

Did Carol Swain “express regret for anti-Muslim rhetoric” or did she merely “clarify” her remarks?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Carol Swain is a retired college professor, both an African-American and a conservative, now running for mayor of Nashville. She recently sought to clarify statements she had made about Islam in a column she wrote in 2015, soon after the murders of a dozen cartoonists at Charlie Hebdo. The report on her recent visit to an Islamic Center appeared in The Tennessean [here](#).

Mayoral candidate Carol Swain visits mosque, expresses 'regret' for anti-Muslim rhetoric.

"What would it take to make us admit we were wrong about Islam?"

In 2015, Carol Swain asked that question in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo killings, suggesting that we in the West had been “wrong” not to grasp the meaning and menace of Islam. Now *The Tennessean* was slyly repurposing her question and applying it to her, making readers think that she had now admitted she had been “wrong about Islam.” But she never did.

The answer to her own question is apparently a mayoral election.

Thus does *The Tennessean* belittle Swain’s attempt to clarify her earlier remarks – not to reject them altogether, as the paper’s reporter seems to think – as mere electioneering. Why should the paper not take Swain at her word, that she felt the need not to withdraw her earlier criticism of Islam – she stands by it – but to make clear that that criticism was not meant to include all Muslims?

*Swain, a retired Vanderbilt professor, visited the Islamic Center of Tennessee over the weekend in a move to repair relations nearly four years after her *Tennessean* op-ed – largely viewed as hate speech for its critique of Islam – was published.*

Note the smuggling in of that charge of “hate speech” against Swain – which *The Tennessean* reporter drops into the sentence – “for [her] critique of Islam.” Nothing is offered to support that charge, not single quote from her 2015 Op/Ed column, which ran in *The Tennessean* itself, is presented as evidence of “hate speech.” She was critical of Islam, but did not express any hatred of individual Muslims.

The staunch conservative is challenging Mayor David Briley in the Aug. 1 election, along with state Rep. John Ray Clemmons and At-large Metro Councilman John Cooper.

“I expressed regret that it [the 2015 Op/Ed] seemed to blame

all Muslims,” Swain posted on social media on Monday, along with a photo of her wearing a head covering. “As mayor, I intend to represent all Nashvillians and that starts with having an open and honest conversation in hopes of obtaining a deeper understanding.

Swain said she visited for several hours and was “welcomed and treated with courtesy and respect.” Her visit came during the holy month of Ramadan. The 30 days of prayer and fasting ends next week.

“I visited the Islamic Center of Tennessee. We discussed my 2015 Op-Ed written in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris that caused angst in their communities. I expressed regret that it seemed to blame all Muslims. As mayor, I intend to represent all Nashvillians.”

Note that she did not retract a single word of her 2015 criticism of Islam. She went to the Islamic Center, politely hijabbed, to “express regret that [her 2015 Op/Ed] seemed to blame all Muslims.” That does not constitute a retraction of her views on Islam, only regret for anti-Muslim rhetoric that seemed, wrongly, to target all Muslims. It was that which she wished to clarify. Clarification is not retraction.

“At the end of the day we’re all hard-working citizens of Nashville who want to feel safe, live comfortably, not sit in traffic all day and have our elected officials represent us properly,” she wrote.

The Islamic Center of Tennessee did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Swain said her 2015 piece was written in a “heat of passion,” and was not intended to create a “firestorm.” Her words, she said, were twisted.

“I didn’t go there to give an apology,” Swain said in an

interview with the Tennessean. "I needed to clarify what I meant."

"I thought it was important to correct the impression I made that I hated Muslims," she said.

In her [2015] op-ed, Swain wrote that the Paris attacks show that critics of Islam are correct and criticized not just those who murdered in Paris, but the faith as a whole."

"More and more members of the (politically correct) crowd now acknowledge that Islam has absolutely nothing in common with Christianity, nor is it a worthy part of the brotherhood of man I long felt was characteristic of the Abrahamic religions," she wrote.

