

BEYOND THE STEREOTYPE: THE SHARED STORY OF MUSLIMS AND MORMONS IN AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION

On the eve of the 2012 presidential elections, both Islam and Mormonism are becoming increasingly politicized in the public sphere. For President Barack Obama, the *myth* of his secret Muslim identity is ultimately “coded into political ‘otherness’—he’s a socialist, he’s dangerous, maybe a Muslim.”¹ GOP Candidate Mitt Romney’s Mormonism, by contrast, is a way for many Americans, particularly secular and non-religious voters, to distance themselves from the candidate: “Mormonism becomes the lens through which they can paint their critique.”² However, with the presidential election less than a month away, Billy Graham, a leading evangelical figure in the U.S., cut out the word “cult” from his association’s description of Mormonism, although the move was seen as partisan by some conservative Christians.³

Ever since its founding, Mormonism, the first American-born religion, has been portrayed as a foreign religion and often defined in opposition to the Protestant majority. Even today, 16% of Americans say that they would not vote for a Mormon presidential candidate due to their suspicion of the religion’s influence on the country.⁴ Islam, although having been in the United States since its founding, has also been denigrated culturally and politically in similar ways. Muslims belong

to the country’s least favorable religion,⁵ and 42% of Americans claim that they would not vote for a Muslim presidential candidate.⁶ Since their earliest days in this country, both religions have been the object of theological comparison. In fact, Bruce Kierney once declared Mormonism to be “the Islam of America.”⁷

This policy brief informs Mormon as well as Muslim lay, academic, and clerical leaders about the causes and persistence of prejudice toward their communities and how collaborative undertakings between them can be strengthened. Recommendations for policymakers to ensure more effective engagement in the civic and political process are also offered.

UNDERSTANDING PREJUDICE

Scholars of anti-Mormonism have consistently noted how Islam has been used to denigrate Mormons. Throughout American history, Islam has been culturally and theologically conflated with Mormonism to paint Mormons as foreign and to drum up xenophobic attitudes against them. Cultural historian Timothy Marr points out that both of these negative narratives have been intimately tied together ever since Joseph Smith founded Mormonism in 1833. In *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism*, Marr shows that orientalist clichés about

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Mormonism were used at the cultural level to “infidelize” Mormons.⁸ Arthur Conan Doyle’s famous novel *A Study in Scarlet* (1889), in which Sherlock Holmes makes his first appearance, includes a very biased description of the Mormon migration to the west and the founding of Salt

Lake City. They are presented as extremely violent and intolerant, systematically terrorizing their neighbors and forcing polygamous marriage upon non-Mormon girls. Interestingly, this novel compares these alleged practices to popularized “stories” of European girls being forced into Muslim harems.

Anti-Muslim sentiment existed in the United States long before Muslims became a visible population here in 1965 due to the passage of the Immigration Act.⁹ Islam has been in this country since before the founding of the republic, for many West African slaves were Muslim.¹⁰ Despite the passage of centuries, Muslims have remained a symbol of exoticism, foreign-ness, and often violence. Many scholars have theorized about the origin of this historical (and ongoing) discrimination and prejudice. This briefing describes the evolution of post-9/11 prejudice and discrimination and how American Muslims have perceived them.

Despite a steady increase of Muslim immigrants since 9/11, hate crimes, work place discrimination, and manufactured “crises” in several states (e.g., the hysteria over Sharia law, the construction of mosques and Islamic community centers, and the high-profile Park 51/Ground Zero Mosque controversy) shows that Islamophobic discourse generated by 9/11 continues.

Unlike anti-Mormon sentiment, anti-Muslim sentiment is intimately connected to such foreign events and policy decisions as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks hate groups, Obama’s election and subsequent inauguration have also contributed to increased anti-Muslim activities and the rise of many explicitly anti-Muslim hate groups.¹¹ Such sentiment has been largely institutionalized through a cottage industry of Islamophobia think tanks, popular blogs, and communications networks that disseminate their views to mainstream media outlets and politicians.¹² Dr. Sherman Jackson, professor of religion at the University of Southern California, points out that Obama’s election has led to an increase in Islamophobia, as a great deal of anti-Muslim prejudice is directly tied to a

displaced form of racism. Painting Obama as a Muslim or an Arab renders him completely outside an identity to which America owes any debt, says Jackson. He cites Rush Limbaugh's calling Obama an Arab, as opposed to an African American, as a way to place him completely outside of the identity of "American."¹³

FIGHTING THE "FUNDAMENTALIST CONFLATION"

Today, Mormons face less policy-based discrimination and more cultural and social-based discrimination, often with political overtones. Mormon historian J. Spencer Fluhman states that "contemporary anti-Mormonism tends to emerge either from the secular left or from the evangelical Protestant right. For the left, Mormonism often functions as a stand-in for discomfort over religion generally."¹⁴ He has also stated that anti-Mormon attacks by evangelicals betray "anxiety over the divisions in the Evangelical movement and their slipping cultural authority as arbiters of religious authenticity."

