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Religious Tolerance and Islam: A Comparative Analysis

BY MARK J. ROZELL

How do attitudes about religion impact elections?

To what extent are perceptions of Muslims in the U.S. and Germany influenced by the media?

What role does religion play in an immigrant group's ability to integrate in the U.S. and Germany?

By most measures the United States today is a religiously tolerant country, despite its past history of discrimination against many minority faith communities. Survey data consistently show that strong majorities of Americans are accepting of the country's current religious diversity. Most Americans perceive pluralism as a special strength of their society and believe that no one group has a right to impose its preferences on others. The U.S. indeed was founded on the principle of protecting the rights of individuals and the original European settlers came to the Americas to freely practice their religious beliefs and to escape government-imposed state religion. The ideal of personal religious freedom is deeply ingrained in U.S. culture.

Basic Trends in Public Opinion

A recent Pew Forum for Religion and Public Life national survey asked Americans to choose whether "my religion is the one, true faith" or "many religions can lead to eternal life." Sixty-five percent chose to say that there are many paths to eternal life, and merely 29 percent professed the belief that there is only one true faith.[1] This openness even extends to nonbelievers. Although two-thirds of Americans agree with the statement that the "U.S. is a Christian nation," 84 percent of the public says that someone can be a good American even if he or she does not have any religious faith.[2]

Nonetheless, while most Americans are personally tolerant, many do not perceive the society as a whole as being open toward certain groups. For example, a strong majority of U.S. citizens (58 percent) believe that Muslims in the country are subjected to significant discrimination. This percentage is far higher than for any other religious identity and on a level with perceptions of the country's treatment of gays and lesbians.[3] As with all data, this finding can

be read in different ways. It can be seen as an affirmation of the existence of discrimination against Muslims in the U.S.; but it can also be seen as a positive in that so many Americans are willing to acknowledge honestly the existence of unfairness in the treatment of certain groups of citizens.

MANY SEE MUSLIMS AS FACING DISCRIMINATION

There is a lot of discrimination against...

Religious Groups	%
Muslims	58
Jews	35
Evangelical Christians	27
Atheists	26
Mormons	24

Other Groups	%
Gays and Lesbians	64
Hispanics	52
Blacks	49
Women	37

Source: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Survey (2009)

Although surveys reveal high levels of overall religious tolerance in the U.S., throughout history certain religious minorities have suffered significant discrimination. It is one thing to express a generalized tolerance toward religion and the concept of religious pluralism; it is quite another to practice tolerance toward specific religious minority groups. In this regard, the current station of Muslims in the U.S. may have some similarities with other religious groups—for example, Catholics and Jews—that in the past were met with resistance and even hostility and had to struggle over time for mainstream acceptance. For Muslims in the U.S., achieving similar mainstream acceptance appears unlikely in the near future. The evidence points to progress in that direction, but slow progress.

Forty-five percent of the people in the country admit that they would be less inclined to vote for someone who is Muslim.

Intolerance or non-acceptance of Muslims is evidenced in concrete ways. At various times, Americans have associated Islam with fringe groups such as the Nation of Islam or with Arab extremists. Some academic research evidences significant bias against Muslims in U.S. elections and an increased propensity among voters not to vote for a person who has what they perceive as an Arab-sounding name that many automatically associate with Islam.[4] When asked whether they are more or less likely to vote for a person who is of a particular religious affiliation, 45 percent of the people in the country admit that they would be less inclined to vote for someone who is Muslim. The only other religious group that attracts as much discomfort for voters in the U.S. is Mormons.[5] And in reality, this finding may be significantly understated because the survey question required respondents to openly identify themselves as disinclined to vote for someone based on his or her religious affiliation. It is likely that a good many respondents did not admit to attitudes that they knew others would understand as discriminatory.

Such attitudes came to the fore most notably during the 2008 presidential campaign when a variety of national surveys revealed that between 12-20 percent of Americans wrongly identified Barack Obama as a Muslim and many of those also questioned his nationality and believed he had connections to terrorism. For American Muslims it was a confirmation of disturbing societal prejudices that it mattered to so many Americans that a candidate for office was suspected by some of being a practitioner of a particular faith. Realizing the possible political downside to questions about the candidate's faith, and in particular whether he is a Muslim, the Obama campaign worked assiduously to assure Americans that he is indeed a Christian. It took a nationally prominent non-politician, General Colin Powell, in a widely-watched televised endorsement of Obama, to bring clarity to the whole issue of Obama's religious identity by posing the simple question of why should it even matter:

"Well, the correct answer is, he is not a Muslim; he's a Christian. He's always been a Christian.

