

“Meet Your Muslim Neighbors”

by Hugh Fitzgerald

Ever since 9/11, mosques and “Islamic centers” have been conducting campaigns of determined “outreach” to non-Muslims. The point of this “outreach” is to present Islam as the least threatening of faiths, one which has been too often misunderstood and its adherents unfairly maligned, and those adherents are only too glad to clear up misconceptions about their faith. One such gathering was [held on September 16](#) at the Islamic Center of Boston in Wayland, Massachusetts, billed as “Meet Your Muslim Neighbors.”

The first “misconception” that the Muslim hosts thought needed to be cleared up had to do with how long Muslims have been in America. “People think that Muslims have just come here to this country,” said Shaheen Akhtar, who is an “interfaith liaison” and runs an “interfaith book club” at the Center. She told her audience that Jefferson and John Adams had both owned copies of the Qur’an. Her implication was clear: these men took a sympathetic interest in Islam. She even described Jefferson as “advocating for the rights of the practitioners of the faith.” This implies special pleading on his part for Islam. What Jefferson actually did was “advocate” for the principle of religious freedom in general, and famously quoted a line from John Locke’s 1698 *A Letter Concerning Religious Toleration*: “neither Pagan nor Mahamedan [Muslim] nor Jew ought to be excluded from the civil rights of the Commonwealth because of his religion.”

However, there were those whom Locke expressly excluded from toleration, and applying his own criteria, Muslims might well have been among them.

At the [website of Apologetics Press](#):

Dr. Dave Miller has noted that in a section of A Letter

Concerning Toleration dealing with those whom a civil magistrate "cannot" tolerate, Locke lists the following (page numbers refer to the 1796 edition of Locke's Letter): Those whose religious opinions are contrary to "those moral rules which are necessary to the preservation of civil society" (1796, p. 53);

1. The religion that "teaches expressly and openly, that men are not obliged to keep their promise" (p. 54);
2. "[T]hose that will not own and teach the duty of tolerating all men in matters of mere religion...and that they only ask leave to be tolerated by the magistrate so long, until they find themselves strong enough to [seize the government]" (p. 55);
3. All those who see themselves as having allegiance to another civil authority (p. 56). Specifically, Locke gives the example of the Muslim who lives among Christians and would have difficulty submitting to the government of a "Christian nation" when he comes from a Muslim country where the civil magistrate was also the religious authority. Locke notes that such a person would have grave difficulty serving as a soldier in his adopted nation (cf. the 2009 Fort Hood shooting spree by a Muslim soldier who shouted, "Allahu Akbar" as he opened fire, killing 13 and wounding 32; see Stewart, 2010).
4. "[T]hose are not at all to be tolerated who deny the being of a God" (p. 56).

#1-#4 would all seem to disqualify Islam from such toleration.

But what did those visitors to the Islamic Center know about Jefferson's reliance on Locke, and Locke's criteria, that would have excluded Islam from "toleration"? And what did they know about, what could they reasonably conclude, from the Qur'ans owned by Jefferson and Adams?

Both Jefferson and Adams were intellectually voracious; they were curious about Islam, as they were curious about so many things; curiosity is not endorsement. Jefferson purchased his Qur'an, translated by the English lawyer and Orientalist George Sale, in 1765. Later, dealing with the problem of the Barbary Pirates, the North African Muslims who attacked Christian shipping and Christian sailors (and enormous sums were being spent by the young Republic to buy off these Muslim marauders), Jefferson, along with John Adams, met with the Tripolitanian envoy Sidi Haji Abdrahaman in London in 1786. Perhaps reading the Qur'an helped Jefferson to understand the motivations of this unexpected enemy; certainly by the time he became President in 1801, he was determined not to negotiate with the Barbary Pirates, but to implacably oppose with force these Muslims whom, he knew, were permanently hostile to all non-Muslims.

In London, Jefferson and Adams had queried the Tripolitanian ambassador "concerning the ground of the pretensions to make war upon nations who had done them no injury" for the Americans had done nothing to deserve being attacked, and the ambassador replied, as Jefferson reported:

It was written in their Koran, that all nations which had not acknowledged the Prophet were sinners, whom it was the right and duty of the faithful to plunder and enslave; and that every mussulman who was slain in this warfare was sure to go to paradise.

