

The Rising Tide of Islamophobia

Written by John L. Esposito

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JOHN L. ESPOSITO, JUL 25 2011

The unspeakable tragedy in Norway is a wakeup call about the dangers of right wing political and religious extremism and Islamophobia which threaten the democratic fabric of American and European societies. They create a social cancer whose metastasis impacts not only the safety and security of Muslims but also, as the attacks in Norway demonstrate, all citizens. Like anti-Semites and racists, Islamophobes are the first to protest that their stereotyping and scapegoating are not Islamophobic.

What fuels the fires of discrimination against Muslims?

The legacy of the 9/11, 7/7 and other post 9/11 terrorist attacks has been exploited by far right political and religious leaders and media commentators, hard-line Christian Zionists whose fear-mongering targets Islam and Muslims. There is no lack of hate speech in the media, in print and on the internet to empower Islamophobia. The media, whose primary driver is sales and circulations, caters to explosive, headline events: "What bleeds, leads." The primary focus is often not balanced reporting, or even coverage of positive news about Muslims but on highlighting acts and statements of political and religious extremists. Political and religious commentators write and speak out publicly about Islam and Muslims, asserting with impunity what would never appear in mainstream broadcast or print media about Jews, Christians and established ethnic groups. If one takes out the word "Muslim" and substitutes "Jew" or "Catholic" in many of the articles targeting Muslims, the negative public reaction would be monumental. **As a result, the religion of Islam and** the majority of Muslims are saddled with a "collective guilt and punishment" for the actions of a fraction of 1% of Muslims who are extremists and terrorists.

There is no lack of hate speech in the media to empower Islamophobia. Here is but a sampling of Islamophobic comments by politicians, media, right-wing bloggers and political pundits:

"We should invade their countries, kill their leaders, and convert them to Christianity. We weren't punctilious about locating and punishing only Hitler and his top officers. We carpet-bombed German cities; we killed civilians. That's war. And this is war."

Ann Coulter, *National Review*

"Islam is something we can't afford any more in the Netherlands. I want the fascist Qur'an banned. We need to stop the Islamisation of the Netherlands. That means no more mosques, no more Islamic schools, no more imams."

Geert Wilders, Dutch politician and leader of the Party of Freedom

"These people [Arabs and Muslims] need to be forcibly converted to Christianity. . . . It's the only thing that can probably turn them into human beings."

Michael Savage, syndicated talk-radio host

"Western European societies are unprepared for the massive immigration of brown-skinned peoples cooking strange foods and maintaining different standards of hygiene. . . . All immigrants bring exotic customs and attitudes, but

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Muslim customs are more troublesome than most.”

Daniel Pipes, columnist and political commentator

“Muslims everywhere behave with equal savagery. They behead criminals, stone to death female—only female—adulteresses, throw acid in the faces of women who refuse to wear the chador, mutilate the genitals of young girls, and ritually abuse animals.”

Robert Kilroy-Silk, former British politician and talk-show host

The international scope of Islamophobia was recognized and addressed by the United Nations, when Kofi Annan, then Secretary General of the United Nations, called a 2004 UN conference, “Confronting Islamophobia: Education for Tolerance and Understanding.” Annan underscored the global need to acknowledge and address this new form of increasing bigotry:

“[when] the world is compelled to coin a new term to take account of increasingly widespread bigotry — that it is a sad and troubling development. Such is the case with ‘Islamophobia’.... Since the September 11 attacks on the United States, many Muslims, particularly in the West, have found themselves the objects of suspicion, harassment and discrimination.... Too many people see Islam as a monolith and as intrinsically opposed to the West...”

What constitutes an Islamophobe? Islamophobes believe that:

- Islam, not just a small minority of extremists and terrorists, is the problem and a threat to the West
- The religion of Islam has no common values with the West.
- Islam and Muslims are inferior to Judaism and Christianity
- Islam is an inherently violent religion and political ideology rather than a source of faith and spirituality
- Muslims cannot integrate and become loyal citizens
- Most mosques should be monitored for embedded cells
- Islam encourages its followers to launch a global jihad against all non-Muslims but in particular against the West

The anti-immigrant drumbeat about the impending demise of Europe’s religious and cultural identity in the face of an Islamic threat has been aided by media coverage that lumps diverse identity, demographic, economic, and social conflict issues together under the umbrella of religion. Rioting in French ghetto areas inhabited by North African Arabs is portrayed as “Muslim” rather than as protests against poverty and hopelessness. Because European Muslims are defined simply in terms of their faith, these problems and issues are incorrectly seen as “Muslim issues” when in fact, given their nature and primary causes, they require social, not religious, solutions or policies.

