

# MODEL COMMUNITY?

HOW MUSLIMS ARE A STRONG EXAMPLE OF  
RECONCILING FAITH AND AMERICAN CIVIC VALUES



The Lantern Project



CAIR  
CHICAGO





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*Executive Director: Ahmed Rehab*



## The Lantern Project

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The Lantern Project is a project of CAIR-Chicago that leverages the organization's accumulated knowledge base established over a decade of research and analysis on Islamophobia. Making it readily accessible for not only the Muslim community but the wider public that seeks to better understand the history, formation and impact of Islamophobia in America and the world. It provides researchers, activists, journalists, policymakers and students a comprehensive resource on Islamophobes, their funders and affiliations. It also serves as a clearinghouse for meaningful studies and essays that demonstrate significant trends within the Islamophobic movement, its impact and how best to counter its malign consequences.

*Director and Editor: M. Tauseef Akbar*



## Islamic Center of Fort Wayne

[www.fb.me/  
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The Islamic Center of Fort Wayne founded in 1970 and incorporated in 1987 is the first mosque to serve the city of Fort Wayne and its surrounding areas, and is located across Maumee Avenue from Indiana Tech, minutes away from downtown Fort Wayne. It is open to the public daily for prayer services and hosts a number of educational and learning opportunities throughout the year.

*Director: Sabah Saud*

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June 2019

# Introduction

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## Muslims are a Strong Example of Reconciling Faith and American Civic Values

When this report was first commissioned, its original purpose was to shed light on American Muslim social values. Thus far, Muslims have been portrayed as excessively conservative and seemingly unable to reconcile their faith with American Liberalism. Since work on this report begun, however, new dimensions have emerged that provide greater exposure to the dynamics of media, narrative and Muslims in the United States. For example, now that two Muslim women have been elected to congress, there is greater scrutiny being placed amongst Muslims, especially within their current social and political environs. The bottom line is, in the United States (and the UK), the particular configuration of capitalism and electoral politics elicits and requires popular consensus to maintain the current order and all the priorities associated with it. Muslims, who have different experiences from those historically reflected in the mainstream media, are challenging this list of priorities. The misrepresentation of Muslims is an attempt to generate a narrative, a narrative vital to the status quo. And if American Muslims are going to succeed in re-prioritizing American politics for the betterment of everyone, they must come to terms with the nature of narrative and the particular way it works in the United States and how it is changing.

This study is not concerned with the grand intersection of prejudice against Muslims, geo-politics and domestic freedom, though examining such an intersection would be most revealing. This study is concerned with one facet, namely the cultural scrutiny of Muslims in America and the strength or weakness of the narrative around Muslims today. The “Muslim as security threat” is a narrative that most adult Muslims are familiar with: This narrative has naturally accompanied major world events, such as the response to the attacks of 9/11, the Iraq War and the war in Afghanistan. The narrative itself is one of scrutiny, the Muslim is constantly recalled in the public mind as a security threat.

In a nation that prides itself on inclusivity and freedom, the scrutiny that Muslims face is wide ranging and varies in purpose and effect. Some scrutiny is simple curiosity, while much else is malicious, hypocritical and, in fact, counter to the very principles this country claims. Since the status quo cannot accommodate all the new voices represented by immigrant communities and the empowerment of African-Americans, the narrative-makers have more openly embraced ethno-nationalism. Whereas, previously, being an American meant embracing American values, that happen to be western; narrative-makers now argue that one must “be” Western in order to embody those values. Most explicitly, there are thinkers, policy makers and scholars who are pressing for a more ethno-nationalist America by way of denigrating Muslims as uniquely strange and dangerous.

Meanwhile, in contrast to the very claims made by these circles, American Muslims are incredibly well-integrated and have moved into mainstream media circles much faster than expected precisely because the reality of American Muslims can no longer be disguised by the veil of denigration cast upon them. But, though it is inevitable that Muslims will change the outlook of America, effecting how the average American perceives international warfare and the plight of African-Americans domestically for example, attempts to demonize and denigrate Muslims will increase in vigor and malice the more the old outlook changes. For example, Rep. Ilhan Omar (D), of Minnesota, is being attacked for her critical stances on the state of Israel.



Rep. Ilhan Omar. Trailblazing Muslim congresswoman from Minnesota Credit: Tom Williams 2019

Rep. Rashida Tlaib, of Michigan, is likewise under scrutiny. But in both cases the nature of that scrutiny goes beyond politics and indulges racist and Islamophobic theories. The conversation has shifted from one of policy to one of ethnicity and origin.

