

C a G a

The cultural contradictions of Islam in America

In the wake of the San Bernardino attacks, Americans must confront the undeniable reality of homegrown Islamist terrorism. We must also confront how little we have learned since 9/11 about Islam and about the Muslims who are our fellow citizens. In recent days our public officials—at least the serious ones—have not been able to articulate anything more cogent than “If you see something, say something,” a tired slogan originally developed by the New York City Metropolitan Transportation Authority in 2002 and officially adopted by the Department of Homeland Security more than five years ago.

One reason for this sorry state of affairs is that there are so few Muslims in the United States. There are no definitive numbers, primarily because the census is prohibited from inquiring about religious affiliation. So whatever talk-radio alarmists or self-promoting Muslim leaders claim, the most authoritative estimate is about 3 million, less than 1 percent of the total population. And while Muslims are scattered across the country, most are concentrated in metropolitan areas, including Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, and New York. It therefore seems safe to conclude that many Americans have never met a Muslim. Indeed, an August 2011 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute reported that almost 70 percent of Americans had seldom or never talked with a Muslim during the previous year. By contrast, a June 2015 Pew survey found that 9 out of 10 Americans said they knew someone who is gay.

More to the point, our political elites have utterly failed us. Our public discourse about Muslims is reduced to simplistic dualisms: assimilated/unassimilated; moderate/immoderate; tolerant/intolerant; good/bad. Conservative leaders either voice their own or tolerate others' wild

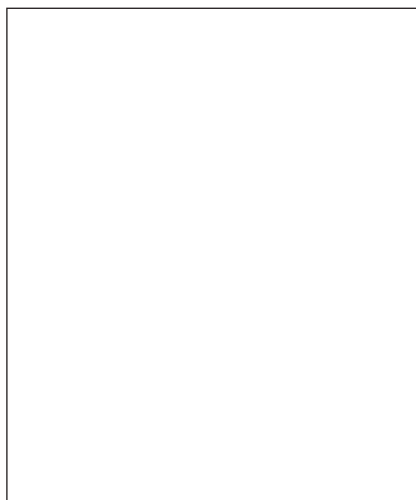
accusations and conspiracy theories about Islamist extremists infiltrating the government and subverting our way of life. Alternatively, liberal political and media elites, only a little chastened after San Bernardino, seem unable to utter the words “Islam” and “terrorism” in the same sound bite.

Regarding our elites, a telling episode involves two surveys undertaken by the widely respected Pew Research Center. In 2007 Pew published perhaps the most thorough and authoritative survey of Muslims in America, entitled “Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream.” Despite that upbeat title, Pew reported only 40 percent of U.S. Muslims saying they “believe that groups of Arabs carried out the attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001.” Twenty-eight percent said they did *not* believe it. The remaining 32 percent professed not to know or simply refused to answer!

In 2011 Pew updated its survey and published the results under the reassuring title “Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism.” Yet disturbingly, that poll reported that in both 2007 and 2011, 8 percent of U.S. Muslims agreed that “often/sometimes . . . suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets are justified in order to defend Islam from its enemies.” Even more disturbing, Pew omitted—without explanation—the revealing question asked in 2007 about who was responsible for the 9/11 attacks.

Such findings get overlooked or simply ignored in part because these elites reassure themselves that Muslims here are “assimilating,” especially compared with their coreligionists in Western Europe. Although generally true, this observation would be more persuasive to ordinary Americans if it were not emanating from the same quarters that in recent decades have loudly denigrated “assimilation” in the name of “multiculturalism.”

To be sure, assimilation is a slippery notion. For example, in recent years many Americans, including analysts such as the late Samuel Huntington, have expressed great



Second-generation Bangladeshi-American Sharmin Hossain, 17, with her father, before her senior prom in Queens, June 3, 2010

Peter Skerry teaches political science at Boston College and is a senior fellow at the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University.

ROBERT NICKELBERG / GETTY

concern that Hispanic immigrants, Mexicans in particular, are not assimilating into the American mainstream. While such fears are in my view exaggerated, they nevertheless reflect legitimate concerns about the continuing presence of millions of illegal immigrants, relatively low naturalization rates, and various indicators of economic marginality and social dysfunction.

In contrast, Muslims in America might be regarded as

Jencks refers to disparagingly as our “laissez-faire culture.”