Across the US a major debate erupted last year over building an Islamic community center a few blocks from the site of the World Trade Center. In the aftermath of Park 51, a tsunami of anti-Muslim opposition swept across the US as attempts to halt mosque construction were wrapped in the charge (used at Park 51) that all mosques are “monuments to terrorism” and “house embedded cells” in locations from NYC and Staten Island, to Tennessee, Texas and California. Former Speaker of the House of representatives Newt Gingrich compared the organizers of Park 51 to **Nazis**: “They’re trying to make a case about supremacy,” Gingrich claimed, adding, “You know, Nazis don’t have the right to put up a sign next to the Holocaust Museum in Washington.”

Republican candidates in 2010 Congressional elections appealed to racist attitudes towards Islam and Muslims as a political wedge to gain electoral votes in the coming November elections. Bogus charges in 2008 that Barack Obama was a Muslim, as if that should discredit him, is an example of an Islamophobia which is still being used as a political strategy today. Newt Gingrich, desperately seeking to recapture his national Republican leader role, tried to create a bizarre national threat about the implementation of Islamic law, shariah, that doesn’t even exist: “One of the things that I am going to suggest today is a federal law which says no court anywhere in the United States under any circumstance is allowed to consider sharia as a replacement for American law. Period.” Republican Rex Duncan of Oklahoma followed suit, warning there is a “war for the survival of America,” to keep the sharia from creeping into the American court system. In California, a Tea Party Rally in protest of an Islamic Center in Temecula, encouraged

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protestors to bring their dogs because Muslims hate Jews, Christians, women, and dogs. In the aftermath, anti-Shariah legislation initiatives have been passed or proposed in more than 13 states across America.

Conclusion

Islamophobia, like anti-Semitism, will not be eradicated easily or soon. Anti-Muslim rhetoric and hate crimes have proliferated. Legitimate concerns in America and Europe for domestic security have been offset by anti-terrorism legislation, indiscriminate arrests and imprisonments that compromise the civil liberties of Muslims. The net result is a growing climate of suspicion, deterioration of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, and the growth of Islamophobia.

As we approach the 10th anniversary of 9/11, there is a very real likelihood that Islamophobes will exploit the commemoration of those who perished to promote their agenda. In the US, just as Islam and Muslims, not just terrorists, became a political issue in the 2008 presidential elections and 2010 congressional elections, so too in the 2012 US presidential elections the “issue of Islam, Muslims, mosques, and shariah law” will no doubt be an issue. Many of the Republican Party candidates have a history of association with such comments. Given the continued vitality of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant politics, any new attack in the US or Europe will simply fuel the growth of Islamophobia and with it hate speech, discrimination and violence.

We all (governments, policymakers, the media, educational institutions, religious and corporate leaders) have a critical role to play in countering the voices of hate, the exclusivist theologies and ideologies. Attempts to limit public discourse and debate, to silence alternative voices speaking out against ignorance, stereotyping and demonization of Islam, discrimination, hate crimes or threats to the civil liberties of Muslims must be turned back if America is to be preserved as the country of unity in diversity and free speech and opportunity for all. Education in our schools and universities and seminaries (as well as our churches and synagogues) that train the next generation of policymakers, religious leaders, educators, and citizens will be critical. What is at stake is the very core of who and what we are as a nation and a society, the foundation of our identity. Islamophobia and its culture of hate is not only a threat to the civil liberties of Muslims but also the very fabric of who we are and what we stand for, the principles and values embodied in our constitutions and laws which have historically made our democracies strong.

John L. Esposito is University Professor, Professor of Religion and International Affairs and of Islamic Studies and Founding Director of the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at the Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University. He is a recipient of the American Academy of Religion's 2005 Martin E. Marty Award for the Public Understanding of Religion and of Pakistan's Quaid-i-Azzam Award for Outstanding Contributions in Islamic Studies. He has served as a consultant to the U.S. Department of State and to governments, corporations, universities, and the media. In 2003 he received the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University Award for Outstanding Teaching. He has recently co-authored a new book with Ibrahim Kalin entitled, 'Islamophobia and the Challenge of pluralism in the 21st Century'.