For example, consider this discussion between Jonathan Mark, associate editor at The New York Jewish Week and Thane Rosenbaum, Distinguished Fellow at New York University Law School on the 20th of February. In discussing Omar and Tlaib, they expand the discussion to include the constituents that the congresswomen represent:

**Mark:** *And I think a big issue we haven't touched on at all, is migration. And immigration is a favorite issue, it's the nurtured baby issue of the Democratic Party right now. And where are these people from? None of them are... this is like the dirtiest word in America or to bring up, but Tlaib's district is all new people, Omar's district is all new people. They all come from a part of the world that's anti-Semitic according to ADL polls and all kinds of international polling.*

**Rosenbaum:** *John, just so we'll be clear since you didn't say the word, I'll say it. You mean Muslims?*

**Mark:** *Yes.*

The scholars go on to elaborate on what they mean by Muslims. They mean people from different parts of the world. The insinuation is these places are backwards and incapable of cultivating a liberal mindset. This is one aspect of the ethno-nationalist narrative: People are the places they come from, never the places they actually are in. Here we uncover our first contradiction, if the place you came from inculcates values, why would the place you have chosen to reside not inculcate values? Why would Muslims who choose to leave places for a better life, simply bring those places with them? Naturally, all immigrants bring elements of their native cultures with them to new lands. But immigrants also integrate into those values that insure success. It is simply a false narrative. Or these scholars are arguing that immigrants are incapable of integrating for other reasons, perhaps genetic? But neither scholar in this case has the courage to make clear their position, they simply want to insinuate and allow the viewer or reader to infer the rest through bias.

One of the common challenges facing Muslim Americans is the idea that Islam is somehow “antithetical” to Western values or that Muslims have difficulty reconciling their beliefs with notions of American democracy. Few things could be further from the truth; in fact, when the data is analyzed and the research completed, Muslims could be considered one of the best examples of living a life of faith and civic virtue. What follows is a report that addresses how and why Muslims are perceived as anything less than exemplary citizens and a data-survey demonstrating that Muslims maintain their beliefs and take liberty seriously, more seriously than Evangelical Christians for example. Finally, we suggest what this data means and how to move forward as Muslim American political actors.

Muslims have successfully animated civic action by faith. Few communities are more outspoken against social injustice, more consistent on economic justice and pluralistic on personal issues (while maintaining faith) than Muslims. Two questions could be reasonably asked: Why are Muslims not perceived this way? And does data reveal that Muslims are serious about liberty?

In the first section of this report we will unpack why Muslims are perceived this way and why perception is important. How Muslims are perceived affects not only Muslims but all Americans. The narrative of the ‘Muslim Problem’ has contributed to the exploitative distribution of wealth, corruption in politics and the division of Americans. Naturally, the ‘Muslim Problem’ is not the only narrative that contributes to the above mentioned issues, but it is emblematic of how race, religion and xenophobia are deployed for nefarious use.

In the second section, we will address what Muslims actually believe and demonstrate how Muslim Americans exemplify American civic values. Statistics show that the more

religious Muslims are (meaning the more often they attend the Mosque, fast and pray) the more politically engaged they become. Muslims are more concerned with civil rights than the average American, particularly the plight of African Americans. And Muslims are more supportive of all Americans having civil rights than Evangelical Christians, for example; Muslims are also more open while 'religious,' more so than Jewish Americans, who are some of the most tolerant Americans, but do not identify as 'religious.'

Finally, the epilogue will begin with a review of perception and end with a reflection on Muslims newfound social standing as "resistance" to the Trump agenda. While we welcome the progress Muslims have initiated and enjoyed in the media and popular culture in the last two years, some caution is also warranted. Muslims risk being tokenized and divided in pursuit of social media 'likes' and 're-tweets.' Again, all faith communities are threatened by the forces of social media, as there is a tendency to invoke large complex concepts and reduce them to simplicity on behalf of a social media avatar.

We benefit from having access to survey data made available over the last few years from the Pew Research Center and the Institute of Social Policy and Understanding. The data reveals that Muslims care more about social justice issues while also extending a great deal of personal liberty to different communities about personal choices. Finally, it shows that Muslims are unique when it comes to the all-too important admixture of fiscal and social issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Dana, Karam, et al. "The Political Incorporation of Muslims in the United States: The Mobilizing Role of Religiosity in Islam," *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Politics*, 2 (2017), 170-200.

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, *Religion and Public Life*, November 3, 2015.



Muslims are turning out to vote and take part in the political process. via. The Wisconsin Muslim Journal



# Section One

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## The Nature of Narrative Politics

The United States is not a democracy. It is a Liberal-Democracy and this distinction is lost on most citizens. A Liberal society is characterized by a high sense of individual autonomy and free expression, personal rights and free trade. Liberal societies also place a high value on private property and actually consider the state the protector of property. It is the state's only real purpose. Property, including capital and assets, possess a certain sacred right in a Liberal state and the United States respects the sacrosanct essence of property by allowing capital to play a prominent role in our politics. But the US does have democratic aspects as well, such as voting and since voting is about majorities and consensus, capital infused Political Action Committees and media "narrate" in order to mobilize groups in such a way that reflects the interests of the status quo.

American Muslims have, historically, been very adept at organizing narratives, but have failed to appreciate the nature of capital infused media and political work. The corporate backed status quo is Goliath and Muslims, David. One can imagine that we as a country would have avoided the tragic war in Iraq or may have, by now, solved the Israel/Palestine issue (this issue cannot be resolved when the resolutions proposed thus far are so unjust to the Palestinians). But instead the American Muslim voice, until very recently, has been altogether marginalized in the American public sphere. Though Muslims have resources, they lack the requisite organization enabling an efficient concentration of capital for media purposes.

This lack of organization has been filled by a narrative proposed by those who seek to narrate the Muslim "problem" to the rest of the world. And to this end, there have been a plethora of critics who have made careers devoted to bashing Islam and Muslims in service to the status quo. And the fact that their thoughts are so incoherent and shallow, yet they still command wide audiences is proof of power, because no other subject of study or commentary can be treated with such poor standards as Islam.

