

A Catholic Approach to Islamophobia

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Abstract

The urgency to change and transform our divisions and rancor with bridges of dialogue and understanding wells up from within many of us who call ourselves Christians. It has dramatically shaped how we understand our purpose and how we share this faith with the world around us as it is, resounded in the words of Pope Francis, “to leave this earth better than we found it.” This essay is an opportunity to reflect more seriously on the national phenomenon of Islamophobia and our response as a Roman Catholic Church, together with our ecumenical and interfaith partners. The experience of Islamophobia brings us to the tools of social analysis and theological reflection that illicit new responses, and the insights they offer as we all reach toward change and transformation.

Introduction

My first encounter with fellow citizens harassing and assaulting their neighbors was on my return from working fifteen years in the Philippines in 2007. I was not in the country during the attacks by extremists’ in New York City and the great anxieties in trying to understand what happened, and what it all means moving forward for our communities and as a nation. In a predictable fashion, it veered toward who to blame for extremist ferment, and local Muslim communities became the object of investigation, intimidation, and assaults of many different types. Our rhetoric for religious tolerance and acceptance has its conditions, and in all honesty, the United States has never sat easy with its cultural and religious diversity. Our long history of periodic nativism is a striking perception into just how challenging our dreams of “E Pluribus Unum” really can be.¹

Considering the oppressive socio-political atmosphere imposed upon a number of Muslim communities near us, we collaborated with the [Groundswell](#) national program to bring letters of support to these communities in our neighborhoods. In my little corner at that time, that meant the New Jersey and metro New York area.² Since then, in our congregational commitment³ to interfaith dialogue, the changing dynamics of *Islamophobia* has colored much of our activity, both in our outreach and support to Muslim communities, and in the intra-dialogue challenge to assist our own faith communities to understand the wider consequences of their interfaith responsibility.

¹ *Cycles of Nativism of US History*: National Immigration Forum 2001. University of Colorado, Boulder.
<https://www.colorado.edu/AmStudies/lewis/1025/cyclesnativism.pdf>

² <https://action.groundswell-mvmt.org/petitions/amid-anti-muslim-hate-sign-this-letter-of-support-to-the-muslim-community>

³ I am in vows about 37 years with the Xaverian Missionaries, an international religious order of the Roman Catholic Church. We are close to 120 years old, working in 21 countries worldwide.

The call to compassion and the promises of transformations requires both philosophical and theological grounding in our faith traditions and our passion to engage with those who suffer the most, the most vulnerable, and the least sought after. The *radical hospitality* it can lead us to as a nation, even though it seems to counter the current socio-political atmosphere, is a tenacious hope that always surfaces in the maelstroms of history. In attempting to understand this call, I begin with a brief, contemporary portrait of Muslims in America.

The Experience of Muslims in America

Islam is the third largest religion in the United States after Christianity and Judaism.⁴ Muslim Americans are a diverse and growing population, currently estimated at 3.45 million people of all ages, it comprises 0.9% of the population, compared with 70.6% who follow Christianity. American Muslims come from various backgrounds and, according to a 2009 Gallup poll, are one of the most racially diverse religious groups in the United States.⁵

Native-born American Muslims are mainly African Americans who make up about a quarter of the total Muslim population. Many of these have converted to Islam during the last seventy years. Conversion to Islam in large part is in urban areas⁶ and has also contributed to its growth over the years, as well as its influence on black culture and hip-hop music.

From the 1880's to 1914, several thousand Muslims immigrated to the United States from the former territories of the Ottoman Empire and the former Mughal Empire.⁷ The Muslim population of the U.S. increased dramatically in the 20th century, with much of the growth driven by a comparatively high birth rate and immigrant communities of mainly Arab and South Asian descent. About 72% of American Muslims are immigrants or "second generation".⁸ In 2005, more people from Muslim-majority countries became legal permanent United States residents—nearly 96,000—than there had been in any other year in the previous two decades. In 2009, more than 115,000 Muslims became legal residents of the United States.⁹

Since the tragedy of 9/11, the perceptions of Muslims by non-Muslims in the US changed dramatically. Many Americans believe Muslims face many significant challenges in making their way in American society. For example, among the public, roughly seven-in-ten now say there is “a lot” of discrimination against Muslims in the United States. This marks an all-time high since *Pew Research Center* began asking this question in 2009. Indeed, in the Center's April 2017 survey (when this question was most recently asked), the share of Americans who say Muslims face a lot

⁴ Religious Composition by Country, 2010 Pew Research (Washington DC, April 2015)
<http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>

⁵ Muslim Americans Exemplify Diversity, Potential". Gallup.com. Retrieved December 19, 2017.
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/116260/Muslim-Americans-Exemplify-Diversity-Potential.aspx>

⁶ Wakin, Daniel J. (January 2, 2002). "Ranks of Latinos Turning to Islam Are Increasing; Many in City Were Catholics Seeking Old Muslim Roots". The New York Times. Retrieved December 19, 2017.
<https://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C03E2DA1230F931A35752C0A9649C8B63>

⁷ Edward E. Curtis, *Muslims in America: A Short History* (2009) ch 1.