And later, Jefferson reported to Secretary of State John Jay and to Congress at greater length:

The ambassador answered us that [the right] was founded on the Laws of the Prophet, that it was written in their Koran, that all nations who should not have answered their authority were sinners, that it was their right and duty to make war upon them wherever they could be found, and to make slaves of

all they could take as prisoners, and that every Mussulman who should be slain in battle was sure to go to Paradise.

These reports do not sound as if they came from someone who thought well of Islam. The more dealings Jefferson had with the representatives of the Barbary states, and the more he studied the tenets of the faith, the more he began to grasp the aggressive nature of Islam, the centrality of Jihad, the inculcation of permanent hostility toward non-Muslims, and the heavenly reward for Jihadis slain in battle.

As for John Adams, his owning a Qur'an did not signify an endorsement of Islam. While Jefferson's Qur'an was that translated by George Sale, the Qur'an that Adams owned was translated by the Sieur de Ryer in 1647 into French, and from that an English translation appeared in 1649, and then published in the United States in 1806. And that edition of the "Alcoran of Mahomet" is prefaced by this: *"This book is a long conference of God, the angels, and Mahomet, which that false prophet very grossly invented; sometimes he introduceth God, who speaketh to him, and teacheth him his law, then an angel, among the prophets, and frequently maketh God to speak in the plural. ... Thou wilt wonder that such absurdities have infected the best part of the world, and wilt avouch, that the knowledge of what is contained in this book, will render that law contemptible."*

On July 16, 1814, in a letter to Jefferson, John Adams described the Muslim prophet Muhammad as one of those (he listed others as well) who could rightly be considered a *"military fanatic,"* one who *"denies that laws were made for him; he arrogates everything to himself by force of arms."* Adams is nowhere on record as praising any aspect of Islam, nor even *"advocating"* its toleration.

Visitors to the Islamic Center of Boston were told only that Adams and Jefferson both owned Qur'ans, and that Jefferson

“advocated” for Islam. They were not told what Jefferson and John Adams themselves had concluded about Islam and Muhammad (see above), or what their experience of dealing with Muslim powers had been, for that might have given those visitors pause.

And they were certainly not told that another American president, the formidable scholar John Quincy Adams, had studied the Qur’an, and the history of Islamic conquest, more thoroughly than any of our presidents before or since, and even felt impelled, from his study of both Islamic texts and of the history of Islamic conquest, to write a longer work on Islam. Here is some of what he wrote:

He [Muhammad] declared undistinguishing and exterminating war, as a part of his religion, against all the rest of mankind...The precept of the Koran is, perpetual war against all who deny, that Mahomet is the prophet of God.

In the seventh century of the Christian era, a wandering Arab of the lineage of Hagar [i.e., Muhammad], the Egyptian, combining the powers of transcendent genius, with the preternatural energy of a fanatic, and the fraudulent spirit of an impostor, proclaimed himself as a messenger from Heaven, and spread desolation and delusion over an extensive portion of the earth. Adopting from the sublime conception of the Mosaic law, the doctrine of one omnipotent God; he connected indissolubly with it, the audacious falsehood, that he was himself his prophet and apostle. Adopting from the new Revelation of Jesus, the faith and hope of immortal life, and of future retribution, he humbled it to the dust by adapting all the rewards and sanctions of his religion to the gratification of the sexual passion. He poisoned the sources of human felicity at the fountain, by degrading the condition of the female sex, and the allowance of polygamy; and he declared undistinguishing and exterminating war, as a part of his religion, against all the rest of mankind. THE ESSENCE OF HIS DOCTRINE WAS VIOLENCE AND LUST: TO EXALT THE BRUTAL OVER

THE SPIRITUAL PART OF HUMAN NATURE [Adam's capital letters]...Between these two religions, thus contrasted in their characters, a war of twelve hundred years has already raged. The war is yet flagrant...While the merciless and dissolute dogmas of the false prophet shall furnish motives to human action, there can never be peace upon earth, and good will towards men."

