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How to Know if You're an Extremist

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How to Know if You're an Extremist

Abstract

I'm a serious West Wing fan. I love it because it not only gives me a little insight into what is obviously a [totally accurate depiction](#) of what life is like working in the White House (right?) but it also makes me think. Take [this scene from season 3](#) as an example:

Josh Lyman, the Deputy White House Chief, is stuck in the White House cafeteria with a group of high school students while the White House is under emergency lockdown. Since the students have been promised the opportunity to speak to influential people in D.C. during their visit, Lyman lets them ask him any questions they want. One student asks him, "Why are Muslims out to kill us?" Josh Lyman challenges the student's statement with the following:

"Islamic Extremist is to Islam as the Ku Klux Klan is to Christianity." [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, Coexist, Extremism, The West Wing, Muslim American

Disciplines

American Politics | Demography, Population, and Ecology | International Relations | Peace and Conflict Studies | Politics and Social Change | Race and Ethnicity

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Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

HOW TO KNOW IF YOU'RE AN EXTREMIST

April 10, 2013

I'm a serious West Wing fan. I love it because it not only gives me a little insight into what is obviously a [totally accurate depiction](#) of what life is like working in the White House (right?) but it also makes me think. Take [this scene from season 3](#) as an example:

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"Islamic Extremist is to Islam as the Ku Klux Klan is to Christianity."

He continues to describe how not all Muslims are extremists. In fact, somewhere between three and five million Muslims live in the United States, with Muslim American citizens serving in the military and in our government. Muslim extremists are not accurate representatives of the Muslim faith any more than the KKK is an accurate representation of the Christian faith.

Religion is one of the most stratifying practices on the globe. We often label someone as "other" simply because they practice a religion that seems different to us. We tend not to look deeper into that particular religion's ideals or any connections that we might possibly have with them. In America, some have very particular stereotypes and assumptions about Muslims, frequently labeling them as terrorists simply because of their faith. Take this story for example:

On December 27th, 2012, a woman [pushed a man](#) under an arriving subway because he looked like someone who could be a terrorist, and she wanted to get him back for 9/11. He was an Indian-American who was a practicing Hindu.



Another belief likely reinforced by stereotype is that the Catholic Church is anti-gay. To be sure, the church's official position is that homosexual acts are against natural law. Cardinal Bergoglio, recently elected to become Pope Francis I, took the name in honor of St. Francis of Assisi, and while electing a Jesuit Pope who wanted to reexamine and redirect social policies in the Catholic Church was a big step for the Catholic Church, his recent appointment also brought attention back to the rigidity of anti-homosexuality sentiments in the much of the Catholic Church, in particular because of the [statements](#) he made as a Cardinal regarding Argentina's consideration of a same-sex marriage bill and gay adoption.

As a now prominent religious voice, the views of the Pope and the views of his immediate constituents can cause many people to believe that all Catholics are against gay rights. However, would it surprise you to know that American Catholics support gay marriage [more than](#) the overall population?

On this topic, Huffington Post contributor Shawn Ahmed wrote an article called "[Imagine Catholics and LGBT Rights Complexly](#)." In it Ahmed argues that it is never helpful or appropriate to view any group of people as "them." Ahmed, who is both Muslim and gay, currently lives with several priests from the largest congregation in Bangladesh. When he came out as gay, all the priests showed him "love, kindness, and support," while he was simultaneously met with rejection from some of his family and friends. Ahmed reminds us, "If you vilify someone it makes it harder to empathize with them. And...whoever you vilify is less willing to try and empathize and reach out to you... So, if you are pro-LGBT rights, I ask that you consider the complexity of Catholics out there in this world."

We should even consider the possibility of complexity in [the Pope's own views](#) on the subject.

March 20th's Eisenhower Lecture, [Transgender and the Military](#), displayed the same idea that Ahmed is getting at. The panel of experts did not try to berate one another. They talked to each other as people, trying to understand where each person was coming from, and then brainstormed complex strategies that might bring a solution to the situation.

My point is that we cannot look on different faiths as just one monolithic collective. We cannot generalize an entire population as terrorists, homophobes, or bigamists. We need to recognize our own ingrained phobias towards certain religions and access information that can help us really understand what certain beliefs (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, etc) mean. This is a way in which we can avoid the mentality of "us" and "them," in favor of a path that requires conversation, questions, discipline, and determination.

So next time someone asks, "Are you a (Christian, Muslim, Mormon, etc.)?" respond with "Tell me what you mean by that, and then I'll tell you if that describes who I am."

And if this leads to more understanding, we might end up with less conflict and more acceptance.

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