

2008

Can Good Muslims Be Good Americans?

James Shoopman

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, shoopf68@erau.edu

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Shoopman, J. (2008). Can Good Muslims Be Good Americans?. *Christian Ethics Today*, 14(1). Retrieved from <https://commons.erau.edu/publication/711>

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Christian Ethics Today

A Journal of Christian Ethics Volume 14, Number 1 Aggregate Issue 68 Winter 2008

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Can Good Muslims Be Good American

By Jim Shoopman, Instructor in Comparative Religions and Ethics Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

Because I am a former pastor who teaches a world religions course, my former church members frequently send emails and articles that they suspect might be of interest to me. The most disturbing trend I've seen among such emails, in the wake of 9/11, has been the explosion of virulent anti-Muslim hatred circulating as Christian sentiment within and beyond the Christian community. Middle Eastern Muslims have been demonized in western culture since the time of the crusades, but reaction to the horrible events of 9/11 truly brought hatred of the Arab to a new level, and people began to broadly circulate statements that were not merely anti-Arabic, but more specifically anti-Muslim.

The most recent email that got my attention because of its pretension to rational discourse and scholarship was a tirade that insists good Muslims, by nature, cannot be good Americans. It ended with the ominous words, "Therefore, after much study and deliberation . . . perhaps we should be very suspicious of ALL MUSLIMS in this country. They obviously cannot be both 'good' Muslims and good Americans."

The basic question, "Can good Muslims be good Americans?" is worth addressing in this current atmosphere of doubt and suspicion. Adding further reason to explore the question are the results of a recent poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, which revealed that "While nearly 80% of U.S. Muslims say suicide bombings of civilians to defend Islam cannot be justified, 13% say they can be, at least rarely." More disturbing, "One in four younger U.S. Muslims said . . . that suicide bombings to defend their religion are acceptable, at least in some circumstances, though most Muslim Americans reject the tactic and are critical of Islamic extremism and Al-Qaeda."¹

Those are certainly disquieting numbers, and those who have already made up their mind that suspicion of all Muslims is warranted will no doubt make much of this information, but such anti-Muslim thinkers may very well have created this situation themselves. I suspect the number of American Muslims who would entertain religious violence would not have been anywhere near so high before 9/11. Muslim Americans have been far more frequent targets of harassment and bullying since that event. According to the FBI, the federal government successfully prosecuted 28 anti-Muslim hate crimes in the year 2000. In the year 2005 (the latest date for which the stats are presently available) the government prosecuted 128 anti-Muslim hate crimes.² This is more than a 300% increase in reported anti-Muslim incidents that reach the attention of the federal government. It doesn't reflect but may be indicative of many more incidents that likely go on among young people in schools and recreational centers around the country. Such open hostility and suspicion would naturally lead many young Muslims to conclude that serious efforts at self defense might well be warranted if anti-Muslim sentiment in America ever got worse. Anti-Muslim tirades, harassment, and yes, hateful emails, could well create the very thing we fear most, in response to our growing prejudices.

So, it would be both wise and useful for Christian preachers and teachers to work toward a more gracious attitude. We can start by more fully appreciating the vast majority of American Muslims who would never in their wildest dreams entertain anything like suicide bombings or religious violence of any sort.³ Sadly their large numbers will rarely be emphasized or appreciated. According to *The Atlas of Religion*, there are over 5.2 million Muslims in

the United States.⁴ Other sources estimate lower—under 3 million. By all accounts they have been peaceful and productive neighbors. It is with that in mind that I argue the thesis that indeed, most good Muslims already are good Americans.

The issue is more important to the ethical treatment of Muslims than one might think. After the early nineteenth century revolutions for liberty in Europe, similar questions were raised about Jews. When progressives fought to grant full citizenship to Jews, conservatives argued that they couldn't possibly be good Jews and at the same time be good Frenchmen, Germans, Poles, Swedes, etc.⁵ In those nations where gentiles were able to imagine Jews assimilating into the mainstream of national citizenship, ethical behavior pretty much prevailed, and in nations where people still had a hard time imagining Jews as fellow countrymen, terrible evils followed in the twentieth century. In a recent article, a Baptist chaplain urges us to "consider a Gallup poll that was taken in the summer of 2006 that found that thirty-nine percent of Americans surveyed favored requiring Muslims in the United States, even those who were American citizens, to carry special identification. . . . Most of these thirty-nine percent would be appalled if one compared their attitude toward Muslims to the anti-Semitism prevalent in Nazi Germany before and during the Holocaust."⁶ So, perhaps the first step in the ethical treatment of Muslims is to begin by understanding that they can be good Americans after all.