As the essential principle of his faith is the subjugation of others by the sword; it is only by force, that his false doctrines can be dispelled, and his power annihilated. They [The Russians – J. Q. Adams was here discussing the endless war of the Russians] have been from time immemorial, in a state of almost perpetual war with the Tatars, and with their successors, the Ottoman conquerors of Constantinople. It were an idle waste of time to trace the causes of each renewal of hostilities, during a succession of several centuries. The precept of the Koran is, perpetual war against all who deny, that Mahomet is the prophet of God. The vanquished may purchase their lives, by the payment of tribute; the victorious may be appeased by a false and delusive promise of peace; and the faithful follower of the prophet, may submit to the imperious necessities of defeat: but the command to propagate the Moslem creed by the sword is always obligatory, when it can be made effective. The commands of the prophet may be performed alike, by fraud, or by force. Of Mahometan good faith, we have had memorable examples ourselves. When our gallant [Stephen] Decatur had chastised the pirate of Algiers, till he was ready to renounce his claim of tribute from the United States, he signed a treaty to that effect: but the treaty was drawn up in the Arabic language, as well as in our own; and our negotiators, unacquainted with the language of the Koran, signed the copies of the treaty, in both languages, not imagining that there was any difference between them. Within a year the Dey demands, under penalty of the renewal of the war, an indemnity in money for the frigate taken by Decatur; our Consul demands the foundation of this

pretension; and the Arabic copy of the treaty, signed by himself is produced, with an article stipulating the indemnity, foisted into it, in direct opposition to the treaty as it had been concluded. The arrival of Chauncey, with a squadron before Algiers, silenced the fraudulent claim of the Dey, and he signed a new treaty in which it was abandoned; but he disdained to conceal his intentions; my power, said he, has been wrested from my hands; draw ye the treaty at your pleasure, and I will sign it; but beware of the moment, when I shall recover my power, for with that moment, your treaty shall be waste paper. He avowed what they always practised, and would without scruple have practised himself. Such is the spirit, which governs the hearts of men, to whom treachery and violence are taught as principles of religion.

Clearly, neither Jefferson, nor John Adams, nor his son John Quincy Adams had anything good to say about Islam. Indeed were they to utter such sentiments today they would most likely be declared “right-wing islamophobes” and consigned to the outer darkness. But the visitors to the Islamic Center were deliberately left with the impression that Jefferson and Adams were defenders, not detractors, of Islam.

The Islamic Center “has long prided itself on its interfaith services,” but what does that mean? Does it mean that non-Muslims can watch, or even participate in, the regular Muslim services? Or does it have to do with charity? Mention is made of “resources for homeless families.” Ordinarily, zakat (charitable giving), many Muslim websites insist, should be limited to fellow Muslims, but if it is given to non-Muslims, it can be justified as helping to “promote Islam” by burnishing its image. It is too bad that the “moderate voices” that Shaheed Akhtar says “need to be heard” did not openly discuss this matter with their guests. They might have said, for example, “you know, there are Muslims who believe that the recipients of zakat can only be other Muslims but we, the

moderates, disagree.” That would have won points, but would also have required, however, the admission that many Muslims think otherwise.

Adil Najam, a Pakistani American, gave a presentation about “the experience of being a Muslim in America.” He has himself led a charmed academic life, and is now that appetizing thing, a full professor and Dean of the Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University. How unfair it was, he smilingly implied, when he appeared on a TV news show after 9/11/2001 and was unpleasantly introduced as an “expert on hate” because he was a Muslim, at the very time when, Najam said, “everyone was talking about why *they* hate *us*.” Muslims should be seen as not experts on, but victims of hate, when they wish only, joked Najam, to someday become regarded as “experts on love.” Muslim love for non-Muslims, reciprocal non-Muslim love for Muslims, the promise of a Peaceable Kingdom if only the Islamophobes could be silenced, what a comforting prospect..

