

# In St. Cloud, Minnesota: “I Don’t Mean To Offend You, But...”

by Hugh Fitzgerald



With a cautionary event on surrendering to Islam [just canceled](#), here yet again is the kind of event that never gets canceled, [one more variant](#) on the theme of Ask-A-Muslim-Anything, this one from some months ago, chosen more or less at random. Same old same old, as sweeping back the tide of taqiyya is part of the Infidel Man’s Burden. Besides, according to the organizer of this event, a certain Pastor John Gabrielson of the Atonement Lutheran Church, we’re all just folks. Muslim folks. Non-Muslim folks. Pull up a chair and set a spell, and listen in as our four Muslim panelists are asked all about Islam.

The complete report on the evening is [here](#).

*Once again, people will have a chance to ask their questions about Islam directly to their Muslim neighbors.*

*#UnitedCloud and Atonement Lutheran Church are hosting another installment of "I don't mean to offend you, but ..."*

*The series features a panel of Muslim speakers, ready and willing to answer questions about Islam, and for some panelists, [about] the Somali community.*

*John Gabrielson, pastor at Atonement for the past few years, said he thinks the event is timely considering the atmosphere in St. Cloud in recent years.*

*"Looking at the atmosphere of the city and the greater St. Cloud area and ... the tensions that we've had here, it just seems like a timely thing to give people a chance to have questions asked and answered, and to get to meet their neighbors and share a meal and know each other," Gabrielson said.*

"The tensions that we've had here" – and what might have caused those tensions? Might the Muslim terrorist attack in St. Cloud, in which ten people were stabbed just three years ago, have had something to do with causing those tensions?

*He said one conversation can make a difference.*

*"I think that makes it a lot easier for us to function as a 'we' than an 'us' and a 'they.'" Gabrielson said.*

How does Pastor Gabrielson propose to persuade Muslims and non-Muslims to function as a "we" when the immutable Qur'an is already so full of distinctions between "us" (the Muslims) and "they" (the non-Muslims)? How does the good pastor hope to persuade his Muslim neighbors to ignore the 109 verses that command them to wage Jihad against the Unbelievers? How can he hope to convince them to ignore the Qur'anic verses

describing the Muslims as “the best of peoples” (3:110) and the non-Muslims as “the most vile of creatures ” (98:6)? Does he know about the verse that instructs Muslims not to take Christians and Jews as friends, “for they are friends only with each other” (5:51)? I suspect he is entirely unaware of all of these verses, that he has been relying on friendly Muslims for his own knowledge of Islam, and hasn’t felt the need to read and study the Qur’an himself. Due diligence, Pastor Gabrielson! You owe it to your parishioners, and to yourself. Read the whole thing.

*“Looking at the neighborhood we serve ... there are a fair number of Muslim folks that are our neighbors now and that are living and working and raising their families right here,” Gabrielson said.*

Just folks, Muslim folks, “living and working and raising their families,” like the rest of us folks, with the same hopes and dreams and worries and sorrows. Except not quite. One of these Somali folks, Dahir Adan, stabbed ten people on September 17, 2016, at the Crossroads Center shopping mall in St. Cloud, Minnesota. As he stabbed his victims, he was shouting “Allahu akbar” – which means “My God is the greatest, is greater than yours,” and is often used as a supremacist war cry. He took care to ask several people if they were Muslims before stabbing those who answered no. And the day after that terrorist attack by a Somali Muslim, the leaders of Minnesota’s Somali-American community held a joint news conference in St. Cloud, where they expressed concern not at the attack, as one might have hoped but, rather, at the rise of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment in response to the attack. There is a time and a place to feel sorry for oneself. This was not it.

