

Perspectives

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5 Myths about Islam and Muslims by Hedieh Mirahmadi and Mehreen Farooq

To some Americans Islam has a “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” split personality disorder. On one hand they see law-abiding Muslim citizens proclaim Islam as a religion of peace, while on the other hand they see Islam represented by suicide bombers who chant “Death to America.” The question of which category the majority of Muslims fall into has generated tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims around the world. Based on our experiences working with Muslim communities at the World Organization for Resource Development & Education (WORDE), it is evident that radical Islamists are at the root of the problem, propagating several myths that depict Islam at odds with American values. At a time when only one in three Americans have a favorable view of Islam, the key to rebuilding positive relationships is to debunk these myths.

Myth #1: Muslims think Christians and Jews are Infidels.

On the contrary, as an Abrahamic faith, Islam embraces Christians and Jews as monotheists and believers in one God. The Quran recognizes the Torah and Bible as Divine revelations to mankind and honors Christians and Jews as “People of the Book.” In fact many of the same revered figures and prophets – including Jesus and Moses, peace be upon them – that appear in the Torah or the Bible, also appear in the Quran. Young Muslims in Islamic Sunday schools are even taught that the second coming of Jesus, the Messiah, will eventually save Humanity.

Given their shared traditions, Muslims have historically coexisted with other faiths throughout the world. The precedent for religious tolerance was established in the first constitution of the Arabian city, Medina, in 622 CE in which the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)* ensured religious freedom to its non-Muslims citizens. Subsequent Muslim leaders throughout the world followed this practice. The first Muslim prince to rule India, Muhammad bin Qasim, vowed to protect even Hindu places of worship, while in Islamic Spain, both Christians and Muslims prayed in the Great Mosque of Cordoba. Many non-Muslims held senior government positions in Muslim states, even serving as Prime Ministers. Samuel Ha-Nagid, for example was a Jewish vizier of Granada as early as the 11th century.

Today, Muslim Americans have founded NGOs and dialogue circles to renew the tradition of working side-by-side with different faiths. They range from youth community service groups to artistic endeavors, such as Jews and Muslims Making Art Together (JAMMArtT). This women’s arts co-op organizes exhibitions to challenge stereotypes, illustrate common faith traditions, and foster mutual understanding.

Myth #2: Muslim Americans do not believe in Democratic Principles

Democratic principles are not foreign concepts for Muslims. In the 11th century, Islamic public intellectuals like Nizam al-Mulk and al-Ghazali outlined principles of good governance and advised sovereigns to safeguard their population against injustice and oppression. Over a thousand years before Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, the Quran stated that humanity is created equal regardless of gender, race, or religion. In addition, the Quran includes the principle of the rule of law through the requirement to “obey those in authority from amongst you” (4:59); and the concept of religious freedom by declaring that there can be “no compulsion in religion” (2:256). The principle of rule by consent is also rooted in Islamic tradition. In 632 CE the Muslim community in

Arabia set a precedent by electing their first political leaders by consensus.

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Muslims around the world continue to strive to uphold these principles. In 2008, the largest-ever survey of Muslim Americans found that 95% of Muslims who regularly attend a mosque believe that Islam and the American political system are compatible. It is no wonder then that Muslim Americans are involved in all steps of the political process from fundraisers led by successful

entrepreneurs, to door-to-door campaigning, to holding political office in state and national legislatures.

Myth #3: Islam Instructs Muslims to Subjugate Women.

Despite radical Islamists’ attempts to denigrate the role of women in society, the majority of Muslims are taught from childhood to honor women according to the Islamic maxim “Heaven is under the feet of your mother.” Muslims believe there is no distinction between a Muslim man and woman in faith: both have the same rights and obligations, and are promised equal rewards in heaven. As such, there

are a number of examples of women who have played a prominent role in Islam, spiritually as well politically. The iconic Virgin Mary - whom Muslims believe will be the first to enter Paradise - is a role model for Muslim men and women. Aisha, a wife of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), is credited for preserving a large number of prophetic traditions which serve as the basis for Islamic jurisprudence. Incidentally, she was also a respected military leader. Two sisters, Maryam and Fatima al-Fihri, founded the world's first university, al-Qarawiyyin, in Morocco in the 9th century. Given Islam's ancient tradition of women as leaders and exemplars, it is not surprising that in recent years, the four largest Muslim countries have elected women as Presidents and Prime Ministers. Even in Yemen, the face of the recent pro-change movement is a female journalist and human rights activist, Tawakkul Karman.

