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Islam in American Protestant Thought

Precious little courtesy or understanding.

by Thomas S. Kidd

A July 2005 Pew Research Center poll showed that even after the horrific events of September 11, 2001, Americans were generally divided in their perception of Islam, with equal numbers expressing a negative and a positive view of the religion, about 38 percent each. Self-identifying evangelical Christians outpaced all other categories with 47 percent expressing a negative view of Islam, while 52 percent of so-called "high commitment" evangelicals expressed a negative view. This pessimism surely reflects what evangelicals and fundamentalists in the pews have heard from some of their pastors. Famously, after 9/11, the *700 Club's* Pat Robertson exclaimed, "Somehow I wish the Jews in America would wake up, open their eyes and read what is being said about them. This is worse than the Nazis. Adolf Hitler was bad, but what the Muslims want to do to the Jews is worse." Samaritan Purse's Franklin Graham called Islam a "very evil and wicked religion." Liberty University's Jerry Falwell said on *60 Minutes* that "Muhammad was a terrorist." His comments spurred riots among Muslims in Asia, and elicited a fatwa from an Iranian cleric calling for Falwell's assassination. Falwell subsequently apologized. Pastor Jerry Vines of Jacksonville, Florida, former President of the Southern Baptist Convention, averred that Muhammad was a "demon-possessed pedophile."¹

Are these comments just the overheated responses of incautious leaders following an unprecedented act of terrorism? Partly. But such conservative Protestant views of Islam have deep historical roots in America. Though the years since 9/11 have seen an explosion of conservative Protestant commentary on Islam, we also need to recognize that American Protestants have been thinking about Islam for a very long time.

I find at least three persistent themes emerging in Protestant thought about the Islamic religion. (American Catholic views of Islam have an important history, too, but telling that story here would require a much longer article.) First, American Protestants have used Islam to justify their own theological or political views. Second, they have dreamed of seeing Muslims convert to Christianity. Finally, American Protestants have inserted Muslims into systems of eschatology that predict the final victory of the Kingdom of Christ over alternative world religions. All of these uses have waxed and waned through American history, but Protestants have persistently marshaled them to validate their own spiritual and/or temporal beliefs.

How did colonial Americans become aware of Islam? There was of course a long history of conflict between Islam and the Christian world, complicated by shifting alliances. Events such as the second siege of Vienna, in 1683, when the Ottoman Empire—which had already absorbed a good deal of territory in Eastern and Central Europe—suffered a decisive defeat, would have been well known in America. (Though there were perhaps

thousands of Muslim African slaves working on colonial American plantations, their presence had little impact on the way that elite Anglo-American colonists thought of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad.²) It appears that the two main sources from which early Americans derived their impressions of Islam were the enslavement of Europeans in North Africa by the "Barbary pirates," and widely circulated books and sermons related to Islam.

Cotton Mather, one of Boston's leading ministers in the early 18th century, helped frame colonists' understanding of Barbary captivity with regular comments on the pirates. In *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), Mather noted that in response to the provoking sins of New England, "God hath given up several of our sons into the hands of the fierce monsters of Africa. Mahometan Turks, and Moors, and devils, are at this day oppressing many of our sons with a slavery, wherein they 'wish for death, and cannot find it.'"³ Conflicts with the Barbary pirates would resurface and become one of the key foreign policy issues of the new American nation, generating a new round of captivity narratives and reflections on Islam.

The most influential treatment of Islam from which Anglo-Americans borrowed, however, was Humphrey Prideaux's biography *The True Nature of Imposture Displayed in the Life of Mahomet*, published in London in 1697. In the American colonies the habit of applying the epithet "impostor" to "Mahomet" became nearly ubiquitous, following Prideaux and other European writers. Prideaux argued that Muhammad hatched the scheme of Islam as a way to gain power over Arabia.

Early Americans also dreamed of Muslim conversions, as demonstrated in the tract *The Conversion of a Mehometan*, published originally in London in 1757, but then printed several times in America. This tract contained a letter, ostensibly written by a Turk, "Gaifer," to his friend Aly-Ben-Hayton. Gaifer told how he came to England to learn more about Christianity, which he had first heard about from an English slave. It recorded the story of Gaifer's conversion to evangelical Christianity. The letter is so formulaic and polemical that it seems almost certain that Gaifer is only a fictional vehicle for a theological attack. The primary target of the polemic is not Islam, however, but ministers of the established Church of England.