*Gabrielson said he hopes the conversation brings some understanding.*

*"I hope the folks who have questions have a chance to ask them, and the four panelists will have a chance to answer things directly, rather than having it just be rumor and innuendo," Gabrielson said. "And that's a beginning for folks, for some understanding and community building."*

*He said the point is not to convert anyone to Christianity or Islam.*

"The folks who have questions." Ask those questions of our panelists. "That's a beginning for folks." The point was never to convert anyone but, as Pastor Gabrielson, a simple and well-meaning soul (who may remind some of Homer Simpson's pious neighbor Ned Flanders), fails to realize, the four Muslim panelists have quite a different purpose than that of enlarging "understanding and community building." They are intent on offering the Christians present a sanitized version of Islam, all the while pretending to provide a frank and candid look at their faith, with nothing held back and no holds barred, in order to put paid to all that "rumor and innuendo" about Islam. What kind of "rumor and innuendo"? Oh, that the Qur'an commands Muslims to wage violent Jihad and kill Infidels. That it commands Muslims to "strike terror" in the hearts of Infidels. That Muslims are taught to despise all non-Muslims. That Muhammad said "I have been made victorious through terror." That he consummated his marriage to little Aisha when she was nine years old. Wild rumors! Crazy innuendo!

*"I'm not interested in telling people how to think or what to think, but I would like them to have the opportunity to talk to each other face to face," Gabrielson said.*

*He knows that not everybody is ready nor willing to come to an event like that.*

*"I can't work with people who aren't motivated," Gabrielson said. "It's their responsibility to be good citizens and*

*neighbors. It's not something that I can accomplish for them."*

*"But the teams from his church and #UniteCloud, which have helped plan the event, have provided a chance for people to step out of their comfort zone.*

*"If those teams put this opportunity together for the folks who are interested and willing to make an investment of their time and of their energy, that's worth it to me," Gabrielson said.*

And yet again, "folks." Folks who are interested and willing to [invest] their time and energy..." Pastor Gabrielson is full of admiration for the "teams" – Muslims and non-Muslims – that "put this opportunity together," so giving of their time and energy. But he appears to be scolding those non-Muslims who are not motivated to attend this event, to take advantage of this chance. In his view, those who don't show up are not being good citizens and neighbors. The four Muslim panelists have gone out of their way to provide a forum where they can be asked the most difficult questions; it's up to the non-Muslims to show that they care enough to "step out of their comfort zone" of "rumor and innuendo" and stereotyping of Muslims. They need to do their part, which is simply to ask away, even at the risk of offending the Muslim panelists, about Islam, and then to listen carefully to those panelists as they answer every question with deep sincerity and refreshing candor.

*The session includes a panel, question-and-answer portion and a community meal. Up to 200 people can be served at the meal, but more can attend the panel session.*

*Gabrielson said the meal is an important part of the event. It's catered by New York Gyro and will include halal food.*

*"I think it's effective because people like to eat,"*

*Gabrielson said. "Having dinner with somebody tends to break down some walls."*

*But there's also something about sharing a meal that's universal.*

*"It also lets you sit down and have a little bit longer time to talk with somebody who's not exactly you," Gabrielson said. "They can have conversations with somebody who might have a different idea about refugee and immigrant resettlement in St. Cloud, about how we can be a peaceful and prosperous community for everybody's who's here."*

Food – especially free food – is a staple of these carefully staged interfaith events with Muslims. Usually it is food made by the Muslims themselves, and it serves as a useful emollient, leaving non-Muslim visitors both charmed by the exotic cuisine and grateful for the kindness shown by their hosts, offering this food. Visitors and hosts sit and break bread together, getting "to know each other as people." Visitors are put at their ease when they realize, in these cozy interchanges over food, that Muslims are just like them, with families, mortgages, kids with after-school commitments, the same hopes and dreams – or so they are led to believe. Folks meeting with other folks. What could be better?

We can well imagine the kinds of conversations that, along with the food, establish that feeling of fellowship, friendship, and well-being.

"I'm sorry you folks didn't have a chance to bring Hamed. But the gal who substituted for him on the panel was really great. And what a beautiful hijab! The whole evening has been really great. Eye-opening. Mind-expanding. To tell you the honest truth, I have learned things about Islam that I never could have guessed. I had no idea that Muhammad's first wife was a businesswoman. Not just that, but he encouraged her in her chosen career path. I'm a small businesswoman myself – Pies By

Priscilla – so that meant an awful lot to me. Muhammad was obviously a feminist. I've learned – we've all learned – so much. I would have loved to have gotten Hamed's perspective. He's still going to law school at night, isn't he?"