The recent conflagration over the anti-Muslim film "The Innocence of Muslims" highlights how extremist Evangelical groups direct their bigotry at both Muslims and Mormons. Sam Klein, the alleged co-producer, is a former Marine and extremist Christian who has helped train militiamen in California churches and led "protests outside abortion clinics, Mormon temples and mosques."¹⁵ While the vast majority of Evangelicals do not openly participate in such activities, Mormons and Muslims often internalize these movements as verification of a generally negative and widespread reaction to their respective faiths.¹⁶

Popular culture and media are the most powerful contributors to erroneous and dangerous characterizations of entire religious communities as the sum of their fundamentalist parts. One of the most telling examples of this fundamentalist conflation occurs in John Krakauer's bestselling *Under Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (2003). To prove his core argument that

Mormonism is a faith rooted in violence, he argues that the "Fundamentalist Church of the Latter-Day Saints" is a puritanical sect that resembles the Taliban. The book, already read by millions, is now being made into a major motion picture by director Ron Howard.¹⁷

American Muslims, especially since the 2001 Patriot Act and associated religion-based profiling cases, continue to feel singled out and discriminated against by law enforcement. They also perceive a significant amount of prejudice coming from mainstream Americans who are influenced by the media's negative portrayals of Muslims.¹⁸ According to the late Edward Said, an influential scholar, cultural critic, and writer most famous for describing and critiquing Orientalism, the perception of Islam and

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Muslims in the age of mass media "is an objective and also a subjective fact, because people create that fact in their faith, in their societies, histories, and traditions, or in the case of non Muslim outsiders, because they must in a sense, fix, personify, stamp, the identity of that which they feel confronts them collectively or individually."¹⁹

Three outstanding media archival projects have added significant scholarly and archival data to the history of negative media portrayals of both communities: *Mormons in the Media, 1830-2012*,²⁰ *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, and *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs and Muslims After 9/11*.²¹ The first undertaking, which includes political cartoons, television shows, films, and other popular media, presents one of the most consistent negative characterizations of Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism: he is an impostor and charlatan right

from the beginning. The 2011 Broadway musical “Book of Mormon” has received resounding success despite a lukewarm response by the LDS Church. Given their concern with the stereotypical and inaccurate portrayals of their scripture, church leaders took out ads in many of the programs encouraging viewers to read the Book of Mormon for themselves.²²

In Shaheen’s media archive, we find a similar denigration of Muhammad: effeminate, an impostor, sex-crazed. Both groups are painted with the same brush: as being a problem to the Protestant-majority Republican establishment. Mormons have also been characterized as non-white others and even associated with Muslims. The Protestant establishment’s portrayal of their religion as blasphemy reached its zenith with the publication of Bruce Kinney’s widely read *Mormonism: The Islam of America* (1912).

Understanding how anti-Mormon and anti-Muslim media stereotypes function must also be seen from the perspective of these two cultures, both of which are perceived as being foreign to American culture and the American way of life more generally. As media scholar Robert G. Lee points out, Hollywood portrays Muslims as alien in part because “their presence disrupts the narrative structure of the community.”²³ Shaheen describes how, prior to the 1979 Iranian revolution, Arabs and Muslims were depicted as exotic but fairly benign foreigners; after that event, however, they came to be affiliated with terrorism and violence. After 9/11, they were associated with darkness, war, and evil.²⁴

As Robert Wright has documented in *American Grace*, his landmark study on religious tolerance in the United States, the best approach to combating prejudice is by forming personal relationships with religious “others.” One cause of religious prejudice can be linked to the general American public’s basic lack of personal contact with members of these two religions. Many Americans report not knowing a Mormon or a Muslim. While 63% of Americans claim to have never met a Muslim, well over 60% of them know a Mormon personally, particularly

those Americans who live on the West Coast.²⁵

It is not surprising, then, that 48% of Mormons²⁶ and 51% of Muslims feel themselves to be the object of discrimination.²⁷ In both cases, the perceived causes are negative media portrayals and a general lack of knowledge about these two religions. American Muslims, however, report more frequent incidents of verbal smears, workplace discrimination, and even hate crimes than do Mormons.²⁸

Despite these perceptions, startling majorities from both communities report that they are thriving in the United States, as the Pew Forum studies “Muslim Americans: Mostly Middle Class and Mainstream (2010)” and “Mormons in America” (2012) make clear. The two most apparent causes of their overall level of satisfaction can be linked to their overall socioeconomic success and high levels of religious engagement. Per capita, Muslims and Mormons have attained higher levels of socioeconomic success and wellbeing compared to their co-religionists. Both cases also reveal a direct correlation between frequent congregational attendance and higher levels of civic and political engagement more generally.