⁸ The Future of the Global Muslim Population". The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. January 27, 2011. Retrieved December 19, 2017. <http://pewforum.org/The-Future-of-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx>

⁹ The Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010–2030" The Pew Research Center. January 27, 2011.
<http://www.pewforum.org/future-of-the-global-muslim-population-regional-americas.aspx>

of discrimination (69%) exceeded the share who say there is a lot of discrimination against blacks (59%), gays and lesbians (58%), and Hispanics (56%), which has not been the case in years past.

Our solidarity with our Muslim neighbors cannot be underestimated in these somewhat uncertain times. As a Catholic, I want to ask some questions that deal with these hard questions that lead us to an attentive listening to the relational dynamics, and compassion that it calls for. It is in this backdrop that allows us, as a response of faith, to examine what Islamophobia is, why it exists, and what are the dynamics that continue to sustain this discrimination.¹⁰

Social Analysis: Features of Islamophobia

The word first appeared in its French form, *Islamophobie*, in a book by the painter *Etienne Dinet* in 1918. In the past few decades, it has become an important part of the social and political fabric, not only in the United States, but particularly throughout Europe across the more recent large waves of forced migrations from Syria and North Africa. There is a much-cited study by a British think tank, the *Runnymede Trust*, whose 1997 report defined Islamophobia as “dread or hatred of Islam” an as unfounded hostility towards Islam. It also includes deliberate exclusion of Muslims from mainstream social and political life.¹¹ The long definition in the 2017 Runnymede Report is:

“Islamophobia is any distinction, exclusion, or restriction towards, or preference against, Muslims (or those perceived to be Muslims) that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.” (p. 6)

There are commonalities and important differences in the rise and effects of Islamophobia in the United Kingdom verses the United States. Yet, the [2017 report](#) on Islamophobia for the UK certainly deserves consideration.

Bearing in mind the Runnymede report, Todd Green outlines some main features of Islamophobia which describe closed, static attitudes that are characteristic of the phenomenon of Islamophobia.

Islam as Monolithic and Unchanging

This prevailing view maintains that all Muslims are basically the same, holding equivalent views and ideologies. Based on this attitude which drives much of Islamophobia in the west, if Islam is indeed unchanging for most Muslims, and if media focuses on coverage of violence and terrorism carried out in the name of a small number of Muslims, then the conclusion that what one sees in the media is prevalent to all Muslims is easy to reach. Likewise, if women in a Muslim-majority country like Saudi Arabia face restrictions on their public life, many in the west may

¹⁰ Pew Research Center. How the US Public Views Muslims and Islam, July 27, 2017.

<http://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/how-the-u-s-general-public-views-muslims-and-islam/>

¹¹ Todd H. Green. *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015) 9-10.

conclude that all Muslim women face similar restrictions, when Saudi Arabia is an exception to the rule.

More concisely, if al-Qaeda launches attacks against Western targets, many have already concluded that this is due to an inherent quality of Islam. These assumptions do not occur in areas that involve other religious affiliations, such as *Anders Breivik*, a self-identified Norwegian Christian who went on a killing rampage in and near Oslo in July 2011. Christianity and Christians were not implicated in his crimes.¹²

Islam as Wholly Different from Other Religious Traditions

This prevailing attitude in the west portrays Islam as incapable to share common core values found in other religions, particularly in Judaism and Christianity, or with American culture. In this view, ironically, respect for religious diversity has no room in this view of Islam. One example of this is in Switzerland, but it's similarity to the United States is striking. Ulrich Schluer, a major figure around an anti-minaret campaign, stated in a comparison to a Christian steeple and a Muslim minaret: "I think Christianity is an attitude of freedom, of recognizing different meanings, of tolerance. Islam has nothing to do with tolerance."¹³

Islam as Inferior

Islam in this closed attitude is viewed is seen as inferior to the west. It is caricatured as barbaric, irrational, and sexist, in contrast to the civilized gender-equal west. "Islam," writes Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a former Muslim and prominent critic of Islam, "is incompatible with the principles of liberty that are at the heart of the Enlightenment legacy. Islam's subjugation of women is one of the things that makes it reprehensible."¹⁴

Islam as the Enemy

In this view, Islam is identified as hostile, violent, and aggressive. It is bent on conquest, and therefore, there is an evitable "clash of civilization" between Islam and the west. The profiling of Muslim passengers in US airport security lines can be interpreted as an assumption that all Muslims are prone to terrorism and thus must be targeted in security measures to protect others.¹⁵

These and other assumptions behind Islamophobia outlined in the original *Runnymede Report* I think provides a partial description of prevailing attitudes faced by Muslims throughout the west, and for our interests here, in the United States. The report does not dwell on the "open attitudes" necessary to overcome these challenges, but it does help us understand partially the decisions being made in the formation of political and social groups interested in fanning the flames of anti-Muslim sentiment. Some political economic, social organizations and networks that embody these and other attitudes will be explored.

¹² Ibid, 13.

