

Three aspects of Muslim Diversity in the USA: Islamophobia, Workplace, and LGBT

By Stan Kimer



Expert Forum



Over the past months, I have published a series of three blogs about Muslim (religion is Islam) diversity within the USA. I discuss:

- The current increase of Islamophobia in the USA
- Considerations for Muslims in the workplace
- And because I am a diversity consultant with a deep expertise in LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender), the intersection of Islam with LGBT.

Islamophobia – A Current Growing US Diversity Issue

As a diversity consultant, I strive to stay up to date on current trends and issues in the diversity and inclusion field. One of the tough issues growing within our country is Islamophobia. My definition of Islamophobia is, “an irrational fear or hatred of Muslim people based on unfamiliarity or stereotyping.” FYI, Webster’s Dictionary defines stereotyping as “forming a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion.” Unfortunately, many people are judging the world’s one billion Muslims based on the actions of a very small radical visible few.

As I was starting to write this series, the horrific massacre at the Pulse Bar in Orlando made this resource now even more timely.

Why is Islamophobia or any phobia or fear of a group of people problematic? When we cannot all respect each other and work together within our society, we cannot be as productive as a nation as we can, and at its worst, hate and violence occurs.

I am currently on the board of the [North Carolina Council of Churches](#), which represents 17 denominations and several independent congregations. We work to build respect and understanding across denomination and religion lines to impact our state for the good of all our residents. At our quarterly board meeting in June 2016, we had a guest presenter, Manzoor Cheema from MERI – the [Movement to End Racism and Islamophobia](#).

Manzoor shared several interesting (and some disturbing) information:

- Islam is not a new religion in the United States. Muslims have been present in our country since the 1830s, including Africans brought over in the slave trade (many forced to renounce their religion by their owners)
- Given that a large number of Muslim are “people of color,” racism and islamophobia are connected and intertwined.

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- Myths about Islam, like that it is inherently violent, are widely propagated based on the actions of a very small minority.
- There has been a tripling of the attack rate on mosques and Muslims since Presidential candidate Donald Trump's anti-Muslim statements.
- There is a disproportionate ratio Muslims incarcerated and expelled from school. And this statement is not meant to imply that Muslim commit more crimes, but instead to point out the inherent bias in our justice system.
- Most Muslims do not hate women, Jews, Christians and LGBT people. For example, the MERI organization has partnered with the Jewish Voice for Peace as well as Methodist and Quaker organizations. Manzoor also mentioned addressing discrimination against LGBT people several times during his presentation.

Here are three recommendations:

- Visit a local mosque or attend a Muslim sponsored event.
- Do research on Islam including viewing resources on the [MERI website](#).
- Connect with an actual Muslim person and ask them to tell you about their beliefs instead of listening to what other parties are saying about them.

Workforce Diversity – Islam (Muslims) in the Workplace

With over 2.5 million Muslims now living in the United States, including many who were born in this country, it is very likely that you will have Muslim coworkers, customers, managers and / or employees. So it is important to understand some of the items which may come up in the workplace with this aspect of religious and multicultural diversity.

Here are just three items to consider:

1) The Muslim religious obligation. For the devout Muslim, the most holy time when many Muslims go to their mosque to worship is Friday at noon. Many Muslims would appreciate having an extended lunch hour to attend services. I once had a devout Muslim working for me, and I made sure to never schedule a department meeting around noon on Fridays nor expected him to attend key meetings around the time.

2) Interaction with women. The devout Muslim woman is not allowed to have physical contact except with her husband or close male relative. This may be important to consider when a female Muslim work associate is being introduced to a male. Often our custom is to shake hands when introduced, but this may not be feasible in this case. If you know you are being introduced to a Muslim woman, simply nod your head in acknowledgement and say "very glad to meet you." If you are unaware that the woman is Muslim and she does not extend her hand back to you, please do not be offended. I would hope that the Muslim woman would be

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gracious and say something like “my religion does not permit me to touch a male, but I am very glad to be here and to meet you.”

3) Traditional dress. Wearing a hijab, or headscarf, is for many Muslim women a visible expression of the faith, piety or modesty. There have already been several cases brought to the EEOC (Employment Equal Opportunity Commission) from employers who felt this dress violated corporate dress codes, especially in customer-facing roles, and in most cases, the EEOC sides with the employee. One of the most visible cases was the clothing store Abercrombie and Fitch’s refusal to hire Samantha Elauf, a Muslim, because of her religious practice of wearing a hijab. (See [EEOC press release](#) about this case.)

Here is an [excellent resource available from the EEOC](#) which goes in more depth on some these issues and additional ones.

Overall, these are simple and reasonable “religious accommodations” as with working with other people of faith in the workplace. It makes good business sense to provide a little flexibility and respect to build a workplace climate where everyone feels included, can be themselves, and bring the very best of their talent to the job.

The Intersection of Islam and LGBT

And since I am a diversity consultant conversant in all areas of diversity, but with a deep expertise in LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender), I always like to include a little more information about LGBT issues within various diversity discussions.

Three main points:

1) LGBT people exist within the Muslim religion and culture just as they do in every single country and race on the face of the earth. Though there are still some people who believe sexual orientation is a choice, most medical professionals and now a majority of US citizens believe it is an inherent characteristic that people are born with and that pervades all aspects of humanity.

2) There is a diversity of views within the Islam community about LGBT and how it relates to that religion. In fact, there are many parallels with the issue of LGBT within the Christian faith.

a. There are some Muslims who believe that being LGBT is a grave sin and against the tenets of Islam

b. There are some Muslim LGBT people and allies who believe that the original and pure teaching of Mohammad does not condemn LGBT people but instead

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welcomes and respects all. One such ally is Ani Zonneveld of [Muslims for Progressive Values \(link\)](#)

c. And there are some Muslim LGBT people who believe that Islam at its core is a violent and anti-gay religion that needs to be rejected by LGBT Muslims. One example is self-described “Afghan American ex-Muslim LGBTI Rights activist” Nemat Sadat. [\(Link to his Linked in profile\)](#). See also his Huffington Post article, [“When Will LGBT Equality Reach the Muslim World?”](#)

3) There is a variety of resources and organizations addressing the issue of LGBT tolerance and acceptance in the Muslim community. My own pastor in Kenya (see information on [my community work in Africa](#)) received a grant from the [Arcus Foundation](#) to hold workshops with Muslim clerics on being more LGBT tolerant. In my own state, the North Carolina based [Movement to End Racism and Islamophobia \(link\)](#) includes acceptance of LGBT people in its work. Additional national and global resources and supportive organizations can be found in this [short post from “Islam and Homosexuality.”](#)

In addition, please do read this [excellent and provocative piece](#) reacting to the Orlando massacre by Salma Mirza, a queer-identified Muslim organizer of MERI.

Bottom line, I feel strongly that all kinds of organizations: companies, governments and yes, even religions need to strongly promote acceptance and inclusion of all diverse people and eliminate all forms of hate and ostracism.