

# PROSPECTS FOR INTER-RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING

## *Will Views Toward Muslims and Islam Follow Historical Trends?*

*Prepared for delivery at the International Conference on Faith and Service  
March 22, 2006 • Washington, D.C.*



### INTRODUCTION

Although tolerance is an American ideal and freedom of religion is enshrined in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, American history has often been characterized by inter-religious conflict. Without question, however, much progress has been made in overcoming blatant forms of institutionalized religious discrimination. But historic tensions among American religious groups, not to mention heightened concerns in the post-9/11 world about a clash of civilizations, ensure that the question of inter-religious relations will remain an important issue for the public as well as for religious and political leaders.

Public opinion polls conducted by the Pew Research Center shed some light on inter-religious relations and the prospects for inter-religious cooperation and understanding. The findings confirm that certain historical religious divisions and tensions have largely been put aside. Catholics and Jews, for example, once the objects of widespread and often institutionalized discrimination, are now viewed favorably by a sizable majority of Americans. But the poll findings also suggest that other religious groups, including evangelical Christians and especially Muslims, are not fully accepted by many Americans.

## 2 AMERICAN VIEWS OF CHRISTIANS AND JEWS

American society and politics were once characterized by bitter religious divisions, often pitting well-established, well-educated and well-off Protestants against newly arrived, less-educated and less well-off Roman Catholics and Jews. Today, however, these divisions seem to have been largely overcome. In recent polling, approximately three-in-four Americans express favorable opinions of Catholics and Jews. Even among white Protestants and seculars,<sup>1</sup> large majorities hold positive views of these groups.

Evangelical Protestants also are viewed favorably by a majority of the public, though substantially fewer Americans express favorable views of evangelicals compared with Jews or Catholics. Seculars, in particular, stand out for their wariness of evangelicals.

In short, this analysis suggests that the tensions that once existed between Protestants and Catholics, and the hostility that Jews faced from both groups, have largely diminished. Though evangelicals are viewed less positively than Catholics or Jews, all three groups are viewed favorably by majorities of the public.

**Table 1.**

*Is your overall opinion of Catholics very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?*

	Fav	Unfav	No opinion
All	73%	14%	13%
White evangelical Protestants	70	19	11
White mainline Protestants	76	14	10
White, non-Hispanic Catholics	84	8	8
Seculars	60	18	22

Source: Pew Research Center, July 2005

**Table 2.**

*Is your overall opinion of Jews very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?*

	Fav	Unfav	No opinion
All	77%	7%	16%
White evangelical Protestants	80	6	14
White mainline Protestants	82	3	15
White, non-Hispanic Catholics	80	7	13
Seculars	62	11	27

Source: Pew Research Center, July 2005

**Table 3.**

*Is your overall opinion of evangelical Christians very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?*

	Fav	Unfav	No opinion
All	57%	19%	24%
White evangelical Protestants	75	8	17
White mainline Protestants	58	20	22
White, non-Hispanic Catholics	56	13	31
Seculars	31	38	31

Source: Pew Research Center, July 2005

<sup>1</sup>The relatively small numbers of blacks and Hispanics in Pew Research Center surveys make it difficult to report results for those groups broken down by religious tradition. Accordingly, unless otherwise specified, references to evangelical Protestants and mainline Protestants refer only to white members of these groups, and references to Catholics refer only to white, non-Hispanic Catholics. The term secular, as used here, refers to individuals who describe themselves as atheist or agnostic as well as to those who say they have no religious preference and report seldom or never attending religious services.

These findings strongly suggest that the United States has the capacity to overcome historical religious divisions and prejudices.

## VIEWS OF MUSLIM-AMERICANS AND ISLAM

**Table 4.**

*Is your overall opinion of Muslim-Americans very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?*

	Fav	Unfav	No opinion
All	55%	25%	20%
White evangelical Protestants	52	29	19
White mainline Protestants	53	23	24
White, non-Hispanic Catholics	61	17	22
Seculars	49	22	29

Source: Pew Research Center, July 2005

With respect to the acceptance of Muslims into American society, the findings are more mixed. A majority of the public (55%) holds favorable views of Muslim-Americans. In fact, the number of Americans expressing favorable views of Muslim-Americans actually increased noticeably following the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> (rising from 45% in March 2001 to 59% in November 2001). In addition, a July 2003 Pew survey found that 56% of Americans would vote for a well-qualified Muslim (from their political party) for president. This was fewer than the percentage who said they would vote for a Catholic, Jew or evangelical Protestant, but a majority nonetheless and more than those who said they would vote for an atheist (46%).

