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**The Cultural  
Contradictions  
of Islam in America**

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Participants in the American  
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# Clash of Generations

*The cultural contradictions of Islam in America*

BY PETER SKERRY

**I**n 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*

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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 highly assimilated. Pew reports that as of 2011, between 83 and 93 percent speak English well or very well, and about 81 percent are citizens, including 70 percent of those who are foreign-born. And while 54 percent have only a high school diploma or less, compared with 44 percent of Americans generally, 26 percent have at least a bachelor's degree, compared with 28 percent of the total population. Then, too, 26 percent of Muslims are currently enrolled in college, but only 13 percent of Americans overall are.

To be sure, Muslims are overrepresented at the low end of the income scale, with 64 percent reporting annual household earnings of \$49,999 or less, compared with 57 percent of Americans generally. But then 14 percent have annual household incomes of \$100,000 or more, compared with 16 percent of all Americans.

Despite such striking evidence, most observers, me included, would be reluctant to conclude that Muslims are more assimilated than Mexicans, especially when it comes to social and cultural indicators such as marriage rates outside the group and adaptation to our values. Unfortunately, much of the data about Muslims necessary for such a systematic comparison are lacking. But I am confident Muslim out-marriage is limited, especially compared with Mexican and Hispanic rates. So, too, culturally Muslims are self-evidently more at odds with mainstream American values than are Mexican immigrants and their progeny.

Properly understood, assimilation is a complex process unfolding along different dimensions—economic, social, cultural, and political—that do not always coincide neatly. Not only that, but as historian John Higham long argued, assimilation along these various dimensions generates crosscurrents and tensions between immigrants and more established groups with whom they must compete. Thus, the process tends to be rife with conflicts.

Little or none of this makes it into public discourse. For example, in the ongoing debate over immigration, assimilation is regarded, almost without exception, as an unambiguous good; and the inevitable discord generated by the process gets characterized as racism, nativism, and

xenophobia. Indeed, these are the only terms in which various elites—in the corporate sector, in social services and education, in health care, in academia, and of course in politics and government—explain the strains generated by mass immigration.

Needless to say, this background is highly relevant to the situation of Muslim immigrants today. In that respect, it is worth noting that the real battleground over assimilation is often between immigrant parents and their children, born or raised in America. This is the locus of what Norman Podhoretz once called “the brutal bargain” of assimilation, and this is what most Americans, including pro-immigration conservatives, consistently overlook.

Generally speaking, immigrant parents reconcile themselves to the brutal bargain by comparing their circumstances in America with those they left behind in their homeland. Such comparisons are never cut and dried,

which is why—contrary to America's flattering self-image—so many immigrants never quite decide to stay here. As economist Michael Piore reminds us, at the turn of the last century European immigrants were sometimes disparaged as opportunistic “birds of passage.”

For the children of immigrants, things are different. They seldom have either the option or the desire to relocate to their parents' homelands; for them, home is here, in

the United States. But because this is the generation that rides the wave of assimilation, whether it wants to or not, this is also the generation that sometimes tries self-consciously to apply the brakes, even to reverse the process, in order to regain what many feel has been lost.

But again, the intergenerational strains of assimilation within families seldom get talked about when we debate immigration policy. A good example is how the authority of immigrant parents gets undermined when their children understand and speak English better than they do. In such already stressed households, the linguistic assimilation of the kids has to be a mixed blessing.

This may not be a big concern among Muslim immigrants, because most have a solid command of English. However, other aspects of assimilation do threaten to undermine the authority and prerogatives of parents. To paraphrase Tolstoy, no two Muslim families are alike. But a great many Muslim immigrant parents are deeply concerned about their children being swallowed up by a contemporary youth culture they disapprove of, by its music, its video games, its movies, its indulgence of alcohol and drugs, and of course its sexual mores—all part of what Christopher

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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.”

**T**hus, 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

disgruntled youth, widely noted by social scientists, is to criticize intrusive, controlling parents as mired in a corrupted version of Islam inflected with the ethnic culture of a home village, tribe, or nation; and to lay claim to a “pure,” culture-free Islam.

