3. Islam in America

The Jesus Fatwah

Prejudice and Civil Rights

At the heart of the Muslim experience of America lies a paradox. On the one hand, life for Muslims in America is hard. The Council on American-Islamic Relations (or CAIR), America's largest Muslim civil liberties organization (think Anti-Defamation League or NAACP, only Muslim) has documented a steady rise in reported civil rights abuses against Muslims between 1996, when fewer than a hundred reports of civil rights abuses were filed, and 2008 (the last year CAIR released numbers), when CAIR fielded more than 2,700 complaints. CAIR is not alone in reporting an uptick in abuses against Muslims. In 2009, the Federal Government's Equal Employment Opportunity Commission received 803 reports of workplace discrimination against Muslims—a twenty percent increase over the previous year. The high rate of abuse suffered by American Muslims also has been noted by a wide range of civil and human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, the Anti-Defamation League, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and Human Rights Watch. In 2011, the Pew Center for People and the Press reported that 28 percent of Muslims report being looked at with suspicion, 22 percent say they have been called offensive names, 21 percent have been singled out for airport security, and 13 percent report being singled out for scrutiny by various law enforcement agencies.

It is an uncomfortable fact that the rise in civil rights abuses propagated against American Muslims correlates to a rise in fear of and prejudice towards Muslims in the wider American population. In 2003, 34 percent of Americans believed that Islam is a religion that encourages violence. Five years later that number had risen to 48 percent. By 2010, half of Americans harbored negative opinions about Islam.[i] A 2006 USA Today-Gallup Poll found that fewer than half of Americans believe Muslims are loyal to the United States, and that nearly a quarter of Americans would not want a Muslim neighbor. Almost a third of Americans would be nervous if they noticed a Muslim man flying with them on an airplane (18 percent would feel similarly nervous if the Muslim were a woman). Forty percent of Americans believe Muslims should be subjected to increased security in public places.[ii] Tragically, as animosity toward Islam has risen in the United States, so have reported incidents of hate crime targeting people of middle-eastern descent, as well as against South Asians—especially Sikhs—and against others who are mistaken for Muslims.

A History of Discrimination

Many Americans assume that the rise in anti-Muslim sentiment documented by CAIR and by other human rights organizations is a recent development, but it is not. While the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror have acted as a catalyst in the explosion of Islamophobia in contemporary American culture, widespread anti-Muslim bias in America is not a new phenomenon. In fact, irrational fears around Islam have been a part of life in the United States since before there even was a United States.

In 17th century New England, prominent Calvinist preachers—most notable the father and son team of Increase and Cotton Mather—preached sermons peppered with anti-Muslim invective.[iii] Their anti-Islamic homiletics came at a time when Muslim pirates sailing out of North Africa's Barbary Coast were attacking British and North American shipping interests, often taking prisoners and holding them as slaves. These pirates sailed at the behest of North African states (their actions would likely be considered state-sponsored terrorism today), and the motivation for their piracy was both mercenary and political. But on the far side of the Atlantic, among fearful colonists living on North America's Atlantic seaboard, the maritime marauders were recast as religious fanatics with a lust for Christian blood.[iv]

In the eighteenth century the British Navy made peace with the Barbary pirates—thus securing the safety of colonial North American shipping interests—but fearful words about Islam continued to lace the sermons of many preachers of the first Great Awakening, including those of George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards, who preached frequently against the supposed sinfulness of Islam, often employing stereotypes still in use today—particularly those that exaggerate Muslims' tendencies to engage in violence and to subjugate women.

In 1784, after the newly-independent former-British colonies in North America lost the protections of the British Navy, American merchant ships once again fell prey to attacks from Barbary pirates, and as a result, the young nation declared war on the Barbary states in North Africa and engaged in its first overseas military campaign. The war in North Africa helped to establish the United States as a world power; it also helped solidify in the minds of Americans that Islam is a religion whose adherents are foreigners and enemies. It is a misconception that has continued, with varying degrees of intensity, into the modern era.

America, the Beautiful

Now, back to the paradox: despite more than 300 years of smoldering Islamophobia, now burning dangerously hot thanks to the catalyst of post-9/11 fear, American Muslims never have had a higher opinion of life in America. In 2011, for example, a poll of American Muslim leaders found that 97 percent of

respondents believed Muslims should be actively involved in American life. In 2000, half of American Muslim leaders felt the United States was hostile toward Muslims. In 2011, that number had dropped to 25 percent. In 2000, 56 percent of American Muslims leaders believed society was immoral, by 2012, that percentage had dropped to 26.

But it's not just Muslim religious leaders who feel positive about life in America. The above-mentioned 2011 study by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press found that Muslim Americans are almost twice as likely as their non-Muslim counterparts to express satisfaction with the way things are going in the United States. Only 16 percent of American Muslims feel the general public is hostile toward them, and two thirds of Muslim Americans believe life is better in the United States than it is in most Muslim countries, and the reason for this American optimism is simple: Muslims value what America has to offer. Like everyone else in America, Muslims long to live in safety and to be governed by the rule of law. Muslims enjoy the educational and economic opportunities the United States has to offer, and Muslims, like Christians, see positive engagement in civil and community life as a religious obligation.

To embrace the flag and to live in the free republic for which it stands is a fond desire for most American Muslims. Perhaps this knowledge can ease the fears of those who lie awake at night worrying that prayers offered in the general direction of Mecca pose an existential threat to America's life and culture. If, as a people, we can set aside our fear, then maybe, at long last we can move past three centuries of fearfulness and the Muslims among us can finally enjoy the benefits of America without paradox.

-- Ben Daniel

Discussion Questions (pause DVD after each video segment)

The Fear-Mongers
1.How have you been exposed to the work of those who disseminate a fear and hatred of Islam?

2. Against the constant drum-beat of misinformation and far-fetched claims, what is your response?

3. How has your own faith tradition been misrepresented in the press?

An American Faith
1. In what ways are your beliefs about Islam's place in Western society being challenged or changed by new information?

2. How does your faith tradition encourage your participation in secular society?

3. What are the parallels between your faith tradition's challenge to improve your community and your country and that of Islam's?

An Inclusive Faith
1. Discuss how your understanding of Islam's attitudes toward non-Muslims is being changed or challenged.

2. Over time, how has your faith tradition embraced or rejected those who don't share your beliefs?

3. Does your faith tradition value diversity? Why or why not?

Islam and the American Experiment
1. Share how Muslims have contributed to your community.

2. In what ways have Muslims benefited from living in your community?

3. Discuss how your neighborhood be might be affected if a new mosque were erected.

***The Jesus Fatwah* Theme Question:**
What element or learning from this session do you think will be most significant in your everyday interactions with others?

BONUS READING:

The Treaty of Tripoli
(Submitted to the Senate by President John Adams, receiving unanimous ratification from the U.S. Senate on June 7, 1797, and signed by Adams, taking effect as the law on June 10, 1797.)

> "As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion; as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquility, of Mussulmen [Muslims]; and as the said States never entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mahometan [Mohammedan] nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries."

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[i] Nathan Lean, *The Islamophobia Industry: How the Right Manufactures Fear of Muslims* (London: Pluto Press. 2012), 39.
[ii] Lean, xi-xii
[iii] Thomas S. Kidd, *American Christians and Islam: Evangelical Culture and Muslims from the Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 3-5.
[iv] Kidd, 20-22