



Muslims and Anti-Muslim Oppression

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On February 10, 2015 three young Muslims, Yusor Abu-Salha, her husband, Deah Barakat, and her sister Razan Abu-Salha were murdered by their white neighbor in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. On February 13th a man started a fire at the Quba Islamic Institute in Houston, Texas. On the 14th the Islamic School of Rhode Island was vandalized. On the 15th the Hindu Temple and Cultural Center in Bothell, Washington was vandalized. On the same day, also in Bothell, Skyview Junior High School was vandalized. On the 28th of the month Mukhtar Ahmed, a Pakistani man was shot in the head and killed while driving on interstate I-71 in Kentucky. On March 5 Ahmed al-Jumaili, newly arrived in the US as an immigrant from Iraq, was shot and killed as he was taking pictures outside his apartment.

These kinds of attacks, while not always of this frequency are constant. Like all hate crimes and Islamophobic comments, they are a reminder to the Muslim community that they are under siege, seen by many white Americans as dangerous outsiders and therefore vulnerable to violence.¹

Anti-Muslim oppression – often referred to as Islamophobia – is a combination of religious, racial and cultural oppression targeting the presence, dress, behavior, job and educational opportunities, and institutions of anyone perceived to be not only Muslim but Arab or generally from the Middle East. Muslims are racially profiled in airports and in urban settings, routinely discriminated against in job and housing situations and portrayed as dangerous fanatics in the popular media – particularly in books, movies and video games. Islamic organizations are under intense surveillance by the government, are denied access to some of the funding and other opportunities that Christian and Jewish groups have access to, have their charitable activities challenged, are routinely denied building permits and have their mosques and cultural centers attacked.

What popular culture does not reflect is that most Muslims are neither Arab nor from the Middle East. Of the over 1.6 billion Muslims in the world (about 23% of the world's population), the majority live in countries as diverse as Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Sudan, China, Nigeria, Kenya, India and the Philippines.² The countries with the largest Muslim populations are (not in order) Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Nigeria and China. Each of these countries has between 50 and 100 million Muslim citizens. Despite the dramatic religious

and cultural variety of the Muslim world, Islam is often portrayed in the US as a monolithic, militaristic religion, unchanged since the seventh century, hostile to Christianity and inimical to all things modern and Western. Muslims themselves are often assumed to be mindless adherents, devoid of any individuality: fanatical, blind followers of extremist clerics.

Muslims have been treated as the prototypical enemy of western Christendom since the first crusade was announced by the Pope Urban II in 1095. The crusade was conceived as an expedition to unite the fighting rulers and people of Southern Europe under a new common identity as Christian. In his proclamation, the Pope denounced Islam as an abomination and enemy of God and declared that every Christian had a moral obligation to march to the Holy Land and claim it from “the Moors.” The subsequent war to claim the areas of Spain and Portugal for Christendom was also labeled a crusade.³ Over the following centuries Christian secular and religious leaders forged a common European identity whose defining characteristic was defence against spiritual and physical threat from Islam.

During the 15th century, in the first process of racial (as opposed to ethnic) cleansing, Spanish rulers began persecuting the Moors as well as Jews in their attempt to create a racially and religiously pure country, expelling the Moors entirely from Spain in 1609.

The Spanish Inquisition was established to hunt down *conversos* (Moors and Jews who were suspected of falsely converting to Christianity) so they would not pollute the blood of a new national identity. During this period, the religious identity “Christian” began to take on a racial component, signifying *white Christian*, and the word “European” began to be equated with both *white* and *Christian*.⁴ Emerging nation-states such as Spain claimed legitimacy from a unity of faith and a common pseudo-scientific racial heritage encapsulated in the Spanish phrases *sangre puro* and *limpieza de sangre*.⁵

During this period of nation building and emerging national identities the word *moor* was used as both a religious and a racial signifier and a general term to describe the Other – the perennial enemy of Christendom anywhere in the world who, by rejecting Christianity, “...remains outside the Western economic, cultural, and political consensus.”⁶ As one commentator has written ...”the term ‘Moor’ was used interchangeably with such similarly ambiguous terms as ‘African,’ ‘Ethiopian,’ ‘Negro,’ and even ‘Indian’ to designate a figure from different parts or the whole of African (or beyond) who was either black or Moslem, neither, or both ... characterized alternately and sometimes simultaneously in contradictory extremes, as noble or monstrous, civil or savage.”⁷

