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How Extreme Anti-Muslim Rhetoric Entered American

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Zahra Noorbakhsh and Asma Uddin: What "Religious Freedom" Means for U.S. Muslims

By Zahra Noorbakhsh

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Asma T. Uddin, a fellow at the UCLA Burkle Center for International Relations and author of *When Islam Is Not a Religion*, has spent her career advocating for religious liberty. She spoke with comedian Zahra Noorbakhsh, host of the hit podcast #GoodMuslimBadMuslim, about the proliferation of extreme anti-Muslim rhetoric in the US, how racial discrimination compounds religious discrimination, and the state of religious freedom and human rights for Muslims in the U.S. *When Islam is Not a Religion* is now available from Pegasus Books.

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Zahra Noorbakhsh: When did you know you wanted to write this book? When did you know you needed to write this book? And, were there any times you felt like you couldn't write this book? Why and what was happening for you?

Asma T. Uddin: The book in many ways is a result of my past decade working on religious freedom cases and issues. I have advocated for broad religious liberty rights in both the international context (including Muslim-majority states) and the American context, and throughout it all, I've maintained total consistency—even if I

don't agree with a particular religious practice, I understand that our human right to religious freedom requires that we protect everyone. Not just some people, but everyone.

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But as I was working on these issues in as morally and intellectually consistent way possible, I noticed that not all public advocates for religious freedom were doing the same. There were in many cases vociferous defenses of the rights of Christians and even some religious minorities like Jews and Sikhs. When it came to Islam, though, there was total silence. That's when I *wanted* to write this book.

Then there were the moments when people were no longer silent—they were vocally and explicitly against Muslims' religious rights. "Islam is not a religion," they said, "instead it's a dangerous political ideology. Therefore, Muslims have no rights under the First Amendment." That's when I knew I *needed* to write this book.

The people making this argument often don't realize that they're picking up their talking points from a well-funded cadre of anti-Muslim agitators. They are professional fear-mongers who work in very strategic and deliberate ways and inspire violence against Muslims. Knowing these guys are out there (and hearing from their proteges every time I published an op-ed on this topic) made me feel at times that I couldn't write this book.

“Your reaction to the claim ‘Islam is not a religion’ is pretty much the way most people react when they hear it. It’s so far-fetched that our first reaction is to dismiss it.”

For example, hours after my op-eds were posted online, I’d start to receive emails filled with links to YouTube videos on about X Y Z problem with Islam (in other cases, instead of the links, the messages just repeated the usual hostile claims about Islam). Pamela Geller wrote a piece responding to my NYT op-ed, and Robert Spencer published a piece on Jihad Watch right after my *Washington Post* piece was published. It’s like they’re watching constantly and are ready to attack and dispute immediately, lest their followers be inspired by my work to begin to think for themselves.

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The advertisement features a dark red background on the left with the text "NOW IN PAPERBACK" and a white bird logo. In the center is a book cover for "FIGHT NO MORE" by LYDIA MILLET, showing a person in a red coat. To the right, a quote reads: "[A] SHIMMERING and BRILLIANTLY ENGAGED collection." attributed to the New York Times Book Review. On the far right, the text "LEARN MORE" is partially visible.

ZN: We hear a lot about narrative strategies to dehumanize Muslims, but your book highlights legislation and court cases that go as far back as U.S. history. Did you ever come across court precedents coming from cases leading up to the Jim Crow era?

AU: There is something inherently dehumanizing about the claim—the very idea—that Muslims don't have the same human rights as other people. Human rights by definition are rooted in our humanness; we get them because we are human. Full stop. We don't have to earn them or prove ourselves worthy of them. We simply have to be human.

When some people begin to question that for Muslims, they in essence are arguing that Muslims aren't fully human or as human as other people. And that line of thinking is what gets us started down the road toward far wider incursions on our freedom.

In this process of dehumanization, race has played a role. For example, in the book, I discuss how for African American Muslims, racial discrimination has compounded religious discrimination. As I write there (quoting the work of critical race theorist, Khaled Beydoun): “Especially if they belong to the Nation of Islam (NOI) sect, black Muslims are perceived as gangsters or militants. In early cases brought by NOI inmates, ‘the gang label stripped the NOI of its religious dimension and projected an image based on insubordination, criminality, and violence—stereotypes attributed most closely to an African American male identity.’”

“At times—reading through some of the cited court cases—it seemed like white supremacy was being treated like its own religion.”

ZN: At times—reading through some of the cited court cases—it seemed like white supremacy was being treated like its own religion. How did you decide what to call dogma? And, how did you navigate all the fallacies thrust at Muslims all the time, on CNN, in court, in legislation, in polls... how did you prepare yourself and your research to navigate the slippery slopes, the straw man fallacies, the red herrings, and loaded questions?