¹³ Ulrich Schluer, interview by Julie Hunt, "Anti-Minaret Campaign Puts Case," October 6, 2009, http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/multimedia/video/Anti-minaret_campaigner_puts_case.html?cid=1012760

¹⁴ Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation of Women and Islam*. (New York: Free Press, 2008), 163.

¹⁵ Green, 15.

Islamophobia, Xenophobia, & Islamophilia as Western *Epistemic Racisms*

Before moving on, I wanted to touch upon briefly the larger picture of Islamophobia within what Mohammad H. Tamdgidi called, “western epistemic racisms.” He argues that Islamophobia and, the other side of the same coin, Islamophilia, far from being Western reactions to an independently developing Islamic tradition, are actually how Western imperial (more recently, oil-based) geopolitics have helped encourage the static, oppressive and ultraconservative interpretations of Islam – which have often been in fact the breeding grounds of extremists – at the expense of marginalizing and misrepresenting its dynamic interpretations, as in Sufism, for example.¹⁶ He contends that the Runnymede definition of Islamophobia represent *Islamophilic* tendencies that need rethinking and reconstruction.¹⁷

Within a long history of Europe’s colonization in the world and post-colonization that clung to western hegemonic thinking, epistemic racism leads to the *orientalization* of Islam. Islamophobia here is not exclusively a social phenomenon but also an epistemic question which allows the West to not have to listen to the critical thinking produced by Islamic thinkers on western global foreign policy. The thinking coming from non-Western locations is not considered worthy of attention. It is the lack of historical perspective and critical sociological imagination on the part of the lay Western population, fueled by short-term memory and amnesia perpetuated by the Western media, that mischaracterizes the problems of Islam, as if they separately and independently evolved alongside the West. Subsequently, many in the west do not even consider that they have had an influence in the rise of extremists.¹⁸

Tamdgidi states that “one does not have to acknowledge the danger of Islamophobia for fear of being accused of Islamophilia. Nor should one abandon being critical of Islamophilia in fear of being accused of Islamophobia. Islamophobia and Islamophilia are woven of similar threads in the sense that they both seek to *oversimplify* and essentialize Islam as a civilizational project for being entirely bad or good. What is to be confronted and questioned head on is the common premises displayed in both tendencies that Muslims are monolithically good or bad, right or wrong.”¹⁹ It is this presumption of uniformity and monolithic heterogeneity that is the attitudinal frame by which Islamophobia finds home.

National Populism

John B. Judis, in his research on the national populist movement in the United States and Europe, explores the transformation of politics in our times through the populist movement since the great recession of 2007. He says that there is no set of features that exclusively defines movements, parties, and people that are called populist—from France’s Marine Le Pen to the late

¹⁶ Mohammad H. Tamdgidi. *Beyond Islamophobia and Islamophilia as Western Epistemic Racisms: Revisiting Runnymede Trust’s Definition in a World-History Context*, in *Islamophobia Studies Journal*. Volume 1, Issue 1, Fall 2012, 56.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

congressman, Jack Kemp. There are numerous personalities and organizations involved, but the different people and parties called “populist” enjoy family resemblances of one to the other, but not a set of traits that can be found exclusively in all of them. Like any religion, they are not a monolith.²⁰ There is, however, a kind of populist politics that originated in the United States in the nineteenth century, and has recurred in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.²¹

For Judis, rightwing populists champion the people against an elite that they accuse of coddling a third group, which can consist, for instance, of immigrants, Islamists, or African American militants. Rightwing populism is triadic. It looks upward, but also down upon an out group.²² In this case, conservative and neo-conservatives who feel alienated and left out of the fruits of globalization, disdain Washington elites and intellectuals, and express their frustrations on immigrants, refugees, and religious minorities who they see are given preferences politically and economically. In this worldview, it is clear for them who is on the “right” side and who is not. And those who are deemed on the right side, know who the other side is exactly.

Kenneth Roth, Executive Director of *Human Rights Watch* says that in this cauldron of discontent, certain politicians are flourishing and even gaining power by portraying rights as protecting only the terrorist suspect or the asylum seeker at the expense of the safety, economic welfare, and cultural preferences of the presumed majority. They scapegoat refugees, immigrant communities, and minorities. Truth is a frequent casualty. Nativism, xenophobia, racism, and islamophobia are on the rise. In the United States and Europe, the perceived threat at the top of the list is migration, where concerns about cultural identity, economic opportunity, and terrorism intersect. Encouraged by populists, an expanding segment of the public sees rights as protecting only these “other” people, not themselves, and thus as dispensable. If the majority wants to limit the rights of refugees, migrants, or minorities, the populists suggest, it should be free to do so. That international treaties and institutions stand in the way only intensifies this aversion toward rights in a world where nativism is often prized over globalism.²³

Anti-Muslim Bias Incidents, July – September 2017

Where do these trends leave their mark in the lives of Muslims and others,²⁴ scattered in many communities nationwide? *The Council on American Islamic Relations* has been diligent in Islamophobic research and the collection of data which has proved invaluable in litigation for example. The compilation of the anti-Muslim bias incidents attempts to capture a portrait, but by no means can provide a complete picture of suffering that originates in employment, air travel, visa issues, harassment in the public and other incidents. But it does provide an indication.

