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American Muslims in the Age of President Trump

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Trump and A Crisis in American Monotheisms

Spotlight on Theological Education

Miguel A. De La Torre, Guest Editor

Spotlight on Theological Education is a major initiative of the AAR Theological Education Committee and is an important venue for exploring opportunities and challenges in theological education. Each issue focuses on a particular theme, setting, or concern of theological education. *Spotlight* appears as a special supplement to *Religious Studies News* in the spring of each year.

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American Muslims in the Age of President Trump

Amir Hussain, Loyola Marymount University

Muslims, both within America and around the world, are the religious community that is most affected by the presidency of Donald J. Trump. I write this *Spotlight* reflection as both an American citizen—a Muslim from Los Angeles—and a scholar of Islam in North America. Wearing either or both hats, it is clear that the next three years of the Trump administration will continue to be difficult times to be an American Muslim. These difficulties were anticipated in the last century by John Carpenter in his 1996 film *Escape from L.A.* In the film, set in 2013, Los Angeles has become a penal colony for those who do not conform to the high moral standards of the American president. One of the residents is a young Iranian woman named Taslima, who tells the protagonist: “I was a Muslim. Then they made that illegal.” In the last century, I used to think that that line was very funny. Now I’m not so sure. In the 2006 film *V for Vendetta*, set in a future neo-Fascist Britain, one of the characters (Dietrich) is taken away by the authorities for owning a copy of the Qur’an. As a presidential candidate, Mr. Trump said famously on CNN on March 9, 2016, that “I think Islam hates us,” and his first year as president has not been a good one for American Muslims.¹

From the time of Mr. Trump’s remark that “Islam hates us,” one has seen a shift from the rise of Islamophobia to what I term “misoislamia,” a neologism that captures the move from a fear (*phobia*) to a hatred (*miso*) for Islam and Muslims. The line that has been running over and over in my head comes from a local California band, Counting Crows: “All the anger and the eloquence are bleeding into fear.” America’s Muslims fear for our country—our home—and what will become of it. We saw the open intolerance to Islam in opposition to new mosques proposed throughout the country. We saw seven states (Alabama, Arizona, Kansas, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Dakota, and Tennessee) passing anti-sharia laws when not a single Muslim group had asked for the implementation of sharia laws. Oklahoma also voted for such a law, but it was struck down in 2012 and never implemented. We saw Lt. General Michael Flynn, who became President Trump’s National Security Advisor, tweet that “fear of Muslims is RATIONAL” and heard him claim that Islam is a political ideology (and not a religion, and therefore not protected under the US Constitution) which has become a “malignant cancer.”² However, he resigned on February 13, 2017, not for his comments about Islam and Muslims, but for misleading Vice President Mike Pence about his telephone calls with the Russian ambassador.

We saw Islam-haters such as Steve Bannon and Sebastian Gorka come and go in the Trump administration; Stephen Miller remains. We saw President Trump retweet anti-Muslim videos from a

¹ Theodore Schleifer, “Donald Trump: ‘I think Islam hates us,’” *CNN*, updated March 10, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/03/09/politics/donald-trump-islam-hates-us/>.

² Maggie Haberman and Matthew Rosenberg, “Michael Flynn, Anti-Islamist Ex-General, Offered Security Post, Trump Aide Says,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/18/us/politics/michael-flynn-national-security-adviser-donald-trump.html>.

right-wing fringe British group on November 29, 2017, to the dismay of British Prime Minister Theresa May.³ However, we also heard President Trump's press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, defend the president by saying that it didn't matter if the videos were real or not, as "the threat is real."