"Yes, he's in his last semester. He's been asked by one of his professors to help write a brief for the Somali-American community. It's a request that has been made go the School Board in St. Cloud, to provide prayer rooms in the schools, and to let Muslim students out of class twice during the school day to pray. If you're interested, you can sign our on-line petition: [freedomtopray@stcloud.com](mailto:freedomtopray@stcloud.com)."

"Well, I don't see why anyone should be against it. We don't have enough religion in our schools as it is. I'm glad at least some folks are doing something about it. Sure I'll sign it, and get some of the other folks to sign it, too."

"I'm so glad you agree. You know, I have three children, two boys and one girl, in the school system, and they keep asking when are they going to get to pray in school. Imran is the older one, Tariq the younger one. They're just regular kids, only Muslim. They really miss praying in school. They are both doing outreach, showing the other kids how they pray, why they turn to Mecca, what a good feeling they get. Imran keeps saying he wants to become a doctor. He wants to help his own people, back in Mogadishu. I think that's great. But other places too, where Muslims need help, we have so many people trying to keep us down – you know, Palestine, Syria, Gaza. Tariq loves to build things. He says he might become an architect. No, try this with the basmati rice. I made the lamb curry. My daughter Noor helped with the deserts. Anyway, this year Tariq built a scale-model of Al-Aqsa Mosque for a school project. The teacher kept it on display for a month, and had him give a talk about Muhammad's trip to the heavens from that mosque. The other kids were enthralled. They didn't know about any of that. They didn't know that Jerusalem, Al-Quds, is a Muslim holy city.

“How old? Noor is twelve. She used to say she wanted to be a journalist. But now she says she wants to become the first Muslim President. And wear a hijab in the White House! She was so excited about our Muslim Congresswoman, the one wearing the hijab, with the nice smile. We’re all so proud of her. We need more people in Washington with the Muslim perspective. That’s what Pastor Gabrielson said. He said that we’re really all just the same, except with different perspectives. He’s a very wise man. I was just thinking about how American we are. Last weekend we went apple-picking. You’ve never been? You should try it – my kids love it. Noor baked the apple pies I brought here tonight. I always tease her – “Noor’s as American as apple pie.” Yes, of course I’ll tell her. I’m glad you liked it. Remember to vote for her in a few decades!”

Unwary Infidels chat about this and that with friendly-faced Muslims who are well-versed in Taqiyya and Tu-Quoque, and just-folks neighborliness, who know exactly what they are doing. They are adept at offering a carefully sanitized Islam, or when the occasion warrants, avoiding certain difficult subjects by changing the subject altogether. Every possible cliché is offered by way of soothing summary. Folks are just folks, in every group there are some good and some bad. People are the same the whole world over. We need to realize how much we have in common. What better way to learn about Islam than by meeting and talking with real Muslims? So now, at events like these, the fear disappears, and you see that they are just like all the rest of us, with the same hopes and dreams, and everyday worries about jobs, and kids, and mortgages, and caring for their parents, and the direction this country is taking. And with all that palaver about “what unites us” at these Ask-A-Muslim–Anything, Open-Mosque Nights, I-Don’t-Mean-To-Offend, But...,” the actual contents of the Qur’an and Hadith never receive the attention they are due.

So why don’t we end with a list of twenty questions – they’ve been posted many times before at Jihad Watch – to ask those



Muslim panelists who are sure they are ready for whatever questions you might have them in those “I don’t mean to offend you, but...” events.

#1. I hope you won’t mind if I offend you, I certainly don’t mean to but...do Muslims really believe those passages in the Quran that call them “the best of peoples” (3:110) and non-Muslims ‘the most vile of creatures”? What do you believe? Should we be worried?

#2. I’m definitely not out to offend you, but I keep wondering about that verse in the Qur’an that says “there is no compulsion in religion” (2:256). I’ve read online that many ex-Muslims who became Christians or atheists are afraid to let other Muslims, even their own families, know. Is that true? Are Muslims permitted to change their religion without any consequences? Do non-Muslims in any way feel “compelled” to change their religion? Why did tens of millions of Hindus convert to Islam? Did they just find Islam more appealing?

