

The Good Muslim: When Positive Portrayals Fail (<https://thepolitic.org/>)



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(<https://thepolitic.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/islam-fact-e1506298204704.jpg>)

Late in the 2000 court drama film ‘Rules of Engagement,’ the commanding officer of a U.S. squadron, played by Samuel Jackson, orders (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fp7ihY2aAaY&t=1s>) his soldiers to open fire on a crowd of civilians protesting outside the U.S. embassy in Yemen.

The rationale, according to the Colonel, was that some terrorists had slipped into the crowd, and the crowd itself was getting violent. But that doesn't quite explain why the Colonel displays such glee as he screams the order: "Waste the motherf*ckers!"

Is what the Colonel did acceptable? For most of its runtime the film pretends to seriously contemplate this ethical question—can we sacrifice civilians to defeat terrorists?—before ultimately contriving a solution that renders it irrelevant: the civilians were not really civilians at all, for they in fact secretly had weapons.

Therefore, they were fair targets in war. That this resolution does not actually address or engage the film's central ethical dilemma is secondary to the moral blank check it affords both the filmmakers and their viewers, who can now guiltlessly construct and enjoy an imagined massacre of Muslims.

Viewers are greeted to the gory spectacle of U.S. soldiers shooting dozens of visibly unarmed Arabs and Muslims to death, but can justify any pleasure they derive from this sight with the knowledge that the supposed innocents are not. Thus the filmmakers can preserve the derogatory optics of the scene without dealing with its moral implications. Is it any wonder we get videos that celebrate (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPGyt3ZDv2Y>) its violence, glorifying the scene by setting it to adrenaline-pumping music?

While 'Rules of Engagement' is a particularly vicious example of Hollywood's thorough dehumanization of Arabs and Muslims, the broad dynamics it epitomizes are in no way unusual. They have been so rampant (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mi1ZNEjEarw&t=86s>) in the American film (American Sniper, Zero Dark Thirty) and the television (24, Homeland, Tyranny) industries that to criticize them as problematic borders on cliché.

To say that American Muslims deserve representation not tied to mass murderers and national security is all the more so. And yet it is necessary to continue to do so, because American media's portrayals of Muslims and Arabs continue to perpetuate the same harmful narratives. Contrary to popular belief, this derogatory stereotyping did not begin with 9/11—as documented (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIXOdCOrgG4&t=42s>) by the late Professor Jack Shaheen in his signature work *Reel Bad Arabs*, which analyzes warped Arab depictions in over 900 films from the earliest days of Hollywood.

In the midst of what amounts to a filmographic assault on Islam, a few sympathetic American filmmakers and television producers have attempted more nuanced and positive depictions of Muslims. Unfortunately, good intentions do not always translate to good results, and the majority of the attempts to respectfully portray Muslims unwittingly perpetuate the same problematic narratives in a different form.

Much of what drives Islamophobia is a fear of Islam as a fanatical and violent religious ideology impervious to reason, and a handful of religious icons particular to it (such as “Allahu Akbar,” turbans, veils, etc.). Almost invariably, sympathetic portrayals of Muslims perpetuate and legitimize this same fundamental fear due to an inability to frame Muslim identity in religious terms without demonizing it.

Accordingly, to render Islam acceptable filmmakers must necessarily secularize it; that is, drain the religion of the content that makes it a religion, and that makes its followers Muslim. This creates an artificial dichotomy between savage religiosity and enlightened secularism. In other words, within the epistemological framework of the American entertainment industry, the bad Muslim understands Islam in religious terms, while the good Muslim largely forgoes religious expression.

Or, put more bluntly, the good Muslim does not understand his religion in religious terms. The good Muslim rejects a basic Islamic lifestyle. In fact, the good Muslim barely registers as Muslim.

Consider *Prison Break*, the popular FOX drama about a genius who goes to prison to break his brother out. Early in its fifth season, just aired this year, we find out that that C-Note, one of the main characters of the first four seasons, has converted to Islam.

At first glance, this major reveal appears to be a bold and powerful statement on the part of the show’s producers, increasing Muslim representation not by introducing a new character but by converting a long-established fan favorite. The presence of a prominent and well-developed Muslim character on the side of the good guys appears to neutralize the potential representational problems of having ISIS antagonists.