²⁰ John B. Judis. *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*. (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2017). Kindle Locations 74-78.

²¹ Ibid, Kindle location 78-80.

²² Ibid, Kindle location 94-96.

²³ Kenneth Roth. *The Dangerous Rise of Populism: Global Attacks on Human Rights Values*. Human Rights Watch, 2017. 1-2. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/dangerous-rise-of-populism>

²⁴ In addition to Muslim women, men and children, those who share characteristics that have been racialized as “Muslim” – whether it be language, clothing or skin color – are also affected by Islamophobia. Thus, Sikhs, Christian Arabs, and Hindu Indians have been targets of anti-Muslim animus.

- Of the total reported cases in this third quarter period of 2017, CAIR reports that a total of 753 were reported to them. Of these 354 contained identifiable elements of anti-Muslim bias.
- Of the most frequent types of abuse, 61 were reported as hate crimes, 53 as harassment, 44 as employment difficulties. Customs and Border Protection accounted for 44 incidences, and 36 were inappropriately targeted by the FBI.
- The top five bias incident locations are 54 in Air/Bus/Train, 40 reported in their homes, 38 in commercial buildings, 20 in public locations and 19 in mosques and online.
- Top five incident triggers are: 98 incidents because of ethnic and national origin, 54 because of the Hijab or Headscarf, 44 because they were perceived to be Muslim, 19 places of worship and 18 other Muslim activities.
- Victims ethnicity showed 104 incidences with Middle Eastern people, 54 South Asian, 26 African American, and 22 African.
- The victim's educational level also has a bearing. 66 incidences occurred with college or post graduate individuals, 23 with some college, 10 with high school, and 12 with education less than a high school graduate.²⁵

Prominent Organizations and Individuals Involved in Islamophobia

The social analysis of Islamophobia is not complete without some understanding of the socio-political institutions that help sustain it, not overtly to express anti-Muslim bias, but masquerade this overall attempt to de-legitimize Muslims through other national values. *The Center for American Islamic Relations* developed a tool called the Counter-Islamophobia Project where they are continually developing American Islamophobe Databases. There are about 101 organizations that are considered by the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) as anti-Muslim hate organizations in the United States. They include:

- **Abstraction Fund:** The Abstraction Fund is a national, tax-exempt private foundation which provides financial support to groups promoting anti-Islam bias. During the 2010-2015 period, \$5.9 million, sixty-eight percent of the Abstraction Funds total grants, went to U.S. Islamophobia Network groups. Board President Nina Rosenwald's Gatestone Institute is a "hub for anti-Muslim ideologies."
- **ACT for America:** Brigitte Gabriel's ACT for America is an anti-Islam hate group, as defined by the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#). Brigitte Gabriel believes that, "America is at stage two Islamic Cancer." She also argues that "every practicing Muslim is a radical Muslim," a Muslim "cannot be a loyal citizen of the United States," and that Arabs "have no soul." ACT is linked to white supremacist and anti-government groups such as the Oath Keepers, Identity Evorpa and Vanguard America. ACT hosted these groups at sanctioned anti-Islam rallies in 2017.

²⁵ *Civil Rights Data Quarter Three Update: Anti-Muslim Bias Incidents, July – September 2017.* Council on American-Islamic Relations. Washington DC <http://islamophobia.org/articles/222-anti-muslim-bias-incidents-in-the-third-quarter-of-2017.html>

- **The American Center for Law and Justice:** The American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) is a conservative legal foundation established by Televangelist Pat Robertson and Jay Sekulow. The ACLJ is part of the outer core of the U.S. Islamophobia network. The ACLJ publication “Shari’ah Law: Radical Islam’s Threat to the U.S. Constitution” contains a chart which compares US law with Shariah law “showing the inherent conflict between U.S. and Islamic standards of justice, punishments, and resolution of disputes” (pg 18).

- **Donors Capital Fund:** The Donors Capital Fund is a Virginia-based organization which allows those who wish to gift funds anonymously to open a donor-advised fund by providing “a minimum initial gift of \$1,000,000.” According to the fund’s web site, its services are useful for “gifts funding sensitive or controversial issues.” The Fund has been linked to numerous donations to Islamophobic groups.

- **David Horowitz Freedom Center:** David Horowitz is the founder and CEO of the David Horowitz Freedom Center. The Freedom Center lists Jihad Watch among its main projects, employing Robert Spencer as director of that program. The Southern Poverty Law Center, a group that tracks hate movements in the United States, labels Horowitz “the godfather of the modern anti-Muslim movement.

- **National Christian Foundation:** The National Christian Foundation (NCF) is a tax-exempt private foundation established in 1982. It is a part of the outer core of the U.S. Islamophobia network. According to the NCF web site, its mission is “To enable followers of Christ to give wisely to advance His Kingdom.” In 2013, the group gave \$10,000 to the Center for Security Policy. In 2012, NCF awarded \$13,000 to the David Horowitz Freedom Center. Other inner core groups that received funds from NCF between 2011-2013 include the following: Florida Family Association, Middle East Forum and Middle East Media Research Institute.