The first step in proving this thesis would be to define what we mean, or what we ought to mean, by a "good American." I suspect most people today, conservative and liberal, would define a good American as a citizen who respects and obeys the laws, and

who participates, at least by voting, in the political process of this nation. A good American might further be defined as a person who appreciates the process of democracy as practiced here—a person who appreciates his own freedom and is willing to defend the freedoms of others, through political, social, or military service.

Therefore, can a “good” Muslim faithfully do that?

What Is A Good Muslim?

What then do we mean by a “good” Muslim? In the virulent email explaining why good Muslims can’t be good Americans, the (naturally) anonymous writer arrived at negative conclusions about Islam by deferring to the experience of “a friend who worked in Saudi Arabia for twenty years.” This anecdotal evidence sounds authoritative. However, the writer does not take into account the enormous variety within Islam. Saudi Arabia is not necessarily representative of Islam elsewhere. People who’ve learned all they know about Islam through a study of the Saudi form sometimes assume that the beliefs of strict Wahabi Muslims in Saudi Arabia are normative everywhere, hence they conclude that all Muslims will prosecute those who convert from Islam to any other religion, cut off the hands of thieves, and seek to control the rank and file through a secret religious police force that spies on the behavior of the populace. But this does not even begin to describe the values of all Muslims in Saudi Arabia, much less Muslims in Turkey, Nigeria, the United Arab Emirates, or Muslim behavior in the United States.

Another related problem is that Americans sometimes assume Muslims in this country are under the religious control of anti-American clerics in other parts of the globe. Certainly there are Mullahs and Imams around the world who preach for the destruction of the United States, but even in those foreign countries Muslims are not obligated to follow them.

It is also vital for people to understand that the most common interpretations of Muslim sacred literature

do not allow for the violent destruction of innocent non-combatants. (Muslims who condemn terrorism cite Quran 2:190, 5:32 and various sayings of Muhammad from the Hadith, in which the Prophet condemned attacking non-combatants during warfare.) Therefore, taking into account the diversity within Islam itself, it should be clear that a violent, hateful religious fanatic is not defined as a “good” Muslim in most places.

So then, what can it mean to call someone a “good” Muslim—someone who loves his faith and takes its teachings seriously? Probably all Muslims everywhere, Sunni and Shia, would agree first of all that a good Muslim strives to live by the five pillars of Islam—the sincere confession of faith, five prayers a day, offerings to the poor, keeping the fast of the month of Ramadan, and at least one pilgrimage in one’s lifetime to Mecca, if possible. The good Muslim would furthermore know and try to practice the teachings of the Quran and would take Muhammad, as revealed in the stories of the *Hadith*, as the ultimate model of Muslim virtue.

On a practical level, all this looks a little different in each Muslim country and among different sects of Islam, just as “following Jesus” looks different, even among differing types of Baptists, Methodists, and even Catholics. Therefore, a *good* Muslim in America may be quite different in dress, ideology, and daily behavior from a *good* Muslim in Saudi Arabia.

So, the first point in my argument for good Muslims as good Americans is the simple observation that there is no monolithic Muslim ideal, but many interpretations of this ideal, including varieties of Islam that allow for loyalty to American ideals and principles.

Can Good American Muslims Protect American Interests?

If simple loyalty to basic Muslim ideals is not a stumbling block to patriotism, isn’t Islamic loyalty to the universal Muslim community something so powerful that it would transcend loyalty to country? Can good Muslims support the national interest

when it involves war or police action against fellow Muslims?

To address this concern, let’s think about how Christians have behaved when faced with military action against other Christian nations. Through World War I, nearly every major American war was against predominantly Christian countries: the British, Mexico, secessionist southern states, Spain, and Germany under the Kaiser. Evidently we simply concluded that these enemies were not acting in a genuinely “Christian” fashion. If Christian Americans can evaluate national policy with that sort of rational detachment, it is also perfectly possible for Muslim Americans to view an American military or police action rationally, and support the best interests of the country, even if the enemies happen to be of their general religious belief.

