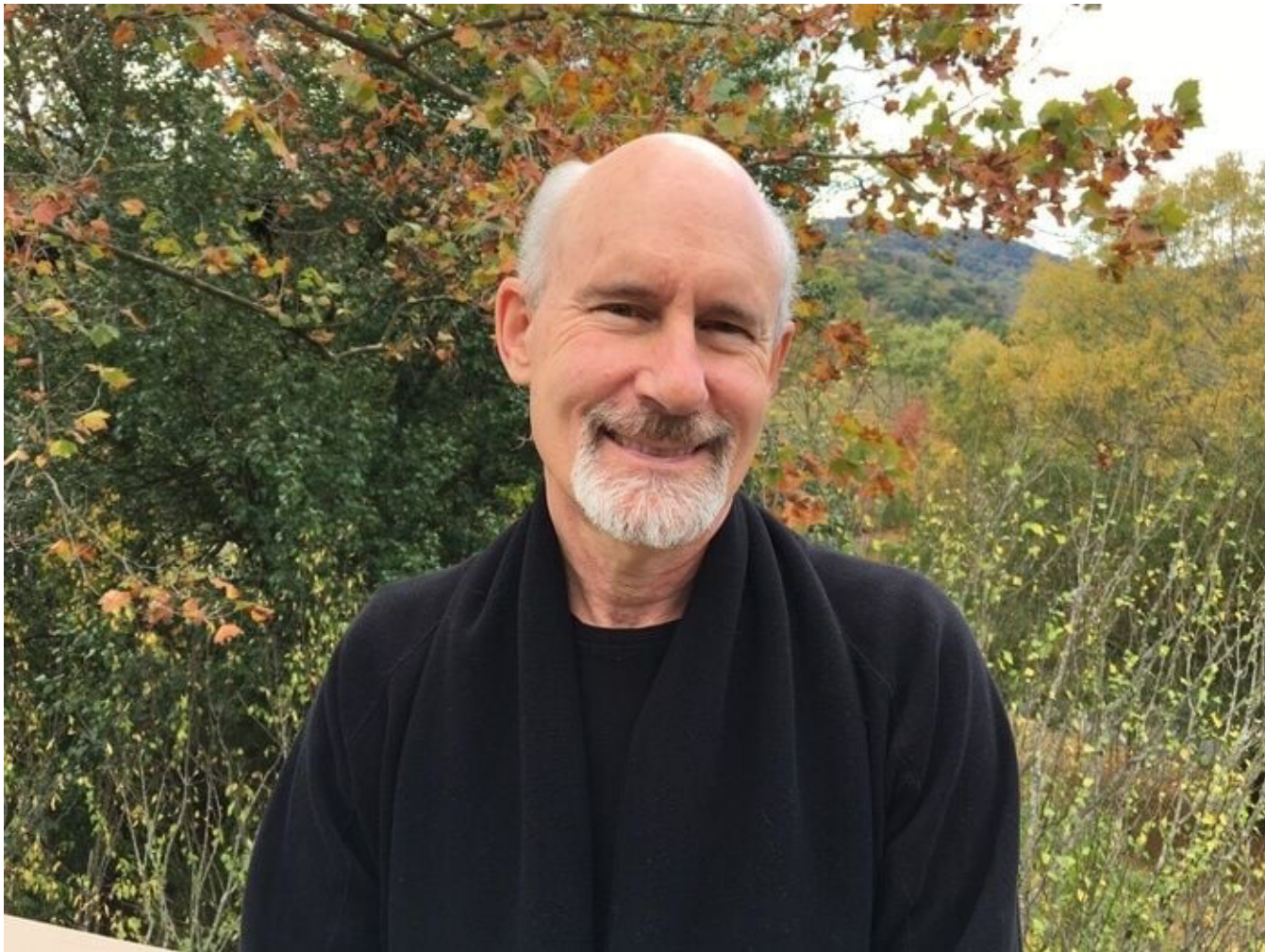
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## Friendly Freethinker: How Should We Treat Our Muslim Neighbors?

