

10 years later, Muslims divided on improving negative image

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(RNS) After all the books, speeches, seminars, Facebook posts and mosque open houses to teach Americans about Islam in the wake of 9/11, Americans say they now know more about Islam than they did 10 years ago. The problem, pollsters say, is that Americans don't seem to like what they're learning.

Indeed, the percentage of Americans who say they know some or a great deal about Islam climbed from 38 percent immediately after 9/11 to 44 percent in 2010, according to the Pew Research Center.

At the same time, Pew polls report, the percentage of Americans with favorable views of Islam dropped, from 41 percent to 30 percent in the past five years.

That has left many Muslims exasperated with Islamic advocacy organizations, and sometimes divided over the best ways to use scant resources in hopes of improving American perceptions of Islam. Critics say the numbers prove that education has failed to reduce Islamophobia among Americans.

"The idea that education will lead to a lessening of bigotry is just factually incorrect," said Reza Aslan, an award-winning author who recently launched a media company, BoomGen Studios, in New York and Los Angeles that focuses on Muslim and Middle Eastern themes.

Americans "don't care about your religion. They don't want to know more about Islam," Aslan said Muslim organizations shouldn't eliminate or overlook education, but argues that more resources should be spent on integrating Muslims into all aspects of American society -- politics, business,

education, and civic life.

He points to American Jews as a community that was once reviled but is now respected.

"What happened? Did people learn more about Judaism? No, there wasn't a concerted effort to teach people about Jewish life or Jewish religion," said Aslan. "The Jews integrated themselves into American life to the point that the argument that the Jews aren't American sounded so stupid, that people stopped thinking it."

Kamran Memon, a civil rights lawyer in Chicago who also heads the grassroots group Muslims for a Safe America, said education isn't the problem. Rather, it is the subject matter.

While Muslim Americans are good at talking about Islam's appealing aspects, Memon said, they haven't addressed legitimate concerns about Islamic scriptures and beliefs that have been used to justify violence.

"When people are so scared of something, you can't change the subject, you have to address the issue," Memon said. "Talking about peace in Islam is like trying to change the subject, and you can't change the subject when someone asks, 'Why are some Muslims trying to kill us?'"

Muslim groups counter that education does work. Without it, they say, Islamophobia would be much worse.

"From our experience, education works," said Ashfaq Parkar, a coordinator for 1-800-Why-Islam, a hotline sponsored by the Islamic Circle of North America in Queens, N.Y. The hotline fields as many as 600 calls per month. "Many people who call will be confrontational when they start, but when they conclude, they're sympathetic, or at least less aggressive."

Maha ElGenaidi, CEO of the Islamic Networks Group in San Jose, Calif., which trains speakers to talk about Islam in schools, government and law enforcement agencies, corporations and religious institutions, also rejected the idea that education isn't working.

"That's not our experience at all," she said. "Just the opposite, in fact."

ElGenaidi noted that Americans under the age of 30 had more favorable views of Muslims than older Americans, in part because public school systems started teaching about Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism in the 1990s. "Before that, students were not taught anything about Islam or Muslims."

The problem, Muslim educators say, is that attempts to provide what they call "positive" knowledge about Islam are often overwhelmed by a sea of "negative" information that's spread by conservative cable and talk radio hosts, and the right-wing blogosphere.

"The challenge is the onslaught of negative images, negative stereotypes," said Nadia Roumani, director of the American Muslim Civic Leadership Institute at the University of Southern California, "and the resources and manpower these (Muslim) groups have just don't match up."

The newly resurgent anti-Muslim movement makes education more important, not less, Muslim educators say. Some experts agree.

Robert P. Jones, whose Washington-based Public Religion Research Institute has tracked public opinion on Islam, said viewers of Fox News Channel, for example, were among the most likely to say they felt informed about Islam.

"They were also four times more likely than others in the population to have negative views towards Muslims," he said.

Eboo Patel, who directs the Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Corps, which focuses on grooming a new generation of interfaith leaders on college campuses, said knowledge about Islam feeds directly into perceptions about Islam.

"If the only thing you know about Islam is Osama bin Laden and the stoning of women in Afghanistan or Iran, then clearly your attitude towards Muslims is going to be bad," he said.

"But if you knew that the most common prayer in Islam is 'In the name of God, the all merciful,' your attitude towards Muslims would probably be a lot better."