There are others and they can be explored on CAIR’s [website](#), along with important individuals who possess a history of crafting, promoting or using anti-Muslim or anti-Islam sentiment.²⁶

Theological Reflection: Response of the Catholic Church to Islamophobia

As daunting as this picture seems, I turn now to a response in the name of faith, not unlike many others, through the lens of the Catholic Church. Political rhetoric, which has the effect of fanning anti-Muslim sentiment was roundly deplored by leaders of the U.S. Catholic Church following Trump’s statements on San Bernardino, an act of apparently home-grown terror planned and executed by a Muslim-American and his Pakistan-born wife. Without specifically noting Mr. Trump’s proposal, Louisville’s Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, president of the *U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops* in 2015, said in an Advent message, “We have reason to announce the need for peace and goodwill throughout the world with even stronger voices this year, in light of the recent

²⁶ Center of American Islamic Relation’s Counter Islamophobia Project at <http://www.islamophobia.org>

mass shooting in San Bernardino. Violence and hate in the world around us must be met with resolve and courage.”

Along with this, Bishop Madden, former head of the *Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs Committee* of the US Catholic Bishops Conference thinks US Catholics should step forward in a special way to respond to anti-Muslim prejudice and its collateral political effects: ““It’s part of our DNA,” Bishop Madden suggests, “and I think during this year of mercy that we should be especially sensitive to this.”²⁷

The response of the Catholic Church, as a worldwide Church institution, is rather complex because it involves international guidelines from the Holy See in the Vatican, the work of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the work of individual bishops in each of the distinctive dioceses, how everything filters down to parish priests and their communities, and the relationship of religious orders in the dioceses where they serve. Bearing in mind this, I will briefly outline the Catholic response on each of these levels and explain where it tends to break down.

Pope Francis & his Predecessors

Pope Francis’ overarching themes of creating a *culture of encounter* and portraying the mercy of God in our closeness with the poorest, the suffering, and the most vulnerable may be one way of characterizing his entire pontificate at this point in time.²⁸ His work builds on a long evolution of change in how the Catholic Church sees itself in a diverse and pluralistic world, beginning with Vatican II more than 50 years ago. There the important relationships between Islam, and Judaism, was re-imagined in the prophetic document, *Nostra Aetate*. Afterward, Pope Paul VI created the *Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions* in 1965, to begin dialogue and collaboration with Islam, and others in a significant way. Pope John Paul II, whose pontificate lasted more than 20 years, contributed a great deal to solidifying Catholic Muslim relations through the *Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue*. Pope Benedict XVI, despite the problems created in his lecture given at the University of Regensburg in Germany in September 2006 provoked outrage in the Muslim world,²⁹ was part of *A Common Word* as a networking of Muslim and Christian leaders and scholars around the commitment to dialogue. Finally, Pope Francis relates in his first encyclical, *Joy of the Gospel*:

Our relationship with the followers of Islam has taken on great importance, since they are now significantly present in many traditionally Christian countries, where they can freely worship and become fully a part of society. We must never forget that they “profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, who will judge humanity on the last day...” Faced with disconcerting episodes of violent fundamentalism, our respect for true followers of Islam should lead us to avoid hateful generalizations,

²⁷ Kevin Clarke. *Bishop Madden: US Catholics are uniquely equipped to push back against Islamophobia*. America Magazine, December 18, 2015. <https://www.americamagazine.org/content/dispatches/bishop-madden-us-catholics-uniquely-equipped-push-back-against-islamophobia>

²⁸ Pope Francis. *For a Culture of Encounter*. Morning Meditation in the Chapel of the Domus Sanctae Marthae, Tuesday, September 13, 2016.

²⁹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-21417767>

for authentic Islam and the proper reading of the Koran are opposed to every form of violence. (252-253)

United States Catholic Bishops Conference (USCCB)

From 1996 to 2015 the USCCB maintained regional dialogues with important Islamic organizations that represent a large number of Muslims from the Mid-Atlantic, Midwest and West Coast regions (i.e., the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), the Islamic Shura Council of Southern California and the Islamic Educational Center of Orange County). With the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* (NA), which solemnly committed the Church to engage in dialogue with members of non-Christian religions, especially with those whose historical connection with the Catholic Church has been formative, i.e., Jews and Muslims, a whole new chapter of the Church's mission of engagement and encounter began in earnest.