"But the really right answer is, what if he is? Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country? The answer's no, that's not America.

"Is there something wrong with some seven-year-old Muslim-American kid believing that he or she could be president?

"Yet, I have heard senior members of my own party drop the suggestion, 'He's a Muslim and he might be associated with terrorists.' This is not the way we should be doing it in America."[6]

Survey data show that anti-Islam sentiments are the most prevalent among the large segment of the population that is evangelical Protestant.[7] One interesting study produced a content analysis of evangelical books from both before and after September 11, 2001. The author found that after 9/11 there was an increased anti-Islam stridency in that literature.[8] Some observers have bemoaned that for many evangelicals, Islam has replaced the former Soviet Union as the leading foe of the U.S.[9]

Negative societal stereotypes of Islam also persist in the U.S. For a significant minority of Americans, Islam is associated with violence. To the question of whether Islam encourages violence more than other faiths, in 2009, 38 percent of U.S. citizens answered "yes." That percentage nonetheless is a significant drop from 51 percent in early 2002 when the question first was asked in a Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey.[10]

Familiarity does foster more tolerance. In the same survey, 45 percent of U.S. citizens say that they personally know someone who is Muslim; and this group was less likely than others to say that Islam encourages violence. Further, slim majorities of U.S. citizens could correctly answer basic questions about the name of the Holy Book of Islam and the name used for God. Again, this group had more tolerant views than those who possessed limited or no basic knowledge of Islam.

Role of the Media

The role of the media in influencing public perceptions of Muslims and Islam in the U.S. is varied and complicated. Given that Muslims constitute merely 1-2 percent of the U.S. population—there are no reliable data on the actual percentage—it is safe to say that for most Americans their understanding of Islam and Muslims is largely media-driven. Here I mean media in the broad sense of the word—not just news coverage but also movies, television programming, music, magazines, and books, among others.

A 2007 survey found significantly that when asked to rank the major influences on their views of Muslims, for the top two categories, 32 percent of Americans chose the media and 18 percent chose personal experience. For the first group, overall 48 percent said that media had contributed to negative views of Muslims and only 20 percent said the media contributed to positive views. Alternatively, for those who cited personal experience, by a more than 3-1 margin this group said that these interactions contributed to positive rather than negative impressions of Muslims.[11]

There are surveys of media coverage that indeed document pervasive negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims. Many of these analyses focus on entertainment media in particular—especially Hollywood films and television programming where the negative stereotypes are perhaps the worst of any media.[12] Scholarly works find that this media stereotyping has existed over a long period of time, beginning long before 9/11.[13]

Edward Said's book *Covering Islam* documented persisting negative stereotypes of Islam in mainstream U.S. news media and scholarship as well. Said emphasized that the sins of the modern news media were (1) the lack of specialized training for journalists who were charged with covering Islam; and (2) the reliance by these journalists on experts who themselves are not culturally aware or knowledgeable or who have a particular bias that the reporters do not recognize.[14]

Since the publication of Said's book, written originally in 1981 (and reissued years later), the dramatic reconfiguring of the news media environment in the U.S. has resulted in substantially more controversial, opinion-laden commentary, with much of that led by very successful conservative talk radio and cable television programs. Putting it mildly, these are not the venues for quality or reliable information about Islam and Muslims in the U.S., although these programs generate large audiences and have a big impact on public perceptions. Popular conservative talk show hosts especially have raged against Islam as an inherently violent religion and further fueled negative stereotypes and some ugly behaviors toward Muslim U.S. citizens.

One academic study by Deepa Kumar of Rutgers University documents that the U.S. media rely heavily on certain "frames," all negative, when reporting about Islam: among these are: (1) that "Islam is a monolithic religion"—witness all of the generalizations about the so-called "Muslim world"; (2) that Islam is a uniquely sexist religion; and (3) that "Islam is inherently violent."[15] Kumar's study points out that such frames for media coverage are widely treated as "common sense" or even factual. And these frames have been given expert validation by some noted scholars such as Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington who have perpetuated the "clash of civilizations" thesis, arguing that Western societies value rule of law, democracy, and human rights, in contrast to the "Muslim propensity toward violent conflict"[16] and rejection of Western-based values.[17]

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There also are numerous studies that document clear biases in the descriptions of Arabs, Islam, and Muslims in U.S. school textbooks. Thus, the major sources of information that many U.S. citizens rely upon—including entertainment media, news media, expertise, textbooks—have all been documented to suffer from substantial biases in their treatments of Islam and Muslims.

