

Do Muslims have equal rights?

By John Esposito

In recent weeks, Republican politics and attempts across America to block the building of mosques have underscored the impact of Islamophobia in American society.

Republican candidates have jumped on a bandwagon, appealing 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. This form of political hate speech was addressed by **Colin Powell in his endorsement of Obama when he asked:**

"Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country? ... I have heard senior members of my own party drop the suggestion, "He's a Muslim and he might be associated [with] terrorists." This is not the way we should be doing it in America."

Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, desperately seeking to recapture his national Republican leader role, tried this past week 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 protestors to bring their dogs because Muslims hate Jews, Christians, women, and dogs.**

Republican politicizing of Islam and Muslims has deep roots from positions taken by their major presidential candidates (John McCain, Mitt Romney, and Rudy Guiliani) to unfounded accusations by members of Congress. In the 2008 presidential campaign, Republican candidate John McCain's desire to credential himself with the Christian Right, whose votes, he aggressively sought, led him to embrace pastors of megachurches and televangelists with highly divisive views.

McCain received endorsements from Ron Parsley and John Hagee, prominent Christian Zionists. **Parsley in his 2005 book Silent No More to warning of a "war between Islam and Christian civilization."** Parsley decries the "spiritual desperation" of America's civil libertarians who advocate the separation of church and state, and identifies Islam as an "anti-Christ religion" predicated on "deception." Muhammad, he writes, "received revelations from demons and not from the true God." Parsley says, "The fact is that America was founded, in part, with the intention of seeing this false religion destroyed. "Jihad has come to America. If we lose the war to Islamic fascism, it will change the world as we know it. . . . It's here. . . . They are waiting to respond as terrorist cells against this nation. It is a war between the culture of death and the culture of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." . . . Radical sects, which include about 200 million Islamics, believe they have a command from God to kill Christians and Jews, he said. . . . "Our crisis is that half of America doesn't know the war has started," Hagee said. "This is a religious war."

When informed of Hagee's extreme statements about Islam, McCain initially refused to disassociate himself from this pastor. It was only after the revelation of Hagee's past anti-Catholic comments, in which he had argued that Adolf Hitler merely built on the work of the "Roman Church," which he called "the Great Whore of Babylon," that McCain finally severed his ties.

Congresswoman **Sue Myrick from NC and Congressman Paul Broun from Georgia charged in an abortive campaign that the American Muslim organization CAIR** (Council on American-Islamic Relations) fostered the secret infiltration of Muslim student interns into key national security committees on Capitol Hill.

American Muslims: Myths & Realities

The taint of foreignness and terrorism continues to brushstroke American Muslim as "the other." But what do major Gallup and Pew polls reveal about American Muslims? **They are one of the most diverse communities in the world**, representing 68 different countries as well as indigenous African Americans and converts. Over the past few decades, the vast majority of American Muslims have become economically and increasingly politically integrated into mainstream American society. Muslims represent men and women spanning the socioeconomic spectrum: professionals (doctors, lawyers, engineers, and educators), corporate executives, small business owners, or blue-collar workers and laborers. In fact, 70 percent have a job (paid or unpaid) compared to 64 percent of Americans overall. ... Muslim women report monthly household incomes more nearly equal to men's, compared with women and men in other faith groups.

Education is a priority for many Muslims, who, after Jews, are the most educated religious community surveyed in the United States. **Forty percent of Muslims have a college degree or more, compared to 29 percent of Americans overall; 31 percent are full-time students as compared to 10 percent in the general population.** (See *The Future of Islam*, pp. 14-15)

Despite their integration as American citizens, their rights of religious freedom and civil liberties are often threatened. Today, opposition to mosque construction, in locations from NYC and Staten Island to Tennessee and California, has become not just a local but a national political issue. Plans to build an Islamic Center near the World Trade Center site have been transformed into a national referendum polarizing political and religious leaders and the media. Right-wing political commentators, politicians, hard-line Christian ministers, bloggers and some families of 9/11 victims have charged that building this Islamic Center is insensitive to 9/11 families (overlooking the fact that innocent Muslims who worked in the WTC were also victims). They characterize this cultural center as a "monument to terrorism."

Islamophobia threatens the fabric of our American way of life

Efforts to demonize Islam and Muslims have become a political football that now threatens the first amendment rights and freedoms not only of Muslims, but indeed of all Americans. Islamophobia is fast becoming what anti-Semitism is for Judaism and Jews, rooted in hostility and intolerance towards religious and cultural beliefs and a religious or racial group.

Despite the persistent distinction by Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama between the acts of terrorists and the faith of the vast majority of Muslims, what we are witnessing today is the tip of an iceberg formed post 9/11. Far right political and religious leaders and media commentators whose hate speech, like Ann Coulter's comment:

"We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity" would never appear in mainstream broadcast or print media about Jews, Christians and other established ethnic and racial groups in America.

The barrage of similar tirades, like the ones below, create an atmosphere of fear and hostility that is totally unfounded, given what we know about mainstream Muslims in America.

Michael Savage, host of the The Savage Nation, warned: "I tell you right now - the largest percentage of Americans would like to see a nuclear weapon dropped on a major Arab capital. They don't even care which one ... I think these people need to be forcibly converted to Christianity. It's the only thing that can probably turn them into human beings."

Rush Limbaugh, reacting to criticism of the abuse of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, commented, **"They're the ones who are sick... They're the ones who are perverted. They are the ones who are dangerous. They are the ones who are subhuman."**

Leading figures in the Christian Right were not to be outdone. Franklin Graham stated, **"The God of Islam is not the same God of the Christian or the Judeo-Christian faith. It is a different God, and I believe a very evil and a very wicked religion."** On Fox News' Hannity & Colmes, **Pat Robertson warned**, "This man [Muhammad] was an absolute wild-eyed fanatic. He was a robber and a brigand. And to say that these terrorists distort Islam, they're carrying out Islam...I mean, this man was a killer. And to think that this is a peaceful religion is fraudulent."

Impact and Implications of Islamophobia

Across America, Islamophobic hate speech and political grandstanding have painted all Muslims negatively, creating deep negative impressions among those who do not know Muslims personally. Major polling by Gallup and PEW shows that significant numbers of respondents question the loyalty of Muslim citizens and would approve policies that profile Muslims or require them to carry special identity cards. Hate speech has precipitated violent crimes against Muslims, Sikhs and other minorities of Asian and Middle Eastern descent who "look Muslim." It has led to indiscriminate accusations against mainstream Muslim institutions (mosques, civil rights groups, political action committees, charities). Concerns for domestic security have unfortunately led to the abuse of anti-terrorism legislation, indiscriminate arrests and imprisonments of Muslims that compromise all of our civil liberties. The net result is a growing climate of suspicion and distrust.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The social cancer of Islamophobia must be recognized as unacceptable as anti-Semitism. It is a threat to the very fabric of our democratic pluralistic way of life, one that tests the mettle of our democratic principles and values. Political and religious leaders, commentators and experts must do more to counter hate speech; they must lead in safeguarding and strengthening religious pluralism and mutual respect. They must walk the fine line between distinguishing the faith of mainstream Muslims from the violence terrorists justify in the name of Islam. Blurring this distinction plays into the hands of preachers of hate (Muslim and non-Muslim, religious and political) whose rhetoric incites and demonizes, alienates and marginalizes and leads to the adoption of domestic and policies that undermine the civil liberties of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

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