# Section Two

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## The Poor Thinking Characterizing Critics of Islam (Sam Harris et al)

It would be incorrect to say that only Muslims are criticized for being faithful; the ongoing Western critique of religion has persisted since the Enlightenment (1685-1815). So in discussing Islam and those who criticize it, it would be helpful to lay out the common challenges posed to religion by contemporary thinkers. When we begin to have a solid understanding of this critique, we can then understand how this critique is even more exaggerated and misplaced when it comes to Islam.

### How Islam is Under Special Consideration

Sam Harris is a prominent American thinker, his thoughts on religion reflect those of the “New Atheist Movement” (NAM) whose adherents range from popular culture figures like Bill Maher to writers like the late Christopher Hitchens. Harris’ views on religion are perfect examples of the type of thinking that undergirds the NAM. Harris is so committed to “debunking” religion; he started Project Reason, a foundation determined to critique the Bible, Quran and other scriptures. The foundation never really got off the ground but boasted an association of thinkers, celebrities and activists. The people of that association reveal how the foundation served a particular opportunism, wherein comedians – like Ricky Gervais and Bill Maher – were thought more authoritative on matters of religion and history than thinkers who are actually specialists in the field. The foundation is akin to Richard Dawkins’ Foundation for Reason and Science, which in 2014 merged with several groups to form Openly Secular, another non-profit advancing anti-theism. Again, this organization took pride in celebrity adherents, like Bill Maher and John Davidson, former host of Hollywood Squares.

Sam Harris is fond of stating certain positions on religion, for example:

*“Atheism is nothing more than the noises reasonable people make when in the presence of religious dogma. The atheist is merely a person who believes that the 260 million Americans (eighty-seven percent of the population) who claim to “never doubt the existence of God” should be obliged to present evidence for his existence — and, indeed, for his benevolence, given the relentless destruction of innocent human beings we witness in the world each day.”* (“There is No God (and you know it),” 10/06/05, The Huffington Post).

And:

*“The conflict between religion and science is inherent and (very nearly) zero-sum. The success of science often comes at the expense of religious dogma; the maintenance of religious dogma always comes at the expense of science.”* (“Science Must Destroy Religion,” 01/02/06, The Huffington Post).

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<sup>3</sup> I say ‘Western critique’ to demonstrate that all societies have engaged in critiques of religious authority and the interpretation of texts, but the Western critique is typified by a conflict between religion and reason, unknown to other traditions.

<sup>4</sup> Visit <https://openlysecular.org/> for access to videos posted by the aforementioned celebrities.

“It is time we admitted that we are not at war with ‘terrorism.’ We are at war with Islam.”

- Sam Harris



Sam Harris, via. Medium/com



Chris Abdur-Rahman Blauvelt, Founder and CEO of Launchgood via The Mecca Post

These types of critiques are then directed at Islam or Muslims more directly and explicitly. Consider the following passages and how, if widely disseminated, would fuel the idea that Muslims pose a unique “problem” for any society.

*“It is time we admitted that we are not at war with ‘terrorism.’ We are at war with Islam. This is not to say that we are at war with all Muslims, but we are absolutely at war with the vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslims in the Koran. The only reason Muslim fundamentalism is a threat to us is because **the fundamentals of Islam are a threat to us**. Every American should read the Koran and discover the relentlessness with which non-Muslims are vilified in its pages. The idea that Islam is a ‘peaceful religion hijacked by extremists’ is a dangerous fantasy — and it is now a particularly dangerous fantasy for Muslims to indulge.”* (“Sam Harris: Yes, it is a war with Islam,” 04/26/2007, Foreign Policy; emphasis added)

Is it possible to deny the connection between the above quote and statements such as “Islam hates us” made by Donald Trump on CNN in 2016? Further, is it possible to deny the existence of opportunism on both counts? We will explore that possibility in our final section of this report. Harris never misses an opportunity to blame all Muslims for the acts of a few or blame Islam for violent acts, while never blaming other religions with the same intensity. Note here how he neatly closes the circle of Muslim violence; both Muslims who commit violence are responsible for the violence they commit and Muslims who do not commit violence should be held responsible for the violence Muslims commit. He says:

*“The position of the Muslim community in the face of all provocations seems to be: Islam is a religion of peace, and if you say that it isn’t, we will kill you. Of course, the truth is often more nuanced, but this is about as nuanced as it ever gets: Islam is a religion of peace, and if you say that it isn’t, we peaceful Muslims cannot be held responsible for what our less peaceful brothers and sisters do. When they burn your embassies or embassies or kidnap and slaughter your journalists, know that we will hold you primarily responsible and will spend the bulk of our energies criticizing you for “racism” and “Islamophobia.”* (Losing Our Spines to Save Our Necks,” The Huffington Post, 05/25/2011 (updated))

The above passage is most revealing; there is a certain type of entitlement that Harris, et al, enjoy in talking about Islam that they do not when discussing Christianity or Judaism. Notice how Harris speaks on behalf of Muslims. He talks of the “Muslim community.” What community? And which community? These are fair questions to ask. “And if you say it isn’t, ‘we’ will kill you.” Who is this ‘we?’ Again, “we peaceful Muslims cannot be held responsible for what our less peaceful brothers and sisters do.” Many of Harris’ colleagues speak with similar smugness and entitlement.