On January 1, 2017, *Cardinal Blase J. Cupich* of Chicago began to serve as the first Catholic co-chair of a new ***National Catholic-Muslim Dialogue***, sponsored by the Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). The rationale for such a project is understood in the following quote:

"As the national conversation around Islam grows increasingly fraught, coarse and driven by fear and often willful misinformation, the Catholic Church must help to model real dialogue and good will. "Our current dialogues have advanced the goals of greater understanding, mutual esteem and collaboration between Muslims and Catholics, and the members have established lasting ties of friendship and a deep sense of trust."³⁰

The Bridge Report from Georgetown University

There are important advances made in the way of dialogue from Catholic communities across the world that fully resonate with what it means to be Catholic in our pluralistic world. That said, attention must be made to a special report from *The Bridge Initiative* of Georgetown University. Based in Georgetown University's Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, *The Bridge Initiative* is a multi-year research project that connects the academic study of Islamophobia with the public square. On September 3, 2016 they released a special report entitled: **[Danger and Dialogue: American Catholic Public Opinion and Portrayals of Islam.](#)**³¹

Despite the advances that are being made in Catholic Muslim dialogue, there are number of factors that have proved challenging in this important commitment. This first question lies with the data of this report. The report finds that nearly half of Catholics can't name any similarities between Catholicism and Islam, or say explicitly that there are no commonalities. The report, which includes survey data on Catholics views of Muslims and interreligious dialogue, also reveals

³⁰ <http://www.usccb.org/news/2016/16-020.cfm>

³¹ Report of the Bridge Initiative, *Danger and Dialogue: American Catholic Public Opinion and Portrayals of Islam*. September 2016. <http://bridge.georgetown.edu/danger-dialogue-american-catholic-public-opinion-and-portrayals-of-islam/>

that three in ten Catholics admit to having favorable views, while only 14% say they have a favorable impression of Muslims. The poll also shows that respondents who consume content from Catholic media have more unfavorable views of Muslims than those who don't.

Many individuals connected to the Islamophobia industry have impacted American Catholic discussions about Islam. In some cases, Catholic publishers, media outlets, Catholic bookstores, and prominent figures have promoted their views. Books and articles by Robert Spencer, who leads *Jihad Watch* and the *American Freedom Defense Initiative* (groups identified by the Southern Poverty Law Center as anti-Muslim hate groups), have been distributed by some Catholic outlets and institutions. The hope is that the report gives Catholic leaders and educators insights into how ordinary Catholics view Islam and interfaith dialogue. The report also gives Catholic outlets, bookstores, and publishing companies a broad picture of how their content is representing Islam and potentially shaping Catholics' views.³²

The results of this report presented quite a quandary to many Catholic leaders. As a response to the report, the USCCB formed the *National Catholic-Muslim Dialogue* project. In response, Cardinal Cupich states:

The report "Danger & Dialogue: American Catholic Public Opinion and Portrayals of Islam," recently published by the Bridge Initiative, a research project on Islamophobia based in Georgetown University's Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim - Christian Understanding, raises serious questions about how Catholics view their Muslim brothers and sisters.

The findings demonstrate the urgent need to cultivate positive dialogue with members of other faith traditions, something that was strongly advocated by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council in their document Nostra Aetate.

Experience has shown that when people of different faith traditions build personal relationships and engage in dialogue to learn about one another; they develop the capacity to work together; and they come to appreciate the positive elements in one another's traditions.

Conversely, when there is no attempt to learn more about one another, we see an increase in the tendency to be negative about those who are different from ourselves.

This diminishes all of us, as we face increasing incidents of religious intolerance across the globe.

It is incumbent upon Catholics to recognize and raise up the positive voices from the Muslim world who clearly reject violence by practicing and teaching an Islam of peace, compassion and mercy. As Nostra Aetate teaches,

³² Ibid.

with them we should "make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace and freedom." ³³

An Ecumenism of Hate

Earlier this year the Catholic journal, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, sanctioned by the Vatican, published a provocative essay entitled: [*Evangelical Fundamentalism and Catholic Integralism: A Surprising Ecumenism*](#). The article speaks of a strange form of ecumenism between some Evangelical fundamentalists and Catholic Integralists³⁴ brought together by the same desire for religious influence in the political sphere. Some who profess themselves to be Catholic express themselves in ways that have little connect to Catholic tradition and are much closer to the Evangelical tradition. They are defined as *value voters* to attract an electoral mass. It says: “Both Evangelical and Catholic Integralists condemn traditional ecumenism and yet promote an ecumenism of conflict that unites them in the nostalgic dream of a theocratic type state.” It goes on:

“However, the most dangerous prospect for this strange ecumenism is attributable to its xenophobic and Islamophobic vision that wants walls and purifying deportations. The word “ecumenism” transforms into a paradox, into an “ecumenism of hate.” Intolerance is a celestial mark of purism. Reductionism is the exegetical methodology. Ultra-literalism is its hermeneutical key.”

Some Catholics have banded with a *national neo-christianity* of some Evangelicals who are the impetus and drive behind the present government administration’s agenda of anti-immigration, isolationism, and fervent minority cultural and religious bias. [*Church Militant*](#), an ultra-conservative Catholic think tank reflects this as it created a close analogy between Donald Trump and Emperor Constantine, and between Hillary Clinton and Diocletian. The American elections in this perspective were viewed as a “spiritual war.”³⁵ As one commentator stated: “Indeed this alliance entailed, of necessity, the reduction of religion to ethics, a kind of default stance for the church in the public square, that has been a source of concern for Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and, now, Pope Francis, even while it has been the operating premise of a host of conservative, neo-conservative and crazy-conservative Catholics for decades. That the rise of the alliance coincided with the rise of the "nones," those identifying with no religion, should surprise no one.”³⁶ Admittedly, these troublesome developments do not really

³³ <http://www.usccb.org/news/2016/16-124.cfm>

³⁴ David I. Kertzer. *Comrades and Christians: religion and political struggle in Communist Italy*. 1980, page 101-2; Krogt, Christopher van der. Catholic Fundamentalism or Catholic Integralism? Catholic Integralism (also called integrism) is an "anti-pluralist" trend in Catholicism; the Catholic Integralism born in 19th century Spain, France, and Italy was a movement that sought to assert a Catholic underpinning to all social and political action, and to minimize or eliminate any competing ideological actors, such as secular humanism and liberalism.

