

Issues/Discussion Forum

What Is To Be A Muslim In America Today?

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Can one define what a Muslim is in the wake of the decision that President-elect Trump wants to take to ban all Muslims from entering America? Had late Edward Said were still alive may attempt an answer to the question I pose here as he did in the late seventies but I gather it will not be sufficient in that we have moved on from the late 20th century stereotype of the Muslim: bloodthirsty, vindictive, and unpredictable. Today, the typecast can be summed up in one word: a monster without a myth. It finds credo in the portrait given to DAECH fighters: bloody, ruthless, and above all, fearless to kill at random.

Still, how can we go on debating Muslims in the wake of the 2016-US election without falling prey to misrepresenting everyone as if Muslims were donuts of sorts? After all, a Muslim from Morocco or Algeria is quite different from a Muslim from Pakistan or Yemen who is in turn different from a Muslim from Chicago or Paris. Needless to note the diversity between a Sunni and a Chi'ia Muslim, an Allaoui and a Druz, a Sufi and a Wahhabi, a fanatic and an agnostic. Many Muslims drink whisky, others prey every day, still others wear burkinis. Never mind all that because the matter is of no concern to President-elect Trump who is bent on expelling all Muslims who live inside America and barring all those who want to enter it in the future. That he is determined to put all Muslims in the same basket is a telling sign of the times we all live in.

Ever since Brexit and the election of Mr. Trump to high office, a good part of the West has become xenophobic, racist, and daring to be politically incorrect. Whether this shift is a backlash following the exit of a black president (the only one ever to hold office since the inception of the country) or a deep-seated hatred for Muslims, one cannot make out. What is certain is that those who call themselves "White" feel beleaguered and are determined to lash out at the world. It will be interesting to see whether Marine Le Pen makes it in the next

French presidential election. If she does become the next President of France, which is quite possible given her ratings in public polls, the circle will be complete. I wonder then what will happen to millions of Muslims living in the West. In the meantime, let us not forget that in Austria a Neo-Nazi party led by Norbert Hofer nearly won the last election. Europe and the world took a deep breath when the Green Party championed by Heinz Fischer came to power.

The problem in America is that most of its people are pretty ignorant about where other people come from. They tend to put the rest of us in boxes: European, Indian, Chinese even though you may be Vietnamese, Arab even though you may be a Sikh. No wonder a Sikh was killed in New York two days after 9/11 simply because he was brown and looked like an Arab. Moreover, a Muslim, and more so an Arab living in America today, finds himself badgered unless he conforms to a certain credo; otherwise he really cannot be safe. An example will clarify what I have in mind. Let us say you happen to be reading a magazine written in Arabic in the subway in New York or Chicago, it is likely that you will be stared at more than once because your very presence poses a threat to whomever is sitting next to you. The writing in Arabic itself has become a sign, a leitmotiv for persecution.

I would like to think that there are many Americans who are open-minded and tolerant and kind but I have also a feeling that they are not in the majority. The reason why Trump appealed to so many Americans is because he says it as it is. He is not a hypocrite. On the contrary, bigoted though he may be, he is nevertheless forthright about race, gender, creed, religion, and that is what endears him to the whole country. In fact, he can be said to articulate what many think and feel but do not have the guts to say it out loud. In this sense, he is a surrogate of a kind—he is the subconscious of “White America”—at any rate, of a good portion of it. Otherwise, why would they elect him? I can only surmise that the road ahead for those of us who are Muslim and brown and yellow living in America and paying our taxes and dreaming of a better world will be quite steep during the next four years. We will have to work in harness with the other America (the one that is welcoming and generous and accommodating) so that we may be able at the end of the day to set our energies free. It is a consummation to be wished for.

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(Courtesy: countercurrents)