Along with attempts to enroll the Founding Fathers in the campaign to burnish Islam’s image, Muslims, and not just in CAIR, like both to backdate and exaggerate the Muslim presence in America. Broad claims have been made for an early Muslim presence. Najam did not disappoint, for he stated, almost offhandedly and, without reference to any supporting evidence, that “around 30 percent of the slaves brought over to the United States were Muslim.” No such certainty exists among those who have researched the question of slaves who were Muslim; figures range from 5% to 10% to 15% to the fantastic figure of 30%. Najam chose not to discuss the complexity of the issue, but plucked out of the air the highest figure that anyone has ever mentioned, 30%, and presented it as indisputable fact. He did not discuss another aspect of this matter, which is that even those slaves who came as Muslims found it impossible to keep up the observance of Islam and within a few generations, as Sylviane Diouf has pointed out,

the observance of Islam practically, and swiftly, died out: "Islam as brought by the African slaves has not survived...in the Americas and the Caribbean, not one community currently practices Islam as passed on by preceding African generations." The absence of Qur'ans, madrasas, mosques, and the pressure to convert to Christianity, all contributed to this rapid disappearance of Islam.

Adil Najam wanted to convey to his non-Muslim audience the challenge of being a Muslim in America, and the "difficult conversations" so many of them had to have with their children. "How do you explain to your child that someone who has a name like his, someone who claims to be from the religion that he has grown up in, would do a horrible thing"? Notice how Najam suggests by sleight of word that anyone who "would do a horrible thing" (a terrorist attack) only "claims" to be a Muslim, but cannot really be one. And it is the good, kind, peaceful and therefore "authentic" Muslims who are also victims of Islamic terrorism, for it is they who suffer the consequences of the acts of bad (and therefore "false") Muslims. Yet Najam passes over in silence – does not attempt to explain – the disturbing habit those "false" Muslims have of quoting passages from the Qur'an to justify their every act. Did they make those passages up?

Adil Najam isn't sorry for Muslims alone. He emphasized that non-Muslims also had to have "difficult conversations" with their children, too. What kind of conversations? Perhaps, you are thinking, conversations about safety, because children have learned about Boston and San Bernardino and Fort Hood and Chattanooga and Orlando, and about dozens – or hundreds, or thousands – of other Muslim terrorist attacks, in London and Paris and Brussels and Amsterdam and Madrid and Moscow, in Nigeria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria, Libya. There have been, after all, nearly 30,000 terrorist attacks by Muslims since 9/11/2001. This might naturally cause some anxiety, and not only among children. The heightened security at airports,

railroad and bus stations, subways, sports events, concerts, political rallies, any place where large numbers of people gather – all this is in response to, and reminds us constantly of, the threat of Islamic terrorism.

But it's not reassurances about safety that Adil Najam thinks non-Muslim parents must offer their children. He does not think that the "difficult conversation" non-Muslim parents need to have with their children should be about terrorism, even if it were in the context of an attempt to reassure them, by possibly minimizing the danger. No, the conversation that *he* thinks non-Muslim parents need to have with their children is not about terrorism at all but should be "*about how to deal with Islamophobia, too.*"

So the problem for all of us, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, is not the steady stillicide of Muslim attacks on non-Muslims (in this country, in Europe, around the world) but, rather, the attitudes such attacks give rise to among non-Muslims (fear, suspicion, hostility), attitudes that the adil-najams of this world insist on dismissing as the bigotry of "Islamophobia." Adil Najam was in his element at this Meet Your Muslim Neighbors event, encouraging the belief that any suspicion or hostility felt by non-Muslims reflected a baseless and irrational fear, an "Islamophobia" that we are all supposed to reject as we learn to meet and trust Our Muslim Neighbors. Others might beg to differ, might even argue that it would be irrational, given the observable behavior and attitudes of so many Muslims, *not* to be exceedingly wary of Islam and its adherents.

The non-Muslim visitors to this "Meet Your Muslim Neighbors" farce were eager to signal their acceptance of Najam's victimization narrative. "You can't be a bystander," said Elizabeth Jonczyk, who was visiting the center with her sister to learn about Islam. "You have a duty to stand up and say, 'That's just wrong,' and that you don't stand with the people who have this hateful rhetoric." Music to the ears of CAIR.