These concerns are shared by many nonimmigrant parents, but American youth culture is particularly threatening, even downright offensive, to Muslim immigrant parents, including those who are not particularly observant. Mohammad Akhtar, a psychology professor at Slippery Rock University, depicts “the Muslim family dilemma” in broad terms: “The values posing conflicts here are the need for autonomy and independence (Western) as opposed to obedience and compliance (high in immigrants), along with the issues of dating and sex.” Akhtar also notes that Muslim immigrants come from cultures where young people, including the males, are “completely ignored” by their elders, to whom it is invariably assumed youth must defer.

This is how a Bangladeshi engineer living in suburban Boston explained the problem to sociologist Nazli Kibria: “The education here is good. . . . Children have opportunities, but it is difficult to raise them well. Here the children have more freedom and the laws are such that you have to constantly watch how you are dealing with the kids. At home we can be more tough and everyone can discipline. We see that there are a lot of children here who don’t respect their parents and teachers and who don’t seem to care about anything.”

To be sure, Muslim parents are more focused on protecting their daughters than their sons from the currents of American society. As anthropologist Nadine Naber reminds us, family honor, both here and among family members back home, still depends on the probity and chastity of daughters. Sons are typically afforded surprising latitude to sow their wild oats—though one would not want to underestimate the final reckoning even for young males in such families.

So far, this may confirm the stereotype of Muslim families held by non-Muslims. Yet the story is more complicated. Contrary to what many Americans might expect, Muslim daughters are with some notable exceptions (for example, impoverished Yemenis) just about as likely as their brothers to be encouraged, even pressured, to earn good grades and gain admission to college or university.

Such expectations may reflect the widespread if not universal emphasis on women being able to read the Koran. But the emphasis, at least here in America, is also on both sons and daughters choosing from a small number of safe, predictable, and remunerative career paths, especially medicine and engineering, the study of which is also presumed to avoid troublesome topics raised in the social sciences and humanities. In recent years Muslim students have begun to branch out into other professions, especially law and journalism. But the pressure on young Muslims to succeed has not abated.

This pressure is not surprising, given that many or most Muslims in America came here as university students in

search of degrees and career advancement. Nor is it surprising that Muslim parents turn to Islam as a bulwark against youth culture. Yet as already suggested, many Muslims here are not themselves very observant. Indeed, a consistent if imprecise survey finding is that most Muslims in America do not attend mosque weekly (one of the basic tenets of Islam, certainly for men). Yet many Muslims report being more observant here than in their home countries. This apparent paradox is explained by the Bangladeshi engineer in Boston quoted above: “At home, you get a natural religious education from relatives. . . . Here you have to constantly answer the children’s questions. . . . It is a good thing, this American questioning of everything; we did not grow up like that. . . . Because I don’t have much knowledge about these [religious] things, I take them to the mosque every week for classes, and we also attend a summer camp where we pray together and talk about the Koran. I do these things for my children, not for myself. I am personally very relaxed about religious matters; I do not pray regularly or fast and I am not inclined to go to the mosque except as a social occasion. But when you are raising children in this country you have to do it.”

Thus, about 4 percent of all Muslim children in America attend approximately 250 full-time Islamic schools. Teachers and administrators at these schools readily acknowledge their frustration with parents who are not very observant or knowledgeable about Islam but who turn to Islamic schools in desperation after their kids run aground in the public schools. Yet while these schools are preoccupied with keeping the youth culture at bay, the quality and rigor of their religious instruction typically takes a back seat to the academic curriculum, which is judged by what colleges and universities their graduates attend.

Not surprisingly, children pick up on their parents’ ambivalent or at best instrumental turn to Islam. Yet even this turn may lead to a genuine religious commitment. For restless and conflicted adolescents, hypocrisy—especially parental hypocrisy—lurks everywhere. And the more successful and assimilated the parents, the more likely the children will regard a sudden preoccupation with Islam as hypocritical. Newly observant daughters donning the headscarf may suddenly start pestering mothers, who long ago decided against wearing it in corporate America. More discerning youth may notice that, whatever the mix of piety and achievement their parents press on them, very few encourage their sons to become imams.

Sooner or later, Muslim youth are bound to ask why their parents are so eager for them to prosper in a society whose values and culture (not to mention foreign policy) the parents reject or even condemn. One tack pursued by