And the perceptions that exist among Muslims in the U.S. confirm the sentiment of pervasive stereotyping and negative images. In a 2004 survey, just one-quarter of Muslims felt the U.S. media portray Muslims fairly. There was some variation between groups, with African-American Muslims the least supportive of the media (18 percent) and South Asians the

most (34 percent). However, there was an even more negative perception of Hollywood's portrayal of Muslims and Islam: just 14 percent of respondents said Hollywood's portrayal was fair.[18]

Negative Media Events and Responses

Certain media events have resonated strongly with many American Muslims who perceive the existence of bias and negative stereotyping. One example was the Salman Rushdie controversy where media coverage emphasized that condemnation of the *Satanic Verses* was a violation of freedom of speech in a country that deplores censorship. At that time in the U.S., there was extensive coverage and debate about speech codes, political correctness, and banning from classrooms certain works of literature that may have offended the sensitivities of some other ethnic and racial groups in the country. For many American Muslims there was an obvious double-standard at work in that offending some groups was potentially actionable whereas offending Muslims was not even a concern.

The aftermath of the controversy over the publishing of the offending cartoon in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in September 2005 is another example where the U.S. media reaction largely was to condemn calls for censorship and, in the views of many U.S. Muslims, the issue of offending a group's religious sensitivities was treated as secondary or even irrelevant to the debate. Given the strong free speech sentiment in U.S. media, this reaction was hardly surprising. Even so, almost all newspapers in the U.S. did not feature the cartoon in any of the many news stories about the controversy. Arguably, by the free speech standard, not printing the cartoon was a self-imposed form of censorship that denied news consumers access to the full context of the controversy.

Therefore, for most Americans, most of these types of controversies fall primarily within the framework of free speech issues rather than protection of religious groups. There are numerous examples of books and movies that have offended Christians or other faith communities and similarly have been met with protests and even calls for censorship by offended groups. A part of the fabric of a free society with strong speech protections is the inevitable tendency of some artistic people to push the limits of social acceptability and to offend people. Yet the concept of a constitutional-based protection of speech is deeply ingrained and most Americans, even members of the offended groups, side with speech protections over calls for censorship.

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Nonetheless, there are numerous examples as well of strong reactions in the U.S. against anti-Islam speech and unwillingness to condone certain utterances under a broad free speech protection. In 2005 a popular radio talk show host in Washington, D.C. was fired from his top-rated program because he equated Islam with terrorism. Conservative commentator Michael Graham had commanded a strong audience for his WMAL-AM program for several years until he referred to Islam as "a terrorist organization," a characterization he repeated twenty-three times in one broadcast. He added other inflammatory comments about Islam during the broadcast. The station fired him after a strong outcry of protest against these comments, advertisers pulled their ads from the program, and when Graham refused to clarify his comments in a different light and apologize.[19]

In April 2010, the U.S. Army disinvited Televangelist Franklin Graham (no relation to Michael) to a Pentagon prayer service because of anti-Islam comments he had made that were reported on NBC Nightly News in November 2001. Rev. Graham had characterized Islam as "a very evil and wicked religion."[20] In a number of public utterances since that comment, Rev. Graham has added more views on Islam that have offended many Americans and ultimately some religious freedom advocacy organizations lobbied against him being honored at a government-sponsored prayer ceremony.

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For many American Muslims, it is nonetheless revealing that such efforts to condemn public anti-Islam sentiments do not happen instinctively and that it took external pressure to attain corrective actions. The initial response by WMAL-AM management to Michael Graham's inflammatory remarks was to retain the talk-show host and to defend free speech. Graham was not fired for weeks; it happened only after an avalanche of protest calls to the station and advertiser boycotts of the show. Rev. Graham retains a strong following among evangelicals in the country, and was initially invited to participate in the government prayer event, despite his inflammatory comments about the world's second largest religion. His disinvite to one major event came about only after organized group pressure.