Remember, several Muslim nations joined in the action against Saddam Hussein during the First Gulf War, when that dictator sought to swallow up the small neighboring nation of Kuwait. There is no inherent religious reason why American Muslims cannot support sound and sensible policies of American self defense, even against fellow Muslims in another part of the world. According to the Muslim Chaplains Association website, there are at least 4,100 Muslims who did just that, serving the defense of our country in the armed forces.⁷

Can Good American Muslims Embrace Democracy?

Despite reason and evidence that American Muslims are willing to defend their nation’s best interests, thinkers might reasonably argue that “good” or genuinely devout Muslims would naturally have a difficult time supporting the very principle of democracy, since their ultimate model of perfect government is Muhammad as the absolute theocratic ruler of Medina. After Muhammad’s initial call to prophecy, he became the leader of a small, persecuted minority in Mecca. Because he preached anti-idolatry and greater fairness to the poor, he was nearly assassinated by

the Meccan leadership. However, he was invited to become the ruler of a smaller city 200 miles to the north of Mecca, Yathrib. He accepted the invitation and for the next ten years ruled that community as "Medina," meaning *city of the Prophet*. All Muslims look back on this era as a kind of golden age in the spiritual life of the sacred community. Medina under the prophet is the ultimate model for the truly Muslim society. That being the case, would Muslims not find any non-Islamic government to be a pale spiritual failure in comparison?

It is certainly true that Muhammad's theocratic leadership of Medina is a precious memory in the minds of all devout Muslims, but the value of that sacred memory need not undermine support for American democracy. To understand why, let's look at how we Christians have evolved in our own thinking about human governance. The Bible enjoins us to "honor" the earthly king (1 Pet 2:17), and there is not one passage in the Christian Bible that specifically calls on Christians to govern themselves through democracies. Devout Christians still revere those scriptures and regularly refer to Jesus as *Lord*. We nonetheless revere democracy and sometimes even idolize it as a "Christian" ideal. The anti-Muslim email that inspired this article even insists that "the constitution is based on the Bible."

Rather than argue that specious point, let me use it as "exhibit number one" in my argument. If the most biblically conservative Christians can, for various reasons, see support for the basic ideals of democracy in the Christian Bible, than Muslims can see the same sort of thing in the Quran and the Hadith. Most religions have a way of evolving and adapting to new ideas of human governance. For example, over the last 300 years Christians moved from supporting "the divine right of kings" to "a government of, by and for the people." Something similar goes on in Islam. While it is true that most majority-Muslim nations are dictatorships and oligarchies, there are at least seven majority-Muslim

nations around the world that can be defined as genuine democracies: Turkey, Indonesia, Senegal, Mali, Bangladesh and Malaysia are all governed as parliamentary republics, and Pakistan will probably revert back to a democratic government someday in the future.

Christians find inspiration in the Bible for basic underlying concepts vital to democracy, like the ultimate equality of all men before God. These same ideals of equality and justice can actually be found in the Quran, and many American Muslims are eager to stress this. I've encountered one website for the MPAC (Muslim Public Affairs Council), a Muslim organization devoted to patriotic ideals. Their vision statement, citing passages from the Quran for religious legitimacy, is worth quoting in full: "To establish a vibrant Muslim American community that will enrich American society through promoting the Islamic values of Mercy (21:107), Justice (4:135), Peace (8:61) Human Dignity (17:70), Freedom (2:256) and Equality for all (49:13)."⁸

Quranic Surah 49:13 is quoted in a number of sites where the authors stress that the Quran supports the concept of human equality before God. The passage reads: "**O you men! Surely We have created you of a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other; surely the most honorable of you with Allah is the one among you most careful (of his duty); surely Allah is knowing, aware.**" That passage stresses that religious devotion to God (one's duty) is far more important than national origin.

One passage from the Hadith reports Muhammad to have said, **O people! Your God is one and your forefather (Adam) is one. An Arab is not better than a non-Arab and a non-Arab is not better than an Arab, and a red (i.e. white tinged with red) person is not better than a black person and a black person is not better than a red person . . . except in piety.**"⁹ This passage also stresses that all people are the same

before God, and the only "difference" of significance is devotion to God.