It is also noteworthy that the number of Americans expressing favorable views toward Muslim-Americans (55%) closely rivals the number expressing favorable attitudes toward evangelical Christians (57%). And Muslim-Americans are viewed much more favorably by the public than are atheists, about whom Americans express a particularly high level of discomfort.

**Table 5.**

*Favorability Ratings of Religious Groups*

	Fav	Unfav	No opinion
<i>Opinions of ...</i>			
Jews	77%	7%	16%
Catholics	73	14	13
Evangelical Christians	57	19	24
Muslim-Americans	55	25	20
Atheists	35	50	15

Source: Pew Research Center, July 2005

It must be pointed out, however, that the high ratings received by Muslims and the other religious groups may be due not only to increased tolerance but also to greater sensitivity among the public as to what sorts of opinions are socially desirable and appropriate. This could lead to a corresponding reluctance to express views that violate cultural norms, such as negative feelings toward a particular religious group. In short, it is entirely possible that the high favorability ratings of Jews, Catholics and Muslim-Americans could understate the actual degree of anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic

**Table 6.**

*Would you say you have a generally favorable or unfavorable opinion of Islam?*

			No
	Fav	Unfav	opinion
All	41%	36%	23%
White evangelical Protestants	31	46	23
White mainline Protestants	42	36	22
White, non-Hispanic Catholics	48	31	21
Seculars	42	31	27

Source: Pew Research Center, July 2005

Muslim-Americans, far fewer (41%) have a favorable impression of Islam as a religion. Evangelical Protestants, who view Islam unfavorably by a 46%-31% margin, stand out for their particularly negative views. And more recent polling, conducted by ABC News and *The Washington Post* in early March 2006, found 46% of the public expressing an unfavorable view of Islam, an increase of 10 percentage points over Pew polling from July 2005. This suggests that negative sentiment toward Islam may be on the rise.

## VIEWS OF ISLAM, VIOLENCE AND GLOBAL CONFLICT

A substantial portion of the American public is wary of the perceived relationship between Islam and violence. More than one-in-three Americans, for instance, say that Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence among its believers. This concern is most pronounced among evangelicals, half of whom (50%) see Islam as more violent than other religions.

**Table 7.**

*Tell me whether the first statement or the second statement comes closer to your own views even if neither is exactly right: The Islamic religion is more likely than others to encourage violence among its believers; or, the Islamic religion does not encourage violence more than others.*

	Encourages	Does not	Neither	No
	violence	encourage		
	more than	violence	(Vol)	opinion
	others	more		(Vol)
All	36%	47%	3%	14%
White evangelical Protestants	50	31	2	17
White mainline Protestants	28	57	1	14
White, non-Hispanic Catholics	42	43	4	11
Seculars	26	54	5	15

Source: Pew Research Center, July 2005

and anti-Muslim sentiment that exists among the public.

Furthermore, though a majority of Americans (55%) express favorable views of Muslim-Americans, this number is far smaller than the number expressing favorable views of Catholics or Jews (73% and 77%, respectively). Moreover, though a majority of Americans express favorable views of

Similarly, many Americans harbor fears that the terrorist attacks of recent years are indicative of an existing or imminent major world conflict between the West and Islam. Nearly 30% see a major conflict already in progress, and an additional 26% foresee the potential for violence to escalate from a conflict with a small, radical group into a major conflict.

