

What the Chapel Hill murders reveal about the place of Muslims in American society

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(RNS) Deah Barakat took my class “Islam in the Modern World” at North Carolina State University a few years ago. He was curious about Islamic history and contemporary spiritual and political movements, and he was great in class discussions. I’ve taught thousands of students in the last 11 years here, but Deah stood out for his enthusiasm, kindness, calm demeanor, and obvious charisma.

Deah Barakat, Yusor Abu-Salha, and Razan Abu-Salha were the very best of people. They embodied the core Islamic principle of *ihsan*—doing that which is both beautiful in itself and beautifying to the world. They volunteered to assist poor and homeless people. They planned to travel to camps in Turkey to help Syrian refugees in need. They were creative, intelligent, kind, generous. There are not sufficient words for how much we have all lost when they were gunned down and murdered in their Chapel Hill condominium last week.

Yet many insist their murders resulted from a dispute over parking. While the particular motives of the shooter cannot be determined at this stage, it is abundantly clear that these deaths were not just about parking. It is also clear the emerging discussion is about the place of Muslims in contemporary America. As we analyze the meaning of Deah, Yusor, and Razan’s murders, we are also peeling back layers of societal debates about Islam, Muslim Americans, and the culture of intolerance and violence taking root in the U.S. On some level, it does not matter whether the shooter actually intended to kill three Muslims because they were Muslim. The public conversation is revealing several collective concerns in stark and disturbing ways:

- **Many Americans are anxious about Islam, but at the same time most Americans admit to little or no knowledge of the religion.** In the absence of knowledge, crises take the place of understanding and experience. The Paris shootings, the inhumanity of the group calling itself the Islamic State, the call to prayer debacle at Duke University, these are only the most recent events leaving non-Muslims with a sense that they only hear about Islam in relation to

tragedy, bloodshed, and identity politics. This could be one of the many possible silver linings to this tragedy. In learning about the exemplary lives of Deah, Yusor, and Razan, we have a glimpse of people anyone can identify with, admire, and wish to know better.

- **Many Americans often call on Muslims for public denunciations of extremist violence, seemingly unaware that countless Muslims—both those with authority and average citizens—speak out every day against violence and in defense of the values that animate their lives.**

It is absurd to call for Muslims to speak out against violence done in the name of Islam for two reasons. Adherents of other religions do not have to apologize when one of their co-religionists commits a crime. Buddhists are not responsible for attacks on Muslims in Myanmar, for example. For some reason, it is hard to imagine that a Muslim may do bad things for nonreligious reasons and do good things due to their faith. Second, it is absurd because in the contemporary Internet age it requires only a few keystrokes for a person to become acquainted with the many ways in which Muslims publicly reject extremism, violence, intolerance, and injustice. One of Deah's last tweets did exactly that. "It's so freaking sad to hear people saying we should 'kill Jews' or 'Kill Palestinians'. As if that's going to solve anything SMH (shake my head)."

- **We are seeing again that this is a difficult time to be a minority of any kind in the U.S.** The hashtag #muslimlivesmatter is an homage to last summer and fall's #blacklivesmatter that circulated in the wake of the deaths of black men by police. Minority populations do not have the same expectation of security and protection that their white neighbors enjoy. Yusor had spoken to friends and family about the hostility and intimidation from her neighbor who would come by with a gun in his belt and eventually kill her. Why wasn't he reported to the police? We can never know, but the possibility is that as Muslims they may not have wished to invite police attention, may not have trusted the police fully, may not have wanted to aggravate the neighbor further, and that it was just part of the background noise of their lives.
- **American Muslims have been detained unlawfully, deported, and monitored by all levels of law enforcement, long before Sept. 11, 2001 and the passage of the Patriot Act.** Less well known are the many cases when operatives working undercover in mosque communities to uncover terrorists and their supporters were reported to law enforcement by the very Muslim citizens whose civic spirit was under scrutiny. As Deah's mother Layla asked us all, "Do not fight fire with fire." Simple, clear, and absolutely true.

I've been reading Claudia Rankine's book *Citizen: An American Lyric*. She writes about race in contemporary American society and observes, "there exists the medical term—John Henryism—for people exposed to stress stemming from racism. They achieve themselves to death trying to dodge the buildup of erasure."

Though Deah, Yusor, and Razan were achievers in every imaginable sense, it was not this that killed them. It was the ability to erase their achievements, their individuality, their humanity that made them easy targets for a person whose rage and frustration was well documented. Muslims in the U.S. and around the world also feel this sense of erasure, of being invisible. It is a profound tragedy that the only way to disrupt the narrative of conflict, trauma, and fear is to confront the world with the tragedy that took three of the best people among us.

These three beautiful individuals were exactly the kind of citizens America needs. Their achievements were celebrations of their lives, loves, faith, commitment, dedication, and integrity. And no amount of death can take that away.