

## Burbank Leader

### In Theory: Can Americans reconcile with Islam?

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*Q. A leading Islamic cleric has begun a tour of America urging American Muslims to help shape the religion's relationship with the USA. Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf says Muslims should depoliticize their faith and that they should aim to make Islam be seen as an American religion, not an alien religion. Rauf, a Kuwait-born Muslim and an American citizen who has stated that he wants to improve relations between Islam and the West, is also the cleric behind the controversial Park51 Islamic center in New York, and has been criticized in some quarters for allegedly saying one thing to Western audiences and another to Muslim audiences.*

*Rauf is also the author of "What's Right with Islam: A New Vision for Muslims and the West," a book which aims for a reconciliation between Muslims and Westerners by finding a common ground and by emphasizing what's right with Islam, not just what's wrong.*

*Do you think American Muslims can bridge the chasm that's developed between Islam and the West since 9/11? Or is Islamophobia so entrenched in American society that there will never be any kind of reconciliation? Could Imam Rauf's tour be the thing America needs?*

Answer:

I am heartened to learn that a leading Islamic cleric has begun a tour of our country to help improve relations between Islam and the West and to try to depoliticize Islam. But I am concerned when I read that some people are already beginning to question both his integrity and his motives.

There is a Native American story that I think sheds important light on our need to find common ground in our lives and our religious values. It goes like this:

An old grandfather said to his grandson, who came to him with anger at a friend who had done him an injustice, "Let me tell you a story. I too, at times, have felt great hate for those who have taken so much, with no sorrow for what they do. But hate wears you down and does not hurt your enemy. It's like taking poison and wishing your enemy would die.

"I have struggled with these feelings many times, as if there are two wolves inside me. One is good and does no harm. He lives in harmony with all around him and does not take offense when no offense was intended. But the other wolf — ah! The littlest thing will send him into a fit of temper. He cannot think because his anger and hate are so great. Sometimes it is hard to live with these two wolves inside me, for both of them try to dominate my spirit."

The boy looked intently into his grandfather's eyes and asked, "Which one wins, Grandfather?"

The grandfather smiled and quietly said, "The one I feed."

I believe that as people of faith, whatever our religious tradition, we need to look for common ground and to feed the wolf within who lives in harmony with all around him and takes no offense when none is intended. I am convinced that if we really do that, we can make our country and the world a more inclusive place. Only then can we hope to rid ourselves of Islamophobia. Only then can we truly live what we say we believe.

**The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford**

Unitarian Universalist Church

Of the Verdugo Hills

La Crescenta

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I believe that the current tension between Islam and the West can be overcome, but that it won't happen quickly and it won't happen with words alone. As a historical precedent, I look to how Japanese Americans were treated after Pearl Harbor. The Japanese Empire was certainly guilty of a heinous attack against Americans, even as the Muslim extremists of today are. Loyal Japanese-Americans were falsely accused and unjustly treated, and that's also happened with many Muslim-Americans today. Yet Japan is now a national ally and Japanese-Americans are no longer vilified.

This reconciliation happened because the root cause of the tension was eliminated. The hostile, aggressive Japanese Empire was defeated and dismantled, and our country came to its senses again and realized that Japanese-Americans, like Muslim-Americans, are just people like us with the same fallible human nature that we all have.

Islam in America will struggle to find a popular common ground until the violent Muslim radicals are likewise defeated. In regard to dialogue and discussions, the appropriate words that settled Japanese/American hostilities were signed by Mamoru Shigemitsu on board the USS Missouri. Imam Rauf's public relations campaign may speak to Muslim-Americans, but because of his past actions, I don't believe he has much credibility with anyone else.

Two Bible passages will help us approach this situation sensibly. First, Romans 12:18 says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." Second, as Jesus told His disciples: "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore be shrewd as serpents, and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16).

### **Pastor Jon Barta**

Valley Baptist Church, Burbank

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Among the zillion words published on Imam Rauf and the controversial Park51 project, it was his link with the Sufi tradition that caught my attention. I first heard of Sufism as an undergrad in Comparative Religion 101 at my Lutheran college. Many years have passed, and I've managed to retain one beautiful thing of this mystical thread, nicknamed the "inner Islam."

"A loaf of bread beneath the bough, a jug of wine, a book of verse and thou, beside me singing in the wilderness — And wilderness is paradise enow."

This verse by Sufi poet Omar Khayyám in translation from Persian just doesn't sound like fundamentalist extremism to me, and neither does Rauf.

Many of us never did blame Islam and Muslim people for 9/11. If anything, the huge amount of U.S. media attention on them since 9/11, and on Park51 and other centers and mosques, should have helped educate us that Islam does not equal terrorism. Obviously I refer to the fact-based, rather than ax-grinding, media here.

The online Islamophobia Watch (<http://www.islamophobia-watch.com>) is a sobering but enlightening read, documenting acts of anti-Muslim bigotry worldwide. They also gather reports on organized efforts, mostly right-wing but with help from some leftist quarters, to create and sustain fear and suspicion of Islam.