#3. I’m not trying to annoy any of you, and I’m sure you are as horrified as I am, but why did so many Muslims want to see Asia Bibi executed? Hundreds of thousands of people protested in Pakistan when she was acquitted of blasphemy and released. They tried to find her and kill her. What did she say about Muhammad that made them think she deserved death? Didn’t the Supreme Court in Pakistan acquit her? What punishment do you think she deserves?

#4. Okay, here’s one that’s really been puzzling me. There is a Qur’anic verse that tells Muslims not to take Christians and Jews as friends, “for they are friends only with each other.” Do you think many Muslims still believe that? I mean, we’re here tonight, and we’ve been invited to meet with you, and you look pretty friendly to me. So what gives? Shouldn’t that verse be deleted from the Qur’an?

#5. What should we make of those verses, such as 8:12, in

which Allah says that “I will instill terror in the hearts of the Unbelievers.” And I’ve read online a half-dozen other verses about instilling terror in the hearts – practically the identical words – of the Unbelievers. Obviously I know the vast majority of Muslims have nothing to do with any of that. So my question is: “How do you, the peaceful Muslims, stop those crazies in the Islamic State and similar places from taking these verses literally, as they obviously do?”

#6. As a woman, I was really taken aback by that verse – I wrote it down, it’s 4:34 – that says a Muslim man may “beat” his wife if she is disobedient. Is that still the case, or have Muslims decided to ignore that verse? What kinds of behavior by the wife would trigger such punishment? And who decides how hard a man can beat his wife? I don’t want to offend you, but I have to admit that I’m still shocked. I hope something can be done about that verse. Are there any plans to produce a new edition of the Qur’an, with that kind of verse left out? I mean, we have many different editions of the Bible, such as the New English Bible and the King James Bible, so why not do the same with the Qur’an? How hard would that be?

#7. There are many verses in the Qur’an which, I’ve read, command Muslims to fight and kill Infidels until they submit, such as 9:29: “Fight against those who do not obey Allah and do not believe in Allah or the Last Day and do not forbid what has been forbidden by Allah and His messenger, even if they are of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizya with willing submission and feel themselves subdued.”□ Could you discuss what the Jizyah was, or maybe still is, how burdensome it was, and what happened if non-Muslims couldn’t pay it?

#8. Aside from payment of the Jizyah, could you discuss what requirements are – or were – made on non-Muslims in Muslim societies? When those requirements ceased to be imposed? Is it true that Christians and Jews had to wear differently colored identifying marks on their clothing and on their dwellings?

What was that all about?

#9. I don't want to offend, I really truly don't, but I've read in many places that Muhammad married his last wife, Aisha, when she was six years old, and consummated the marriage – we all know what that means – when he was 54, and she was nine years old. I find that unbelievable. And I also found out that Ayatollah Khomeini, who married his own wife when she was ten years old, succeeded in amending the Civil Code of Iran in 1982, so that the marriageable age for girls was reduced to nine years, emulating the example of Aisha. My question is: what is going on? Can any of this be real? I simply don't believe it. Please explain.

#10. Could you discuss what "honor killings" are? And why do you think 91% of the world's "honor killings" are committed by Muslims? Do you think polygamy should be outlawed in Muslim countries? What about for Muslims living in the West?

#11. I don't mean to offend, but...I've wanted to ask this question for quite a while. It means a lot to me. My son-in-law has Jewish relatives who live in France, and they are quite worried. I would like your comments on the letter made public on April 21, 2018, which was signed by several hundred French notables, including former president Nicolas Sarkozy, a former prime minister, Manuel Valls, a famous singer, Charles Aznavour, a celebrated actor, Gerard Depardieu, and many others. And it was also signed by several well-known Muslim leaders and bloggers, including the philosemitic imam of the Drancy mosque, Hassan Chalghoumi.

The letter was prompted by the murders around that time of Jews in France by Muslims, including two elderly women. It asked Muslims to "make obsolete" certain verses in the Qur'an that call for violence, which those who signed the letter believe encouraged antisemitic acts. Do you think that is a reasonable request to have made? Many Muslim leaders were outraged. What do you think? How would you handle the violent

verses in the Qur'an?