At the grassroots level, both Mormons and Muslims have turned to social media to push back against a media environment they perceive as saturated with negative and inaccurate depictions of their communities. Two recent far-reaching and well-publicized social media campaigns seek to humanize everyday Mormons and Muslims. The “I’m a Mormon”²⁹ project has posted thousands of YouTube profiles of everyday Mormons going about their daily lives. They tend not to discuss any theological inspiration, but simply portray Mormons as active members of society. One video features Lorin, a blind guitarist who plays concerts for children. “I’m a Mormon,” which is operated and produced by the Church of Latter Day Saints and has been featured in Times Square and on major websites, has garnered millions of hits.

Similarly, the “My Fellow American”³⁰ project, a grassroots YouTube campaign launched by American

Muslim activists, asks non-Muslims to share positive and uplifting stories about friendships they have with community members. The videos have been uploaded thousands of times, and many stories have been written about the project. A similar project, “My Faith, My Voice,” gives American Muslims a platform to tell their own story and is designed to dispel stereotypes and empower them to take back their own narrative.

OUT OF SHARED VALUES, COLLABORATION

Since the founding of Mormonism in 1833, scholars have pointed to its theological similarities with Islam: a shared emphasis on prophets as recipients of God’s revelation, their stemming from the same Judeo-Christian heritage, and their sharing a common patriarch: Abraham. Other significant values-based similarities include modesty for worshippers, refraining from alcohol, and a strong sense of family.

These values-based similarities have led Mormons to hold more positive views of Muslims than of any other religious group, according to Akbar Ahmed’s anthropological study of attitudes toward Muslims. His study revealed that Mormons were so comfortable with Muslims that a surprising 98% of them said they would vote for a Muslim presidential candidate.³¹ The Brigham Young University (BYU) Center for Religion has developed study guides and interfaith dialogue efforts that emphasize these shared values. In addition, BYU has been instrumental in facilitating the translation of many Islamic and Arabic texts, thus making them far more accessible to the general American public.

These similarities, which serve as an opening for mutual relationships, should not be viewed as ends in themselves. Nor should these values-based similarities conceal very real differences. For instance, about two-thirds of Mormons self-identify as conservative, and 75% affiliate themselves with the Republican party.³² Muslim organizations in the United States also tend to

form around more abstract religious identifications, rather than the national cultural ones that bind Turks in Germany and North Africans in France. American Muslims also lack a centralized political and/or ideological voice on issues of concern to the larger Muslim community mainly because the community is so diverse. However, research has shown that they are well informed about politics and pay attention to what is happening at home and abroad.³³

A number of positive Mormon-Muslim grassroots projects are underway at the local level. Events organized around various community practices have proven to be very effective. For example, interfaith dinners hosted in Southern California and at Georgetown University on one Sunday during Ramadan were ideal opportunities for the two communities to come together and increase their awareness and communication about their respective

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faiths.³⁴ These dinners were held to support experiential learning and build interpersonal relationships, as opposed to collaboration on various political or social causes. Organizers wrote that the “dinners were important steps in an effort to introduce real Mormons to real Muslims so that the dialogue between the two faiths can proceed at a personal level.” To exemplify this natural proclivity for coexistence and mutual interfaith relations, Salt Lake City, the Mormons’ spiritual capital, hosts six mosques and a diverse 15,000 strong Muslim community.³⁵

ENGAGEMENT IN THE 2012 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND BEYOND

Mormons make up about 1.7% of the entire American population, while Muslims are estimated to make up just

less than 1%. Despite their relatively small demographics, however, both faith communities are important voting blocs. According to several studies, their members are politically active and, most importantly, their political preferences are diverse. Nearly 80% of Mormons identify as Republican,³⁶ and recent exit polls indicate that over 90% of them will vote for Romney.³⁷ Muslims are more diverse politically and have a far higher percentage of Independents. In fact, a 2010 Harvard survey indicates that about 26% of American Muslims do not identify with any particular party,³⁸ and a 2011 Pew study found that 70% of them are either affiliated with or incline toward the Democratic Party.

