

4. Making Connections 1

The Jesus Fatwah

Adjusting our Malarkey Filter

This two-part video segment features, among others, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, a Kuwaiti-born American Imam and writer who, like his father before him, is a long-time leader in New York's Muslim community. For decades, Imam Abdul Rauf has been an outspoken advocate of interfaith understanding. He is perhaps most famous for his leadership in establishing a Muslim community center not far from Ground Zero in New York City. Initially called "Córdoba House," the community center—which, as of this writing, is partially open but still under construction—has come into existence despite fierce opposition from Americans opposed to an organized Muslim presence so close to the former site of the World Trade Center.

Those opposed to the community center give a variety of reasons for their opposition, chief among them is the fact that the community center, when complete, will have space for formal Muslim prayers. Because of the spiritual component designed into the planned center, Imam Abdul Rauf's detractors have dubbed the center, "The Ground Zero Mosque," and have interpreted its building as an expression of Islamic triumphalism—a celebration of the destruction wrought in the name of Islam at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. As evidence supporting this claim, those opposed to building the community center have pointed to the community center's original name: "Córdoba House." Among those offended by the decision to name the community center after the former capital of Muslim Spain was Newt Gingrich, erstwhile speaker of the House of Representatives and occasional aspirant for the presidency, who wrote:

"The proposed 'Cordoba House' overlooking the World Trade Center site — where a group of jihadists killed over 3000 Americans and destroyed one of our most famous landmarks — is a test of the timidity, passivity and historic ignorance of American elites. For example, most of them don't understand that 'Cordoba House' is a deliberately insulting term. It refers to Cordoba, Spain — the capital of Muslim conquerors who symbolized their victory over the Christian Spaniards by transforming a church there into the world's third-largest mosque complex.

Today, some of the Mosque's backers insist this term is being used to 'symbolize interfaith cooperation' when, in fact, every Islamist in the world recognizes Cordoba as a symbol of Islamic conquest. It is a sign of their contempt for Americans and their confidence in our historic ignorance that they would deliberately insult us this way...

America is experiencing an Islamist cultural-political offensive designed to undermine and destroy our civilization. Sadly, too many of our elites are the willing apologists for those who would destroy them if they could." ¹

Newt Gingrich's historical observations regarding Córdoba are unadulterated malarkey. Córdoba was never the Muslim capital of territory formerly held by Christian Spaniards. It was the capital of territory taken from the Visigoth empire, which took southern Spain from the Romans, who held southern Spain before the advent of Christianity (there would be no Christian Spanish rule in southern Spain until after Córdoba fell to Roman Catholic Spanish armies in the 13th century). Nor does his description of the Córdoba mosque tell the building's whole story (It is true that Muslims built a mosque on the site of a Visigoth church; it's also true that the Visigoth church was built on a pre-Christian pagan shrine, and it is true that the mosque in Córdoba has been used as a Roman Catholic cathedral for the last 800 years—roughly twice as long as the space was used as a mosque). Nor does any Muslim—"Islamist" or otherwise—think of Córdoba as anything but the place of enlightenment and relative tolerance that, according to any objective reading of history, it actually was.

What Newt Gingrich did get correct, however, was American fear of Islam—a fear he attempted to harness for political gain (he was getting ready for his unsuccessful presidential bid when he wrote these words). The Islamic center in New York was hardly unique in meeting opposition. All over America, proposals to build mosques are met with fierce resistance by Americans who believe the institutional presence of Muslims is a harbinger of imperial ambition on the part of those who dream of a worldwide Muslim caliphate, and who cannot envision an encounter between Islam and Christianity that is not marked by rivalry and conflict.

But if anyone among the world's 1.5 billion Muslims has a serious desire to conquer the world and the capacity to act on those dreams, it has not become apparent to any of the world's sober journalists or serious political scientists.

What, then, should be a proper and appropriate Christian response to the presence of Muslims in America?

¹ Ben Daniel, *The Search for Truth About Islam*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013, p. 90.

Do Your Homework!

The most important thing is for non-Muslim Americans to adopt a willingness to learn about Islam, something you already are doing, gentle reader, by exploring "The Jesus Fatwah" to inform your knowledge of Islam. Keep learning. A list of good books and resources is included at the end of this study guide. It has been organized around the idea that, to learn about Islam, it is important for Christians to hear what Muslims have to say about Islam—because who will know more about Islam than Muslim writers and scholars? Hearing from Christian writers and scholars who understand the Christian mindset and who employ language readily accessible to Christians is also a priority.

Not included on the attached list of resources are the best-selling books and videos produced by those who profit by spreading fear about Islam—books by professional Islamophobes such as Robert Spencer, Pamela Geller, and Daniel Pipes or the Clarion Project videos, *Obsession* and *The Third Jihad*. Much like Facebook postings by your bigoted fraternity brother or mass emailings from your eccentric aunt, such materials should be read and viewed through a filter of common sense. Ask: "if the world's 1.5 billion Muslims really held such vile intentions and evil opinions in common, could it really be kept a secret? If so significant a portion of the world population was really that bad, would not the world be a lot worse for it? And why is it that the portrayals of Islam promoted by professional Islamophobes is so unlike the Muslims I know?"