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<sup>5</sup> CNN, “Donald Trump: I Think Islam Hates Us,” 3/20/2016.

Richard Dawkins:

*"I am against Islam not least because of the unpleasant effects it has on the lives of Muslims."* (The Telegraph, 06/11/2017)

Dawkins and Harris patronize Muslims by posturing concern for Muslims. Again, there is an insistence that Islam is uniquely stubborn when it comes to liberty.

Ayaan Hisri Ali:

*"A culture that celebrates femininity and considers women to be the masters of their own lives is better than a culture that mutilates girls' genitals and confines them behind walls and veils or flogs or stones them for falling in love. A culture that protects women's rights by law is better than a culture in which a man can lawfully have four wives at once and women are denied alimony and half their inheritance. A culture that appoints women to its supreme court is better than a culture that declares that the testimony of a woman is worth half that of a man."* (Ali, "Nomad", 2010, pg. 212)

Notice the sloppy analysis. "A culture?" What culture? Whose culture? And this sloppiness does not extend in only one direction, but two. The "West" is constantly simplified and generalized. As if culture in Sicily is like that of Manchester; and as if either is like Houston. Is Moscow part of the West? It is simply shoddy analysis, which would never be accepted by any reputable academic. But the point here is clear, Muslims who subscribe to Islam are not suitable to the "West."

But the point of this report is not to suggest that Muslims can live a life in accordance with Western values or that Muslims have succeeded in marginalizing their faith for the sake of a Western life. No, the point of this report is to clearly prove the type of analyses we see above, exemplified by Harris et al, are ridiculous by their very nature. Further, Muslims have, in fact, been exemplary in demonstrating the power of American political values by being active, remaining faithful and enjoining conciliatory, complimentary alliances. The entire premise that religion is "problematic" and that Islam is particularly so, bares a childish impulse to speak of the world in the most simplistic terms and to deny humans any agency, which is, ironically, what Islamophobes accuse Islam of accomplishing.

In this respect there are two things we should keep in mind as we move forward. First, the act of having a life animated by faith is one that is dynamic, not one that is static. People, motivated by faith, simply do not live out religious principles in the way described by Harris and company. They caricaturize a life of faith. In other words, the NAM mischaracterize religiosity as much as they do religion. Secondly, as the NAM misstate religion and religious life, they misstate Islam in the extreme. As we correct the NAM's thinking on religion and Islam, we will also articulate ways in which the Muslim community can lead in a new discourse.

# Getting It Right: Believing, Belonging and Behaving

Muslims in America are different from Muslims in Afghanistan, who in turn are different from Muslims in Poland, who are likewise different from Muslims in Peru. This seems like a self-evident statement, but if the New Atheists are correct that religion causes violence or intolerance or is the actual “cause” of any act carried in its name, then the religion in question – Islam, in this case – would cause Muslims to look and behave the same way everywhere it emerges. But that is not the case and clearly so. If one is to argue that Islam “causes violence” why are not all Muslims violent? Islam, in fact, enjoins charity. Are all Muslims charitable? Of course not. Religion does not cause violence or charity; people are violent or charitable and may use religious language, just as they use cultural language or national language to convey the “meaning” of their acts to a larger community.

American Muslims are a distinct community that overlaps with a larger Muslim sense of belonging. But that overlap does not undermine the coalescence of a very real sense of American Muslim values. Analysts who argue otherwise not only deny Muslims their agency and intentions, they deny normal human behavior altogether. And to deny Muslims humanity is a form of discrimination. Harris et al discuss religion as if it is only a set of beliefs, when religion is, in fact, a form of belonging to a community and communities are always located, they have a geographical place. A local community will always be more determinative than an abstract global community.

Numerous studies have in fact shown that American Muslims are very sophisticated in integrating global concerns (such as the Palestinian cause), local concerns (such as police brutality against African-Americans), economic views and their faith. Muslims are also not a monolith in the United States, they come from different ethnic backgrounds, different parts of the world and different economic classes. But regardless of this diversity, they are tied to a coalition of American institutions that facilitate a notion of an American Muslim identity. Further, those institutions are not merely “religious” in nature. Remember, Muslims go to American universities, are members of Bar Associations, medical associations, neighborhood associations and this, in turn, just like all religious groups, informs their sense of belonging. So when we define what American Muslims believe and look at how they behave, we can determine to where they belong and they belong to a distinctly American tradition of living a faithful life, maintaining a very pluralistic outlook, while committing to issues of justice.

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<sup>6</sup> The terms used here “believing, behaving and belonging” were taken from the study “The Political Incorporation of Muslims in the United States.” By Dana, et al. *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Politics*, 2 (2017) 170-200. The authors of this study employed the concept developed by Layman, Geoffrey in *The Great Divide: Religious and Cultural Conflict in American Party Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001; “Religion and Political Behavior in the United States: The Impact of Beliefs, Affiliations and Commitment From 1980 to 1994,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 61 (2): 288, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Dana, et al, p. 171.