#12. There are a lot of reasons for thinking women are not equal to men in Islam. But I'd really like your opinion on specifics. My women's group has been studying what is in the Qur'an, and Hadith, about women. Please correct me if I'm wrong but this is what we concluded. We learned that Muslim women inherit only half as much as men (Qur'an 4:11); that their testimony is worth half that of a man (2:282); that polygamy is allowed (Muhammad allowed himself about – I'm not exactly sure, but I think he had about ten wives, and also some female slaves, which I think he may have slept with, I'm not sure about that. I still can't quite believe all of it. But as far as I now understand, a Muslim man is allowed to beat his disobedient wife, though "lightly." A Muslim man need only pronounce the Arabic word "talaq" three times to divorce his wife. Women are described in the Qur'an as inferior to men, for "the men are a degree above them" (2:228); and in the hadith, in Sahih Bukhari (6:301), "[Muhammad] said, 'Is not the evidence of two women equal to the witness of one man? They replied in the affirmative. He said, 'This [is because of] the deficiency in her intelligence.'" What do you think of these examples of misogyny? Can anything be done to change these quotes, to toss them out, to get rid of them? How can we non-Muslims help Muslims – obviously not any of you – to get beyond these passages, and bring about real equality of the sexes in Islam?

#13. I don't mean to offend, but...I represent the LGBTQ community at my university, and I have prepared a fairly lengthy question about Islam and homosexuality. I've been very concerned with some of the photographs coming out of Muslim countries. I have seen pictures of homosexuals who were hung from cranes in Iran, and heard of others who were decapitated in Saudi Arabia, and saw the Islamic State videos of homosexuals being thrown off of tall buildings. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think the Qur'an contains unambiguous

condemnations of homosexual activity. There's Allah, in the Qur'an, describing how to punish such people: "And [We had sent] Lot when he said to his people, 'Do you commit such immorality as no one has preceded you with from among the worlds? Indeed, you approach men with desire, instead of women. Rather, you are a transgressing people.'...And We rained upon them a rain [of stones]. Then see how was the end of the criminals." (7:80-84)

That was Allah speaking about a "rain [of stones]," that is, lapidation. And Muhammad speaks of execution as the punishment for homosexual behavior in a hadith: "The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, 'Whoever you find doing the action of the people of Lot, execute the one who does it and the one to whom it is done.'" (Sunan Abu Dawud 4462). He is reported to have said that he feared homosexuality among his followers more than anything else: "It was narrated that Jabir: "The Prophet said: 'There is nothing I fear for my followers more than the deed of the people of Lot.'"— Al-Tirmidhi: 1457, Ibn Maajah: 2563

This terrifies me. And many Muslims worldwide apparently agree that we should be punished. It's not just the death penalty. Even in Muslim countries where the death penalty is not inflicted, the treatment of homosexuals can be unusually cruel. In Egypt, for example, the police troll for homosexuals online, using personal ads, then arrest anyone who answers. Some of those they trap have been given five-year prison sentences, and according to Human Rights Watch, some have been – and I quote – "whipped, bound and suspended in painful positions, splashed with cold water, burned with cigarettes, shocked with electricity to the limbs, genitals or tongue."

Muslim clerics from Morocco to Qatar to Indonesia have denounced homosexual behavior. In 2016, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association listed the 12 countries where same-sex sexual acts are punishable by death: Sudan, Nigeria, Somalia, Mauritania, Iran, Saudi

Arabia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Qatar, the UAE, and Iraq. 11 of the 12 are Muslim states, and the 12th, Nigeria, is more than half Muslim. In another dozen states, all of them Muslim, homosexual acts are severely punished, though with prison and flogging, rather than capital punishment.

So I put the question to all of the panelists: what can or should be done to make homosexuality legal in Muslim countries? Or at least, how can we just be left alone? Help me to understand what we in the LGBTQ community can do to protect ourselves or to change Muslim minds. We now have same-sex marriage in the United States. Forty years ago, even thirty or twenty, that would have been unthinkable. But now it's accepted, and protected. Why can't something of the same be done in Muslim countries? It might take a little bit longer, but still...Anyway, I'd love to hear your opinion about this.

