

Mainstream Muslims

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A recent cover of *Time* magazine asked: “Is America Islamophobic?” A *Time* survey discovered equivocal evidence on the question. Nearly half of Americans (46 percent) think Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence against nonbelievers, and 61 percent oppose the building of an Islamic community center near Ground Zero in lower Manhattan. But 55 percent believe that U.S. Muslims are patriotic Americans, and the same percentage would approve of a mosque being built in their own neighborhood.

Assimilating ethnic and religious groups has never been smooth in the U.S. Color, religion and nationality have always made a difference in how well immigrants are treated. The Immigration Act of 1924 restricted the number of southern and eastern Europeans coming into the country, and it barred immigrants from East Asia and India. This rule was not lifted until 1965.

Suspicion of those who are different has a long history. Speaking to the largely Irish-Catholic Knights of Columbus in 1915, Teddy Roosevelt said that “there is no such thing as a hyphenated American who is a good American. The only man who is a good American is the man who is an American and nothing else.” President Woodrow Wilson echoed this sentiment, saying that “any man who carries a hyphen about with him carries a dagger that he is ready to plunge into the vitals of this republic whenever he gets ready.”

Yet over the years people of different religions and nationalities have found their way into the American mainstream—precisely because they have been allowed to practice their religious and ethnic customs and enjoy the benefits of freedom. Fifty years ago a scholar studied a thriving mosque, in Toledo, Ohio. At the time many people assumed that the more Muslims participated in the life of a mosque, the less they would identify with mainstream American values and behaviors. But the opposite turned out to be

true: participation in the mosque actually led to greater identification with the United States and greater involvement in the community, especially in business.

A 2007 Pew Research poll of U.S. Muslims concluded that they were “middle class and mostly mainstream.” Eighty-eight percent were likely voters, 75 percent contributed to local charities, and over half had household incomes greater than \$50,000.

Newcomers come to admire and engage in national life when their own values and practices are met with respect and tolerance. It’s for that reason that Muslims have become much more a part of the mainstream in the U.S. than they have in France, for example, which places restrictions on women’s wearing of the hijab and burqa.

E pluribus unum—out of many, one—is our nation’s motto. The republic is stronger when the *pluribus* is respected as well as the *unum*.