This tack has particular appeal for Muslim college students away from home for the first time and meeting, mixing with, and marrying Muslims from other backgrounds. Indeed, the college campus is often where such youth begin seriously to identify themselves as “Muslim Americans.” Then, too, such a culture-free understanding of Islam resonates with Islamism, which affords young people still another way to outflank the religious demands of their parents. Naber quotes a Palestinian youth who grew up in the Bay Area and then attended college there: “Arabism is backward and patriarchal, while Islam is modern and liberatory.”

The parents of such a youth are likely to see things in precisely the opposite way. Not only do they object to the disrespect shown to their traditional culture and customs, but they are inevitably fearful that their offspring’s turn to Islamism might be the beginning of a path to extremism, or at least might be perceived as such by anxious, ill-informed Americans.

For the young, however, this culture-free version of Islam offers many advantages. For the politically savvy, it helps address one of the central obstacles to uniting Muslims: the extraordinary ethnic, racial, linguistic, and sectarian diversity that fragments and divides them in America, more than in any other country. Then, too, Islamism affords youth the opportunity to challenge what they typically view as the political timidity of their parents with regard to American policy in the Middle East and in the Muslim world generally. Finally, some version of an Islamist identity, as opposed to their parents’ ethnically inflected, traditionalist Islam, allows Muslim youth to stake a positive claim to a negative characterization imputed to them by non-Muslims. And their efforts continue to be protected by the First Amendment.

**S**o what are the lessons for non-Muslims? First, we are too preoccupied with what goes on in Islamic schools and mosques. Typically, these institutions are dominated by immigrant doctors, engineers, and businessmen, who pay the bills and sit on the boards, which routinely interfere in day-to-day decision-making. The political views of such patriarchs would not gratify most of us, but more relevant is their rigid, controlling management style, which tends to alienate youth.

Imams do not escape this ethos. Lacking any unique sacramental or ceremonial powers, they can be relegated all too easily to the status of hired hands chosen by the board to lead prayers and perhaps give marital advice. Since most

imams come from overseas, where mosques are subsidized and to varying degrees controlled by the state, they are unaccustomed to the day-to-day operation and management of self-sustaining voluntary institutions. Moreover, their English and their understanding of American society may be poor. Such individuals arguably have a difficult time gaining genuine respect from a congregation’s lay leaders, never mind young people predisposed to seeing Islamic schools and mosques as the bastions of adults who don’t listen to them and certainly don’t understand their lives in America.

Second, sweeping, intemperate attacks on Muslims and Islam are not only unfair, they are counterproductive—though not necessarily in the way our political elites invariably claim. The primary objective of Muslim leaders in America is to mobilize and unify a diverse and fragmented agglomeration of coreligionists from all over the world. Casting suspicion on this agglomeration as if it were a coherent whole plays into the hands of leaders who may be unsophisticated or unimaginative—but are hardly out to terrorize America.

Indeed, however much Muslim leaders and their organizations express genuine outrage at inaccurate and unfair characterizations of their faith, they have nevertheless grown dependent on such attacks, not only to sustain themselves and their organizations, but even more critically to pull together a disparate assortment of individuals, many of whom identify more with their countries of origin than with Islam. In this sense, second-generation Muslim Americans, especially those who have gone to university, are leading the way. And the more they are unfairly and intemperately characterized in public discourse and the media, the more they will perceive the imperative to mobilize politically as Muslim Americans.

Finally, the social and psychological turmoil associated with the assimilation of Muslim youth suggests that defining Islam as “a religion of peace” is almost certainly counterproductive. Young people who are already disaffected with their elders, whom they are inclined to dismiss as religious hypocrites, are likely to be highly sensitive to perceived wrongs committed against their fellow Muslims, here and especially overseas. And they are inclined, rightly or wrongly, to interpret these wrongs as the result of American foreign policy and ultimately as the responsibility of the American people.

Telling such young people that Islam is “a religion of peace” is likely to come across as self-serving, condescending, and manipulative. Even if the overwhelming majority of them don’t feel the need personally to avenge wrongs visited on their coreligionists, they are nevertheless likely to regard their faith as worth fighting for—especially as they struggle to come to terms with their place in a proud religion that understandably sees itself as having been outperformed and overcome by the West. ♦