On Friday, January 27, a week after his inauguration, President Donald Trump ordered that the United States ban travelers and refugees from seven Muslim-majority countries (Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen). He did this in the afternoon, after making comments that morning for International Holocaust Remembrance Day that made no mention either of the Jews or of anti-Semitism. Thousands of people protested the ban at airports across the country in the following days. I flew back to Los Angeles from Washington, DC, on January 29, and those protests were quite powerful to see: people standing up for us not just or only as refugees or immigrants, but as Muslims. That was extraordinary. What has also been amazing to see is the response from the American Jewish community. They have been at the forefront of the protests, both because they know that the commandment that is repeated more than any other commandment in the Torah is to not oppress the stranger, and because they know with the painful history of the Holocaust of where the road of prejudice and intolerance ends. And with the rise of hate crimes against Muslims, over half of the hate crimes committed against a religious group in America were against Jews.

The first travel ban was rejected by the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit on February 9, 2017. President Trump introduced two subsequent versions of the ban, the most recent of which was ruled unconstitutional on February 15, 2018, by the US Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit in Richmond, Virginia.

Instead of celebrating American Muslims as an American success story of an educated and wealthy community, we are openly discriminated against by the Trump administration. And that hatred has been exported to other countries, with the perpetrator of the January 29, 2017, terrorist attack that killed six at the Islamic Cultural Centre of Quebec City expressing support for President Trump.⁴

American Muslims, it should be pointed out, are very different from European or Canadian Muslim communities, other places where we are also minorities in a Western context. Canadian Muslims do not have the same history that American Muslims do. So while there was a small Muslim population in Canada at the end of the nineteenth century (the first Canadian census in 1871 listed a Muslim population of 13), it was nothing like the number of Muslim slaves that were present in America generations earlier. There is no comparable component in Canadian Muslim life that resembles African American Muslims, who represent at least one-quarter of American Muslims. African American Muslims, as Americans, have for centuries been part of the history of the United States.

In Europe, the situation is markedly different, both among the Muslim and non-Muslim populations, which each tend to be much more homogeneous than they are in the United States. So in Britain, the majority of Muslims have their origins in South Asia. In France, Muslims are mostly from North Africa. In Germany, Muslims are usually Turks or Kurds. Contrast that with the American situation, where Muslims are equally African American, South Asian, or Middle Eastern (to take only the three largest groups).

³ Karla Adam and William Booth, "Trump's Retweets Elevate a Tiny Fringe Group of Anti-Muslim Activists in Britain," *The Washington Post*, November 29, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/trumps-tweets-elevate-a-tiny-fringe-group-of-anti-muslim-activists-in-britain/2017/11/29/02489a42-d515-11e7-9ad9-ca0619edfa05_story.html.

⁴ Mahita Gajanan, "Quebec City Mosque Shooting Suspect Criticized Refugees and Supported President Trump Online," *Time*, January 30, 2017, <http://time.com/4654434/alexandre-bissonnette-quebec-mosque-shooting-donald-trump-marie-le-pen/>.

There are also narrower definitions of what it means to be French or English or German than what it means to be American, which incorporates all of those European identities and many others.

There is also a socioeconomic difference. American Muslims are an American success story, solidly middle class and mostly professional. There are thousands of American Muslim physicians, for example, perhaps as many as 20,000 if one looks at information from the Islamic Medical Association of North America. European Muslims by contrast are more marginalized, often in a much lower socioeconomic class with much higher rates of unemployment. Sometimes, as is often the case in Germany, they are in the status of migrants or guest workers, not citizens.

Finally, there is a difference between American-style secularism, which doesn't seek to abolish religion but to give all religions an equal seat at the table, and various kinds of European disestablishment of religion, which seek to make the public space nonreligious. In the United States, America's seven million Muslims are free to live out their Islam in the public space. And there are so many American Muslims who do this, none who did it better than my childhood hero, the Greatest of All Time. Look at the life of Muhammad Ali, and you begin to understand the contributions that American Muslims have made to what it means to be American.

American Muslims need to live the legacy of Muhammad Ali. We need to continue to stand, as he did, for justice. "Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth," Ali would often say, and we need to not only remember that saying, but to act on it. In this way, we can live out the best of our ideals, both as Americans and as Muslims.