

“Muslims are out to kill us all,” opined the man with whom I was speaking. It was a strange statement to me within a conversation that was stranger still on a day that was truly bizarre. “All Muslims?” I asked. “Yes,” came the swift reply. Then, “Well, maybe not all of them, but the majority, and they all support overthrowing *us*.” (I’m always intrigued by what the *us* truly stands for in many conversations.) “Do you know any Muslims?” I asked. “No,” he shot back. “Perhaps it would be good to get to know some to see what they really think and desire,” was my final statement on the matter.

Perhaps, it would be good to get to know a Muslim to see what he or she really thinks and desires. What a novel thought. And what a difficult thing to do if we do not find ourselves in circles where meeting a Muslim and having that conversation is very easy. Luckily, we have a Muslim community—the American Institute of Islamic and Arabic Studies—meeting at St. Francis. While we have met together to share Iftahr meals with them, we have not done much more beyond that.

This year we are deliberately setting up opportunities to get to know our Muslim brothers and sisters. (I was about to use neighbor, but I realized that we are part of the larger family of faith, and seeing the other as family more so than simply neighbor seems like an important distinction.) We are calling these gatherings *Cross and Crescent* and they will be relaxed gatherings where Dr. Kareem Adeeb, the imam of AIIAS, and I can offer some historical, theological, and practical perspectives. However, the bulk of the work will be done in small groups. The first gathering which will take place on November 6, at 4:00 PM, will consist of simple questions to each individual participating:

1. What does your faith mean to you? What is important about it? And how does it inform your life?
2. What is something about your faith that you wish others knew?
3. What question do you have for the person of the other tradition?

From this initial gathering, we hope to continue quarterly conversations. Where they will lead us, we are not entirely sure. I do know from my experience with the community at AIIAS, that it is a wonderfully diverse Muslim community. Sunni, Shia, and Sufi all pray together (and if you know something about Islam, you know that this is quite rare and unique). They are a model of what modern Islam looks like, and they are like so many of us. They seek to live out their lives, engaged in activities that give meaning and purpose to them. They desire to offer a better life and a safer existence to their children. They want to be able to practice their faith without threat or censure. And they want to give back to the communities in which they live, recognizing the opportunities that they have been afforded. (The other important thing to know about the community at AIIAS is that they are wonderful cooks, and if you want, you are welcome to stay after these conversations and dine with our brothers and sisters.)

I am not naïve to think that the expression of Islam that AIIAS practices is the norm throughout the world, and I am acutely aware of the violence that is done in the name of Islam. I am, however, persuaded that in the same way as I do not want people to make blanket statements about the nature of Christianity—that, for example, it is homophobic, misogynist, irrational—I want Islam to be able to stand on its own where it is practiced and understood for what its

practitioners believe and live out. I also hope that the engagements that we make across religious lines regarding deeper understanding, recognition of the lives of others, and our similarities rather than simply our differences make us stronger in our own faith, stronger as communities, and more adept at offering visions for the future that augur well for the survival of not only our traditions but, indeed, our world.