By Chris Highland  
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While serving in ministry, I led services and prayed with Muslim men and women. As a chaplain, I brought many Qur'ans inside to prisoners. When I taught courses on World Religions in congregations, we read from a selection of sacred scriptures, including the Qur'an. In my experience, most who follow the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad are just as kind and thoughtful as any other neighbors.

Fear, and fearful faith, can lead to all forms of erroneous beliefs, even bigotry. It's disturbing to see the hatred currently directed toward Islam and Muslim Americans. It is upsetting to read that an Islamic school in Birmingham, Alabama, known for excellence in education, is unwelcome by many in the community. Apparently some believe a "true American" has to be a Christian. A disturbing number of politicians make wild claims, repeating falsehoods from viral media, pushing to deny basic rights or even claiming "They shouldn't be here." These elected leaders claim to be good Christians, and are often the same ones who want the Ten Commandments in every classroom, apparently forgetting that one of those commands is: "Thou shall not bear false witness." And what about "Love your neighbor as yourself," or the hardest of all instructions: "Love your enemies"?

If you have never made the effort to meet a Muslim neighbor, never read the Qur'an, or never taken the time to learn about Islam, how can you judge the religion or a follower of this historic faith tradition? As I see it, only fear-driven ignorance would be the reason for that. The best antidote to this irrational rejection is better education. If a person is open to learn about others, and learn from them, there are many opportunities to gain knowledge and perhaps empathy.

Muslims believe the Qur'an was dictated to Muhammad who was told to "recite" the words (Qur'an means "recite"). It's true, the Qur'an contains some passages that harshly judge "disbelievers," and verses that could potentially be used to support violence, though without initiating conflict: "Fight those who fight against you, but do not begin hostilities. Allah does not love aggressors" (sura—"chapter"—2). However, it is critically important to keep in mind: there are far fewer verses on "righteous" conflict in the Qur'an than we find in the Bible. On balance, there are many more instructions on living a peaceful life from the Religion of Peace ("Islam" is related to the word for peace: salam).

We would do well to listen to these words: "Have you observed the one who gives the lie to religion? That's the one who repels the orphan, and does not feed the needy. Woe unto worshippers who don't heed their own prayers, who want to be seen at worship, yet refuse small kindnesses." (sura 107). In one of the last surahs, addressed to non-Muslims, we read: "O disbelievers, I don't worship what you worship [yet] unto you your religion, and unto me my religion" (sura 109).

As for Jews and Christians (called "the People of the Book"), the Qur'an states: "We believe in Allah and that which was revealed to us [and Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Jesus] (sura 2). We can certainly turn to other verses that teach the superiority of Islam, just as similar verses are found in the Bible.

Anyone who takes the time to actually open a Qur'an will discover that nearly every chapter opens with "Bismillah al-Rachman, al-Rachim"—"In the name of Allah (God), the Compassionate, the Merciful." Is this a book from a religion to be feared or excluded from a free society priding itself on Religious Liberty?

We can question and criticize Islam, for the extremists, the treatment of women, and more, and I think we should, but no more than we can criticize Christianity, Judaism or any other faith. Yet, it's not reasonable to challenge any faith until we have accurate information about it. Are we merely judging by the extremists? Do we lump all believers into one neat package and take potshots? How is that fair or honest?

In his revolutionary pamphlet, "Common Sense," Thomas Paine offered a guideline: "For myself, I fully and conscientiously believe, that it is the will of the Almighty, that there should be diversity of religious opinions among us." Though his expansive vision of inclusive religious belief and expression in America and beyond, caused Paine to be branded an atheist and infidel, he believed that more diversity of opinions in religion "affords a larger field for our Christian kindness." He explains: "I look on the various denominations among us, to be like children of the same family."

Our Muslim neighbors are a minority in our great American family. Shouldn't we treat them as we would wish to be treated?

**Chris Highland**

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