Indeed, *Prison Break*’s executive producer Paul Scheuring has stated (<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/prison-break-producers-explain-everything-know-revival-989423>) that C-Note’s conversion is meant to refute popular connotations of Islam and terrorism by associating “nobility” with the faith and to provide a “measured and circumspect” view of the religion.

But despite Scheuring’s benevolent intentions, C-Note’s weak characterization and convenient narrative function mostly neuters his representational value. The problem is two-fold.

Firstly, the ramifications of C-Note’s conversion to Islam, a major life decision that ought to lead to important social and spiritual changes, are never meaningfully addressed. Aside from the white Kufi that he dons throughout the season, C-Note’s outward behavioral tendencies do not substantially differ from that of the series’s first four seasons, when he was not a Muslim.

Besides a couple of vague lines about taking up jihad, in the sense of a spiritual struggle, C-Note's motive for and benefit from conversion remains a mystery.

What brought him to Islam? What role does he play at his mosque? Has he attempted to memorize portions of the Qur'an, despite not speaking Arabic? What did his family and friends think of his conversion?

What about racial or ethnic tensions? Does he struggle with any tenets of his newfound faith? The enormous narrative and symbolic potential suggested by an exploration of C-Note's changed worldview (and lifestyle) is totally neglected in favor of the series's fast-paced action narrative.

Where this misstep evolves from literary failure to political shortcoming is in its production and exacerbation of the problematic story role of C-Note's faith: an expositional plot device. Lincoln's stated reason for seeking C-Note's help, finding a way to reach Yemen, takes for granted the troubling conflation of Islam and the Middle East.

The show does little to justify C-Note's or his mosque congregation's literacy in Middle Eastern politics beyond their Islamic faith, as if a logical connection existed between their spiritual beliefs and their geopolitical knowledge.

More so, by framing a mosque and its worshippers as only relevant insofar as they are agents of counter-terrorism effort and expository sources of information about foreign lands, *Prison Break* reaffirms the burdensome expectation that Muslims are uniquely responsible for and capable of stemming the rise of terrorism.

C-Note's newfound Islamic faith is stripped of definition beyond its utility for fighting extremists and relegated to a travel-expediting plot device. In other words, C-Note's character presents no real commentary on the realities of living Islam—praying the five prayers, fasting, giving charity, reciting Qur'an—of which any would have constituted genuine counterweights to the show's Muslim terrorists.

The absence of meaningful spiritual or religious commentary on C-Note's faith becomes seriously damaging when contrasted with the presentation of the terrorists, whose violence is always linked to their Islamic faith.

They frequently invoke God and (misunderstood) Islamic teachings to justify their actions. By placing religious invocation strictly in the realm of the terrorists, the show associates adherence to faith with extremism.

The terrorists appear to be authentic adherents of Islam, because their behavior and ideology seem so strongly informed by it. In doing this, the show fails to distinguish between religious adherence and religious fanaticism. Within this framing, observance of Islam necessarily entails religious zealotry and therefore religious extremism.

This conflation of religious belief with religious fundamentalism reflect a wariness of religion in general, and Islam in particular, that reverberates throughout the American entertainment landscape, complicating and undermining even sympathetic portrayal of Muslims as filmmakers appear unable to escape certain ideological trappings in their conceptualization of the ‘good’ Muslim.

The nature of these preconceived prejudices is perhaps best (unintentionally) captured by director Ridley Scott’s 2008 film *Body of Lies*, a CIA-oriented action thriller that, like *Prison Break*, attempts more positive depictions of Islam. But while Scott finds limited success with the character of Aisha—who has a romantic subplot with Roger that does not demonize her more conservative sexual mores—he undercuts himself with multiple scenes that brazenly dismiss basic Islamic values as fundamentally abnormal.

In a key scene, a subordinate informs main character and CIA agent Roger Ferris that the family they’d been monitoring for potential terrorist activity appeared “normal.” The behaviors the subordinate lists as evidence for this assertion is telling: the men “drink alcohol, chase girls, smoke hash.”