Reaching Out to Muslims

Which leads us to the most important way to learn about Islam: non-Muslim Americans *must get to know American Muslims*. We must not be shy about this. Most Muslims want to know Christians, and like anyone else, Muslims enjoy talking about life and faith over a mug of coffee or a cup of tea. Christians who don't have the opportunity to interact with Muslims at work or in the neighborhood or within the family should encourage their pastors to reach out to a local imam, to organize social events and service projects that include members of both communities.

Here is something that Christians should know about Muslims: Muslims want to have good relations with Christians; indeed tolerance and mutual good will are integral to Muslim spirituality and self-understanding. In 2007, 300 of the world's top Muslim scholars and political leaders sent a letter to the Christian world. Entitled "A Common Word Between Us and You," (see www.acommonword.com) it is a document that implores Christians and Muslims to find common cause in loving God and neighbor and it is rooted in a deep and historical commitment to the idea that Muslims and Christians and Jews worship the same God; Muslims honor the Jewish and Christian Bibles, Muslims revere Moses, Jesus and the Prophets, and most Muslims long to see those spiritual connections to Christianity and Islam manifested in positive relationships with their Christian friends and neighbors.

This is why so many Muslims remember Muslim Córdoba with such fondness. Relative to the rest of Europe, it was a place of tolerance and acceptance and of strong relations between Muslims, Christians, and Jews. For most Muslims, the history of Islamic Córdoba is not a matter of warm feelings and positive emotions. Rather, the interfaith goodwill that marked life in medieval Cordoba is remembered as a manifestation of a righteous society—a small taste of which most Muslims hope to recapture by establishing and maintaining positive relationships with Christians and Jews, especially in the United States.

A Question of Honesty

Among the many difficulties that must be overcome as Christians reach out to Muslims is the misconception—promoted by Islamophobic purveyors of fear—that Muslims are permitted and even encouraged to lie to non-Muslims. The idea that Muslims are allowed and encouraged to lie is a misconception rooted in a misunderstanding of the concept of *taqiyya*, an Arabic word which, literally translated, means “precaution.” *Taqiyya* is a legal construct in which Muslims are permitted to lie about their faith when telling the truth would lead to death or serious harm. Historically, *taqiyya* is a concept that was used by Shiite Muslims as a way of avoiding persecution by their Sunni counterparts. There is, however, no legal permission in Islam to lie for the sake of lying or in order to make one’s faith seem more palatable to non-believers.

Accusations of *taqiyya* are most often bandied about when Muslims speak up and correct misinformation about Islam. Those seeking to discredit Muslims or cast suspicions on anything Muslims say use the argument that, “Of course they’re lying! The universal evil of Islam demands that they lie to non-Muslims!” Since the Muslim contributors to *The Jesus Fatwah* present Islam in an appealing manner, avoiding stereotypes and representing Islam as rational and peaceable, those committed to spreading Islamophobia have only one tired and threadbare argument: “They must be committing *taqiyya*!!”

So, when a faithful Muslim speaks about her faith you can be assured she is telling the truth to the best of her ability. Unless, for instance, you happen to be pointing a gun at her. Then all bets are off. Under the Islamic law of *taqiyya*, she’s allowed to say whatever it takes to save her life. But more to the point, if you are threatening her life, it’s not *her* morality that should concern you.

A Future Together

While conducting interviews for *The Jesus Fatwah*, we asked Muslims and non-Muslims to reflect on the work of building interfaith understanding and cooperation. The responders shared in common the conviction that Muslims and non-Muslims need to learn about each other, but they approached that shared conviction in different ways. Our Muslim interviewees tended to focus on the importance of embracing an American diversity in which Muslims are seen as an

indispensable part of America's identity. Non-Muslims tended to focus on best practices for interfaith dialogue. Muslims spoke more from the heart while non-Muslims were more intellectual in their approach to the question of what a positive engagement between Christianity and Islam might look like. This may have more to do with who we chose to interview than with how Christians and Muslims around the world might reach out to one another, but to think and speak differently about common beliefs is to model faithfulness in divergent traditions.

We've divided the "Making Connections" video into two parts. The first session presents Muslims talking about interfaith cooperation and the second session presents non-Muslims addressing the same issue. We hope you will find it instructive to see how people of different traditions speak about a common belief.

-- Ben Daniel

Discussion Questions (pause DVD after each video segment)

The Way, the Truth and the Life

1. How disappointed will you be if, upon your arrival in heaven, you are met at the pearly gates by a Muslim?
2. How comfortable are you with the idea that Islam is a valid pathway to God?
3. Describe one way in which the practice of your faith would cause a Muslim neighbor to be glad you are her neighbor?

Faithful Interfaith Understanding

1. Stephen Prothero's approach to interfaith understanding emphasizes an appreciation for difference while Hans Küng's approach seeks to find common ground. Which approach (Prothero's or Küng's) do you find to be most helpful?
2. How can we learn from an appreciation of difference?

3. How can we learn from the process of finding commonalities?

Faithful Interfaith Action

1. Were people in your faith community to protest the building of a mosque in your neighborhood, what would you do?

2. Hans Küng suggests that there must be peace between religions if there is to be peace between nations. Discuss.

3. What are the barriers to respectful interfaith listening and appreciation in your community?

Faithful Interfaith Appreciation

1. What do you appreciate about Islam?

2. What would you like for Muslims to appreciate about your faith tradition?

3. How does your faith tradition inform you as you seek to live in a way that is authentically human?

***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?



