

Theological work to be done, but by whom?

By [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#)

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Between the ISIS-linked terror attacks in Paris and California and the strident, often xenophobic responses on the campaign trail and elsewhere, it is a difficult time to talk rationally about Islam in America. Fantastical stories abound, and come dangerously close to the mainstream: President Obama is importing 250,000 Syrian refugees (his actual plan is for 10,000); there are Muslim terrorist training camps around the country; Hillary Clinton aide Huma Abedin is [a stalking-horse for the Muslim Brotherhood](#). Quite predictably, these outlandish claims have been paralleled by mob violence against Muslims, from [attacks on mosques](#) to [assaults on women in hijabs](#).

In this Sunday's column, Ross Douthat looks at the polls on Americans and Islam and [sees a problem](#). While most Americans disagree with Donald Trump that our borders should be closed to all Muslims, majorities in recent soundings believe that Islam is incompatible with American values and hold an unfavorable view of the religion. Writing at a safe remove from the fever swamps and the hate crimes—without, in fact, even mentioning them—Douthat argues that pious Muslims must inevitably face conflict between the “lure of conquest, the pull of violent jihad” and the ambiguous, unsettled place of traditional religion in a secularizing culture.

Perhaps, Douthat muses, Muslims might adopt a position analogous to American evangelicals: missionary and scriptural, but peaceably assimilated into “the liberal democratic West.” But for Islam to do this, he warns portentiously, “it has to set aside the sword.”

Douthat's column is the sort of thing that passes for an astute and sensitive engagement in the theological issues that cluster like camp-followers of every terrorist attack. Its immediate and obvious fault is that it poses a traditional or authentic Islam that sounds an awful lot like ISIS itself on one hand against the “Unitarianism with prayer rugs and Middle Eastern kitsch” version peddled by

secular multiculturalists on the other. In the real world, vast majorities of Muslims both within and outside the U.S. practice their religion without seeming to give much thought to using “the sword” to impose it on every facet of life.

But the deeper problem with arguments like Douthat's—and presidential candidate John Kasich's post-Paris call for a greater emphasis on the assimilation of Muslims—is that they reverse the actual relationship between minorities and majorities in the “liberal democratic West.” Douthat has argued that Islam has some theological work to do to become compatible with the norms of a liberal democracy, noting (to be fair, if not quite accurate) that Roman Catholicism had such work to do as well. This is an overwhelming, perhaps irresistible temptation for a thinker situated within a democracy's majority, however it is constituted at a given time: become more like us, and we'll treat you more like we treat ourselves.

This is never how it has worked. My study of American history is rather haphazard, but by my count, roughly 100 percent of attempts to govern by “the sword”—to violate the norms of liberal democratic pluralism—have come from America's religious and racial majorities, however defined at that moment. Radical violence has always been with us, from John Brown to the Symbionese Liberation Army, but it has always been designed to provoke and shock, not to control or overwhelm. For the latter, we have needed the tools of the democratic majority: the Alien and Sedition Acts, the Fugitive Slave Act, the lynch mob, the Chinese Exclusion Act, and on and on.

The American question has never been whether minority groups could raise themselves to the rank of citizens, but whether the republic could redefine itself so as to include them. Put another way: it is America who must lay down the sword and accept her own profusion of peoples and creeds, and not the other way around.

Whether we do so is—has always been—a keen and urgent question. We have not answered it as well as one would wish. James Baldwin wrote about it decades ago, on the demand felt by black Americans to assimilate to white America. “One had the choice of ‘acting just like a n-----’ or of *not* acting just like a n-----,” Baldwin explains, “and only those who have tried it know how impossible it is to tell the difference. Whatever dilemmas modernity poses for Islam—and surely it poses its share, as it does for all religions and cultures—this is the dilemma faced by those majorities in

the polls.

It is not only unjust but dangerous to insist that American Muslims make themselves as fully American as the people who brandish assault rifles outside of mosques. To grant them the individuality and the dignity that America extends—thank God!—to Dylan Roof or to last week's mosque arsonist is a task for our morality, not theirs.