As identified above, Mormons and Muslims share a number of traditional values that, at first glance, might bring them into symmetry with the “Values Voter” platform. Recent research has pointed out that Mormons are becoming increasingly involved with conservative Evangelical and Catholic causes, despite a history of religion-based exclusion. Issues such as protecting family values and pro-life initiatives form the basis for much of this collaboration. Muslims, on the other hand, have been largely excluded in values voter circles on the basis of religious prejudice. The mid-September 2012 Values Voter Summit, hosted by the influential Evangelical public policy group Family Research Council, was filled with anti-Muslim rhetoric, including that provided by many ex-Muslim speakers.³⁹ Governor Romney has increased his ties to the Values Voter Summit in large part out of an attempt to appeal to conservative Evangelical and Catholics voters.

While Muslims still support the Democratic Party and President Obama, there has been a significant drop in overall support for the Obama presidency due to his foreign policy in the Muslim world. The persistent drone strikes and perception of broken promises following his 2010 Cairo speech have resulted in widespread disappointment within the global Muslim community. Despite this record and declining appeal, however, many Muslims have been placed in senior and mid-level

positions in his administration. Recently, his reelection campaign held a Muslim outreach event in the swing state of Virginia.⁴⁰

Governor Romney has largely refrained from engaging in Islamophobic rhetoric on the campaign trail, going so far as to denounce anti-Muslim speech around the Sharia controversies during the primaries. If elected, however, there might be some reason for concern: his appointment of Walid Phares as co-chair of his Middle East advisory group. Phares, who maintains strong ties to the Islamophobia network, states in his *Future Jihad* that “in the west, all Jihadists pose as civil rights advocates” and “almost all mosques, educational centers, and socioeconomic institutions fall into their hands.”⁴¹

In the context of the 2012 presidential election, the Mormon vote is not nearly as decisive as a potential factor in swing states as is the Muslim vote, largely because 76% of Mormons live in the west. Even in the swing state of Nevada, Mormons are expected to bring Romney only an extra 15,000 votes.⁴² In his extensive research study, “Engaging American Muslims: Trends and Attitudes,” Farid Senzai, a fellow at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU), shows that Muslims could very well play a decisive role in twelve key swing states.⁴³

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure more effective engagement in the civic and political process, policymakers are recommended to:

- **Increase Religious Literacy among Mormons and Muslims:** Increasing the religious literacy of lawmakers through talking points, lectures, cultural events, short courses, and reading lists is an effective way to promote a greater appreciation of this country’s diverse democracy.

Community Leadership Recommendations

Muslims and Mormons have much in common as regards social policy issues. A Gallop 2011 study,⁴⁵ in fact, shows that they have more social issues in common than do any

other religious groups. Mutual collaboration should take place at the grassroots, leadership, and academic levels.

But theological commonality must not be the only, or even the primary, source of this envisaged collaboration, for both communities are too vast and diverse to form and develop relations based on scripture and religion alone.

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As Ahmed argues in his *Journey into America*, “sociology rather than theology needs to define relations between Mormons and Muslims and their place in American identity.”⁴⁶

- **Grassroots Engagement:** Mormon and Muslim collaboration should go beyond interfaith dialogue to projects that allow participants to delve deeper into their shared narratives of struggle, marginalization, and bigotry. Promoting understanding of their historical experiences would go a long way toward building more substantive grassroots relations. To facilitate this goal, educational groups from both communities should develop a curriculum that can strengthen a grassroots-level inter-community dialogue. Such organizations as the Islamic Networks Group (www.ing.org), a nationwide interfaith and Islamic speakers bureau, could create and disseminate this material. Project Interfaith (www.projectinterfaith.org), which belongs to the Church of Latter Day Saints, could be enlisted as a partner to develop material as well as disseminate and market it to congregations nationwide.
- **National Media Campaigns:** Grassroots, social media, and film-based campaigns and projects designed to

reclaim the narrative of what it means to be Mormon and Muslim are effective. Building on projects such as “My Fellow American” and “I’m a Mormon” is one proactive way to further this process. Social media activists, filmmakers, and youth activists from both communities should promote online networking and campaigns that combine strategy as well as content. Mormon leaders should be invited to participate in the Islamic Society of North America’s annual convention and given the chance to work out ways to promote this sort of grassroots collaboration.

- **Academic Collaboration:** Institutions such as the Muslim-founded Zaytuna College, the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, and Hartford Seminary can serve as a neutral convening ground for American Muslim scholars and their Mormon counterparts. These dialogues should not stop at theological similarities, but should address their shared legacies of marginalization, prejudice, and struggle as well as positive steps forward.

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