

burbankleader.com/news/opinion/tn-gnp-in-theory-can-muslims-shake-off-a-negative-image--20110812,0,3563124.story

Burbank Leader, In Theory: Can Muslims shake off a negative image?

August 12, 2011

Q. As Muslims around the world observe the holy month of Ramadan, a new survey shows that American Muslims are happier than ever. A Gallup study found that 60% of Muslim Americans surveyed reported they were “thriving,” slightly higher than for Americans of any other religion except Jews, and are optimistic about their lives.

The survey, carried out over two years by the Abu Dhabi Gallup Center, found that Muslim Americans said their standard of living was improving over past years and that, with the election of Barack Obama, they felt a sense of political enfranchisement. More Muslim Americans said attacks on civilians were wrong than any other religious group, and almost 70% said they identified strongly with America.

Ahmed Younis, an analyst for the center, said, “Muslim Americans are thoroughly American in their allegiance and identity and don't see a conflict between that and being thoroughly Muslim.”

Nonetheless, the poll also found that negative perceptions of Muslims are still strong, with half reporting racial or religious harassment or discrimination. About a third of Catholics or Protestants polled claimed that Muslims aren't loyal to America, and that Muslims should be more vocal in condemning terrorist attacks.

While the increased happiness of Muslim Americans is a good thing, can the community ever shake off its negative image?

Answer:

While I am happy to hear that 60 percent of Muslim Americans reported being happier than in the past, I know that there is still a great deal of negative feeling in our nation about Islam and Muslims. I wonder how the other 40 percent of Muslims who were questioned feel about their lives. The fact that the same Gallup study showed that about a third of Catholics or Protestants believe that Muslims are not loyal to America and should be stronger in their condemnation of terrorist attacks reveals that we have a long way to go in establishing a truly accepting culture.

Ramadan is a time in the Islamic calendar when Muslims fast and make amends for their past wrongs and pray to lead more faithful lives. Perhaps the rest of us would do well to follow their example. Our country has done things for which we should all ask forgiveness, not the least of which is the invasion of Iraq. We now know that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and that the pilots of the planes that crashed into the World Trade Center were not from that country. It is very well for us, in the safety of our homes, to make judgments about the evils of others. But we have much to atone for in the deaths of innocent men, women and children in that far-away land.

I do not naively assume that all Muslims are without blame. But the destruction of a country and its people in revenge for the actions of those who used religion as a cover for their heinous actions is not a fair trade. My hope is that we will cease blaming those Muslims in our country for crimes that they did not commit and learn more about the true nature of Islam — not the radicalized version practiced by terrorists. If we can do that, we may find that we can share common ground. And maybe the Muslim Americans will be able to forgive us for our arrogance.

Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills, La Crescenta, CA

Wow to this great question, and wow to the great city of La Cañada Flintridge and the surrounding areas of Glendale, Pasadena, Burbank and the Crescenta Valley.

For the first wow, “Can the community (of Muslim Americans) ever shake off its negative image?” The answer is a resounding yes, because the negative image is a creation of Islamic extremism, media sensationalism and the cottage industry of Islamic bigotry.

The small problem of Islamic extremism is caused by al-Qaida and the deranged individuals who act as lone wolves (think about the Christian parallel, a Norwegian extremist trying to hijack Christianity). The large problem of Islamic extremism is perpetuated by the mostly illegitimate and oppressive governments of Muslim-populated countries. Saudi Arabia and Iran are the largest purveyors of Islamic extremism. The most advanced exception to this general condition is Turkey, which has successfully integrated moderate Islam and secularism since 2002, when it was freed from the web of corruption caused by its military establishment.

Media profiteering and the quest for TV ratings just cannot cope with the plain reality that most Muslim Americans, and Muslims worldwide, are simply moderate, peace-loving and freedom-seeking people. The poorly named Arab spring is the manifestation of the moderate and peaceful nature of the vast majority of the Muslim world.

