

Title screen: "Significant Others: Understanding our Non-Christian Neighbors" by Monte Cox, Preface: Us and Them

I fly a lot in my work. Once on a late night flight home from somewhere, I discovered that my seatmate was a Muslim from Syria who had recently immigrated to the United States. He went on to tell me he was a medical doctor at the VA hospital in Little Rock attending to wounded veterans. Eventually he got around to asking me what I do for a living, and I explained to him that I teach comparative religion at a university nearby. Then we proceeded to have a pretty good conversation about his experience as a Muslim in America. I noticed that the people around us were completely quiet. I assumed because it was a late night flight and they were sleeping. But then the plane landed, we got off the plane, the Syrian doctor and I said our goodbyes, parted company. Then as we moved through the terminal, a passenger who apparently had been overhearing our conversation approached me and said, "I'm so glad it was you sitting next to that guy on the plane instead of me." Several of that fellow's buddies were with him and they nodded in agreement. Then I realized they were all quiet because they were afraid. Afraid because they've learned there was a Muslim from Syria on our plane. It's "our plane." Another example of us and them. To those of us who are part of this audience, how many of us are afraid in situations like that? Maybe we're not afraid because it's a Muslim and all Muslims are terrorists, maybe we're afraid that in our pluralistic culture, we just don't know what other people believe, we don't know what to say, we're afraid that if we say anything at all we might be offensive. And so those opportunities pass by and we don't engage. Well, this series and the book it accompanies are an attempt to change that, to change that for all of us.

I can summarize today's topic with just two words: "us" and "them." Now I know as soon as I say those two words, groups are forming in your head where "us" might be young people and "them" might be old people. I suppose I could draw a line through most audiences these days and find myself with "them" the old people more often than not. "Us" could be teachers and "them" could be students. "Us" could be Texans and "them" would be everyone else. "Us" could be football fans and "them" could be soccer fans, or as the rest of the world calls them, football fans. "Us" might be Democrats and "them" could be Republicans or vice versa. "Us" could be Christians and "them" could be Muslims or Buddhists or Hindus or Sikhs or Atheists.