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[Religion Isn't One-Size-Fits-All](#)

When the newspapers reported last week that six Muslim men were arrested for plotting to kill soldiers at Fort Dix, "I told you so"s rang out all over the country. They came from people who were convinced by September 11th that all Muslims are extremists who cannot be trusted. They came from secularists and liberals who firmly believe that any kind of religion is up to no good.

And they came from the many average Americans who have never talked to a Muslim up close.

All three positions are misguided, and the consequences are dire if those who hold them continue to think as they do. People who kill in the name of faith represent the religion of the margins, not of the middle. By giving all believers a terrorist face, we not only make a terrible mistake, we also miss opportunities for collaborative partnerships for pursuing social change.

Over the past 10 years, I've had many conversations with immigrants from Pakistan, India, Ireland, Brazil, and the Dominican Republic living in the Boston metropolitan area. They do not come from countries founded by immigrants, where turning newcomers into natives is a natural part of the national story. They do not come from places where mixing with people unlike themselves was necessarily considered a good thing, or where the church was supposed to stay out of the business of the state. Nor was decreasing inequality always high on the list of national priorities.

Given this backdrop, we might expect that the "I told you so"-ers have a point. They believe that the traditions and beliefs that newcomers import will not only unravel our social fabric but inspire violent acts. My conversations with immigrants, however, suggest otherwise. Hot button topics like gay rights and the death penalty evoked passionate responses on both sides. But when I asked people how they wanted to put their faith into practice, their answers mirrored the range of opinions expressed by the native-born. There was a small group who believed they held a monopoly on the truth and it was their job to convince the rest of us. The vast majority, however, cared much more about affordable housing, education, and health care. They wanted to live in a place where they could walk down the street without being afraid and where government officials could be trusted. Even people who said they wanted religion to play a central role in public life didn't want to impose it on the rest of us. While they knew that they brought a different set of values to the table, most people generally subscribed to the old adage that "when in Rome..." They felt it was their job to adjust to the norms in place, not the other way around.

Treating Muslims, Hindus, or evangelical Christians who don't pray in English as if they fit into one-size-fits-all categories is to make the same mistake as saying all Christians are equal. Newcomers come in all religious shapes and sizes. In general, they broaden and steady the American religious boat rather than rock it. They're potential partners in the fight to make the United States a better place.