AU: Slippery slopes, straw man fallacies, red herrings, and loaded questions all comprise the story of my life! Having worked on religious liberty issues for almost a decade before I even began to write this book prepared me for all of the chaos. Unfortunately, in today's world, basic rights like religious freedom are hopelessly politicized and constantly contested. I entertain some of the chaos to a certain extent, but have learned to draw my listeners and readers back to the fundamental point of religious freedom: protecting each human's ability to find meaning in their lives and live out their deeply held beliefs. Put aside all of the social commentary and political fighting and just focus on the basic fact that we as humans have rights, and the only way we are going to protect those rights is by defending them for everyone.

ZN: When you cited the ways in which Steve Bannon contorts the definition of a Muslim to liken it to one who submits to a cult, I actually had to get up out of my chair and take a walk. How do we even work with such contortions? It feels like no matter what we say, our words and our lives can be twisted for more hate-mongering. Were there ever moments that made you feel hopeless?

There are lots of things about the lines of attacks on Muslims that are absurd and can be deeply frustrating. But the one thing that really got to me is the twisted use of the concept "taqiyya." The *Oxford Dictionary of Islam* defines *taqiyya* as the "precautionary denial of religious belief in the face of potential persecution." In Islamic history, it was a concept largely relevant to intra-Muslim disputes, a doctrine Shi'as used to weather Sunni persecution. As I understand it, it was used by Shi'as

primarily in the period before the rise of the [Shi'a] Safavid dynasty in 1501 and, even today, the Twelver Shias consider it a legitimate practice as a way of maintaining unity among Muslims.

In American political discourse, however, the professional fear-mongers have distorted the concept beyond recognition. They have disseminated this concept to mean that basically anytime a Muslim does anything good, it's merely a way of deceiving others into trusting Muslims and letting their guards down. Then, one day, when Muslims have everyone duped and have climbed the rungs of power they will pounce! And the takeover of America will be complete!

The notion is SO fantastical, but believe it or not, it is widely held among large swaths of Americans. And it's a clever tactic by the opposition, if you think about it, because nothing we say or do can help dispute it—because it'll all be dismissed as Muslims just saying the right things while they actually mean something else.

What is interesting, and I note this in the book, is that while American Muslims are by no means practicing taqiyya to dupe others, they *are* forced to engage in so-called “performance strategies”—ways of presenting themselves in a way that is acceptable to the majority culture. There are various types of strategies (conforming, converting, covering, etc.) but in the end, each is a way of carefully expressing ourselves in a way that fits very narrow conceptions of what is “right” and “proper.” Other minorities in America might well find that act of walking a tightrope familiar.

ZN: Did publishers, agents, publicists ever wonder why *this* title? I myself have to admit that I had no idea the legal precedents being set in the attempt to frame Islam as “not a religion.” I always shrugged it off as the kind of questions I'd get from internet trolls. I was curious if you ever came up against that?

Your reaction to the claim “Islam is not a religion” is pretty much the way most people react when they hear it. It’s so far-fetched that our first reaction is to dismiss it. We heard it when Australian Senator Fraser Anning said the Muslims killed in the New Zealand mosque shooting were not “blameless” because “Islam is the religious equivalent of fascism.” A lot of people dismiss Anning and those like him by saying, “Well, ‘crazy’ people say ‘crazy’ things.” The reaction is of course problematic—not just because it is demeaning against people who are truly mentally ill, but also because it dismisses Anning’s intentionality in saying what he said and for very specific reasons.

So, the book is my way of saying, “Hold on! There’s more to this than meets the eye!” Let me tell you about all of the other people—very powerful, influential people—who have said the same thing, albeit in different forms, and let me tell you how it’s already impacting our rights and what else they’ve got in store for us.

And my message was one that is rooted in action—it is not just a theoretical statement on rights, but something I exemplify through my legal and advocacy work. That work is entirely based on advocating for a coherent religious freedom jurisprudence—one that protects people of all religions and no religion. My publisher and agent were both drawn to that real world element of my work, the on-the-ground engagements that complement the book in creating a broader movement for equal protection.

ZN: How was it to put your family in the book? As a memoir writer myself, I worry that I could be putting my family in danger spotlighting them. How did you navigate this?

It was scary, especially when I wrote about my young children. When I write and speak about Muslims, I have received hostile emails, angry responses from the crowd, and have even required security at times.

But this is our reality and as much as I want to shield my family from the anger and dirty looks, I know I cannot. I note in the book the way my fears and anxieties about raising Muslim kids in this environment help connect me, in a small way, to the fears so many other parents are experiencing today—fears about the safety of our children at a time when school shootings have become tragically common; fears about not being able to be with our children and protect them, at a time when our government is forcefully separating families.

The best thing I can do for my kids—for all of our kids—is to help create a society, and a legal coherence, that protects their rights with the vigor and sincerity required by our Constitution.

Zahra Noorbakhsh



Zahra Noorbakhsh is a comedian and co-host of the award-winning podcast #GoodMuslimBadMuslim. The podcast was featured in Oprah Magazine and invited to record at the Obama White House. The Pop Culture Collaborative awarded Zahra a Sr. Fellowship on comedy for social change. Find out more about her work at ZahraComedian.com.



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