Many American Muslims also point to the immediate news media coverage of the 1995 domestic bombing of a U.S. federal building in Oklahoma City. News organizations sought out, and some even featured on television, experts on Islamic terrorism, before anyone knew who was responsible for the bombing. The wrong assumption of who might be responsible resonated with many as confirmation of negative stereotypes in the U.S. media and U.S. culture more broadly.

Yet, the survey data also make it clear that the more people know about Islam and Muslims in the U.S., the more likely they are to reject the negative stereotypes, to be accepting and tolerant. Thus, presuming that people get significant amounts of information from reporting, it is clear that there is simultaneously an educational role being played by some of the media. That may be a function of the more educated citizens—people who are already predisposed toward tolerance—who consciously seek out better quality sources of information.

Perceptions Among U.S. Muslims

The perception among Muslims in the U.S. is that the American people in their specific communities tend to be more open and tolerant than U.S. society at large. Only two-fifths of American Muslims in the 2001 survey agreed with the statement: "In my experience and overall, Americans have been respectful and tolerant of Muslims." On this response, there was some variation by ethnic group. More than one-half of South Asians agreed with this statement, but less than one-third of African-American Muslims concurred. By 2004, agreement with this statement had fallen to less than one-third overall, and had declined in every ethnic group. By a 2004 survey, a plurality of Muslims agreed with the statement that "Americans have been respectful and tolerant of Muslims, but American society overall is disrespectful and intolerant of Muslims."[21]

U.S. citizens who say that they know Muslims personally tend to have positive views; those who do not tend to draw negative images from entertainment and news media.

To what can we attribute this disconnect between perceptions of American people on the one hand and U.S. society on the other? Much of that is due to the differences between the directly personal and the mediated experiences of people. U.S. citizens who say that they know Muslims personally tend to have positive views; those who do not tend to draw negative images from entertainment and news media. Muslim Americans recognize and acknowledge the general openness and kindnesses of most other Americans with whom they have had personal contact in their communities, but simultaneously see the same media-driven stereotypes that frame their broader perceptions of how American society views them.

According to the Pew Research Center survey, most Muslim Americans nonetheless have a positive view of the communities in which they live and are generally happy with the state of the country. The vast majority believe that today in the United States, they have the opportunity to succeed and enjoy a quality life if they work hard.[22] This finding is vastly different from the reality for many past religious minorities in the U.S., such as the Irish Catholics, who suffered widespread discrimination in all facets of life and spent generations economically marginalized.

The Pew data reveal that Muslim Americans in general are highly integrated into the mainstream of U.S. society. They are largely middle class, report having many close friends who are non-Muslim, believe that it is important for new immigrants to adopt American customs, and do not perceive any significant conflict between practicing their faith and living in the contemporary U.S.[23]

A Continued Dialogue: U.S. and Western Europe Compared

These findings showcase a significant difference, for example, between the situations for Muslims in the U.S. and in western European countries. The Pew Global Attitudes surveys in 2006 found that in western European countries Muslims were far less content than U.S. Muslims with their living conditions and that western European Muslims harbored significant fear of unemployment and generally low economic opportunity. The data also showcased that Muslims in western Europe are far less integrated into their cultures than Muslims in the U.S. For example, western European Muslims are much more likely than American Muslims to say that they consider themselves Muslims first and not primarily as members of a national community.[24] Societal acceptance of Muslim immigrants has been far more difficult to achieve in western Europe than in the United States.

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Presentations by experts at the AICGS conference in Berlin in February 2010 revealed some

important differences between the cases of the U.S. and western Europe (Germany in particular). They concluded that the case of Muslim integration in the U.S. offers some important lessons for western Europe, but also some possibly insurmountable differences.

Regarding perceptions of predominant societal attitudes, Mounir Azzaoui explained that many Muslims in the U.S. recognize that they are not unique in that other groups in the past—for example, Irish Catholics, Jews, East Asians—have struggled for and over time achieved widespread acceptance. Conflict within the society is significantly mitigated by the realization that in the U.S. overcoming discrimination occurs for groups over time, whereas the notion of "overcoming" does not exist among Muslims in Europe.[25]

There is a stronger push in Europe for integration by new immigrant groups, whereas the U.S. is much more comfortable with its culture of pluralism.

