



Diversity and Pluralism in Islam: Historical and Contemporary Discourses amongst Muslims

What is this research about?

Stories in the media often treat Muslims as if they were all the same. They also often treat understandings of Islam as if they have never changed and are the same around the world. This problem has been made worse since the events of September 11, 2001. Muslims continue to be portrayed as uniformly fundamentalist, violent, and anti-Western. In addition to the media, scholarship often pays limited attention to the debates that Muslims have amongst themselves about Islam, what it means to be Muslim, how Muslims deal with differences amongst themselves and their differing understandings of Islam, and their diverse relationships with non-Muslims.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers in this edited volume of scholarly papers draw on primary research and secondary studies to examine pluralism in a diverse range of Muslim societies including India, Indonesia, France, and the United States. They also look at Muslim societies in the past, through studies on classical and historical poetry, art and religious texts from Muslim societies

What you need to know:

The media tend to talk about Muslims in stereotyped ways. However, Muslims live in diverse societies around the world and are extremely diverse in their cultures and languages, lifestyles, and political views. While they share many religious beliefs, they have varied widely in the way they understand their faith and the manner in which they express it.

around the world. They use this information to understand the debates that Muslims have amongst themselves in different historical and geographical settings.

What did the researchers find?

Today, there is vast diversity amongst Muslims but this diversity is not new. It has existed since Islam was founded in the 7th century. Muslims have continually debated about issues of faith since that time. Muslims have regularly differed from one another in how they interpret the Qur'an, religious practices and what it means to be a Muslim, and they have managed these differences in various ways. Sometimes



and in some contexts, they have emphasized uniformity. In other situations, they have valued diversity. Some Muslims recognize that their particular understanding of Islam is informed by their social, cultural, and historical roots. Other Muslims articulate their religious identities in relation to non-Muslims (e.g., Christians, Jews, Hindus, Secularists and Atheists). Muslim understandings of self, other and community are always in the making.

How can you use this research?

Policymakers, journalists, and the wider public, especially those in multicultural and pluralist societies, can use this research to better understand the diversity amongst Muslims. This will help them avoid the harmful biases and stereotypes that occur when Muslim individuals and societies are treated as being all the same.

About the Researcher

Zulfikar Hirji is Associate Professor in Social Anthropology at York University. This Research Snapshot is based on his publication, "Debating Islam from Within: Muslim Constructions of the Internal Other," featured in the book, *Diversity and Pluralism in Islam: Historical and Contemporary Discourses amongst Muslims*.

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Citation

Hirji, Z. (2010). Debating Islam from Within: Muslim Constructions of the Internal Other. In Hirji, Z., (Ed), *Diversity and Pluralism in Islam: Historical and Contemporary Discourses amongst Muslims*, p. 1-30. New York: I.B. Tauris. Available online at: books.google.ca/books?id=-wcqAQAAMAAJ

Keywords

Islam, Muslims, stereotype, bias, unity, uniformity, diversity, difference, debates, pluralism, plurality, civil society, 9/11, sects, sectarianism.

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