The self-proclaimed Islamic pundits are always looking to stoke the winds of hatred. Islamophobia is here, but is always marginalized by anybody who has real knowledge of Islam or personal contact with Muslims. Unfortunately, in the run-up to the 2012 presidential elections, we will see fear of Islam used as a wedge issue again. Browse over to loonwatch.com for a list of practitioners of hate toward Islam and Muslims.

For the second wow, Muslims in our local community — through the activities of the Islamic Congregation of La Cañada Flintridge — have received overwhelming positive reception with all our activities since December 2005. Since we were greeted with open arms by our elected officials, our interfaith community service activities have quelled the negative images created by the Islamic pundits and media sensationalism.

Our homeless feeding and partnership with Habitat for Humanity have served countless underprivileged people in the Southland. The byproduct of our social gatherings has become a rallying point to not only serve the underprivileged, but to also naturally serve the mission of the ICLCF: Muslim neighbors working together for peace and mutual understanding. There is no image problem to shake off because the force of human relations has seen through the garbage of bigotry.

By sheer coincidence, our guest speaker for our sixth annual Ramadan potluck dinner is Ahmed Younis, senior analyst at the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies. We invite all to attend on Friday, Aug. 19, at 7 p.m. at the Community Center of La Cañada Flintridge. If you are interested in attending, please send an email to info@iclcf.org.

Levent Akbarut
Islamic Congregation of La Cañada Flintridge
La Cañada

First of all, I am more than a little concerned that there are religious groups that condone attacks on civilians. In the name of God — however you call out to God — the Gallup Poll Center should get a resounding 100% “no” whenever it asks such a question.

For those who are unsure when asked, it is tragically easy to locate, and to hear from, civilian victims of military attacks — from the Holocaust to Zimbabwe to Burma to Syria and into places and stories unimaginable.

On the question of the image of Muslim Americans: Muslim leaders in Southern California consistently and publicly communicate the messages of moderate Islam in order to distinguish themselves from radical fundamentalist elements of Islam. They issue ongoing condemnations of terrorist attacks. They communicate their commitment to the country through participation in civic institutions and charities that serve their communities. I hear these statements all the time.

But we hear what we want to hear. It is possible to select a news source that will never report on the normal lives of moderate Muslim families, but will faithfully report and interpret the words and actions of extreme elements. This happens with Christian communities, too, of course. In the media, you are more likely to hear of scandalously lusty and greedy pastors than church members who shape their lives around Christ-centered service and love. The life-giving expressions of a moderate, faithful life are just not as newsworthy as the extreme, death-dealing expressions of broken lives.

We fail ourselves and our communities when we allow sensationalized reporting to shape our impressions of our neighbors, when we could actually meet our neighbors and form our own impressions. We build up our communities when we take the time to move beyond image to relationship.

The Rev. Paige Eaves
Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church
Montrose

On my way back from a camping trip this week, traveling south through the Owens Valley on Route 395, I passed the historic site of Manzanar. The National Park Service has been restoring it as a museum and educational center to teach cautionary lessons on the use and abuse of land for purposes of using and abusing people. (Miners and ranchers took the land from the Paiute tribe, with help from the U.S. Army; city folk took it from them, rerouting all the water for the Los Angeles Aqueduct; then, of course, it was used for the internment of Japanese American citizens in World War II.)

Even though the purposes for rebuilding are good, it's still chilling to see the looming guard tower and humble barracks buildings rising back to life among us. Downright creepy, to see it being rebuilt during this era of paranoia, xenophobia and religious reactivity.

I'm so glad to hear that Muslim Americans are able to be mostly happy and hopeful despite continuing harassment and prejudice. And I think that the burden for removing a negative image should be less on them, more on non-Muslim Americans.

I think every one of us should, at least in our imagination, stand often on the dust of the windblown desert at Manzanar, look up through the barbed wire at the empty guard tower, and take a vow within our own soul to never allow that sort of hysterical racism to take root within us. Ever.

“For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek [native and settler, Asian American and other Americans, Muslim and Christian, us and them]; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him” (Romans 10:12).