Author Max Blumenthal terms it the "new Crusades." Operating at the margins of political life until 9/11, when it gained momentum, the Islamophobes went into high gear with the election of President Obama.

The chasm of misunderstanding about Islam is not so much entrenched in U.S. society as it is created by those who seek to gain politically by fanning the flames of religious hatred.

### **Roberta Medford**

Atheist, Montrose

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If we actually engaged such issues with our rational minds, Imam Rauf and other moderate Islamic voices would long ago have provided non-Islamic America with the information it needs to distinguish moderate, faithful Muslims from fundamentalist, terrorist Muslims. Unfortunately, however, people are rarely analyzing information when it comes to religion and politics — we are more likely to act out of irrational fear, especially when there are so many media voices fueling it. Conservative Christian and Jewish voices frame a worldview that generates fears of Muslim world domination. Americans who are tuned to a particular voice of the American media will hear this message reinforced frequently. Weigh that against the possibility that Imam Rauf's speaking tour might get one night's news coverage or one article in the newspaper, or that his book will be widely read.

On the other hand, it is possible that his speaking tour, which appears to be internal to American Muslims, will generate more passion within that community for an activist approach to service, peace and justice. Perhaps he will reach more young people seeking a faith that enlivens and energizes them, and direct that awesome energy into creating a better world for everyone.

Those of us in the Christian community engaged in seeking common ground will keep doing the same — fueling a passion for service, peace and justice, and building a desire to heal hate and fear. And we'll all keep working to live into a worldview in which there is no enemy to fear and no enemy to conquer — only other people on the planet, trying to live with dignity and joy.

The Paige Eaves

Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church, Montrose

The roles of Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf and the Park 51 Islamic Center in New York are simply being overplayed. The trumped up controversy plays nicely into the hands of special-interest groups, and the media loves the sensationalism that the theater of confrontation creates. What gets lost is the authentic and more pervasive American-Muslim narrative.

Mr. Abdul Rauf is one individual doing excellent Islamic work through writings, interfaith dialogue and carrying out his civic duty as both Republican and Democratic administrations have called upon him to build bridges between the U.S. and the Muslim world. As a Muslim author and thinker, he has some great ideas, but he is one voice among many of the diverse American-Muslim leaders. I was an organizer of an art-and-music interfaith festival in 2004 called "God Loves Beauty" where the interfaith community in Los Angeles invited him to be a speaker. So while he does have some national recognition as an interfaith leader from New York, he was primarily put into the national spotlight by a strife fueled by the political agendas that come and then go. The main issue is not the significance of Abdul Rauf's good ideas and his speaking tour, which I think would be beneficial. The central issue is that American Muslims are naturally integrating into our pluralistic society and are doing good work in their own communities. The alleged chasm that's developed between Islam and the West since 9/11 is not really happening here locally or in the Los Angeles area on a wide scale. The Islamic Congregation of La Cañada Flintridge, through its multitude of activities, has brought together the Muslim residents of the city with their fellow citizens around social issues that are important to all of us. Together, our community has defied the political partisanship and the vitriol of bigotry by building affordable housing through Habitat for Humanity, feeding the homeless in Skid Row, providing the annual Interfaith Baccalaureate Service for all graduating seniors and breaking bread during Ramadan.

There are also many other organizations based in Los Angeles that are doing their part in reaching out to the larger community and have been quite successful in disseminating correct information about the authentic teachings of Islam and what American Muslims are all about. Yes, Islamophobia does exist in some parts of the country, and at times gets perpetuated by some pundits and special-interest groups, but for the most part, it is being eradicated on a daily basis by a civic-minded and engaged American Muslim community working together with the larger interfaith community.

No acts of overt reconciliation needed because we are united as one community of Americans, e pluribus unum.

**Levant Akbarut**

the Islamic Congregation of La Cañada Flintridge

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I do not think Feisal Abdul Rauf's tour is helpful to the Muslim cause. He is too controversial, seems to speak with a forked tongue, and expresses no real revulsion to terrorism or regard for the terrorized. He's been quoted as saying the U.S. was an accessory to our own 9/11 tragedy because of our policies. That's like saying a woman was responsible for being raped because of what she was wearing, which isn't a far-fetched comparison, given that Islamic law (Sharia) generally disfavors rape victims and often punishes them to death.

Rauf blames Christianity for bombing Japan in World War II, as if dropping bombs during wartime is up to ecclesiastical law in America. He obviously doesn't make the distinction between our religious people and our secular government, and it doesn't appear that he wants to. If Rauf had his way, I believe he would like to see Sharia replace democracy in America, thereby replacing what has come to be the fruit of western civilization's generally Christian ethos.

Our religions are diametrically opposed, but that doesn't mean I disparage another man's right to worship whatever he wants, only that I do not want to help it proliferate, and I might remind the readers that nobody fears Christian suicide bombers.

