

MUSLIMS CELEBRATING ON 9/11? THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS WHAT THEY SEEM

Insights
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Perception is often more important than reality, and perception can vary radically among people of different religions and national origins.

Ramadan is a time of fasting and prayer for Muslims. Ramadan does not fall on the same dates every year, as is frequently the case with religious holidays of other faiths. When Ramadan ends, it is marked with great celebrations by members of the Muslim faith.

This year, the end of Ramadan, also known as Eid ul-Fitr or the Eid, falls on or around September 11. In predominantly Islamic countries, there would be no question that the celebrations on September 11 were meant to celebrate the Eid and not to demean the tragic events that took place in New York City, Washington, D.C. and Pennsylvania in 2001.

But in the United States, Ramadan is not commonplace, and most people don't even know what it is. So when a non-Muslim in the United States learns that Muslims are celebrating on September 11, it may not be as obvious that the celebrations are unrelated to the tragedy on 9/11. Such misconceptions can lead to religious harassment or even worse, it can lead to violence.

While these misconceptions are relevant everywhere, they are especially relevant in the workplace. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination in the workplace based on religion and in 1972, the Act was amended to require accommodation to religious practices and beliefs so long as it does not impose an "undue hardship." It is likely that employees will talk about the September 11 tragedy at work and it is also probable that some employees will share information about

celebrating the Eid. Without advance education, these conversations at work may lead to harassment, discrimination or even violence.

The news media is saturated with stories about controversial Muslim issues the mosque planned on a site in lower Manhattan near Ground Zero and more recently, a Florida-based church that intends to burn copies of the Quran to mark the September 11 terrorist attacks so it is likely that these will be topics of conversation, if not controversy, among employees.

Since you cannot fully prevent these conversations at work it is best to be prepared and plan ahead for September 11. To help to avoid misunderstandings, consider educating employees about the upcoming Eid and its significance to the religion of Islam. While some people may still feel offended by the celebrations, many others will be more understanding and enlightened. If your employees already are talking about these issues, you may want to remind them about your policies against harassment and discrimination, and about the importance of respecting all points of view even though they may be unfamiliar or controversial.

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