

Countering Myths about American Muslims (Part 1)

There is no end in sight to the disturbing trend of anti-Muslim rhetoric that has been dominating this Presidential election cycle. While Donald Trump has been the source the most notorious and well-documented examples of this phenomenon, politicians in both parties have taken the opportunity to jump on the anti-Muslim bandwagon. While the unconstitutional and racist policy proposals being bandied about have become the stuff of splashy front-page headlines, the falsehoods masquerading as facts that are used to support such proposals have gotten less attention. However, it is only by countering the lies and rumors that has been passed off as facts about Islam and Muslims that we can draw down the kind of anti-Muslim moral panic that feeds such despicable policy “solutions” in the first place.

This piece is the first in an open-ended series that will address some of the misconceptions about Islam and Muslims in America. Even if, or especially if, you are a non-Muslim who does not buy in to the cynical anti-minority populism of Trump and his ilk, please take the time to educate yourself about the facts and history of Islam, Muslims and their place in American society. Reasoned arguments based on facts are one of the few effective methods of inoculating yourself and others against a brand of bigotry that masquerades as truth.

Misconception: Muslims are a recent addition to the American religious landscape.

Reality: Muslims have lived in the Americas almost as long as European Christians. The first Muslim Americans were sub-Saharan Africans brought as slaves to American colonies. We will never know exactly how many African slaves practiced Islam before their enslavement. One estimate places the figure around 10%,¹ another at 20%.² The conditions of slavery were not conducive to the survival of African cultural and religious traditions, but there is documentary evidence that not only did African Muslims live in what was to become the United States, but that a minority were able to continue to practice Islam. Muslim names begin appearing on slave registers in 1717.³ We know details about the lives of these first American Muslims in a few exceptional cases. One educated and noble-born Muslim, Abdul Rahman Ibrahima, was able to successfully lobby for his freedom and returned to Africa.⁴ Another slave, Omar ibn Said, wrote an autobiography in Arabic.⁵ Slaves who worked on the massive plantations on the South Carolina and Georgia barrier islands were supervised by other slaves and therefore had relatively more freedom to organize their communities and continue African traditions. Evidence suggests that some of these African Americans practiced Islam into the nineteenth century.⁶

Further reading:

[Muslims in America: A short history](#) by Edward Curtis

¹ Bukhari 311

² Kepel 20

³ Bukhari 311

⁴ Curtis 2-4

⁵ Curtis 12-13

⁶ Curtis 15

[Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas](#) by Sylviane Diouf

References:

Bukhari, Zahid H. et al (ed). Muslims' Place in the American Public Square: Hope, Fears, and Aspirations. Walnut Creek: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004.

Curtis, Edward E. IV. Muslims in America: A Short History. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Kepel, Gilles. Allah in the West: Islamic movements in America and Europe. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.