# Locating American Muslims: What American Muslims Actually Believe

Though we will be discussing Americans, it is useful to look at Britons as yet another example of the power of the local. In the late 80's one of the most controversial issues involving Muslims in the West was the Rushdie affair. Indian-British author, Salman Rushdie wrote *The Satanic Verses*, a book that was perceived by some as defaming Islam. The scandal became a world affair when Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, issued a call for the author's death. The threat placed Rushdie under protective custody for a decade of his life. And made the author more famous than he had ever been.

This incident was an example of Muslims' "problem" with free speech. Similarly, the Danish cartoon controversy of the early 2000's were seen as yet another example of Muslims resisting free speech. In the West, free speech is sacred, thus any discomfort with speech is seen as threatening one of the cornerstones of Western liberalism. But both incidents are greatly exaggerated by Islam's critics. And both incidents make it fundamentally clear, you cannot ignore local context when discussing Muslims.

When the Rushdie affair began, the response among British Muslims was, well, very British. Muslims did not storm the streets nor break shop windows. Actually, nothing of the sort happened. Muslims protested the fact that British blasphemy laws (which were abolished only in 2008) did not protect minority religions and instead seemed to apply only to Christianity. Thus they cited British common law in their disapproval of the Rushdie book. Only after Khomeini's infamous proclamation was the opinion of a man in Tehran, 3,400 miles away from London, projected onto local Muslims by local media. Meanwhile, the event is still invoked to blame all Muslims for the opinion of one Muslim and the demonstrations in Britain are still remembered as violent, even though no violence occurred.

Similarly, the Danish cartoon controversy is misstated and misrepresented. Anne Norton in her work *On the Muslim Problem* provides a comprehensive account of the various stages to the controversy but the reality boils down to this: Muslims in Denmark did not care and the ones who did care expressed themselves through Danish legal means. In fact, Muslims in the Arab world did not care, as the cartoons were published alongside a critical op-ed in *al-Fagr*, a Cairene paper. The publication neither called for nor provoked violence. Eventually, critics of Muslims had to point to Muslims in other parts of the world, usually war-torn and unstable, to demonstrate that Muslims somehow have a "problem" with free speech. And again, there is the persistent double standard when it comes to Muslims; Europe is replete with laws against discrimination and 'hate speech,' but the cartoons disparaging Islamic figures are treated as "freedom of speech" issues rather than discriminatory issues consistent with European norms. The "Muslim reaction" in Europe sought consistency, not special treatment.

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<sup>8</sup> Norton, Anne. *On the Muslim Question*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, pg. 18.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 19.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 25.



The practice of lumping all Muslims together, in spite of the socio-economic conditions that differentiate them is a form of stereotyping and thus can be described as a form of racism if coupled with policy statements that are either discriminatory or violent (i.e. bombing nations, drone activity). Yet when Muslims criticize the practice of generalizing all Muslims into a single monolithic entity, they are accused of being too sensitive, in other words, they are accused of having a problem with free speech and free thought.

Yet, when we look at other religious groups, we notice things being seen differently. For example, Yair Rosenberg argues in Tablet Magazine that “conflating all Jews with Israel and its policies—and attacking them for it—is textbook anti-Semitism.” This is a premise that Bill Maher or Sam Harris would rarely challenge. Christopher Hitchens argued that the right to criticize not only “Islam but religion in general” is fundamental to Western liberalism. In other words, we should be able to scrutinize religious texts, such as the Qur’an and Hadith, as part of an open, curious society. But Alice Walker, an American novelist who wrote *The Color Purple* was recently called anti-Semitic because she criticized the Talmud. Again, no one of the NAM is rushing to the defense of an American writer, who also happens to be an African-American woman, on the grounds of intellectual rigor and free speech. That passion is reserved for critics of Islam only.

