ISLAM, ISLAMOPHOBIA AND THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

To the list of “isms” and phobias plaguing American society and political discourse, including racism, sexism, xenophobia and homophobia, Islamophobia is increasingly front and center in the American presidential campaign. In August, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker (R) said publicly that there were only a “handful” of “reasonable and moderate” Muslims in the world. A “handful” out of 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide?

The recent Republican debate was peppered throughout, not merely with tough talk on terrorism, but with obvious anti-Islamic sentiment. Mike Huckabee, in his vehement opposition to the Iran deal, said: “This is really about the survival of Western civilization.” John Kasich believes the remedy to combating jihadists is to: “make sure that all of our people feel fulfilled living in Western Civilization,” which he explicitly said refers to Judeo-Christian culture and society.

Such individuals might be surprised to learn that they have bought into a seriously flawed and fallacious worldview held similarly by ISIS that “Western civilization” and the “Islamic World” emerged completely independent of one another and were always at war with one another. Neither “Western Civilization” nor the “Islamic World” would be what they are today without the other. The contributions of the Islamic intellectual tradition with its achievements, inventions, and scholarship have shaped virtually every field of study in the arts and sciences, as we know them today. Anyone who does not recognize that is no better a student of “Western Civilization” than ISIS is of Islam.

More recently, at a Donald Trump town hall event in Rochester, N.H., a man stood up to say: “We have a problem in this country. It's called Muslims. You know our current president is one. He’s not even American.” Donald Trump said nothing to defend the millions of American Muslims who are an integral part of American society, and did nothing to correct the man’s erroneous views. Trump merely responded: “We’re going to be looking at a lot of different things.”

The media rushed to address the Obama identity issue, as they generally do, without addressing the larger issue of Islamophobia and American Muslims. So how might Trump have responded to such incendiary remarks? I offer the following:

Muslims have been a part of American society for well over a century. They were among the African slaves brought forcibly to the United States, and then among the many different immigrants who came in the late 19th and early 20th centuries seeking freedom from injustice, gainful employment and a better life. They worked in the textile mills of the Northeast, owned and operated businesses, and farmed the land in the Great Plains. Today several million American Muslims, both native-born and naturalized, continue to be part of the rich fabric of
American cultural and religious diversity, and active participants in every profession and walk of life.

There is no doubt that terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, the “Islamic Caliphate” (ISIS), Boko Haram, and others that claim a Muslim identity continue to pose a serious threat to life and liberty, and have seriously damaged attitudes towards Muslims and the Islamic faith. What is often overlooked, however, is that it is Muslims themselves who are most often the victims of terrorism. Muslim scholars, activists, political leaders, and clergy from 100 countries have condemned such violence, yet this often goes unreported by American media.¹

In responding to the man in Trump’s audience, I also would have referred to the speech made by President Eisenhower at the dedication of the Islamic Center in Washington, D.C., in June 1957:

*I should like to assure you, my Islamic friends, that under the American Constitution, under American tradition, and in American hearts, this Center, this place of worship, is just as welcome as could be a similar edifice of any other religion. Indeed, America would fight with her whole strength for your right to have here your own church and worship according to your own conscience...*

*Civilization owes to the Islamic world some of its most important tools and achievements. From fundamental discoveries in medicine to the highest planes of astronomy, the Muslim genius has added much to the culture of all peoples. That genius has been a wellspring of science, commerce and the arts, and has provided for all of us many lessons in courage and in hospitality.*

*This fruitful relationship between peoples, going far back into history, becomes more important each year. Today, thousands of Americans, both private individuals and governmental officials, live and work — and grow in understanding — among the peoples of Islam.*

Finally, Mr. Trump might have taken the opportunity to say that given the tragic reality of sectarian violence in our world today, it is tempting simply to blame Islam and its adherents. To do this, however, is to overlook the complexity of geo-politics and the various underlying causes of sectarian violence, and thus unwittingly perpetuate discrimination, prejudices and worse. Moreover, it perpetrates a great injustice against the vast majority of Muslims in the world and in our country who aspire to lives of true faith, freedom and lasting peace.

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