Not only does this statement present the liberal norms of Western culture as normative, it implies that their mere absence is grounds for suspicion of extremist behavior. And Roger, far from challenging the implications of this statement, accepts its underlying assumptions by suggesting that the family is faking its so-called “normal” behavior to deceive “infidels” like themselves. He is invoking the widely cited but mythical phenomenon of the lying that Muslims are “allowed” to use to conceal their true murderous intentions.

This scene demonstrates with disturbing clarity how Hollywood’s draconian expectations of the ‘good’ Muslim—the rejection of a basic Islamic lifestyle as radical—essentially denies Muslims both the possibility of innocence and of accurate media representation. Critically, baseline Islamic practices like abstinence from alcohol, the kind of behavior that even a casual American Muslim might exhibit, is coded as evidence of extremism. This demonization of common Islamic practice as radical is in itself the logical endpoint of the stringently secular perspective that dominates Hollywood.

What the viewer is left with, then, is a narrative that suggests commonplace Islamic behavior is suspect because it does not comply with a narrow range of acceptable Western cultural norms. But that said compliance, even when it occurs, is but a smokescreen hiding the malevolent truth.

By the film's own logic, the CIA-monitored Jordanian family was damned no matter what they did: if their behavior contradicted orthodox Islam, which it did, then they were concealing their radicalism; if their behavior didn't, then their radicalism had already been exposed.

But *Body of Lies* does potentially critique how the American media regularly sensationalizes mild religious expression as dangerous. It includes a subplot where, in order to draw out the leader of a radical Islamist group, Roger frames an innocent Muslim as a terrorist sympathizer by finding "someone who fits the role of being jihadist without actually being jihadist."

Contained within that statement is a remarkable admission: that the West's conceptualization of radical Islamists is so broad that a completely innocent Muslim can be mistaken as one.

Indeed, Roger's next statement stunningly confirms this notion: "So [Sadiki] touches his head to the floor five times a day. He believes in God. So why would he trade with an infidel like myself?"

What Roger describes—praying the Islamic daily prayers and believing in God's existence—are two of the five pillars of Islam. What he is describing, in other words, is being Muslim.

Even Muslims that do not consider themselves particularly religious would likely meet these requisites, as again they represent the bare minimum of Islamic belief, and yet Roger treats Sadiki's adoption of these practices as evidence of intense religiosity and so, within the film's (and Hollywood's) worldview, evidence of potential radicalism.

Whether or not the eventual failure of Roger's scheme, which gets Sadiki wrongly executed and shatter's Roger's willingness to continue his mission, constitutes a critique of the scheme's underlying attitude is open to interpretation. Regardless, the paranoid worldview suggested by Roger's words reflects a hostility to Islamic religious expression widespread in Hollywood and American culture as a whole.

Body of Lies is hardly the only culprit; even an ambitious and cerebral geopolitical thriller like *Syriana*, which boldly attempts to transgress Hollywood convention by humanizing its Muslim terrorist, fails because much of the jihadist doctrine that it presents as extreme, like the prohibition on premarital sex, falls under the category of "basic Islamic practice." None of these practices are at all indicative of the genuinely radical dogma innovated by the likes of ISIS and Al Qaeda.

As such, even movies sympathetic to Muslims set a restrictively low bar as to what comprises dangerous belief and behavior. Given the cramped perimeters in which Hollywood situates acceptable religious expression, it is not at all surprising that its “good” Muslims, historical and current figures alike, tend to be rigorously secularized—the religious components of their lives are either minimized or eliminated.

Ali, a biopic about a tumultuous period in the life of Muhammad Ali, almost totally omits Islam’s central role (<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/muhammad-ali-refuses-army-induction>) in the boxing legend’s decision to refuse the Vietnam draft, despite that refusal powering the drama of the film’s entire second half and defining the real-life Ali’s legacy.

In a similar vein, Scott’s *Kingdom of Heaven*, a 2005 film on the 12th-century Crusades, preserves Muslim General Saladin’s faith but subtly undercuts it by contrasting (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwdsO4c25b4>) his rationality with the irrationality of the religious zealots who serve him.

Prison Break, too, codes its non-savage Muslims as enlightened secular modernists. They are too modern, in fact, for a place as trapped in the past as the Middle East.