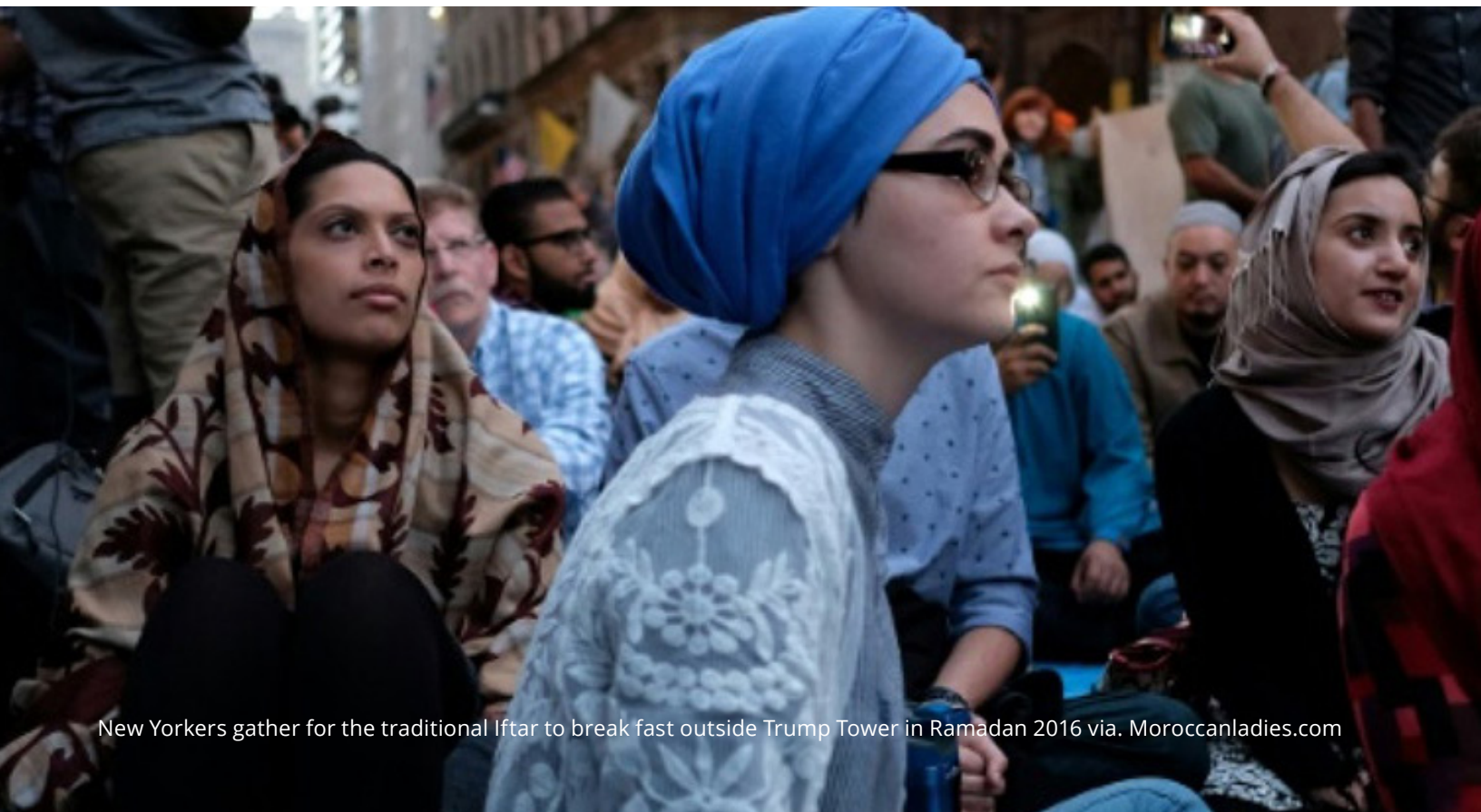
When we focus on what Muslims believe locally, much of the scaremongering of Islamophobes is revealed as hollow and shallow; further, their general criticism of religion is problematic and how they treat Islam is the best example of how problematic their views on religion happen to be.

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<sup>11</sup> Rosenberg, “Israel Boycott Activists Call for Jews to Be Expelled from South African University,” *Tablet Magazine*, 2/12/2015.

<sup>12</sup> Hitchens, Christopher. “Cartoon Debate: The Case for Mocking Religion,” *Slate*, 02/04/2012.

<sup>13</sup> Finley, Nolan. “New Face of Anti-Semitism is Black,” *Detroit News*, 01/02/2019.



New Yorkers gather for the traditional Iftar to break fast outside Trump Tower in Ramadan 2016 via. [Moroccanladies.com](http://Moroccanladies.com)



Muslims making congregational prayer outside Washington D.C. via. Diyanet Center of America

# Section Three

## Reviewing the Actual Beliefs of American Muslims

Numerous studies are available to us reporting Muslim American values and beliefs. What those studies reveal is that Muslims are open minded. They do have shared beliefs that reveal a distinctly American community with American concerns, informed by Islam and are not negligent of Islamic principles when thinking of American justice. But again, this does not mean that Islam causes these beliefs; it means that American Muslims engage a long-standing tradition in relation to their local concerns. In other words, the real question is not religious belief, but social context. Muslims “believe” shared things, “behave” with those beliefs in mind and “belong” to a distinctly American community.

It is important to ask, of course, whether American Muslims are religious or not, if we are going to ascribe any role to Islamic tradition at all in creating an American Muslim community. According to studies, American Muslims are observant, generally more so than other groups. Two things stand out here, though American Muslims are generally observant, the majority of Muslims are open-minded about Islam, with 64% insisting there “is more than one way to interpret the faith.” Further, American Muslims believe Islam is fully compatible with the times, because the mechanisms for reform and renewal are inherent to the tradition itself (islah).

### Most U.S. Muslims say there is more than one true way to interpret Islam

*% of U.S. Muslims who say there is \_\_\_ true way to interpret Islam*



*% of U.S. Muslims who say traditional understandings of Islam ...*



Source: Survey conducted Jan. 23-May 2, 2017.

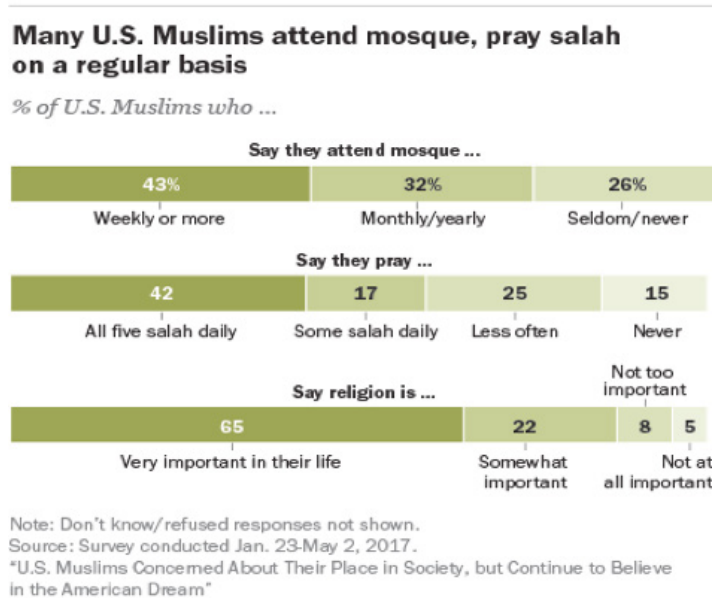
“U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

<sup>14</sup> Sciupac, Elisabeth. “US Muslims are Religiously Observant but Open to Multiple Interpretations of Islam.” The Pew Research Center, 08/28/2017.

