

Muslims, Head Coverings and Fantasy Football: Moving Beyond the Stereotype

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In an introduction to interpersonal communication course at a Midwestern university students are assigned a listening project that requires them to learn about themselves and others by selecting a representative of a group whose perspective they would not ordinarily listen to.¹ Two days after the project is assigned the news is dominated by the Boston Marathon bombing where one bomber, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, before his capture leaves a hastily scribbled note stating that an attack against one Muslim is an attack on all. Reports link Tsarnaev to a mosque with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and suggest the attack was payback for American military action in Muslim countries. Deeply disturbed by this incident, Michael, a Christian student in the class, decides to visit the Muslim Student Center on campus and listen to the perspectives of a Muslim student.

Before visiting the Muslim Center, Michael stumbled across an online study discussing current views of American Muslims. The report stated that ten years after 9/11 American Muslims overwhelmingly reject any form of Muslim extremism. However, more than 40% of the general public believes there is a great deal of support for extremism within the Muslim American community. When asked, 56% of American Muslims reply that they desire to embrace American values and participate in American customs, while only 33% of the general public agree that Muslims entering our country want to adopt American values and lifestyle.²

Walking to the Muslim Center Michael decided spontaneously to ask students he passed what they thought of when they heard the word, *Muslim*. He was shocked at the responses. Some of the words people said: *angry, war, hatred, upset, terrorists, Allah, religious, head covering, devout, and 9/11*. While his impromptu survey was hardly scientific, it confirmed key parts of the study he'd read before coming to the center. Michael wonders what words the guy he's going to interview would use to describe Christians?

Michael walks into the Muslim Student Center and is introduced to Amon, an American-born Arab who is a devout Muslim majoring in religious studies and psychology. They grab coffee and settle into two large leather chairs in the lounge. Amon notices Michael's Detroit Lions football cap and congratulates him on his team winning two games this season. Michael laughs and responds that after going winless the previous year two victories is a huge success! Michael asks if Amon likes football, and Amon explains that while his dad grew up playing soccer in Saudi Arabia, he's a huge football fan and is a fantasy football junkie. Michael says

he is too, and soon they are comparing how their fantasy teams and players fared the previous Sunday. After a complete rundown of stats, the interview begins with Michael pulling out a tape recorder and asking the first question.

Michael: On my way over, I asked students to tell me the first word they thought of when they heard the word, *Muslim*. They used words like, *angry*, *war*, *hatred*, *Allah*, *religious*, *terrorist*, *head covering*, *devout*, and *9/11*. As a Muslim, how does that make you feel?

Amon: Well, it saddens me, but I'm not surprised. While not all Arabs are Muslim, many of the same stereotypes would apply to both. At the very least, Arabs and Muslims are seen as angry or unstable people.

Michael: (attempting to make a joke) You did get angry when I said my fantasy team would *crush* yours if we went head-to-head.

Amon: (in a deadpan tone) Hey, don't *ever* mess with my team. My religion, yes, my fantasy team, never.

Michael: Go back to something you just said, that all Arabs are not Muslim. To be honest, I make that assumption all the time.

Amon: That would be like saying all Americans are Christian.

Michael: Seriously, where do you think that impression of Arabs or Muslims comes from?

Amon: It might be helpful to separate the two. Arabs often take a beating in how they are portrayed in films and TV shows. It comes from a million different voices. Movies like *True Lies*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *The Mummy*, *Father of the Bride 2*, and TV shows like *JAG*, *The West Wing*, and *The Agency*, all present Arabs and Muslims in a negative light. In fact, a media scholar named Jack Shaheen—I think that's his name—documented over 900 Hollywood films that portrayed Arabs in an offensive manner. When you see a negative or menacing image of something or someone over and over you can't help but form an impression of it and even grow fearful of it.

Michael: But don't you think we watch those shows, we know they're fiction?

Amon: I hope so. But what about kids who are perhaps less discerning? What happens when an image is placed before them at a young age? Did you ever see Disney's movie, *Aladdin*?

Michael: Of course. I remember my teacher showing it in school.

Amon: Remember the opening song? Don't worry, I won't sing it. It's something about a barbaric place where people cut off parts of your face if they don't like you! People sing it and don't even consider the racist lyrics! They get caught up in the catchy tune and watch Aladdin and Jasmine, two light-skinned heroes, fight off sinister Arabs. When they hear this song and watch the movie it perpetuates an offensive stereotype of Arabs being barbaric and angry. *Look at me in the wrong way and I'll cut off your ear*. So, no, it doesn't surprise me that students responded that Muslims are upset or angry. However, the other words the students used—*war*, *terrorists*, *9/11*—really is scary and deeply discouraging. This view of Arabs as terrorists has even found its way into my favorite comedy, *The Office*.