In contrast, there have been brief periods in US political history when Islam was not treated as an enemy of Christendom and relations between the US and Muslim nations were friendly. Washington, Franklin and Jefferson respected and had generally positive things to say about the



religion. In 1777, Morocco was the first country in the world to recognize the new United States government, with Tunisia following suit the next year. Even in the period of the Barbary War against pirates off the coast of North Africa, Islam was referred to with respect and a political alternative to war was sought to the conflict. At the same time, however, stereotypes about Muslims as infidels were promulgated by Christian priests and ministers and expressed in popular culture, often through the negative portrayal of Native Americans as Moors.⁸

Islam was first brought to the United States by enslaved Africans. It has been estimated that 20-30% of the enslaved men and 12-15% of the women were Muslim.⁹ However, practicing Islam was difficult for them and many were forced to convert to Christianity. There were also some Muslim immigrants from Arab countries in the early days of the Republic.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries in the United States, various immigration laws favored Arab Christian communities and worked to restrict the arrival of Muslims.¹⁰ With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, the US began to play a larger role in West Asia. However, it was only after the collapse of the British Empire, our growing dependence on oil, and the creation of the state of Israel that the US began seriously intervening in Middle East countries and heavily funding right-wing regimes such as that of the Shah in Iran and the Saudi royal family in Saudi Arabia.

After World War II, immigration from Muslim countries increased. At the same time, the African American Muslim community continued to grow, now about one quarter of the Muslim population in the US. Besides the 4% who are Hispanic, the rest of the Muslim population is primarily first or second generation immigrants from South Asia (India and Pakistan), various West Asian countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, Turkey and Iran, and Indonesia, Bosnia, Kenya, Somalia and Malaysia. Estimates of the total Muslim American population in the US range widely but it is probably somewhere between four to five million. As a Pew Research Survey title suggests, most Muslims in the US are well-educated and middle class. The report concludes that Muslim Americans are “...largely assimilated, happy with their lives, and moderate with respect to many of the issues that have divided Muslims and Westerners around the world.”¹¹

The target of present day Islamophobic is Muslims not as they are, but as they have been imagined for centuries in the western imagination. They are the dark, menacing, non-Christian Other, intent on destroying western civilization. They are interchangeable with Jews, African Americans, Native Americans or undocumented immigrants. And this danger becomes the justification for public policy that targets individual Muslims and Muslims as a group for systematic marginalization, discrimination, harassment, hate crimes and continual vilification.

Recent controversies over the siting of Mosques and Islamic cultural centers are indicative of



deep-seated Islamophobia and racism. There have been protests against the building of mosques in such diverse places as Murfreesboro, TN, Sheboygan, MI, and Temecula, CA as well as in Brooklyn and Staten Island, NY. In Columbia, TN a mosque has been burned down and in Cedar Rapids, Jacksonville, Detroit and Seattle mosques have been smeared with animal feces, defaced with graffiti, vandalized, attacked with pipe bombs and set afire by arsonists.¹² In Columbia, in a powerful act of solidarity with the Muslim community, the local pastor of the Presbyterian Church gave the Muslim community the keys to the church and said that they could use it as their house of worship.

The 2010 protest against the Park51 Islamic cultural center proposed for a site two blocks from the location of the 9/11 bombings is indicative of Islamophobia. Protesters assume that because Al Qaeda is a Muslim organization, all Muslims are terrorists, that there were no Muslims who died in the 9/11 attacks or who played roles in the rescue of people caught in the buildings and that an old Burlington Coat Store is suddenly “hallowed ground.” They also assume that Muslims should not enjoy the same religious freedom as Christians or Jews, even while many Muslims are risking their lives fighting as US soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The controversy over whether President Obama is a Muslim is another example. Underlying the disbelief that Obama is a Christian is an assumption that African Americans cannot be true Christians and will always be outsiders. This disbelief is enhanced by an assumption that Muslims and people of color are dangerous, and neither can be the equal of law-abiding, white Christian Americans.

