

OPINION

10 terms *not* to use with Muslims

There's a big difference between what we say and what they hear.

By Chris Seiple

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ARLINGTON, VA. - In the course of my travels – from the Middle East to Central Asia to Southeast Asia – it has been my great privilege to meet and become friends with many devout Muslims. These friendships are defined by frank respect as we listen to each other; understand and agree on the what, why, and how of our disagreements, political and theological; and, most of all, deepen our points of commonality as a result.

I have learned much from my Muslim friends, foremost this: Political disagreements come and go, but genuine respect for each other, rooted in our respective faith traditions, does not. If there is no respect, there is no relationship, merely a transactional encounter that serves no one in the long term.

As President Obama considers his first speech in a Muslim majority country (he visits Turkey April 6-7), and as the US national security establishment reviews its foreign policy and public diplomacy, I want to share the advice given to me from dear Muslim friends worldwide regarding words and concepts that are not useful in building relationships with them. Obviously, we are not going to throw out all of these terms, nor should we. But we do need to be very careful about

how we use them, and in what context.

1. "The Clash of Civilizations." Invariably, this kind of discussion ends up with us as the good guy and them as the bad guy. There is no clash of civilizations, only a clash between those who are for civilization, and those who are against it. Civilization has many characteristics but two are foundational: 1) It has no place for those who encourage, invite, and/or commit the murder of innocent civilians; and 2) It is defined by institutions that protect and promote both the minority and the transparent rule of law.

2. "Secular." The Muslim ear tends to hear "godless" with the pronunciation of this word. And a godless society is simply inconceivable to the vast majority of Muslims worldwide. Pluralism – which encourages those with (and those without) a God-based worldview to have a welcomed and equal place in the public square – is a much better word.

3. "Assimilation." This word suggests that the minority Muslim groups in North America and Europe need to look like the majority, Christian culture. Integration, on the other hand, suggests that all views, majority and minority, deserve equal respect as long as each is willing to be civil with one another amid the public square of a shared society.

4. "Reformation." Muslims know quite well, and have an opinion about, the battle taking place within Islam and what it means to be an orthodox and devout Muslim. They don't need to be insulted by suggesting they follow the Christian example of Martin Luther. Instead, ask how Muslims understand *ijtihad*, or reinterpretation, within their faith traditions and

cultural communities.

5. "Jihadi." The jihad is an internal struggle first, a process of improving one's spiritual self-discipline and getting closer to God. The lesser jihad is external, validating "just war" when necessary. By calling the groups we are fighting "jihadis," we confirm their own – and the worldwide Muslim public's – perception that they are religious. They are not. They are terrorists, *hirabists*, who consistently violate the most fundamental teachings of the Holy Koran and mainstream Islamic scholars and imams.

6. "Moderate." This ubiquitous term is meant politically but can be received theologically. If someone called me a "moderate Christian," I would be deeply offended. I believe in an Absolute who also commands me to love my neighbor. Similarly, it is not an oxymoron to be a mainstream Muslim who believes in an Absolute. A robust and civil pluralism must make room for the devout of all faiths, and none.

7. "Interfaith." This term conjures up images of watered-down, lowest common denominator statements that avoid the tough issues and are consequently irrelevant. "Multifaith" suggests that we name our deep and irreconcilable theological differences in order to work across them for practical effect – according to the very best of our faith traditions, much of which are values we share.

8. "Freedom." Unfortunately, "freedom," as expressed in American foreign policy, does not always seek to engage how the local community and culture understands it. Absent such an understanding, freedom can imply an unbound licentiousness. The balance between the freedom *to*

something (liberty) and the freedom *from* something (security) is best understood in a conversation with the local context and, in particular, with the Muslims who live there. "Freedom" is best framed in the context of how they understand such things as peace, justice, honor, mercy, and compassion.

9. "Religious Freedom." Sadly, this term too often conveys the perception that American foreign policy is only worried about the freedom of Protestant evangelicals to proselytize and convert, disrupting the local culture and indigenous Christians. Although not true, I have found it better to define religious freedom as the promotion of respect and reconciliation with the other at the intersection of culture and the rule of law – sensitive to the former and consistent with the latter.

10. "Tolerance." Tolerance is not enough. Allowing for someone's existence, or behavior, doesn't build the necessary relationships of trust – across faiths and cultures – needed to tackle the complex and global challenges that our civilization faces. We need to be honest with and respect one another enough to name our differences and commonalities, according to the inherent dignity we each have as fellow creations of God called to walk together in peace and justice, mercy and compassion.

The above words and phrases will differ and change over the years, according to the cultural and ethnic context, and the (mis)perceptions that Muslims and non-Muslims have of one another. While that is to be expected, what counts most is the idea that we are earnestly trying to listen to and understand each other better; demonstrating respect as a

result.

[Editor's note: *Due to a technical glitch, the original headline misstated the author's view.*]

- *Chris Seiple is the president of the Institute for Global Engagement, a "think tank with legs" that promotes sustainable environments for religious freedom worldwide.*