

Beneath the Radar

USA: Islamophobia, European-Style

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Say what you like about George W. Bush; he respected the Muslims he murdered. Even as he wiped them out and tortured them, he professed his respect for their religion. “The Muslim faith is based upon peace and love and compassion,” he said. “The exact opposite of the teachings of the Al Qaeda organization.” The problem wasn’t that he hated Muslims; it was that, through invasion and occupation, he sought to love them to death.

There was no reason to disbelieve these claims. Iraq, in particular, was never a war against Islam. It was primarily a war for oil; Muslims just got in the way. The driving logic behind it had no more to do with religion than slavery had to do with skin pigmentation. When it came to marketing the war, not only was disdain of Islam not necessary; it was actively unhelpful. With the war branded as an act of liberation, there was little to be gained by wantonly disparaging the faith of the very people it was now your task to subdue. And so long as the United States was bombing Muslims abroad, there was no need to bash them at home.

Needless to say, this official sensitivity bore little relation to how Muslims were treated by the state. Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, broad sweeps of people from predominantly Muslim countries resulted in the “preventive detention” of 1,200, mostly men; voluntary interviews of 19,000; and a program of special registration for more than 82,000. Not a single terrorism conviction emerged from any of this.

Nor did Bush’s tactful words do anything to quell popular Islamophobic attitudes. In 2006, long before the brouhaha over Park51, the so-called “Ground Zero mosque,” a Pew survey showed that Muslims were viewed less favorably in the United States than in Russia, Britain or France, while a Gallup poll revealed that 39 percent of Americans supported requiring Muslims in the country, including US citizens, to carry special identification. By the time Obama ran for president, “Muslim” was a slur—an accusation about his faith he felt compelled to deny.

But while these views were prevalent, they did not gain electoral expression or widespread political currency. There was no rush to reprint cartoons of Muhammad or hold vexed national discussions about what Muslim women should or should not wear. Though Islamophobia may have been rife, Islam itself did not appear to provide a rich vein to tap. There were, it seems, precious few votes in it.

That paradox is now unraveling. The fallout over right-wing attacks against Park51, as well as those against several other mosques across the country, suggests that a sizable section of the right believes there is capital to be gained from scapegoating Muslims. From now on, the Koran burnings, mosque torchings and hate crimes directed at Muslims can no longer be understood simply as isolated incidents of bigotry. They will draw their strength and legitimacy from within the establishment and their encouragement from the mainstream media: not acts of individual calumny but insidious calculation.

Just as earlier waves of Islamophobia cannot be understood outside the context of 9/11 and the “war

on terror,” so this current strain is consistent with two related trends at home and abroad. First, it marks the rise of xenophobic and racist forces within the Republican Party, for whom the election of a black Democratic president with an uncommon name and an African father has produced a perfect storm for divisive, deranged rhetoric. As such, this most recent outburst of Islamophobia marks a plot development in the narrative of the Nixon strategy, which used the dog whistle of racially charged rhetoric to realign the South toward the GOP. Now no dog whistle is needed. The racism is not veiled but naked, the delivery not subtle but brutal. With the Minutemen, the birthers, the Tea Partiers and Fox News on common ground, it was only a matter of time before they turned their pitchforks on Muslims. For while they did not invent Islamophobia, they were well positioned to exploit it. Twenty-eight percent of Americans believe Muslims should not be eligible to sit on the Supreme Court, while fully one-third believe Muslims should be barred from running for president.

Second, the moment also brings the American hard right into line with its European counterparts, which bodes ill for American political culture as a whole. The past decade has seen an alarming rise in anti-immigrant and Islamophobic parties gaining political representation in Europe. In the Netherlands in June the party of Geert Wilders, who calls Muslims “goat fuckers” and wants to ban the Koran, almost tripled its representation, becoming the third-largest party. In “liberal” Sweden in September the hard-right Sweden Democrats entered Parliament for the first time, with 5.7 percent of the vote. With extremist parties regularly getting more than 10 percent, and in some cases sitting in government, European fascism has returned as a mainstream ideology. These movements start off on the fringes, but like arsenic in the water supply, their policies and rhetoric have a tendency to infect the broader discourse. The result, where Muslims are concerned, has been a moral panic. Switzerland voted in a national referendum to ban the construction of minarets—there are just four in the whole country. Belgium has passed a law banning the burqa, a garment estimated to be worn there by a couple of hundred women at most. In Italy a woman was fined 500 euros for wearing a veil on her way to a mosque.

That the American right, so contemptuous of Europeans on almost every level, should follow them on this front is, to say the least, disheartening. Polls show that despite living in the very country whose foreign policy, in Iraq and the Middle East as a whole, had done so much to enrage the Islamic world, Muslims felt more at home here than in European countries that opposed the Iraq War. That paradox, too, is unfortunately set to unravel.

Gary Younge

Comments (27)

1. posted by: mkmcfr at 10/14/2010 @ 5:26am

calling this “european style” islamophobia is making the assumption that because there are right wing parties that preach xenophobia in europe, then europeans are xenophobic.

nothing could be further from the truth. while some europeans are more prone to this kind of behavior than others, it does not represent anything near a significant part of the population which is much more tolerant than the US. even the famous Geert Wilders, in holland, must temper his speech in front of european audiences to retain any kind of credibility and to avoid prosecution. in fact, he is on trial now for inciting hatred. jean-marie le pen, in france has been prosecuted several times for making jokes about the holocaust.

i would turn your title around and ask the question if some europeans are not beginning to imitate
“american style” bigotry.

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P.S.

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