When Michael’s team saves the life of Muslim pilot (and his family) from ISIS, he explains that he and his daughters were targeted because they had attempted to provide girls with an education. Like C-Note, Islam is never associated with the pilot or his family in their brief screen-time, once again leaving overt religious expression largely in the realm of the radicals.

As such, *Prison Break*’s “good” Muslims are largely those who keep religion from constituting an identifiable part of their identity. They are clean-shaven, Western-clothed folks, visually distinct from the bearded men in traditional Middle Eastern garb reminiscent of the archetypal image of the Muslim terrorist in the American imagination.

The secular Muslim’s monopoly on television and the silver screen has become clearer in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential campaign, as more filmmakers and producers attempt (<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-hollywood-values-updates-how-hollywood-s-muslim-portrayals-1483650479-htmstory.html>) to craft a counter-narrative to Islamophobic paranoia by making space for positive Muslim portrayals. All these efforts have done, though, is reproduce Hollywood’s familiar Huntington-esque paradigm, the same one that molds its terrorists: the cultural and philosophical clash of the superior and secular West and the inferior and traditionalist Islamic East.

This demeaning narrative has simply been reframed as stories about native-born Muslims' struggle to reconcile their faith with their "Americanness," presupposing a definition of American identity as strictly secular and extrapolating a tension from this assumption.

In the past two months alone, we have seen this narrative parroted in comedian Aziz Ansari's Netflix hit *Master of None*'s episode "Religion" and Kumail Nunjiani's critically acclaimed romantic comedy film *The Big Sick*. Both men's eventual disillusionment with their Islamic upbringing is used to explore the cultural gap between them and their parents and their efforts to preserve their familial bonds in spite of it.

While both efforts are technically proficient and well-told, they propagate a common theme essential to the secular Muslim narrative: the reduction of Islam to a collection of ancient cultural rituals to be abandoned on the path to modern enlightenment.

Islam is defined in terms of its prohibitions rather than its allowances. For Ansari's character Dev, Islam means not eating pork, while for Nunjiani it means prayer and arranged marriage. Both conflate Islam and ethnic cultural practice, which in the case of Nunjiani renders his film's central dilemma incoherent—arranged marriage was a cultural institution in Asian countries long before Islam and is not taught by the religion.

Yet Nunjiani's narrative treats Pakistani culture and Islamic doctrine as one and the same, leading to exclamations like, "I'm fighting a 1,400-year-old culture!" Islam is transmuted from a complex religious worldview to a crude cultural relic, a handful of arbitrary stipulations understood only as physical restrictions bereft of spiritual significance.

Inevitably Islam becomes a barrier to overcome, not a tradition to understand. Thus we watch as Dev dramatically eats (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ArBPvjbReM) pork moments after his mother tells him not to and Nunjiani pretends to pray while actually surfing YouTube.

Ansari and Nunjiani are free to tell these stories, which are grounded in their real-life experiences and no doubt resonate (<http://www.manrepeller.com/2017/06/master-of-none-religion.html>) with secular millennials. The problem is that the narrative they offer, the only media alternative to narratives centered on Islamic terror, is an utterly bleak one for American Muslims, who are offered a dichotomous choice: either be a religious fanatic beholden to primitive practices, or renounce Islam wholesale to become truly "American" or "modern."

The absolute binary essentially deems impossible the notion of a Muslim who, say, both prays and goes to the movies. By presenting these two versions of Islamic practice as the only viable options, American media contributes to a polarized political discourse detached from the lived reality of most Muslims, who continue to be misunderstood and misportrayed even by those who support them. The driving force of Islamophobia, fear of Islamic religious expression as unnatural, sits untouched and unchallenged by either form of “representation.”

Ultimately, the Muslims that populate American screens live in extremes: either they abuse their faith in the name of backward practices, or they barely acknowledge their faith at all. The vast majority of Muslims would recognize neither, but it is they who persist in their absence. In the American entertainment industry, at least, Islam’s worst detractors are right: the good Muslims are few and far between.

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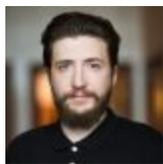
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