These issues are obviously stirred up by conservative political leaders like President Trump and mainstream, corporate media. They are also constantly fueled by the Islamophobia industry. There are five key individuals and seven foundations that provide tens of millions of dollars to various entities for development and dissemination of misleading propaganda about Islam and the American Muslim community.¹³ All of this taps into widespread underlying beliefs that must be taken seriously. In September, 2015 a Pew poll showed that 29% of the population still believes Obama is a Muslim¹⁴ A more general 2015 YouGov poll found that 55% of respondents said they had an unfavourable opinion of Islam and 40% supported a national registry of Muslims.¹⁵

Like the impact of any form of oppression the toll on Muslims is tremendous. In the words of Darakshan Raja, co-founder of the Muslim American Women’s Policy Forum and program manager for the Washington Peace Center, “For some of us, organizing and resisting against this system of anti-Muslim violence is survival.” “It is emotionally exhausting and traumatizing to live in a world where a core part of our identity, Muslim, is consistently dehumanized.” “...”I would like for the broader U.S. society to recognize that anti-Muslim violence is structural,” said Raja. “It is an extension of the systems of oppression that America is built upon.” She continues, “It is codified in policies and laws that make up the War on Terror, which we all fund through our



tax dollars, ... The collective blame, hate violence, and dehumanization Muslims experience must be seen as an extension of state violence. These systems of violence can only sustain themselves if we continue to accept the dehumanization of communities. A simple start to rejecting anti-Muslim violence is rejecting our dehumanization.”¹⁶

Just as with racial profiling and discrimination directed against other groups, Islamophobia threatens our collective safety when resources are selectively and inappropriately directed at entire communities rather than at criminal behavior which is prevalent in all communities. It threatens our civil and religious liberties when one group is singled out as not entitled to constitutionally guaranteed rights. It also curtails our freedom when surveillance and harassment are legally sanctioned and we must limit civil rights in order to “prevent attack.” When we speak out and stand strong as allies to the Muslim community we challenge violence and injustice, increase our safety and freedom, challenge age-old Christian stereotypes and myths and uphold the legal rights to freedom of religion, freedom of assembly and freedom from discrimination and attack. Now is the time to work with Muslims to challenge Islamophobia.

Endnotes

1. Information on these events is from Deepa Iyer. *We Too Sing American: South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Immigrants Shape our Multiracial Future*. The New Press, 2015. pps 169-70.
2. Michael Lipka. *Muslims and Islam: Key findings in the U.S. and around the world*. Pew Research Center, Fact tank, July 22, 2016 [online]. [cited December 18, 2016]. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/22/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>.
3. I use the word “claim” rather than the more common “reclaim” intentionally because Christians had no more historical right to control these areas than Muslims did. There were crusades waged by Christians against Moors, Slavs, dissident Christian groups such as the Cathars and even against individual secular Christian leaders over a period of 600 years.
4. As part of this whitening process western Christianity transformed God and Jesus into light-skinned Europeans.
5. The *limpieza de sangre* statute was passed in 1449.
6. Anouar Majid. *We Are All Moors: Ending Centuries of Crusades Against Muslims and Other Minorities*. University of Minnesota, 2009. p 62.
7. *Ibid.*, p 63.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
9. Samuel S. Hill et. al. *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South*. Mercer University, 2005. p. 394.
10. See the previous chapter on Arab Americans. Many Arab Christians claimed immigration rights as white people. Although not all these claims were upheld by the courts, a significant number of Lebanese, Palestinians and Syrians successfully entered the US.
11. Pew Research Center. *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream*. May 22, 2007. [online]. [cited August 10, 2010]. <http://www.pewresearch.org/files/old-assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf>.
12. American Civil Liberties Union. “Nationwide Anti-Mosque Activity” ACLU, 2015 [online]. [cited December 18, 2016]. <https://www.aclu.org/map/nationwide-anti-mosque-activity>.
13. Deepa Iyer. *We Too Sing American: South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Immigrants Shape Our Multiracial Future*. The New Press, 2015. See the detailed report on the Islamophobia industry--Matthew Duss, et. al. “Fear, Inc. 2.0: The Islamophobia Network’s Efforts to Manufacture Hate in America.” Center for American Progress, February 11, 2015 [online]. [cited December 8, 2016]. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/religion/reports/2015/02/11/106394/fear-inc-2-0/>.



14. Mona Chalabi. "How anti-Muslim are Americans? Data points to extent of Islamophobia." The Guardian, December 8, 2015 [online]. [cited December 2, 2016]. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/08/muslims-us-islam-islamophobia-data-polls>.
15. Ibid.
16. Lazare, Sarah, "On Both Sides of the Atlantic Muslims Organizing to "reject dehumanization." Common Dreams, December 21, 2015 [online]. [cited October 25, 2016]. <http://www.commondreams.org/news/2015/12/21/both-sides-atlantic-muslims-organizing-reject-dehumanization>