**Table 8.**

*Do you think that the terrorist attacks over the past few years are a part of a major conflict between the people of America and Europe versus the people of Islam, or is it only a conflict with a small, radical group? Do you think this conflict is going to grow into a major world conflict, or do you think it will remain limited to a small, radical group?*

	All	White evang	White mainline	White Catholic	Seculars
Major conflict	29%	30%	28%	31%	20%
Conflict with radical group	60	60	61	62	62
<i>Will become major conflict</i>	26	27	23	19	30
<i>Will remain limited</i>	31	28	34	39	31
<i>Unsure about future of conflict</i>	3	5	4	4	1
No opinion	11	10	11	7	18

Source: Pew Research Center, July 2005

## VIEWS OF MOSQUES AND FAITH-BASED INITIATIVES

This relatively guarded posture of Americans toward Islam is reflected in public attitudes toward the involvement of religious groups in administering government-funded social services. In polling conducted in March 2001, large majorities of the public expressed support for the involvement of Catholic and Protestant churches and Jewish synagogues in the provision of such services. By contrast, fewer than four-in-ten said they favored Muslim mosques applying for government funds to provide social services to those in need. The only groups receiving less support in this regard were religious organizations that proselytize as part of providing services, Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam and the Church of Scientology.

Since this polling was conducted prior to the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the results indicate that Americans' wariness toward the participation of Muslim organizations in the provision of social services (and toward Muslim-Americans and Islam more generally) cannot be attributed solely to a negative reaction toward the terrorist attacks. Nor do the attacks and the ensuing U.S. reprisals appear to have appreciably changed Americans' attitudes toward the involvement of Islamic groups in providing government-funded social services. A Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* poll conducted in September 2003, for instance, found similar attitudes toward participation by Islamic religious organizations in faith-based programs, with 41% expressing support for the involvement of such groups in providing federally funded social services, compared with 64% for Christian religious organizations.

**Table 9.**

*I'm going to read the names of some specific religious groups. For each one that I name, please tell me whether you would favor or oppose this group applying for government funds to provide social services to people who need them.*

	Fav	Oppose	No opinion
Charitable organizations that have a religious affiliation	69%	26%	5%
Catholic churches	62	32	6
Protestant churches	61	31	8
Individual churches/synagogues, etc.	60	35	5
Jewish synagogues	58	34	8
Evangelical Christian churches	52	35	13
Church of Jesus Christ LDS, or Mormon churches	51	41	8
Muslim mosques	38	46	16
Buddhist temples	38	46	16
Groups encouraging conversion as part of service provision	32	59	9
Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam	29	53	18
Church of Scientology	26	52	22

Source: Pew Research Center, March 2001

## A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Despite these obstacles to full acceptance of Muslims and Islam by the American public, the severity of the situation should not be overstated. In no instance do overwhelming majorities of Americans express negative views toward Islam or Muslim-Americans. And though many Americans are wary of the potential for the

**Table 10.**

*Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of Muslims.*

	Fav	Unfav	No opinion
U.S.	57%	22%	21%
Canada	60	26	13
Great Britain	72	14	14
France	64	34	2
Germany	40	47	13
Spain	46	37	17
Netherlands	45	51	3

Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project, Spring 2005

scope of hostilities to expand, most continue to view the terrorist attacks of recent years as symptomatic of a conflict with a small radical group, rather than as a sign of conflict with Muslims more generally.

In addition, the U.S. seems to foster a more hospitable climate than do some European nations. Surveys from the Pew Global Attitudes Project show that nearly six-in-ten Americans express favorable views of Muslims. By



contrast, fewer than half of Germans, Spaniards and Dutch express favorable views. And while favorable attitudes toward Muslims in Canada, Great Britain and France rival or exceed those found in the U.S., only in Britain does a smaller percentage of the public express *unfavorable* views toward Muslims. Thus, just as there seem to be obstacles to Muslim-Christian understanding in the U.S., so there are some grounds for optimism among those seeking improved inter-religious relations.

## ROOTS OF ATTITUDES TOWARD MUSLIM-AMERICANS AND ISLAM

The foregoing analysis raises an obvious question – What accounts for attitudes toward Muslim-Americans and Islam in general? Detailed analyses that simultaneously considered the impact of a number of factors on attitudes toward Islam and Muslim-Americans revealed that at least four key attributes – education, age, knowledge of Islam and personal acquaintance with a Muslim – were independently related to views of Muslim-Americans.