The 19th century saw the advent of the first large-scale American foreign missions, and an increasing awareness of adherents of other world religions, including Muslims. In an era of increasing domestic and international evangelical activism, many hoped that the church could Christianize America and the world. Many saw apocalyptic significance in the advent of foreign missions; large numbers of conservative Protestants believed that before the return of Christ, the Jews would be converted to Christianity, and Roman Catholicism and Islam would be destroyed. For example, pastor Isaac Knapp of Westfield, Massachusetts, speaking before an 1812 meeting of the Hampshire Missionary Society, anticipated the pouring out of the sixth and seventh vials of wrath (Revelation 16), "when the tremendous fall of Mahomedism, and the still more awful overthrow of Antichrist will shake all nations."⁴

As American Christians became increasingly conscious of the evangelistic challenge posed by non-Christian faiths, Muslims began to develop a reputation for being the hardest non-Christians to "reach." Herman Melville—certainly no evangelical—traveled to the Middle East and despairingly wrote that one "might as well attempt to convert bricks into brick-cakes as the Orientals into Christians. It is against the will of God that the East should be Christianized."⁵ By the late 19th century it had become conventional to note the difficulty of missions to Muslims.

Observers offered complex reasons for Muslims' resistance to missionary

appeals—including the most obvious, the harsh reprisals that Muslim apostates were likely to suffer. James Barton of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions pointed to the perceived connection between Christian nations, imperialism, and conquest. In *The Christian Approach to Islam* (1918) he argued that missions to Muslims had been hampered by a lack of knowledge, coordination, and funds. Ultimately, the "Oriental" mindset of the Muslim, and Western missionaries' lack of understanding of that non-scientific outlook, was at the heart of the difficulties with Muslim evangelization. Missionaries "must not expect to find in the thinking of the Oriental ability to see life steadily as a whole and to grasp firmly the principles and system of our Christian theology." Thus, the missionary to Muslims must "orientalize himself" to succeed.⁶

Paradoxically, American Christians came to believe both that it was very difficult to convert Muslims, and that Muslims were widely dissatisfied with Islam as a religion. The perceived spiritual intransigence of Muslims boosted the popularity of accounts of Muslim converts in the 19th century. One of the most famous conversion narratives was the account of Abdallah and Sabat, originally told in a sermon titled "The Star in the East" (1809) given by Claudius Buchanan, a former chaplain to the British East India Company. As told by Buchanan, the Arabian Muslim Abdallah procured an Arabic-language Bible and converted to Christianity. His former friend Sabat turned Abdallah over to the authorities for torture and execution. Wracked with guilt, Sabat wandered aimlessly in south central Asia, until he too came into possession of an Arabic New Testament and converted.⁷

Abdallah and Sabat's narrative caused a sensation in Anglo-American evangelical circles, generating a book based on the story, at least two published poems, and a play. "The Star in the East" was published all over Britain and America. The tract saw editions not only in most major American cities but also in smaller towns of the early republic like Newark, New Jersey (1809) and Winchester, Virginia. (1810). Adoniram Judson, the pioneering American foreign missionary, was deeply influenced by the story, and it helped prompt his decision to go to Burma. As late as 1887, the tale was being reprinted in American missionary periodicals. Prompted by growing interest in missions, memoirs of foreign missionaries to Muslim lands also became increasingly popular in America.

By the early 20th century, however, frustration had developed in Protestant missions circles, where it seemed clear to many that evangelization of Muslims remained scattered and ineffective. Responding to this need, Samuel Zwemer of the Reformed Church and Princeton Seminary became America's most influential evangelical scholar of Islam and organizer of missions to Muslims. As a student at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, Zwemer heard missions advocate A. T. Pierson speak. He became convinced that Pierson's vision of "the evangelization of the world in this generation" could become a reality, and Zwemer devoted himself to the most difficult field of all, the Islamic Middle East. From 1889 to 1929 Zwemer served as a missionary in Arabia and Egypt, after which he became a professor at Princeton Seminary. He founded and edited *The Moslem World*, the key disseminator of information regarding missions to Muslims in the first half of the 20th century. Although he cared deeply for the people to whom he ministered, Zwemer saw Islam as fatally corrupt and destined for extinction. As he said in a Princeton lecture series in 1915, "when the crescent wanes the Cross will prove dominant, and . . . the disintegration of Islam is a divine preparation for the evangelization of Moslem lands."⁸

Despite occasional successes, by 1930 the American foreign missions movement had failed to make serious inroads among Muslims worldwide. The missions movement entered a period of decline and reorganization in the 1930s, hindered in part by the

fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the early 20th century. After World War II, conservative Protestants surged in church membership and missions sending, and by the 1980s perhaps 35,000 American Protestant missionaries were in the field, with the vast majority representing conservative groups or denominations.⁹

These groups sustained the American Protestant dream of Muslim conversions, embodied for the post-1970s generation in the popular autobiography *I Dared to Call Him Father* (1978) by Bilquis Sheikh. Sheikh, a Pakistani noblewoman, was converted from a nominal Islamic faith after receiving a series of dreams and visions about Jesus. In 1968 Sheikh received an invitation to speak at a Billy Graham crusade in Singapore, and finally in 1972 she fled Pakistan after numerous threats against her life and came to America.