Thus it is clear that American Muslims are not only open minded about their fellow Americans, but their faith as well, which facilitates an open outlook that does not place strain on either identity, wherein one is favored over the other or where they are treated as mutually exclusive.

Muslims also maintain an open relationship with their tradition, even if they are not particularly observant. As we can see below, more Muslims hold faith important than attend Mosque, which means just because Muslims are not particularly “observant” does not mean they abandon their tradition. The conversation within the Muslim community is healthy, robust and open.

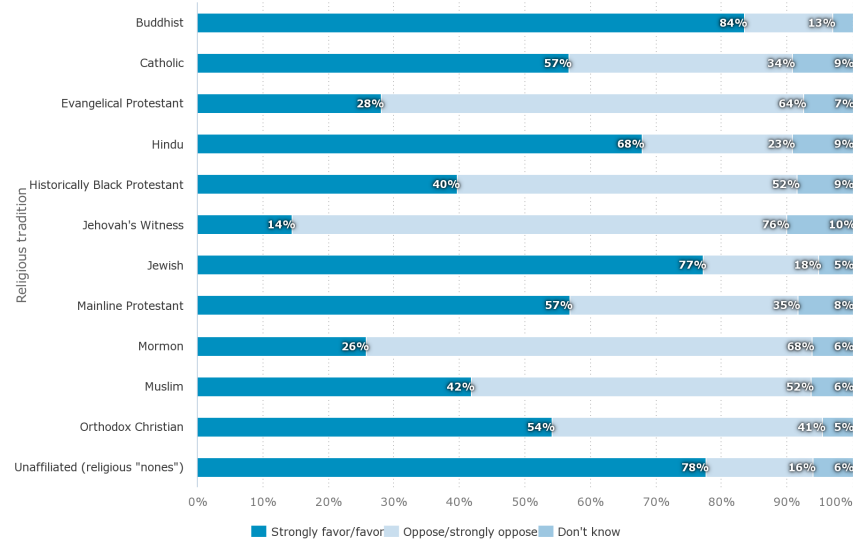


An example of this openness can be found on the issue of same-sex marriage. Islam, like all the Abrahamic traditions is relatively conservative about sex and marriage. But American Muslims (42%) are more open to same-sex marriage than Evangelical Christians (28%) for example, but a key difference to take note of here is the relationship between faith and views when all the data is analyzed. Jewish Americans are far more open on this issue than Muslims, but Jews marginalize the Jewish religion far more than Muslims, rather than engage the religion. 64% of Muslims consider Islam important to them, even though they may not be observant as opposed to 31% of Jews who think of Judaism as important.

Muslims, like Christians, still do not approve of homosexuality in large numbers, but that does not prevent them from supporting civil rights on the issue. And this is a general trend amongst Muslims, they may not believe in something, but they, generally, will not inhibit the ability for people to live their lives freely. And since Muslims actually maintain a relationship with their faith, it makes them exemplary Americans in so far as they tend to conciliate religion and civic views, rather than privilege one over the other.

### Views about same-sex marriage by religious group

% of adults who ...same-sex marriage



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Another area where Muslims distinguish themselves is their views on the plight of African Americans. Muslims are far more likely to see injustice against African Americans than other Americans and are more likely to see discrimination in American institutions.

### Most Muslims say changes still needed to give blacks equal rights

% who say our country \_\_\_ to give blacks equal rights with whites

	Needs to continue making changes	Has made needed changes	Other/DK/refused
<b>U.S. Muslims</b>	67%	26%	7%
Black	79	16	6
Other race	66	27	7
White	59	31	10
Asian	68	26	6
<b>U.S. born</b>	76	18	6
Black	83	10	7
Other race	75	19	6
Foreign born	61	32	8
<b>General public</b>	57%	37%	6%
Black	85	10	5
Other race	53	40	6
White	50	44	6
Hispanic	63	30	7
Other	62	33	5

Note: Whites, blacks, Asians include only non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race. Source: Survey conducted Jan. 23-May 2, 2017. General public data from survey conducted Nov. 30-Dec. 5, 2016.

"U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream"

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Naturally, one could assume that Muslims are more cognizant of the plight of African Americans because a full one third of American Muslims are African Americans. But “even when those who identify solely as black are excluded, U.S. Muslims are more likely than Americans overall to say more changes are needed for black people to have equal rights with whites (66% vs. 53%) and are more likely to say there is a lot of discrimination against blacks (66% vs 56%).”

What can be inferred from these statistics and why are Muslims more engaged in regards to civil rights than other communities? Finally, why do these facts not warrant mention amongst critics of Muslims in America?