Education is closely related to views toward Muslim-Americans, Islam in general and views of the relationship between Islam and violence. No matter how attitudes toward Islam are gauged, the highly educated express more favorable attitudes than do those with less education. For example, two-thirds of college graduates express favorable views of Muslim-Americans, compared with only 44% of those with only a high-school education. Age, too, is a consistent correlate of attitudes toward Muslim-Americans. Younger people are much more likely to express favorable attitudes toward Muslim-Americans than are older Americans.

While education and age are the most consistent predictors of views toward Islam, familiarity with Islam and Muslims also

**Table 11.**

What shapes views toward Muslim-Americans?

	No		
	Fav	Unfav	opinion
All	55%	25%	20%
<i>Age<sup>1</sup></i>			
18-29	62	25	13
30-49	57	22	21
50-64	55	25	20
65+	40	30	30
<i>Education<sup>1</sup></i>			
High school or less	44	34	22
Some college	63	17	20
College graduates	66	14	20
<i>Know anyone who is Muslim?<sup>2</sup></i>			
Yes	74	12	14
No	50	21	29
<i>Knowledge of Islam<sup>1*</sup></i>			
Low	47	28	25
Medium	56	24	20
High	61	21	18

<sup>1</sup>Source: Pew Research Center, July 2005

<sup>2</sup>Source: Pew Research Center, November 2001

\*Low knowledge includes those who are unable to identify Allah and the Koran; medium knowledge includes those who correctly identified either Allah or the Koran; and high knowledge includes those who correctly identified both Allah and the Koran.

8 tends to be related to overall views of Islam and Muslim-Americans. Knowledge of Islam is associated with favorable views of Muslim-Americans and of Islam in general (though not in any straightforward way with views of the relationship between Islam and violence). Among Americans with little knowledge of Islam, for example, fewer than half express favorable views of Muslim-Americans. By contrast, among Americans who are relatively more knowledgeable about Islam, more than six-in-ten express positive views.

Finally, there is a strong relationship between personal acquaintance with a Muslim and views of Muslim-Americans. Among those who say they personally know someone who is a Muslim, 74% have a positive impression of Muslim-Americans, compared with only 50% of those who do not personally know any Muslims.

## CONCLUSION

What, then, do the data show about the prospects for inter-religious understanding and cooperation? The preceding discussion makes clear that Americans have largely discarded their historical suspicions of Catholics and Jews. And though there are clear signs that Muslims have not yet been fully accepted by the American public, this analysis suggests that certain concrete steps – such as education, both in general and with respect to Islam in particular, and efforts that lead to personal interactions between Muslims and other Americans – might lead to more favorable views.

But the news is not entirely positive. Americans harbor certain reservations with respect to Islam and Muslim-Americans, and it seems that there is no easy solution for overcoming these reservations. Consider, for instance, that the same ABC News/*Washington Post* survey that recently found an increase in unfavorable views of Islam also found an increase in the number of Americans who think that there are more violent extremists within Islam compared with other religions, from fewer than four-in-ten (38%) in 2002 to nearly six-in-ten (58%) today. In short, while certain historical religious tensions are largely a thing of the past, other forms of religious discord persist and continue to pose a challenge for inter-religious understanding.



THE PEW  
FORUM  
ON RELIGION  
& PUBLIC LIFE

THE PEW FORUM ON RELIGION & PUBLIC LIFE DELIVERS TIMELY, IMPARTIAL INFORMATION TO NATIONAL OPINION LEADERS ON ISSUES AT THE INTERSECTION OF RELIGION AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS; IT ALSO SERVES AS A NEUTRAL VENUE FOR DISCUSSIONS OF THESE MATTERS. THE FORUM IS A NONPARTISAN ORGANIZATION AND DOES NOT TAKE POSITIONS ON POLICY DEBATES. BASED IN WASHINGTON, D.C., THE FORUM IS DIRECTED BY LUIS LUGO AND IS A PROJECT OF THE PEW RESEARCH CENTER.

1615 L STREET, NW SUITE 700 WASHINGTON, DC 20036-5610  
202 419 4550 TEL 202 419 4559 FAX [WWW.PEWFORUM.ORG](http://WWW.PEWFORUM.ORG)