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Implications of American Islamophobia

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The remarks of the United States presidential hopeful, Donald Trump, on Muslims in America have caused outrage all over the world and have led many to say that Trump is going against what the country stands for. The present rash of Islamophobia is, however, only the latest example of a deep vein of racism and xenophobia that runs through mainstream American society.

The swirling controversy that has arisen over the remarks made in recent weeks by Donald Trump regarding the place of Muslims in American society has far-reaching implications that extend well beyond the question of whether it has now become acceptable in certain circles to be openly Islamophobic. In the immediate aftermath of the Paris attacks a month ago, Trump described himself as open to the idea that mosques might have to be shut down in the United States (us). A few days later, he came out with what seemed akin to a suggestion that a national registry may have to be established for all Muslims in the us. Trump has explicitly warned that American Muslims are incapable of extending their loyalty to the us.

Thus, he has repeatedly circulated the discredited story that a large number of Muslims cheered when the Twin Towers were brought down by terrorists on 11 September 2001. Though not an iota of evidence lends credence to his narrative, Trump has sought to give it the stamp of veracity with the imprimatur of his own experience: “I watched when the World Trade Center came tumbling down,” Trump told an audience in Alabama on 19 November 2015, “and I watched in Jersey City, New Jersey, where thousands and thousands of people were cheering as that building came down.” Trump would not budge from this story when he appeared on the ABC network: “It did happen, I saw it. It was on television. I saw it.”

Responding to Trump

We shall have to leave aside for the present the question, which would be of paramount importance to a philosopher and social scientist, of how experience is theorised, the evidentiary claims behind experience, and the nature of perception. It may be, too, that Trump

remembers what he heard and saw on television as something that transpired before his own eyes, and there is of course the much simpler and far more attractive explanation that Trump is a congenital liar.

To lavish too much attention on Trump is perhaps not very different than throwing pearls before swine. When Trump first announced his candidacy, he was dismissed as something of a buffoon; since then, his “staying power” has dazzled all his opponents and public commentators, even if some are convinced that each outrage from Trump is merely calculated to raise his stock precisely when it appears he might falter.

Meanwhile, however, Trump’s latest pronouncement has rattled a good many people and, not less importantly, given him a commanding lead over his Republican opponents. Following the murderous rampage in California, where a Muslim couple, now believed to share the ideological sentiments that animate the Islamic State, shot dead 14 people and wounded many more, Trump declared that he would ban Muslims from entering the us. He has admitted that his statements are “probably not politically correct,” but adds: “I don’t care.”

There has been, not unexpectedly, huge outrage around the world over Trump’s pronouncements. The most unlikely figures, none of them even remotely noted for their democratic credentials, such as Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, or the other half dozen Republican candidates who in varying degrees are convinced that Obama is a communist, have condemned Trump for his “insensitive” and “slandorous” remarks. Many ordinary Americans themselves have balked at his ideas, and the *Detroit Free Press*, which serves one of the largest Muslim communities in the us, took the unusual step of issuing an unequivocal denunciation of Trump’s “rank bigotry and racism” in a front-page editorial. The newspaper’s editors noted that “some slurs are so heinous that they must be answered. And some lies are so vile that they become dangerous if not met with truth, and strength.”

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We can well imagine the response of film-maker Michael Moore, who is nearly singular in his suggestion that a country with an intense history of genocide mocks only itself with the insinuation that people of a particular faith are not deserving of being Americans. In a letter castigating the governor of Michigan in the most forceful terms for backtracking on his previously announced commitment to welcome Syrian refugees, Moore wrote that,

What you've done is anti-American. This is not who we are supposed to be. We are, for better and for worse, a nation of descendants of three groups: slaves from Africa who were brought here in chains and then forced to provide trillions of dollars of free labor to build this country; native peoples who were mostly exterminated by white Christians through acts of mass genocide; and immigrants from EVERYWHERE around the globe. In Michigan we are fortunate to count amongst us tens of thousands of Arab and Muslim Americans.

Moore's passionately felt response permits us to grapple with some of the questions that are central to the question of Islamophobia: what defines an "American," the nature of the American past, the essential characteristics of America as an immigrant society, and the conception of the sacred that undergirds what purports to be a secular society. However, before moving on to explore the ramifications of the question, "to whom does America belong," it is well to recognise, as Moore's brief recounting of the American past tacitly does, both that Islamophobia has deep roots in American history and that Trump is at best an egregious example of a disease that is pervasive across all ranks of the Republican party and indeed in large sectors of American civil society.

Among Republican presidential candidates, the retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson, who led the pack before he was dislodged by Trump, has said that a Muslim should not be permitted to occupy the White House, and he expressed a widespread concern that the election of a Muslim to the presidency would lead to the sovereignty of Sharia and the abrogation of the us constitution. Former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum has advocated racial profiling; when asked if he had any particular groups in mind, he unhesitatingly said: "Obviously Muslims

would be someone you'd be looking at, absolutely." Mike Huckabee has shed all decorum in speaking of Muslims: in a speech delivered in 2013, he asked "why it is that we tiptoe around a religion that promotes the most murderous mayhem on the planet in their so-called holiest days?"