In the US, Muslim women are thriving as doctors, university professors and executive directors of NGOs. In fact Muslim American women are one of the most highly educated female religious groups in the United States, and they report incomes more nearly equal to men, compared with women and men of other faiths. Women such as Anousheh Ansari, the first female Muslim in outer-space and Tayyibah Taylor, the founding editor-in-chief and publisher of the award winning Azizah Magazine, are bold role models for young Muslim Americans. Likewise, these female social entrepreneurs have immense potential to inspire the new generation of women leaders in the Arab Spring.

Myth #4: Sharia Law is Part of a Muslim Plot to Transform the US into an Islamic Caliphate.

Given that over a dozen US states have tried to introduce legislation to ban Sharia law, we have to be clear on what Sharia is, and what it is not. It is not a single-bodied codified law which could replace the US Constitution. The varying rules and regulations associated with the term "Sharia" are derived through hundreds of years of scholastic debate on Islamic jurisprudence. Traditionally jurists or scholars would study legal texts and scriptures, debating major religious issues like the timings of prayer, the principles of giving charity and divorce procedures. On any religious issue, there is no single verdict of what is considered right or wrong. Over time, major schools of thought developed their own consensus on guiding principles for leading issues.

As a result, for the average Joe-Muslim, "Sharia" is a large corpus of norms and conventions that guide daily Islamic practices. A recent report from the Center for American Progress stated that Sharia is "overwhelmingly concerned with personal religious observance such as prayer and fasting, and not with national laws." As such, most Muslims support our current rule of law and would prefer to leave Sharia to the private realm.

Myth #5: Muslims are Socially Active only on Issues that affect other Muslims

Muslims are committed to look after the wellbeing of their entire community, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The spiritual obligation for Muslims to give charity has spurred the creation of social welfare endowments throughout the world. A well-known example is the Edhi Foundation, founded by Abdul Sattar Edhi, "the Mother Theresa of Pakistan" which has the world's largest volunteer ambulance service.

In the US, Muslim Americans have raised funds for Hurricane Katrina victims, built houses for Habitat for Humanity, and created soup kitchens to feed the homeless. A group of young professionals in the Washington DC area created Green Muslims to practice sustainable living to protect our environment. Countless NGOs such as the Muslim Women's Coalition - a grass-roots volunteer organization that routinely donates large gift baskets to local women's shelters - are driven by their love for America and the belief that service to mankind is a central component to Islamic practices.

In his landmark speech in Cairo, President Obama said, "So long as our relationship is defined by our differences, we will empower those who sow hatred rather than peace." In order to end social conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims and foster cooperation, we have to use our public diplomacy resources well. Although extremists constitute a very small minority of Muslims, because they are well-funded and receive undue media attention, they have led a successful campaign to propagate these myths. The key to counter their narrative is to emphasize the beliefs and practices of mainstream Muslims who share our values and work towards creating a better America. Highlighting the examples of Muslim Americans who are promoting religious tolerance, pluralism, democracy, gender equality, and community service will pay-off in the long run by marginalizing the extremists that work against US interests. The efforts in this regard led by US Special Representative to Muslim Communities Farah Pandith are a step in the right direction. US Embassies around the world should go one step further by calling upon Muslim Americans to guide dialogue efforts between Muslims and non-Muslims at the national and international levels. After all, Muslim Americans who embody values of democracy and freedom are our best ambassadors in our efforts to communicate these values in the Muslim world.

*PBUH is a common acronym for "peace be upon him."



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