One wonders what exactly Ms. Joczcyk learned about Islam during her visit. Whose “hateful rhetoric” was she deploring? Has she been made aware of any “hateful rhetoric” in the Qur’an? Has she glanced at even one of the thousands of Muslim websites spewing “hateful rhetoric”? Or is “hateful rhetoric” what comes only from “right-wing” Islamophobes? Was she made aware, in meeting her Muslim neighbors, of any of the more than 100 Jihad verses in the Qur’an? Did she learn anything about the life of Muhammad? Did she find out – and please pardon the repetition, but these things must be repeated again and again – about his attack on the Jewish farmers of the Khaybar Oasis, or his marriage to little Aisha when she was six and consummation of that marriage when she was nine? Did she learn of the satisfaction he expressed at the murders of Asma bint Marwan and Abu ‘Afak for mocking him, or his viewing of the beheading of the 600-900 bound prisoners of the Banu Qurayza? Did anyone at the Islamic Center let her know that despite all this, Muhammad is considered by Muslims to be the Perfect Man (*al-insan al-kamil*), the Model of Conduct (*uswa hasana*)? Did she find out that Muslims are called the “best of peoples” and non-Muslims the “vilest of creatures” in the Qur’an?

I would bet my bottom dollar she learned none of that from her hosts at “Meet Your Muslim Neighbors.” All she heard was that it is hard for Muslims in this country, for they are so unfairly tarred with the brush of terrorism, when we all know, don’t we, that these attacks by people who “claim” to be Muslims have “nothing to do with Islam.” Yet Muslim parents have to have that “difficult conversation” with their children, in this climate of right-wing hate speech (add any other epithets you like) and Islamophobia, and non-Muslim parents have a similar duty, too, to make sure their own children become aware of this “Islamophobia” phenomenon and are properly immunized against it.

Adil Najam, who grew up in Pakistan, knows what is in the

Qur'an and Hadith. He knows perfectly well the Qur'anic verses that call for Jihad, knows the description of non-Muslims in the Qur'an, knows about Aisha and Asma bint Marwan and the Khaybar Oasis and the Banu Qurayza. He knows the significance of the Hadith as a gloss on the Qur'an, perhaps even more disturbing than the Qur'an. But he does not wish to share that knowledge with his trusting non-Muslim guests. He would prefer that whatever they learn about Islam not be anything that might alarm or worry them. And he wants them to think that any anxiety about Islam is merely the result of motiveless malignity, irrational hatred, "Islamophobia."

What might Adil Najam, Dean of the Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies, and a Professor of More Than One Thing at Boston University, have done differently that Saturday morning at the Islamic Center? He might have said that yes, there are many passages in the Qur'an that call for Jihad against the Infidels. He might have admitted that these passages had proven dangerous to the well-being of all non-Muslims, as over the past 1400 years Muslims had repeatedly shown that they took the duty of Jihad to heart, and had conquered many lands and subjugated many peoples.

Professor Najam might have said that it was up to Muslims, like himself, to own up to the centrality of Jihad in Islam. It was imperative for Muslims, Dean Najam might have argued, "to put Islam back into history," as Christians and Jews had learned to do with their holy books, instead of treating it as uncreated and immutable. It was up to Muslims, he might have continued, not to try to protect their faith from the prying eyes of Infidels, but to own up to the texts and teachings of Islam in the hope of finding ways to contextualize or re-interpret the offending passages in the Qur'an and Hadith.

Adil Najam might have said that many events in Muhammad's life were deeply disturbing, and ought to be recognized as such by mainstream Muslims, rather than denied or explained away, and non-Muslims had a perfect right to be alarmed at those events,

particularly since Muhammad was regarded by Muslims as “the Perfect Man.” Professor Najam might have said that Muslims should try always to enlighten, and never to mislead, their non-Muslim Neighbors.

Yes, he might have said any of these things, and by now in these paragraphs you have been asked to believe, if my aging abacus is accurate, Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast. But if Adil Najam, Professor and Dean of the Frederick S. Pardee Etc., were to say or do even one of the things just suggested, he would not be Adil Najam, but instead be Maajid Nawaz, or Pervez Hoodbhoy, or Ibn Warraq, or Wafa Sultan, or Ayaan Hirsi Ali. And he would then not only have, but would actually deserve, the trust of those who came to Meet Their Muslim Neighbors.