Along with the Quran's validation of concepts like human equality before God, there are hints of democratic government in the early Muslim historical tradition. After Muhammad died, a minority of Muslims sought to pass the leadership of the Muslim community on to the descendents of Muhammad. (These thinkers eventually became the Shia.) However, the Sunni leaders believed it was best for the community to arrive at a consensus on who was *most qualified* to lead the people, and put the matter to a vote among tribal leaders.¹⁰ Now, after that vote, the elevated Caliph was certainly given the full authority of an absolute monarch, but this initial decision on the part of the Muslim community to *select* the most qualified leader is a part of Muslim spiritual heritage (similar to the Acts of the Apostles in the Bible), and as such serves as early validation of the possibilities for democratic government.

With the Quran's support for equality before God and the presence of some democratic governance in the sacred historical tradition, any American Muslim, born or naturalized, can give spiritual support to the democratic ideals of equality and self-determination that are precious to this nation. If young Muslims are raised in America, with wise rearing they can grow to revere their country as naturally as any descendent of the Puritans on the Mayflower. As many Muslims fled religious persecution themselves, they can *feel* the impact of the story of the Mayflower pilgrims far more powerfully than we can. That alone makes the American ideal precious to many Muslim citizens of the United States. It is worth mention, that according to numerous websites, and the interesting new book *American Islam: The Struggle for the Soul of a Religion*, "4 out of 5 [Muslims] are registered to vote."¹¹ Few other religious communities can make that claim. So, my second argument for good Muslims as good Americans is that a commitment to Islam is not inherently antithetical to the laws and ideals of this country.

Can Good Christians Extend Grace To Muslim Neighbors?

My final argument is about why we in the Christian community have a vital mission to affirm and encourage all that is best in our fellow Americans who are Muslim. There are at least three reasons why we should actively extend Christ-like acceptance to our Muslim neighbors.

First, when we only expect the worst of people, they have nothing to lose for they will certainly no longer fear disappointing us. If we bully, harass, and denounce our neighbor, we are likely to *create* the very thing we fear most—radicalized Muslims who are convinced Americans hate them simply because they are Islamic.

Second, as Muslim immigrants come to our shores we have a wonderful opportunity to share the love of God in Christ Jesus, but no Muslim will listen to Christians who talk hatefully of Muhammad and Islam. Hateful talk from leaders and laity sets back the cause of Christian missions among Muslims in America and around the world.

Third, Jesus declared, "Anyone who says to his brother 'raca' is answerable to the Sanhedrin but anyone who says 'you fool,' will be in danger of the fire of hell," (Mt. 5:22). The phrases "raca" and "you fool" are pejoratives of contempt that mark someone out as

a worthless being of no value in the world. Jesus suggests that a person who uses such language cannot be in a good relationship with God. Why? Because the dehumanization of our neighbor inevitably turns us into individuals who cause needless suffering for other innocent people. Jesus calls on us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Lk 10:27).

Through teaching, preaching, and personal example, Christians must faithfully educate our own community of believers. Too many Christians are succumbing to fear, and fear can quickly turn to hatred. The beloved apostle John reminds us, "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 Jn 4:18). For the sake of our country, God's kingdom, and our own moral influence, we need to understand that *good* Muslims can indeed be *good* Americans. ■

- 1 *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, "1 in 4 Muslims: Suicide bombings OK, poll says," May 23, 2007, 2A.
- 2 <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm>, for incidents in 2000. <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/hc2005/table1/htm>, for year 2005.
- 3 *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, 2A.
- 4 Joanne O'Brien and Martin Palmer, *The Atlas of Religion*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, 24.
- 5 Richard Rubenstein and John K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and its Legacy*, Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1987, 69-89.
- 6 Karen Thomas Smith, "God is So, So Big," *Review and Expositor*, Vol. 104, No. 1, Winter 2007, 148.
- 7 <http://www.muslimchaplains.org/faq.php>. Muslim sources claim 9 to 10 thousand serve in the armed forces.
- 8 <http://www.mpac.org/about/vision-mission>.
- 9 <http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/245/> "Human Rights and Justice in Islam," quoting from Hadith, narrated in *Saheeh Al-Bukhari #1739* and *Mosnad Ahmed, #2 037*.
- 10 Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*, New York: the Modern Library, 2002, 25.
- 11 Paul M. Barrett, *American Islam: The Struggle for the Soul of a Religion*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007, 9. However, this common belief that approximately 80% of all Muslims are registered to vote may be a "best case" scenario. Since no one knows how many Muslims there really are in the U.S., we can't really know what percentage of them are registered to vote.