Religion and religious institutions play central roles in the integration of immigrant communities in the United States. Religious organizations, both Muslim and non-Muslim, provide important resources and facilitate community outreach to many new Muslim immigrants in the country. For example, for years, it was a frequent practice in the U.S. for churches to allow the use of their facilities for religious services by Muslim immigrants in communities where there were no mosques.

An important study in the 1950s disproved a widespread assumption that religion actually delays acculturation and assimilation into a new community in the United States. Abdo Elkholy examined two Muslim American-Arab communities—one in Toledo, Ohio and the other in Detroit, Michigan. The former was the more religious community and also better assimilated than the latter. A part of the explanation was that religion provided for a common bond among many Muslims of diverse national origins, and that as religion became the basis of connection among people, nationality receded in importance.[26]

Other studies have pointed to immigration laws and practices as important factors in explaining the relative success of Muslim integration in the United States. Large numbers of highly educated Muslims have been admitted to the U.S. on preference visas, providing not only an important influx of doctors, professors, and engineers, among other professionals, but also groups of new people who became economically contented and happy citizens. Changes in U.S. immigration laws led to a significant wave of Muslims into the country after 1965, with most coming from South Asia and possessing high levels of education.[27]

By the mid-1980s, a survey of several Muslim communities in the U.S. showed that their level of educational achievement vastly exceeded the national average, with an astonishingly high over two-thirds of the sample possessed a graduate degree.[28] As Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad points out, from the 1990s to the present the children of these immigrants have similarly sought out advanced education and careers in the higher professions.[29] More recent data drawn nationally show Muslim Americans to have income levels on a par with the country's average, and that they fare far better in the U.S. economically than in western European nations.[30]

Any comparison of the U.S and western European situations must take into account the very different Muslim populations. Most estimates place the Muslim population at between 1-2 percent of the U.S. and between perhaps 5-6 percent in Germany. As Azzaoui points out, about one-third of Muslims in the U.S. are African-Americans. Thus, the U.S. is "the only Western country to have such a large number of indigenous Muslims." Therefore, Islam is less easily "depicted as something foreign and un-American" than in Europe.[31] The stronger perception in Germany of Islam as a "threat" is due in part to the larger portion of the population that is Muslim and also because of the lower socioeconomic status of the new Muslim immigrants who are relatively recent arrivers to the country.

Cultural factors also play a major role in explaining the differences between the U.S. and western European experiences. As several of the AICGS conference speakers pointed out, there is a stronger push in Europe for integration by new immigrant groups, whereas the U.S. is much more comfortable with its culture of pluralism. Religious institutions in the U.S. facilitate adaptations for new immigrant groups. The heavily secular cultures of the European countries result in religion being perceived instead as an obstacle to successful integration.

Debates common to European countries regarding banning women from wearing head scarves or full-face Islamic veils are not part of the U.S. political dialogue. The U.S. custom of protecting religious freedom in a pluralistic community extends to such practices among pious Muslims that are controversial in Europe. Groups such as Human Rights Watch have denounced current and proposed European bans as affronts to religious freedom and also as setbacks to the cause of facilitating integration.[32] At this writing, it is not clear whether the naming and shaming of European governments by transnational organizations will have a positive impact on these current

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debates or result in national backlashes and further efforts at restrictive policies.

Integration generally is not a smooth or easy process anywhere in the world. Differences in the experiences of the Western democracies are expected. Efforts are being made on both sides of the Atlantic to address many of the complex issues surrounding Islamic immigration and integration. Further transnational dialogues are necessary to facilitate better recognition of the special challenges faced by societies that are in transition and seeking strategies themselves for adapting.

NOTES

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22 Pew Research Center, *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream*, 1-2, 29-30.

23 Ibid, 1-3, 29-35.

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This Issue Brief is part of AICGS' project on the "Integration of Muslim Immigrants in Germany and the United States," which works to deepen German and American understanding of immigration and integration of Muslims. Even though the U.S. and German debates are clearly different, a comparison of Muslim integration in the U.S. and in Europe is still drawn frequently. Europeans often view the U.S. as model in integrating immigrants, including Muslim immigrants, whereas the U.S. cites Europe's perceived lack of integration as a security risk. In examining these assumptions, the project focuses especially on the second and third generation of Muslim immigrants on both sides of the Atlantic, who show remarkably similar tendencies. Comparing German and American approaches toward integrating Muslim minorities will impact the debate in both countries positively and contribute to the development of optimal policies on both sides of the Atlantic.

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