By the mid-1980s conservative Protestant missions agencies were making a great noise about the need, finally, to do something about reaching Muslims with the gospel. Suddenly, among Americans and world Christians, evangelical missions to Muslims became red-hot. A 1985 *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* article reported that Bible college students were feeling "peer pressure" to go as missionaries to Muslims. From 1982 to 2001 the number of Christian missionaries in Muslim countries globally may have nearly doubled from 15,000 to 27,000. About half of those missionaries were American. September 11, and the celebrated detention and rescue of Heather Mercer and Dayna Curry in Afghanistan, have generated a great deal of new interest in Muslim evangelization.¹⁰

American Protestants have long given a place to Islam in their end-times thought, but speculation about Islam's role in the last days has become remarkably popular and specific since the early 1970s, as political Islam has become a global force. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 inspired Pentecostal evangelist Lester Sumrall to write *The Holy War Jihad: The Destiny of Iran and the Moslem World*. In it, Sumrall asserted bluntly that the Qur'an "encourages Moslems to wage a war (JIHAD) against non-Moslems in the name of Islam." The Islamic revolution, he explained, began a process by which Iran and other Muslim states would ally with Russia, as prophesied in Ezekiel 38 and 39, and invade Israel. These combined forces would be miraculously destroyed by God. The first Gulf War sparked even more speculation about Islam's place in the last days. Some, like Moody Bible Institute's Charles Dyer, began speculating that Saddam Hussein meant to rebuild Babylon, which would be destroyed at the return of Christ.¹¹

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 unleashed a host of new claims about Islam, Islamist terrorism, and the last days. Todd Strandberg, host of a website named raptureready.com, saw his "rapture index" hit its highest mark ever just after September 11, indicating that it was more likely than ever that the rapture of the saints was about to occur. Many prophecy books followed in the wake of the attacks, putting Islamic terrorism at the center of American eschatological speculations.¹²

A number of conservative Protestants have come to the conclusion that conflict between the Jews and Muslim Arabs is rooted in an ancient sibling rivalry, making inevitable Islamic attempts to destroy Israel in the last days. Televangelist John Hagee, pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, reflects this opinion of Arabs and Muslims. Hagee, in his post-September 11 book *Attack on America*, suggested that the origin of the Arab/Israeli rivalry goes back to the children of Abraham. "The root of the problem" is that "the Jews are descended from Isaac; the Arabs are descended from Ishmael." This view of the conflict between Arabs and Israelis is pervasive in conservative Protestant circles.¹³

Hagee teaches that Islam is an unusually aggressive religion: "no matter what the

Arabs say about peace, their religion demands that they defeat Christians and Jews." However, Muslims really only play a secondary role in Hagee's and many others' end-times scenarios. Like Sumrall, Hagee contends that the Arab nations will ally with Russia and attack Israel with nuclear weapons, the prophesied attack of Gog and Magog, but the attack will miraculously fail. The rise of the Antichrist will follow that defeat. Hagee has also become one of the most active evangelical supporters of Israel, and of George W. Bush's Middle East policies. In December 2002, at Cornerstone Church's annual "Night to Honor Israel," Hagee reportedly addressed Saddam Hussein directly in light of the impending war with Iraq, by saying "Listen Saddam. There is a Texan in the White House, and he's going to take you down."¹⁴

Since September 11, American Protestants have become even more fascinated with the prospect of Muslim conversions and finding out what Muslims ostensibly believe. These two points of interest have met perfectly in the persons of Emir and Ergun Caner, who have become the most influential converts from Islam among conservative American Protestants, perhaps in America's history. Emir is Dean of the College at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and since February 2005 Ergun has been the Dean of Jerry Falwell's Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary in Virginia. The two gained notoriety in 2002 as the source cited by Jerry Vines for his characterization of the Prophet Muhammad. Vines got the idea from the Caners' book *Unveiling Islam: An Insider's Look at Muslim Life and Beliefs*. The Caner brothers had been converted from Islam to Christianity in 1982 after emigrating with their family from Turkey to Ohio. After September 11, they catapulted to new heights of fame, as both had received graduate degrees in theology and attained teaching posts at conservative Christian seminaries. In *Unveiling Islam*, the Caners strongly suggested that demons had provided Muhammad his revelations, not God. They also reported as fact the disputed tradition that Muhammad's youngest wife was nine years old when their marriage was consummated. Liberty Seminary's decision to promote Ergun Caner to the Dean's office heralds the Caner brothers' growing sway in conservative Protestant views of Islam. Two Turkish former Muslims holding senior positions at conservative Baptist seminaries speaks simultaneously to the growing ethnic diversity of American Protestantism and to the power of the Muslim conversion story in American Christian thought.¹⁵