#14. There have been a few mosques opened in the West – I've read about the one in Berlin here men and women now pray side by side. Do you think that's a change that should be widely adopted, or is there some good reason to keep the sexes apart when they pray?

#15. We often hear that Islam is the "world's fastest-growing religion." At the same time, the fastest-growing religion in the Islamic Republic of Iran is Christianity. Could you comment on both those trends?

#16. It was not until 1962 that Saudi Arabia finally abolished slavery, under heavy Western pressure. In the same year, Yemen also abolished slavery, and Oman did so in 1970. In Mauritania, slavery kept being abolished – in 1905, 1961, and 1981 – because people ignored the prohibition. It was finally criminalized in August 2007. But even with that, there are still at least 100,000 black African slaves of Muslim Arab masters in Mauritania, at least 200,000 African slaves with

Arab masters in Mali, and another 600,000-800,000 slaves in Niger. Could you explain why slavery lasted so much longer in the Muslim lands than elsewhere? Is it more legitimate because Muhammad himself was a slave-owner? Or was there some other reason?

#17. Namaste. I happen to be the only Hindu here tonight. I grew up in Mumbai, before coming to graduate school here, and I have a question that is very specific. I wonder if any of the panelists could comment on the fact that at the time of Partition in 1947, 23% of the population of West Pakistan was Hindu, and now it has declined to 2-3%, and in East Pakistan in 1947, 15% of the population was Hindu and today, in what is now called Bangladesh, is 8%, While the Hindu population has gone down precipitously in Pakistan and Bangladesh, the Muslim population of India has gone from 9%, or 34 million, in the 1951 census to 180 million, or 14.5% of the population today. Why do you think the Hindu population has declined in Pakistan and Bangladesh, and the Muslim population gone up fivefold in India?

#18. I don't mean to offend, but...I wonder if you have ever asked yourself why there have been so few Nobel Prizes in the sciences won by Muslims. There have been only three, and one of them was to Abdus Salam, an Ahmadi whose own government says is not a real Muslim. So maybe there are only two. Some people argue that Islam encourages a habit of mental submission, instead of the habit of critical inquiry, and that this discourages the questioning and skeptical spirit that the pursuit of science requires. Do you think there is any truth to that? Or is there some other reason that explains the paucity of Nobel Prizes in science for Muslims?

#19. I don't mean to offend, but would it be okay if I ask the panelists about FGM, female genital mutilation? I'm in the middle of writing about it for my Gov class. I can go ahead? Okay. I'm just curious about a case that recently was brought in a federal court in Michigan. There were eight defendants – two doctors and six others, including several sets of parents. They were being prosecuted for participating in, I think, about ten cases of FGM. In 1996, the Federal government passed a law banning FGM. But the judge in this case said that Congress lacked the authority to ban FGM under the Commerce Clause, and that the law was unconstitutional. He did say that individual states could still ban it. My question is not about the American Constitution, and Section 8 of the Commerce Clause. What I want to know is this: were the doctors and parents in this case right to claim that FGM is mandated by Islam, so banning it might violate the Free Exercise clause of the First Amendment, or are those people who say that FGM is only a “cultural” practice, and Islam has nothing to do with it, correct?

#20. Well, you all know me. I'm Pastor Gabrielson, I've been given the great privilege of asking the last question. And the even greater privilege of expressing our gratitude. I know I speak for all of the folks here tonight in thanking our four panelists for a great evening. We've all learned so much. I have just one final question – we promised to limit ourselves to twenty questions. And some of those previous questions were pretty long. So I'll try to make mine short. Obviously our distinguished panelists have seen for themselves tonight how eager folks here are to learn, directly from them, about their faith. And judging by tonight's success, we're going to have many more such gatherings.

I just have one simple question. I was wondering if Christians



in Muslim lands ever put on similar events to explain Christianity to Muslims? Don't you think that would help clear up many misunderstandings folks in Muslim countries might have about us? Or even here, in America, I'm sure many Muslims would like to ask questions about Christianity. Not to convert or anything – just to try to understand. I'd be glad to get involved in that kind of person-to-person outreach. So I wonder what you think of this idea, and how we might get started, with Muslim folks here and abroad. Any suggestions?

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