I also do not like the term Islamophobia. Defined, the word generally includes hatred, prejudice, and unreasonable dread of all Muslims. It isn't the people, per se, but Muslim philosophy and its application about which Americans are leery. Is it not wise to keep our heads out of the sand with regard to this?

### **The Rev. Bryan Griem**

Montrose Community Church, Montrose

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Do most Americans have a good understanding of Islam? I don't think they do. Would it be helpful for well-respected American Muslims to tour the country with the goal of helping educate Americans about Islam and build bridges? Yes. Would it be helpful or detrimental for a controversial American Muslim, such as Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, to be a spokesperson for the Muslim community? I think it could be detrimental — the focus would be on him, rather than on his message.

I do believe that it is important for Americans to understand Islam and, for that matter, the politics of the Middle East. As I write, we are seeing uprisings in Tunisia, Yemen and Egypt. Recently, the Lebanese government went through a significant change. In the coming months, it is very possible that the landscape of the Middle East could be changed dramatically.

It is too early to tell whether these changes will be along the lines of secular moves to democracies or religious moves to theocracies, or a combination thereof. It is clear that the United States is in a tenuous position, as it has supported certain regimes that have promoted "stability" in the name of guarding against theocracies. However, this support has not endeared the United States to many in the Middle East.

Regardless of the outcome of the current strife in the Middle East, bridge-building in the United States is important. An example of this is the "The Islamic Translation Series." Brigham Young University (which is affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) is one of its sponsors. This series is "designed not only to further scholarship in the study of Islamic philosophy, theology and mysticism, but, by encouraging the translation of Islamic texts into the technical language of contemporary Western scholarship, to assist in the integration of Islamic studies into Western academia and to promote global perspectives in the disciplines to which it is devoted."

By the small steps of many, a larger step can be taken by all.

### **Rick Callister**

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

La Cañada II Ward,  
La Crescenta Stake

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Here is what concerns me: Saying one thing to Western audiences and another to Muslim audiences can breed mistrust, and in my opinion, at the very least suspicion.

Rauf says Muslims should depoliticize their faith and that they should aim to make Islam be seen as an American religion, not an alien religion. I agree with this.

With all the Muslims who have integrated into American life, then partook in attacking us, Americans lean toward being prudent now. And that makes sense to me. And of course we should accept, and even embrace, those who are our allies, and are true to their faith. All people and religions deserve respect – as long as individuals or groups do not intend to bring violence against us.

**The Rev. Kimberlie Zakarian**  
LMFT, therapist, Pasadena

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First of all, don't say, "Never!" While there is certainly a rift between mainstream non-Muslim-Americans and the religion of Islam, I'm too much of an optimist to say that such-and-such will NEVER happen.

After Pearl Harbor, there were Americans who regarded every Asian with suspicion. That's certainly not true now, is it? It's no big deal now that some Caucasians marry Asians, and some years down the line Christians will marry Muslims and Muslims will marry Jews and every combination that you can think of right now, and it will be no big deal.

I like the idea that Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf is touring America and urging Muslims to make the effort that their faith be seen as an American religion. The truth is that America and American ideals are open to every person of every faith, and even to those of no faith.

As Emma Lazarus says on the Statue of Liberty, somewhat paraphrased, Send me all who are yearning to breathe free. And what does our Pledge of Allegiance say?

"With liberty and justice for all." Now what part of the word "all" do you not understand?

**The Rev. Skip Lindeman**  
La Cañada Congregational Church, La Cañada

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Yes, I definitely believe that American Muslims can — and should — help bridge the chasm that has developed between Islam and the West. The population of our country is made up of many different types of people who represent every culture, religion and ethnicity in the world. This serves as a powerful testament to the fact that Americans are at heart an accepting people who support integration and multiculturalism.

I disagree with the assertion that our nation is deeply Islamophobic — on the contrary, the foundation and strength of our republic lies in our ability to accept and assimilate people with different backgrounds and beliefs. However, this acceptance cannot come at the expense of our cherished values and vital commitment to liberty, equality and justice.

Our tolerance should not be automatically extended to those who are extremist or violent.

The unfortunate fact is that in most parts of the world today, Islam represents suppression of rights, religious fanaticism, and the demonization of the United States and Israel. The fear of these ideas spreading to our college campuses and population centers is real and present.

As I wrote previously in the column, I urge Feisal Abdul Rauf to unequivocally state his commitment to

American and Western values.

Unfortunately, to date, he has failed to do so and has instead declined to rule out funding from Islamic extremists for his controversial center in New York. Furthermore, he has refused to describe Hamas as a terrorist organization and has been quoted as saying that “the United States has more Muslim blood on its hands than Al Qaeda has on its hands of innocent non-Muslims.”

Until Feisal Rauf comes clean and places himself squarely in the camp of American moral understanding, I fail to see how his tour will accomplish much. The idea of American Muslims launching a campaign to improve ties and deepen understanding between Islam and the West is certainly a good one. But Imam Rauf's efforts will likely ring hollow until he creates a genuine and sincere substructure to underpin his words.

**Rabbi Simcha Backman**

Chabad Jewish Center, Glendale

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