



America's Melting Pot and America's Muslims

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The story of American pluralism began with the migration of Puritan separatists, who came to the New World seeking a haven where they could practice their faith as they saw fit. The Puritans didn't show much tolerance toward subsequent newcomers practicing other faiths, such as Quakers and Baptists. But those religions put down roots, and the intolerance evaporated over time.

That became the pattern. Though religious diversity is one of the hallmarks of American life, believers from less-familiar traditions typically start out facing resentment and mistrust. After a while, however, those minority creeds and churches grow accepted and comfortable and become part of the nation's religious and cultural mosaic.

We don't often think about it, but it's an amazing phenomenon. In a world torn by religious bitterness, the United States has repeatedly managed to assimilate clashing faiths. It was true for Quakers and Baptists in the 18th century, for Catholics in the 19th, and for Mormons and Jews in the 20th. It is proving true yet again in this century for American Muslims.

The Pew Research Center recently released the results of a detailed survey of Muslims in the United States — the third it has conducted since 2007. It is no secret that many Americans, especially since 9/11, have come to regard Muslims with fear or suspicion. During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump fueled that animus, decrying the “great hatred towards Americans by large segments of the Muslim population” and demanding a “total and complete shutdown” of Muslims entering the United States.

Yet for all that, the Pew surveys make clear, U.S. Muslims are replicating the age-old trajectory of religious minority communities: They adopt American values, reject fundamentalism, and form ties of friendship and love across religious lines.

In the latest poll, an overwhelming 92 percent of Muslims agree with the patriotic statement “I am proud to be an American.” When asked how much they feel they have in common with most Americans, 60 percent of Muslims say “a lot” and another 28 percent say “some.” Only 36 percent say that all or most of their friends are fellow Muslims, a striking drop from the 49 percent who said so in the 2011 survey — and far less than the 95 percent of Muslims who say so in other countries.

Islamist fanaticism and terror have been among the world's intractable problems for decades; the scholar Daniel Pipes has estimated that as many as 15 percent of Muslims worldwide support radical Islam. There is no simple solution to the problem of militant Islamist extremism, and too many Americans — from Boston to Fort Hood to San Bernardino to Orlando — have been among its victims.

But as the Pew data show, the Muslim community in America is the most religiously tolerant and socially liberal Islamic population in the world. And Muslims in America, far from sanctioning deliberate violence against civilians, are actually more likely than the general public to oppose it in all circumstances.

In Pew's latest survey, 59 percent of Americans overall said that targeting or killing civilians for a "political, social, or religious cause" can never be justified. Opposition among U.S. Muslims, however, was 17 percentage points higher — three-fourths of Muslim respondents opposed such killings. The Cato Institute's David Bier suggests that American Muslims are so strongly opposed to religion-based terrorism for the obvious reason that Muslims worldwide are its most frequent victims.

Perhaps it is for the same reason that Muslims in the United States are considerably more likely to reject fundamentalist or monolithic interpretations of Islam.

About 43 percent of U.S. Muslims say they attend religious services at least once a week; 65 percent say religion is very important to them. For U.S. Christians, the numbers are comparable — 47 percent say they go to church at least weekly, and 68 percent consider their religion very important in their lives. Contrary to the popular view of Muslims as dogmatic, however, a large majority of those living in America take a latitudinarian approach to Islam and the Koran. Pew found that nearly two-thirds (64 percent) "openly acknowledge that there is room for multiple interpretations" of their religion" and just over half of all US Muslims agree that "traditional understandings of Islam must be reinterpreted to reflect contemporary issues." Polls of Muslims worldwide have found overwhelming majorities supporting a literal interpretation of the Koran; in America, less than half of Muslims do.

Similarly, a majority of Muslims in this country reject the view that Sharia should be a source (let alone the source) for national legislation. In France and Britain, by contrast, majorities of Muslims insist that Sharia should be the primary law of the land. When asked if there is "a natural conflict between the teachings of Islam and democracy," 65 percent of American Muslims say no.

All this is a wonderful affirmation of the power of the American melting pot — E Pluribus Unum. It is a reminder of the fundamental difference between the blood-and-soil nationalism that prevails in Europe and the American conviction that nationhood is grounded in equality and natural rights.

During the debate on independence in 1776, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia declared that liberty in America must be universal, embracing "the Mahomitan [Muslim] and the Gentoo [Hindu] as well as the Christian religion." The potency of that embrace has not diminished. Immigrants of every faith still come to America, and become Americans.