The Rev. Amy Pringle
St. George's Episcopal Church
La Cañada

The 9/11 and other attacks exposed the violent tendencies of Islam, which many believe are inherent in its core doctrines. These murderous attacks on innocent people have understandably left a serious, long-term scar in the hearts of Americans. They have cast a long shadow over the credibility of Islam in our country.

That being said, I believe most of us don't think our Muslim friends and neighbors themselves are terrorists. Most would agree that they desire the peace and prosperity of our country as much as anyone else. Public image in America is generally repairable, given enough time and demonstrated contrition. For many Americans, there apparently hasn't been enough of either, thus the ongoing negative perceptions.

Being accepted by the public is important to living happily in America. But for a happy life in eternity, the Bible teaches that acceptance by God isn't just important — it's essential. Every one of us has sinned during our lives, and our sins alienate us from God. Sin's wages are eternal death and separation from him. Faith in the cross of Christ is the only avenue God has opened that we might be accepted by him.

“For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.” (Romans 5:10).

It's the one way, but that way is open to every person who wishes to take it.

Pastor Jon Barta
Valley Baptist Church
Burbank

Of course Muslim Americans can — and will — shake off any negative image that persists among certain segments of the population. One thing that sets our country apart from others is our ability to effectively integrate immigrants. Over the past 250 years we have attempted many assimilation strategies. Some have worked better than others. This poll reflecting the Muslim American community's happiness and identification with America seems to indicate that we have finally gotten it right.

For a long time, our country was defined as a melting pot of ethnic minorities. This metaphor was used to describe the process in which the immigrant — like metal placed in a hot crucible — allows himself or herself to be “melted” into a formless liquid and then molded into the American way of life. Many immigrants, especially Jews, embraced this model, and along the way abandoned thousands of years of tradition. The term “melting pot” was actually coined by a Jewish immigrant, the playwright Israel Zangwill (1864-1926), who said, “America is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming.... Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians — into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American.”

However, I believe the melting pot theory is misguided, not only from a Jewish or religious point of view, but also from a purely American perspective. Unity that is achieved through obliterating diversity and minority culture is short-lived. We cannot afford to form a superficial union that is based on denying our differences and insisting we're all identical. Diversity, after all, is sewn into the fabric of human existence. When we join hands and unite as one people despite our differences, when we learn to appreciate and respect each other's religion and culture, then we have formed true unity. A symphony composed of one tone is meaningless, but when diverse musical notes are combined, they can form beautiful music.

In my opinion, this poll speaks volumes about our national character and our ability to preserve our respective traditions while at the same time being unequivocally American. This is the bedrock of our national identity, and it distinguishes us from the rest of the world. It is no secret that almost every Western European nation is facing a major challenge from an immigrant Muslim population that is becoming increasingly hostile and radical. Perhaps our allies across the Atlantic could learn something about effective integration from America's positive assimilation practices.

Rabbi Simcha
Backman
Chabad Jewish Center
Glendale

While I can't know the heart of any Muslim American, I can only hope that when foreign Muslims arrive on these shores and take the oath of allegiance, their motives are pure. We are a land of myriad religions and races and backgrounds, but I am still of the unshakable belief that we are this way because of our essentially Christian foundation. The freedoms granted us by our creator, the choice of religious expression and the ability to thrive unmolested is something that comes to us by virtue of Western society forged in the history of Christianity, and it culminates here.

John Jay, America's first Supreme Court chief justice, said once, "Providence has given to our people the choice of their rulers, and it is the duty, as well as the privilege and interest of our Christian nation to select and prefer Christians for their rulers." Reading that quote gives me a clue as to the thinking of our first citizens, and I think had they made it more officially clear that we are a Christian nation, there would be less worry by current people regarding our ever-growing Muslim population.

I think those who wring their hands [might] look at officially Muslim nations and recognize the suppression of Christianity that typifies such places. They hear of Muslim immigrant populations elsewhere rising to positions of power and then overturning governments to conform to their Sharia or other Muslim ideals.