Michael: (laughing) *The Office* is a riot. I love it. Remember the episode where Dwight unexpectedly punched Michael Scott in the gut and then they fought during their lunch break at Dwight's karate school?

Amon: (laughing with him) Yes, absolutely hilarious. Do you remember the show in which Michael as the boss decides to do diversity training? He has everybody in the office put Post-it notes on their foreheads that have different ethnicities written on them such as Black, Asian, Mexican, Jewish, and so on. They then are to treat each other according to the stereotype; Asians don't care about food and Jews only care about money. At the end of the exercise, Michael says into

the camera: "Nobody was an Arab—that would be too explosive. No pun intended." It's said for laughs, but we all know what he means.

Michael: Look at an Arab in the wrong way, and he'll cut off your ear.

Amon: (pointing to himself) Or, look at *me* in the wrong way and I'll put a bomb in your office.

Michael: You mentioned that having fellow students use words like, *hatred*, *terrorists*, and 9/11 to describe Muslims is scary. Could you elaborate?

Amon: Sure. Every time there is an incident involving a person of Arab ethnicity the entire Arab community holds its collective breath and fears an anti-Islamic backlash. For example, I remember reading somewhere that after the Fort Hood massacre in Texas, a mosque in Dearborn, Michigan, found a disturbing package left on its doorstep. It was a hardbound copy of the Quran which had been defaced with spray paint. Inside was a note that read something like: "Islam is a disease. Muslim immigrants are the virus. Every Muslim should be kicked out of the USA."³ I know that such talk is crazy and should be ignored. When events like Fort Hood or 9/11 happen my community feels a type of double shock—shock at the tragedy itself and shock at the possible retaliation against us by people who view us negatively. Knowing that people have such twisted views of us can also make listening to the news a nerve-racking experience.

Michael: How, so?

Amon: As an Arab living in the States, when you are listening to the news and hear of a shooting or bombing your first thought can be: God, don't let the shooter be a Muslim. Did you know that right after the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City news outlets quickly reported suspicious Middle Eastern individuals had been seen in the area before the bombing? Of course, later we learned that it was Midwestern Caucasians that were responsible.

Michael: I don't mean to offend you, but let me ask you a delicate question.

Amon: Fire away.

Michael: Hasn't Islam kind of earned its reputation of being violent? Doesn't Islam in fact believe in something called a holy war?

Amon: Yes, we do. However, let me say two things about holy war, or as we call it, Jihad. First, not all Muslim theologians agree on what the Quran—our holy book—teaches about this topic. You are a Christian. Not all Christian scholars or pastors agree on every doctrine or passage of the Bible?

Michael: Uh, no. We have plenty of lively and heated disagreements.

Amon: Well, we do, too. It's impossible to boil all of the richness and diversity of Muslim perspectives into one monolithic voice. When it comes to a controversial idea like holy war, you are going to get very different ideas coming from the Muslim community. Second, most Muslims I know believe that when Jihad was started by Muhammad—the leading prophet of Islam—it was done only as a form of self-defense. As I and most of my friends understand the Quran, it teaches that holy war should only be waged in defense of life and property and never to oppress or dominate another. So, six days after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 dozens of leading Islamic scholars issued a statement that said they were grief-stricken at such horrifying events and the murder of innocents could never be justified nor tolerated by true followers of Islam. However, because the idea of Jihad is so controversial, it's all people think of when it comes to Islam.

Michael: My communication professor said that all language simultaneously *reflects*, *selects*, and *deflects*.⁴ If I hear what you are saying, when people talk about Muslims and Islam, all they select is the most violent view of the holy war aspect.

Amon: That's right. In talking about Muslims people reflect the media's representation of us as violent people and then selectively only focus on the so-called violent aspects of Islam such as Jihad.

Michael: What do you think is deflected or neglected by this pervading stereotype of Muslims as being violent or terrorists?

Amon: Wow, a lot. First, to me, Islam is a religion of peace, not war. The Quran teaches that peace is one of the names of Allah and many Muslims end their daily worship with the simple prayer: "O God, you are Peace." Also, when Arabs or Muslims are seen through the limiting lens of oil barons or nomads herding camels, then all the great accomplishments of Arab culture are deflected and glossed over. Few people realize that geometry, algebra, and Arabic numerals are all linked to the medieval Arab world as well as our modern understanding of astronomy. As a fellow believer in God, you may be interested to know that one of the key arguments for God's existence, the cosmological argument, was developed by Islamic theologians and is often used by Christian philosophers to debate atheist thinkers. But all of this is passed over, or deflected when individuals select one aspect of my community such as how we look or dress and ignore the rest.

Michael: (smiling) This is just my opinion, but if you're trying to win people over to the Muslim perspective—particularly teenagers—I wouldn't take credit for helping create Algebra. Just a thought.