The September 11 attacks have also prompted more sober theological reflection on the relationship between Christianity and Islam, the shared beliefs of the faiths, and their essential theological differences. Some of this reflection came in response to George W. Bush's assertion in late 2003 that Muslims and Christians "worship the same God." Dudley Woodberry of Fuller Theological Seminary argued that the Muslim Allah and the Christian God do refer to the same being, the "God of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob." Muslims and Christians hold very different understandings of that God's attributes, however, particularly with regard to the Trinity. Likewise, in his popular 2002 book and video series *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?*, Timothy George of Beeson Divinity School argued that Muslims' denial of the Trinity equaled denial of the true God. Nevertheless, Muhammad's teachings against pagan idolatry in favor of monotheism moved toward the truth revealed about God in the Bible, George wrote. George also called on Christians to show respect to Islam as a legitimate religion with which Christianity shares many moral values. But he would not countenance a relativistic approach that tried to affirm both religions' doctrines as simultaneously true.¹⁶

Despite such evidence of American Protestants seeking genuine understanding of Islam without abandoning their own convictions, there is much reason for discouragement, as politically charged stereotypes have often substituted for substance, sympathy, and generosity. One of the general problems we are dealing with is, of course, ignorance. The Pew poll shows that 50 percent of Americans could not identify "Allah" as the

Muslim name for God. American Christian churches shoulder some of the blame for that lack of basic understanding. The essential challenge regarding American Protestant views of Islam is that Christianity and Islam are both exclusivist religions. It will not do for followers of Islam to say Jesus is as good as Muhammad, and vice versa. Orthodox Christians and Muslims will agree that proselytizing efforts should continue among adherents of other faiths. That is what exclusivist religions normally do.

In light of the history of American Protestant thought about Islam, I will only suggest that Christians should take Muslims seriously, refusing to traffic in sound bites, stereotypes, and "gotcha" stories about Islam and its Prophet. American Christians must also be exceedingly careful not to conflate their faith with contemporary political agendas, parties, and wars. There are courteous and understanding ways to witness for the truth of one's faith. Indeed, such an approach makes for a more credible testimony. The history of American Protestant thought about Islam, sadly, has revealed precious little courtesy or understanding.

Thomas S. Kidd is assistant professor of history at Baylor University. He is finishing Awakenings: The First Generation of American Evangelical Christianity, to be published by Yale University Press. This article is adapted from a talk given in Gordon College's Faith Seeking Understanding lecture series.

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Early America engaged with Islam through multiple channels. As American missionaries traveled abroad in search of converts, and lived among Muslims, they often viewed the religion and its adherents through the lens of Christianity. For some, Islam's prophet was a false hero, "an impostor," and the message of the religion was an unfortunate pastiche of the Judeo-Christian tradition.⁵ Thus, two dominant strands of thought emerged that led to divergent discourses about Islam in the United States. These two discourses—an academic one versus a popular one rooted in missionary experiences—have endured and shaped the contemporary understanding of Islam in America. But is Islam an inherently violent religion? With good reason many of us have been turning to acknowledged experts for help in clarifying what turns out to be a complex issue.⁶ Nearly everybody knows a Catholic who almost never attends mass or who practices birth control, or a Protestant who believes in heaven but not in hell. Many of us who are familiar with variations in religious practice and belief among both Christians and Jews may not realize that similar variations exist among Muslims. Like Americans in many other religious groups, a substantial share of adults who were raised Muslim no longer identify as members of the faith. But, unlike some other faiths, Islam gains about as many converts as it loses. Try our email course on Muslims and Islam.⁷ Among those who have converted to Islam, a majority come from a Christian background. In fact, about half of all converts to Islam (53%) identified as Protestant before converting; another 20% were Catholic. And roughly one-in-five (19%) volunteered that they had no religion before converting to Islam, while smaller shares switched from Orthodox Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism or some other religion. When asked to specify why they became Muslim, converts give a variety of reasons. American Islam is a mosaic of many racial, national and ethnic groups.⁸ There are nearly 6 to 7.5 million Muslims residing in the United States and identifying themselves as Americans.⁹ The group affected by Islamophobia in many recent studies is described as "Muslims," "Middle Easterners," or "Muslims and Arabs."¹⁰ because of the fact that many Americans define themselves as white, protestant, and Anglo-Saxons. Social institutions expect immigrants to integrate socially and become Americans as soon as possible.¹¹ The assimilation of American Muslims into the American environment was a major issue also. Protestantism and Islam entered into contact during the early-16th century when the Ottoman Empire, expanding in the Balkans, first encountered Calvinist Protestants in present-day Hungary and Transylvania. As both parties opposed the Austrian Holy Roman Emperor and his Roman Catholic allies, numerous exchanges occurred, exploring religious similarities and the possibility of trade and military alliances.