But can this happen here? Should we expect anything different? How can we know? We can only embrace our Muslim neighbors and regard them as fellow Americans unless they prove otherwise. It seems that they desperately want to show themselves faithful, so let's afford them the opportunity. If Americans have any real religious concern regarding our Muslim fellows, then let them return to the churches they have been neglecting and let them fortify the Christian presence here. If America becomes a Muslim nation, it will do so because the people freely chose it by actively embracing Islam or by simply neglecting the Christianity that used to identify us.

Rev. Bryan Griem
Montrose Community Church
Montrose

The survey had some surprising and, for that matter, positive, findings; it was heartwarming to learn that Muslim Americans, who have had to deal with much scrutiny over the years in the United States, have an optimistic outlook about their future in the United States. I hope that these views are not short-lived, as it may be hard for anyone to stay optimistic, given the current economic turmoil.

The survey highlights two possible reasons for this optimism. One is that "Muslim Americans were hurt more than other major religious groups by the recession, and have therefore experienced more improvement as the recovery has begun." Second, Muslim Americans "see [President] Obama as promoting policies that are more in keeping with their own political views."

There is no question that Muslim Americans have a daunting task in trying to change negative religious perceptions, especially when fanatical offshoot groups continue to get the headlines and cause trouble.

In a small way, I understand that. Warren Jeffs, the polygamous leader of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, recently was found guilty of child sexual assault and sentenced to life in prison. What he did was inexcusable. The problem is that the media often associates Jeffs and his beliefs with the Latter-day Saints Church, although Jeffs is not a member of the LDS Church.

Several years ago, a survey of Americans' perceptions of Mormons was conducted. The survey noted that 39% of respondents believed that LDS Church members still promote or practice polygamy.

That is not the case. Polygamy was banned by the LDS Church in 1890 and was only practiced by a small percentage of church members before the ban. I am a fifth-generation church member and as far as I know, I do not have any ancestors who practiced polygamy, and I oppose the practice. Yet I often get asked the polygamy question. Unfortunately, old stereotypes are hard to kill, and despite the LDS Church's efforts, misconceptions still exist.

For Muslim Americans, it will take time, smart media relations and positive public interactions to overcome negative perceptions. It will also take an informed and willing public.

Rick Callister
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
La Cañada II Ward,
La Crescenta Stake

Asking the targets of hostility to "shake off" negative views that others hold of them is an interesting choice of words.

True, it is certainly good for the recipients of insulting words or hostile looks if they can manage to consider the source or use other cognitive or psychological methods to maintain their emotional equilibrium. But I hope this question isn't suggesting that victims should be zen-like enough to rise above physical attacks or illegal discrimination. The responsibility for negativity lies with the viewer, not with the viewed.

Hearing about acts of religious hatred makes me sorely tempted to declare a pox on all the houses of worship that are the sources of the hostility. Try to put yourself in my shoes, a non-participant who nonetheless is forced to have ugliness that seemingly arises from religious differences present in my world.

But it is not about the actual religion, really, any more than those resisting foreign invaders and occupiers are opposing a way of life, or anything other than imperialism. It is xenophobia and racism at work, I believe, in the guise of religion.

Roberta Medford
Atheist
Montrose

Our founding fathers displayed great wisdom when limiting connections between religion and our political structures. Their design of the United States sends a strong message for us to disregard religious affiliations and differences and treat all Americans equally. We see today, with the events in the world, how wise their leadership has been. The United States is fortunate that no single religious sect or polity is accorded any higher legal status in this country. We can see internationally the danger when religious believers seek political power and attempt to force countries to obey their religious views.

Members of diverse beliefs, including Buddhist, Christian, Atheist and Muslim, have resorted to suicide bombings when attempting to influence political decisions. This should convince us that no single group can be identified as violent or disloyal. Americans belonging to Muslim faiths in the United States are just as loyal to the United States as holders of other beliefs. So Muslim believers are right to consider themselves loyal Americans, and they should be viewed with trust and fairness by all other Americans.

Steven Gibson
South Pasadena Atheist Meetup
Altadena