Love, Fear, and Loathing: A Qualitative Examination of Christian Perceptions of Muslims

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Abstract

For centuries Christians and Muslims have sometimes shown extreme thoughts and feelings about each other, often based on very little factual information. While one large and well-respected survey study (PEW RESEARCH CENTER FOR THE PEOPLE AND THE PRESS, 2002), has researched attitudes in the United States toward Muslims, including a breakdown of attitudes by religion, race, sex and other demographic characteristics, that research may be limited by its quantitative approach to a question that is best answered using qualitative methodology. This study used an innovative qualitative method inspired by market research to investigate Christian feelings about Muslims. We note the undercurrents of fear and curiosity expressed by subjects and although the respondents in this study would have received high knowledge scores in the PEW survey, we found that they actually knew very little about Islam. We give rationale and detailed examples of our method of metaphor elicitation, suggest possible uses for it elsewhere, and close with suggestions for further research.

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Some Christians have actually tried to move their congregations into a more loving direction toward Muslims, but this has sometimes been met with resistance and backlash. For example, in a post-9/11 bid to better relations with Muslims, pastor Bob Roberts invited Muslims to his North Wood Church in Keller, TX, for Q&A sessions and a cooking club and to help on a few home remodeling projects. The barrier of fear must be addressed and removed for Christian witness to be effective, because Sherman A. Lee shares, “Fear is a unique emotion in that it activates escape and avoidance motivated behavior…Research on post-911 sentiment has shown that fear is a significant predictor of support for policies designed to avoid or escape contact with Muslims.”