A Muslim GOP leader, a Catholic judge, and the American tradition of associations

The right to form associations is part of First Amendment. Yet Americans sometimes view membership in them with suspicion—as some did with Shahid Shafi and Brian Buescher.

by Henry Gass in the February 13, 2019 issue

Shahid Shafi addressing the Texas Republican executive committee on December 1, 2018. AP Photo.

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) Shahid Shafi is a trauma surgeon in Southlake, Texas, and vice chair of the Republican Party in his county. Brian Buescher is a lifelong Nebraskan who was nominated for U.S. District Court judge.

In recent months both faced suspicion about their loyalties because of their membership in religious organizations: Shafi in his mosque and Buescher in the Knights of Columbus, a fraternal Catholic organization.

Forming organizations and associations for religious, social, and political purposes is so foundational for Americans that it is enshrined in the First Amendment. At the same time, U.S. history has been rife with distrust about some of those organizations, from George Washington's concerns about political parties to the

widespread belief that John F. Kennedy, a Roman Catholic, would be more loyal to the pope than the Constitution.

Meanwhile, broad participation in social groups and associations has been eroding in recent decades, according to sociologists and political scientists—and that includes participation in local faith communities. On those rarer occasions that they do choose to congregate, Americans are increasingly spending time primarily with people who share similar political and cultural beliefs. A result has been an increase in misunderstanding and fear of others.

Republicans in Tarrant County in Texas held a vote on January 10 on whether to remove Shafi from his position as vice chair of the county GOP. [The vote was 139 to retain him, 49 to remove, and 10 abstaining, according to Religion News Service.]

The vote was a culmination of months of objections to Shafi's appointment last July from a group of local Republicans in the north Texas county, citing that he practices his Muslim faith and attends a mosque, which some equate with recognizing no law but Shari'a law.

Shafi has emphasized that he fully supports "our Constitution and the laws passed by our elected legislatures" as what governs the United States, not other forms of law.

High-profile Texas Republicans such as Gov. Greg Abbott and Sen. Ted Cruz have backed Shafi, who joined the GOP shortly after becoming a U.S. citizen in 2009.

Matt Mackowiak, a Texas Republican strategist and chairman of the Travis County GOP, commented on the people who think that because some Muslims believe Islamic law comes ahead of everything else, Shafi does as well.

They "are behind the times and fear what they don't understand," he said. "I don't doubt from their perspective they think they're doing what's right."

Laura Turner, a San Francisco–based religion writer and author of a forthcoming book about the cultural history of anxiety, noted that misunderstanding and mischaracterizing religions has been a regular feature of American history. If it's Islam today, it was Catholicism in the early 20th century, and new Protestant denominations a century earlier.

Misunderstanding and fear of associations, particularly religious ones, will likely never disappear, and “good-faith questioning,” she said, is “a good place to start increasing understanding across religious divides.”

That’s how Turner saw questions from Democratic senators to Brian Buescher, a U.S. District Court nominee and member of the Knights of Columbus.

When Buescher appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee in December, of particular interest were comments he made on the campaign trail for Nebraska attorney general in 2014 that being “an avidly pro-life person” was “simply [his] moral fabric.”

Sen. Mazie Hirono of Hawaii asked if a woman seeking to enforce her right to an abortion “should have confidence that you will treat her fairly.” In addition, she asked if he would recuse himself from any cases relating to abortion rights and if he would end his membership in the Knights of Columbus “to avoid any appearance of bias.”

Sen. Kamala Harris of California, who described the Knights of Columbus as “an all-male society comprised primarily of Catholic men,” asked whether he agreed with a 2016 statement from Carl Anderson, the organization’s leader, that abortion is “the killing of the innocent on a massive scale.”

Buescher responded that, if confirmed, he would apply all legal precedent “on all issues without regard to any personal beliefs I may have.” The Knights of Columbus, he said, “simply doesn’t have the authority to take personal positions on behalf of all of its approximately 2 million members.”

Anderson wrote in a January 1 letter to members, referring to the First Amendment and the prohibition on religious tests: “Any suggestion that the Order’s adherence to the beliefs of the Catholic Church makes a Brother Knight unfit for public office blatantly violates those constitutional guarantees.”

In response to Buescher’s confirmation process, author Marc Dunkelman and others have cited Alexis de Tocqueville in arguing that the societal good of organizations such as the Knights of Columbus far outweighs any bad. Americans are “forever forming associations,” the French diplomat and historian noted in the 1830s, because in democracies like the United States “all the citizens are independent and feeble … [and] therefore become powerless if they do not learn to voluntarily help

one another.”

Dunkelman argues in his book, *The Vanishing Neighbor: The Transformation of American Community*, that a person’s social universe can be divided into three rings: an innermost ring made up of intimate family and friends, an outermost ring made up of occasional acquaintances with whom they share a common interest, such as being fans of the same sports team, and a middle ring made up of those in between, people whom they see fairly often at a religious service, PTA meeting, or membership organization event.

“There you would have in many cases some variety of people who would have different points of view, and it’s there you would begin to say ‘I don’t agree with this person, I didn’t vote for the same person, but I can understand why,’” he added. “Without those sorts of interactions, you begin to assume that everybody on the other side is just completely out to lunch.”

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