Amon (chuckling): I'll bring it up at our next meeting.

Michael: You mentioned that when people just focus on how some Arabs dress, so much else gets glossed over. I found it interesting that some students in my survey, particularly female students, mentioned *head covering* in describing Muslims. Thoughts?

Amon: They were most likely refereeing to a *hijab*—an Islamic covering—that some women choose to wear. The word *hijab* is an Arabic word that literally means *curtain* or *covering* and is not mandated by the Quran. Some women wear them as a sign of modesty and others wear them simply because they like how they look. I have one friend who has over 100 of them and she started wearing them after the attacks of 9/11 as a sign of pride in her culture and religion. I know of another woman who wears miniskirts to school and a *hijab* to the mosque. I have a good friend who is Arab but not particularly religious who wears one made by the fashion designer Yves St. Laurent because she thinks it looks cool.

Michael: That makes me think of a stereotype I have that's become clear during this interview—all Arabs are Muslims or are religious.

Amon: That'd be like saying all Americans are Christians. People tend not to fit into one neat category.

Michael: Why do you think we like to do that, fit people into predictable, neat categories?

Amon: Good question. I think most of us—myself included—like to keep life simple, organized, and predictable. Trying to figure out the world is tough work and we are all looking for shortcuts. In my religion class, I remember my prof saying that on average one new mosque opens each week in the United States and that Buddhism is now the fourth most practiced religion in America. Well, imagine how messy, chaotic, and exhausting it would be to take time to form an opinion of every Muslim and Buddhist individually. It's easier to form an opinion about the group as a whole and then apply that general judgment to all the people in the group.

Michael: So, all Muslims are angry and violent individuals who will cut off your ear if they don't like your face . . .

Amon: And all Christians are intolerant and supported the Crusades.

Michael: Touché. That reminds me of something we studied in one of my classes. We just had a test on it last week. One expert argued that in order to break a complex world up into more manageable, predictable pieces we continually work through a three-stage process when encountering people.⁵ What was it? I know it started with three Cs. Categorization, characterization, and . . . what is the third one? . . . Nuts, what was it?

Amon: "Nuts" doesn't start with a "C".

Michael: You're not helping. *Correction.* That's it. Categorization, characterization, and correction. When we first meet a person we immediately place him or her into broad categories such as liberal or conservative, Christian or Muslim, and so on. Once we place them into a category, we assign specific characteristics to that person based on the category. The correction stage, which my professor said was the *most* neglected stage, only occurs if we get to know individuals and address initial judgments. The problem is our categories often keep us from getting to know people on an individual basis. To be honest, if it weren't for this listening assignment, I would never have come into this center and met you.

Amon: Don't feel bad, I can count on one hand the number of serious conversations I've had with Christians outside of my religious studies classes.

Michael: One last question, it's kinda off the wall. What do you think God thinks about stereotypes?

Amon: (laughing) What made you think of *that*?

Michael: One of my favorite writers, Eugene Peterson, says that with God there is no ditto among souls. What I think he means by that is that each person is created uniquely by God and could not possibly be contained by a one-size-fits-all label.

Amon: Well said. While labels or categories can help us organize life, they can also blind us to the unique qualities of individuals within a particular group. With each person we should, like God, seek to see the uniqueness inherent in them.

Michael: Okay, that's a perfect place to end this interview. Hey, this has been really helpful.

Amon: God's peace to you and good luck next Sunday with your fantasy team.

Michael: Thanks, I need both.

Surprising. That's the word Michael used to describe his interview with Amon at the Muslim Center. He was surprised that Amon liked fantasy football, watched *The Office*, and even joked about being able to diss his religion but not his fantasy team—he didn't see that coming. All in all, he liked him even though he doubted they would run into each other again. After the interview he was troubled by the story of the defaced Quran being left on the doorstep of the Mosque in Michigan. How would he feel if someone did that to the Bible? He wondered if stereotypes aren't always about merely organizing a chaotic world, but sometimes about fueling hate and wanting to feel superior to others? He also wondered if meeting Amon would make a difference in how he viewed Muslims on campus or if he'd just see Amon as an exception?

Endnotes

1. Thank you to my colleague Dorothy Alston Calley who regularly challenges her students to engage in such a meaningful listening assignment and shared her idea with me.
2. <http://www.people-press.org/2011/08/30/a-portrait-of-muslim-americans/>
3. Ghosh, B. (2009). In America's most Muslim city, fears of a backlash, *Time*, November 30, p. 6.
4. Burke, K. (1966). *Language as symbolic action*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
5. Quattrone, G. A. (1985). On the congruity between internal states and actions. *Psychological Bulletin*, 98, 3-40.