"A younger, more naive version of myself once believed in a world where the people of the Book could and would get along because they all claimed Abraham as their father. No more!"

Swain urged that "(c)ivic education and other indicators of assimilation should be a prerequisite for remaining and advancing in this nation," and that burqas are dangerous as they allow individuals to conceal their identities.

Swain on Tuesday [in late May] said she has not changed her perspective and that she is not backing down in her warning.

"I still believe that it's important to assimilate and for us to be one America," she said. "If people comes [sic] from other countries, they must respect our constitution ... respect laws and freedom of speech."

She said she's "always wanted to address" the issue but waited for an invitation to the mosque. She also was told that other mayoral candidates have gone for a visit.

"They can reject me and chose to hate me but I don't want to be the person that didn't reach out," she said. "I told them ... I always wanted to have that conversation."

But Swain's post has received mixed feedback from supporters and critics alike.

Some responded by calling her visit and apparent change of perspective as pandering in an attempt to gain votes. Others applauded her for her expressed "regret," while some said she "blew her base" by going "weak."

Swain said those who don't support her visit to the mosque, are not "truly her supporters."

The people who are complaining the loudest are not representative of my supporters," she said. "I want to move on from this. If people have a problem with it, it's their problem."

Carol Swain has not, contrary to the news reports, including this one in *The Tennessean*, changed her mind one whit about Islam. Just a month before her misunderstood "apology," she deplored the inclusion of Muslims as attendees at Mayor Briley's State of Metro [Nashville] address. She understands that Muslims are commanded in the Qur'an to be hostile to Christianity and to Christians, and she has not backed down from that position. She had, however, wanted to clarify her 2015 remarks, to make clear that she recognizes that not all Muslims follow those Qur'anic commands to wage Jihad, or support others who do.

Swain did not plan her visit to coincide with the electoral campaign; she accepted an invitation from the Islamic Center when it finally came, which happened to be during the mayoral race, when all the candidates were invited. In her appearance at the Islamic Center, she did not "retract" her remarks about Islam itself. She "regretted" only having been too inclusive in her condemnation of Muslims.

Her visit to the Islamic Center is being presented by *The Tennessean* as a crass attempt to win Muslim votes, but had

that been its purpose, she would likely have made some further remarks of regret, more crowd-pleasing than her mere “clarification.” If she were trawling for votes, she would have insisted that she now “sees Islam in a new light” or she “better understands the faith that I too hastily condemned in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attack” or she “apologizes for remarks that I now find shameful and Islamophobic.” None of that happened. Instead, she went out of her way to insist she did not “regret” her earlier Op/Ed in her attempt to tell the truth as she sees it – that Islam remains a menace to the values of the free West, and we must guard against it.

When she explained that she should have made clear that not all Muslims deserve condemnation, she likely gained no votes among Muslims, who wanted her to denounce her Op/Ed in its entirety and, just as likely, she lost support among those who were first attracted in 2015 by what they took to be her implacable stand against Islam and all Muslims, and who were disturbed at her visit to the Islamic Center and her excluding some Muslims from her previous general condemnation. They misinterpreted this as a softening of Dr. Swain’s view of Islam. It was not.

Dr. Swain was quite clear in noting that she has not changed her perspective [on Islam] and that she was not backing down from her 2015 warning [about Islam]. She did not “retract” nor “regret” those earlier remarks about the faith. She wanted only to let local Muslims know that she had not meant in 2015 to condemn all Muslims, for she was perfectly aware that not all of them were Jihadis or supported violent Jihad; further, she knew that there were many other disturbing aspects of mainstream Islam that not all Muslims subscribed to. She did not “express regret for ‘anti-Muslim rhetoric,’” as the title of *The Tennessean’s* story about her said. That title ought to have read: “Dr. Carol Swain Clarifies Her 2015 Remarks on Muslims.” “Clarifies” offers a more modest distancing than “expresses regrets” and – which is always a good thing for

newspapers to adhere to – also happens to be true.

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