

Stereotypes

It is easy to give in to stereotypes. I imagine we are all in danger of falling into that trap at some point. The current debate about immigration, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia very much bring that home. It is so simple to view people just by the labels we attach to them.

Last Saturday there was a stall in Parliament Street for Islam against Terrorism. Here were a group of men who by their dress and general appearance were clearly identifiable as Muslims, and proud to be. It was good to engage with them. I was wearing my clerical collar and so it was clear to them that I was a Christian minister.

There is sadly a direct association in some people's minds between Islam and terrorism, an association which members of ISIS and other terrorist organisations consciously fuel.

For most Muslims, though, acts of terrorism are totally contrary to their religion. Those who advocate such violent actions are not true Muslims but are rather hijack Islam for their own questionable ends. That was the message these men in York were trying to put across. That misuse of religion for misguided ideological means is of course not restricted to Islam. Christianity has suffered that too.

Islam, Judaism and Christianity are all religions of the book. We all worship the same God. That is not to deny the very real and deep differences in our beliefs and practices. For Muslims Jesus is one of the great prophets but they believe the Christian understanding of him is wrong. For Christians the humanity and divinity of Christ is fundamental and not negotiable. The Muslim position is equally not negotiable. We can only beg to differ.

Yet despite that we can build on the values we do share and work together. As the young man I spoke to said the common threat is secularism, a world without God. That is surely the real challenge for us as Christians, not the challenge of other faiths.

If we cannot endorse the beliefs of others we can at the very least respect them. We can look behind the stereotypes and the prejudice to see the genuine humanity and sincerity of those of other faiths. Islam itself is based on respect and concern for one's neighbour. And neighbours very much include those of other faiths and none. Love of one's neighbour and love of God are the shared underlying requirements of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Much divides us, but that is our common bond.

For peace to be established and maintained, and for the process of reconciliation to succeed, there needs to be real dialogue on an equal footing. Stereotypes and prejudice need to be challenged and rejected. Above all, as our Lord taught so clearly in our reading just now (Luke 6.36-38) we are not to judge one another.