³⁵ Antonio Spardaro & Marcelo Figueroa. Evangelical Fundamentalism and Catholic Integralism: A Surprising Ecumenism, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*. July 2017. <http://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articolo/evangelical-fundamentalism-and-catholic-integralism-in-the-usa-a-surprising-ecumenism/> Also See “Donald ‘Constantine’ Trump? Could Heaven be intervening directly in the election?”, in *Church Militant* www.churchmilitant.com/video/episode/vortex-donald-constantine-trump).

³⁶ National Catholic Reporter, July 14, 2017. <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/civiltà-article-finally>

include much of “conservative Catholicism,” which has not fallen so far to the extreme, but they do have an abiding influence to some extent, played out in some conservative Catholic media sources.

Theological and Pastoral Dissonance between Global and Local Visions

Recently, the Vatican and the *World Council of Churches* concluded a three-day meeting exploring ways of combating xenophobia that is often provoked and exploited by populist policies. A recent UNHCR report spoke of responses to the global migration and refugee crisis as marked by “toxic” fear rooted in xenophobia and encouraged by populist politics. Among its goals was the planning of a world conference on these issues, to be held from May 21st to 24th, 2018.³⁷ As important as these conferences and engagements are, they tend to have little effect in the lives and matters of ordinary Catholics and others, unless they have some extraordinary interest in these things. It speaks of a *theological and pastoral dissonance* between the Holy See, the Conference of Bishops, how local Bishops build pastoral priorities in their respective dioceses, and how it effects ordinary people.

I worked on the *National Advisory Council* of the Bishop’s Conference from 2012-2016. The NAC’s role is to be an advisory body for the Bishops as they gather twice a year in plenary session in mapping out their plans which are in three-year cycles. The pastoral priorities in this planning have included issues of interfaith dialogue a number of times. Although our role is advisory only, and the bishops have the discretion of what to accept and what not to accept, our suggestions were often considered in their dealings as an episcopal conference. However, there is a great span of latitude for individual bishops and how they bring these priorities to their particular dioceses. It is understandable because there is enormous diversity among dioceses in rural and urban centers, wide cultural and religious differences, and so much more. Rural dioceses, for example, see far less religious diversity than urban centers. Given that the new ranks of priests tend to be more conservative, dialogue priorities are often lost, not because they do not believe in it necessarily, but other “in house” issues take priority. At the same time, many local clergy are poorly prepared to meet the religiously and culturally diverse world that their parishes live in.

Ultimately, the Catholic Church often works with the “trickledown” formula, from Bishop, to priest, to people, one that sometimes works just as well as trickledown economics. Even though many dioceses do give some priority to interfaith commitments, particularly those dioceses that have a high degree of religious diversity in urban centers. While this remains an important way the Church attempts to act as one through the teaching role of the Bishops, the Church also has a long history of extra-parochial movements and new initiatives that are global in their effect. Some include the Cursillo Movement, Opus Dei, Liberation and Communion, The Catechumenate Movement, and many more. These movements work in part, not from the top down, but among lay leaders as all of these movements are lay driven. It is from the lay people that there will be a

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http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2017/12/15/vatican_wcc_plan_world_conference_on_combating_xenophobia/1355044

strengthening of the Church's commitment to dialogue with our Muslim neighbors and to be a testimony against irrational fears of our neighbors.

Toward Transformation: Reconciliation as a Christian Paradigm

I attempted to give a brief glimpse of Muslims in the United States as a religious minority and how they are received in the many communities they find themselves. The prevalence of negative perceptions of non-Muslims brings us to examine more carefully the phenomenon of anti-Muslim bias, or Islamophobia. These are not mere personal prejudices of individuals, but they are slogans that stoke the creation of anti-Muslim national associations and foundations that fund Islamophobic activities nationwide, and, in the time of national populism, are given political privilege and voice in alt-right empowerment. The response of faith to these troubling endeavors is limited to my study of the Catholic Church in this regard, notwithstanding the many faith-filled witnesses of hope and solidarity with Islam across many religious and non-religious worldviews. The Catholic response is an important voice of solidarity, but it is also troubled by voices of integralism and distorted by a neo-national ecumenism.