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<sup>16</sup> Diamant, J, et al. “Muslims More Likely Than Americans to Say Blacks Lack Equal Rights in US.” Pew Research Center, 09/18/2017.



Kayzar Abdul-Kahbir waits for prayers to begin outside Masjid Mujahideen Credit: Annie Risemberg/Al Jazeera

# Conclusion

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What this brief survey of data reveals is that Muslims are generally open minded about their tradition, insist on contextualizing tradition to suit time and place and care more about civil rights than the average American. We could say more, for example 67% of Muslims say having more women in the workforce is better for society. Again, this statistic flies in the face of comments made by Islamophobes. So why do critics like Harris, Ali and Maher continue to make comments suggesting that Muslims are uniquely stubborn about gender issues or social issues? Because it is propaganda, plain and simple. Islamophobes are within the pro-military loop and contribute to its needs by creating false narratives about foreign enemies to “civilization.” No facts bare their proclamations. But war needs enemies and enemies must be seen as less than human or somehow a “threat” to “civilization.”

Speaking on the Iraq war Harris says: “whatever one may think about the rationale for invading Iraq and the prosecution of the war, there is nothing about the conflict that makes Islam look benign.” Again, the Bush administration, which lied to the American public to prosecute the war, while funneling literally billions and billions of dollars to powerful corporations on behalf of the “war effort” are absolved. Rather it is “Islam” that is on trial, regardless of the origins of that war or the destruction it wrought. And, in Harris’ estimation Islam is malignant, like a cancer. For anyone who has ever thought seriously about the Iraq War and its consequences, for not only the Iraqi people but for American democracy, Harris’ position here is outright childish. He is obsessed with acts of violence carried out in the “name of Islam,” but acts of violence carried out in the “name of democracy” are perfectly understandable – and “civilized.”

A narrative has emerged in the United States over the last nearly twenty years: American tax paying dollars are better spent on war and war technologies rather than health care and education. This is how anti-Muslim animus effects all Americans, it creates a hierarchy of priorities that puts “security” first and social needs last and such a narrative requires a boogie man - and the Muslim has been assigned that role, not by and through him or herself, but through Islamophobes like Harris et al. 70% of Americans supported the invasion of Iraq in 2003, because the average American was told that Afghanistan, Iraq, Osama b. Laden, Saddam Hussein and, possibly, your neighbor Muhammad, the doctor, or Salman the cab driver are all one and the same; they are a monolith, a “true” stereotype. And what could be more shoddy a social science than that?

In the past two years, however, this narrative has changed, dramatically. There are no studies to yet specify what this change looks like, but it is a change evident to the eyes. Since Trump took office, there has been a reactive, but net positive, embrace of Muslims and other minorities by some mainstream media. Trump’s rhetoric against Muslims and Mexicans was so severe and explicit, he violated the one rule of racist policy, the powerful are judged on what they say and not what they actually do. You can invade Muslim countries and profile Muslim Americans as long as you visit the mosque first and say a few nice words. Donald Trump has transgressed the undisclosed manners of polite politics of saying one thing while doing another.



This has provoked a strong reaction amongst mainstream media elites who must distance themselves from such racist rhetoric by embracing minorities, including Muslims in periodicals, magazines and television interviews. But the newfound red carpet treatment being extended to Muslims right now must be received with optimal caution and wisdom. First, it is not at all clear whether mainstream media outlets will remain open to minorities after the Trump presidency, thus some institution building should be a priority for Islamic organizations to take advantage of this opportunity beyond the every so often viral video.

Secondly, Muslims should remain conscience of overarching principles as both Muslims and Americans; these principles should never be easily discarded in pursuit of media fame, especially the social media variety. It has been said often, by not only Muslims but other minorities as well, “we need our own media,” and social media seems an optimal platform for free expression. But social media lacks coherence and, more importantly, organization. Like crabs crawling out of a barrel, there are many Muslim proponents of social justice who promulgate unfounded claims, make generalizations and seek media prominence at the expense of a larger community project. Social media critiques often suffer from poor thinking, these critiques have little to no data-based foundation, are directed at no one in particular to provoke change and are made in vague general ways that resemble Islamophobes. The Muslim intelligentsia must be committed to robust standards of thinking and expression and not imitate those who have made poor assertions about Islam in the name of defending Islam.

But the reality of American Muslims is clear as the data is very clear, American Muslims are open-minded and diverse. Muslims should never be stereotyped by outsiders or “insiders” to serve the purposes of a vacuous critique. Focus should instead shift and remain upon certain shared values that benefit society as a whole, such as Muslim attitudes towards charity and social needs. This report will conclude with one last statistic, 63% of American Muslims say government aid for the poor is good. This statistic is much higher than any other mainstream Christian group. No doubt, this charitable disposition is familiar to Muslims because of Islamic principles. The clear way forward for American Muslims to remain united and cohere is to focus on institution building that focuses on human needs and civil rights to maintain the freedom to do so. These priorities also unites Muslims with their fellow Americans in terms of liberty while enabling Muslims to lead Americans in terms of charity.

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<sup>17</sup> Pew, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> [https://samharris.org/response-to-controversy/#war\\_in\\_iraq](https://samharris.org/response-to-controversy/#war_in_iraq)



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