

Understanding Muslim extremism

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A German judge recently ruled that a Moroccan husband had the right, under Islamic sharia law, to beat his wife. The ruling caused a furor, with many Germans _ and Muslim representatives _ arguing that only the German Constitution should apply in Germany. Yet European governments have, de facto, for decades allowed aspects of sharia law in immigrant ghettos.

That tolerance for a legal and religious system with a different concept of human rights has created a dangerous situation. As Europeans are learning, just defining 'moderate' as those who do not want to blow things up is not enough. 'Non-violent' Muslim extremists who want to replace Western laws with Islamic sharia law, and democracy (rule by man-made law) with theocracy (rule by God's law, as interpreted by Islamic clergy and jurists) may actually pose a more serious threat.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, Americans have struggled with how to respond to the threat of Muslim extremism. The United States should uphold its traditions by welcoming Muslims, but distinguishing between moderate Muslims and extremists turns out to be very difficult. Looking at what is going on in Europe helps to clarify this issue.

Sharia law conflicts with Western law in several key areas. First, it considers blasphemy _ saying or writing negative things about Islam _ as a crime punishable by death. Since there are no blasphemy laws in the West (we fought for centuries to get rid of them), these conflicts are often presented as complaints about hate attacks on Islam. But their true nature should be clear: Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh paid with his life for crossing the line on blasphemy, and the Danish cartoonists who published cartoons about Mohammed are in hiding to avoid the same fate.

A second area is apostasy, the 'crime' of abandoning a religion. A direct challenge to the very concept of freedom of religion, apostasy too is punishable by death under sharia law. Muslims are enjoined to do their best to spread Islam, but it is a one-way street _ no one can opt out. The impact of this is to stifle free speech and action among Muslims. Muslim extremists in the West may not be issuing death threats openly, but the underlying intimidation is there.

Women's rights are a third area of conflict. American Muslim women may wear headscarves as a voluntary symbol of their religious devotion, but in many parts of the world women are harassed and assaulted if they do not cover themselves. Indeed, there are now places in Europe where non-Muslim women have begun to follow suit to avoid being molested.

Beyond rules governing women's dress are broader restrictions on what women may do. The punishments for violating these rules are severe. Several years ago, the publication of an autobiography by a young French woman of Algerian descent finally lifted the taboo on discussing the use of gang rape in France to suppress Muslim women who showed too much independence.

Moreover, Muslim women in Europe often pay with their lives in so-called honor killings carried out by other family members. Their crime: adopting a modern lifestyle or showing interest in a non-Muslim man.

The situations in Europe and the United States are different. European societies have refused to integrate their Muslim minorities or provide them professional opportunities. The Muslim immigrants, on the other hand, have sought to live apart, maintaining their separate religion, culture and identity. The result: large, insular minorities with high unemployment living on the dole, providing a fertile ground for radicalization. Muslim extremists who assert the dominance of Islam over all other religions and Muslim superiority over Christians and Jews can tap into a large wellspring of resentment and discontent.

Although the United States offers many more opportunities for assimilation and advancement, that does not mean there is no threat here from 'nonviolent' Muslim extremism. In 2005, the Center for Religious Freedom published "Saudi Publications on Hate Ideology Invade American Mosques," translating anti-American, anti-

Semitic and other hate tracts circulated in the United States. It then published a study of Saudi textbooks _ some in use in the United States _ that still contain hate propaganda, despite Saudi claims to have deleted those passages. Such propaganda is critical to radicalizing young people.

So what can Americans do? First, we can inform ourselves about what is going on, in Europe and in our own communities. Second, we must defend our values. All those living here must abide by the Constitution and adhere to the rule of law. We must defend women's rights, starting with the right to be alive rather than dead. We must distinguish between religious freedom and violence in the name of religion, supporting the former and rejecting the latter. By doing these things, we will create space for moderate Muslims - and everyone else - to live and prosper.

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