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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

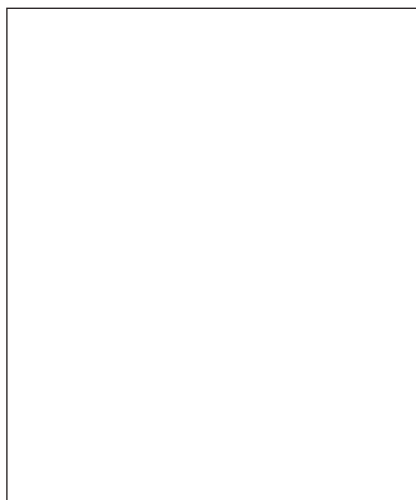
accusations and conspiracy theories about Islamist extremists infiltrating the government and subverting our way of life. Alternatively, liberal political and media elites, only a little chastened after San Bernardino, seem unable to utter the words “Islam” and “terrorism” in the same sound bite.

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 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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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