One could go on in this vein, ad infinitum; but what remains unsaid thus far is the fact that no candidate appears to be any worse off as a consequence of their naked embrace of bigotry and ethnocentrism. Indeed, as a poll conducted on 22–23 September 2015 established (yougov.com), 57% of all Americans, and an overwhelming 83% of Republicans, agreed with Ben Carson that a Muslim ought not to be put "in charge of this nation;" only 27% of Americans expressed disapproval with this view.

'Never Again?'

Moreover, it would be disingenuous to suppose that the call to ban Muslims is un-American or a fundamental departure from the entire course of American history. Most Americans, even those who are educated, are aware of only one major precedent for which they believe the country has atoned enough. By Executive Order 9066, the removal of over 1,10,000 Japanese-Americans, many of them us citizens, to various concentration camps—or, in the more anodyne language of the apologists, "relocation centers"—was effected after the Japanese invasion of Pearl Harbor. The Civil Liberties Act of 1988, signed into law by Ronald Reagan, offered an apology and financial remuneration to 1,00,000 people of Japanese descent for their unlawful incarceration.

Many Americans see this repentance as more characteristic of the spirit of the country, and some are bold enough to ask how and why the us seems to have so quickly relapsed to an earlier age, unmindful of the drone-like insistence on "never again." But even the more liberal narratives have little if any room for the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, or the 1917 Immigration Act, repealed only in 1952, which prevented large classes of "aliens" from entering the us, among them "idiots, imbeciles, epileptics, alcoholics, poor, beggars, criminals, polygamists, anarchists, and prostitutes;" it also defined an "Asiatic

Barred Zone." Thus all Asians, except for Filipinos, were shut out from the us; they were also given the none-too-subtle message that they were no different from imbeciles, criminals, and anarchists—in a word, "undesirables," one and all.

We may, then, simply conclude that xenophobia is intrinsic to American history, and that the fear, suspicion, and hatred of the Muslim is only the latest instantiation of an inability to live with the Other. However, such a conclusion stops considerably short of pursuing the implications of present-day Islamophobia. It is important, as well, that the difficult questions about the nature of "American" identity not be deflected by considerations that, while they are important, are not centrally important in the present debate.

Many Americans and even some Muslims, for example, will argue that Trump and his ilk are only proposing to do what Muslim nations have already done. The treatment of non-Muslims in most predominantly Muslim countries is shabby at best, and more often simply horrendous. On this account, merely being a non-Muslim is hazardous in a country such as Saudi Arabia. Pakistan, to name another country, even requires all Muslims who are applicants for a passport to take an oath denouncing Ahmadis.

Tarnishing All Muslims

A second argument, which is increasingly being heard in Muslim communities and has been voiced by most American public officials, including President Barack Obama, is that law-abiding and "good Muslims" must increasingly take responsibility for the "bad Muslims;" or, in somewhat more sophisticated language, the onus falls on the vast majority of Muslims to understand how radicalisation has affected their youth, and then isolate and rehabilitate the "bad Muslims" and "evil jihadists" among them.

Surprisingly, however, little attempt has been made to situate the present controversy in relation to the widespread language of "diversity," which today is conceivably the single most important issue in the American workplace. Diversity has most been understood as a way of accommodating women, ethnic minorities, and increasingly members of the

LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) communities; however, there has been scant discussion of religious diversity. Ignorance of Islam is widespread; the greater majority of Americans admit that they have never known a Muslim.

Five years ago, there was a storm of resentment over the proposed installation of an Islamic centre and mosque at “Ground Zero,” the “hallowed ground” where two planes struck the World Trade Center towers and made martyrs of some 2,500 Americans. Obama, echoing Lincoln, declared that “I understand the emotions that this issue engenders.

Ground zero is, indeed, hallowed ground.” There was indignation that Muslims were being allowed to lay claim to the very ground that their fellow Muslims had desecrated: the unstated supposition, which has never been allowed to tarnish the barbarism of any white Christian, was that all Muslims stood condemned. The public remarks that were then on display could reasonably have led one to the view that the abuse of Islam is the new form of anti-Semitism in America.

Yet the implications of Islamophobia are still deeper. Arguments that the ban on Muslims will keep America safe from

violent terrorists, or that America is in dire need of controlling its borders, are a smokescreen. Immeasurably, more Muslims have paid with their lives for the terrorist attacks of September 2001 than Americans, or practitioners of any other faith, though an American can only recognise this if a Muslim life is viewed as equivalent to an American life. Those who denied Muslims an Islamic centre at “Ground Zero,” on the grounds that it is sacred space, arrived at a conception of the sacred that has no room for the Muslim at all. That is the fundamental problem that lurks behind American Islamophobia.