Here political compassion exposes the flaws, both the self-understanding of those who harbor anti-Muslim prejudice and the worldview that shapes their misguided ethics of security over solidarity. It leads us to the suggestion of Peter Berger that we need to be critical of the values, beliefs and mores that shape our perception and interpretation of the suffering and anxiety of our Muslim neighbors and so many others.³⁸ Particularly, values of security, economic equality, and cultural identity that are used to masquerade cultural and religious prejudice impede solidarity and dialogue that honors our diversity as a nation. These values find their roots in what Maureen O'Connell calls the "historic American ideal of whiteness and in the attitudes, systems, and structures that privilege whiteness." This privilege conditions every aspect of someone's life, from self-understanding and cultural identity, to social interactions and investments. They reinforce racism and prejudice in our political, educational, and religious institutions.³⁹

Christian Contribution to Interfaith Commitment of Reconciliation

What we learn in solidarity with our Muslim neighbors who feel the weight of oppressive social judgement is a faith-filled response that re-imagines fractured relationships, seeing more than one way we all connect, and that reconciliation becomes the higher option. In fact, from a Catholic point of view, a new paradigm for Christian mission today is the *mission of reconciliation*. Robert Schreiter, Vatican II theologian at Catholic Theological Union, has written extensively on this important area more recently with the political upheavals of the 1990s followed by the end of the Cold War. The increase of armed conflicts and the need to reconstruct authoritarian structures created enormous divisions within countries, cultural and tribal divides. Reconciliation and a healing of memories marked the UN Commemoration of Indigenous Peoples, the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 and the fall of Apartheid in South Africa. These and many more events where Christian mission is ever present changed attitudes about that mission. A concern for relationships

³⁸ Maureen H. O'Connell. *Compassion: Loving our Neighbor in an Age of Globalization*. (New York: Orbis Press, 2009) Kindle Edition (Location 4822 of 6167).

³⁹ *Ibid*, Kindle Edition (Location 4856 of 6167).

that needed healing and restoration, careful attention to the needs of communities and larger societies for a new wholeness and integrity re-shaped this mission enormously.⁴⁰

Is it possible to apply the spirituality of reconciliation to the Christian mission and interfaith commitment in the United States, where the more cognizant of our diversity we are, the more divided we become? Can this spirituality shape our strategies of interconnectedness and solidarity across cultural and religious boundaries? An outreach of reconciliation is by nature an interfaith strategy. But in our contribution as disciples of Christ, we understand that the theology rests on the following principles: Reconciliation is the work of God, who makes it a gift to us. In turn we are called to cooperate in God's reconciling activity. Only God can bring about reconciliation. That is the message of Romans 5:1-11. While the ministry of reconciliation is entrusted to us, it remains dependent upon God's action, which implies the need for a profound communion with the Creator.⁴¹

Reconciliation, like the political compassion of Johannes B. Metz, is always directed toward an accompaniment with the victims who have been alienated and marginalized. Despite intransigent wrongdoers, God has a way of acting apart from them. Healing makes both the victim and wrongdoer a 'new creation' (cf. 2 Cor 5:17). Healing of Islamophobia does not return victims to status quo, but rather takes them to a new place, often quite unforeseen. Finally, it also has to do with coming to terms with suffering, and ways to cope with it and its residual effects. One way this is frequently done is by attaching our suffering to a larger, redemptive narrative. The Biblical and Qur'anic sources are significant in this, such as: *Verily, we created man from a drop of mingled sperm so that We may test him; and therefore, We made him hearing and seeing. We have indeed showed him the way, now he be grateful or ungrateful. (Qur'an 76:3)*⁴²

Interfaith Leadership

Interfaith dialogue and engagement is the methodology of a mission of reconciliation. It strives to bring Muslims and non-Muslims in interpersonal opportunities and to humanize the perceptions of the "other" in the bias and prejudice. It is about changing the narrative we have about each other as we come to the "other" as similar and different from me. Creating opportunities for Catholics and other non-Muslims to engage with their Muslim neighbors is crucial. But these must not be infrequent opportunities for those who have this interest. These interfaith interactions need to be a central part of the pastoral plans of parishes and the training for interfaith leadership is key. Catholic interfaith leadership is key.

Gathering people with divergent views requires a pluralism that is an energetic engagement toward a positive end. Where diversity is fact, pluralism is achievement.⁴³ For this diversity to achieve pluralism, interfaith leaders engage people in a manner that accommodates the deeply held

⁴⁰ Robert Schreier. *Reconciliation and Prophetic Dialogue*, in *Mission on the Road to Emmaus*, eds. Cathy Ross and Stephen B. Bevans. (New York: Orbis Books, 2015) 123-124.

⁴¹ Ibid, 126.

⁴² Ibid, 127-128

⁴³ Eboo Patel. *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer*. (Boston: Beacon Books, 2017), Kindle Edition (Location 1340 of 3124)

identity differences and the inevitable conflicts these differences imply. For Eboo Patel, founder of [Interfaith Youth Core](#), the framework for this pluralism lies in three areas:

- a) Respect for identity and concerns: to respect someone's concerns does not require you to agree with it or to accept it.
- b) Relationships between different communities: building relationships with diverse communities is essential. It takes the form of conversation, activity, or other friendly contacts. This engagement understands that full agreement is not possible, but in the interaction and humanization of our perceptions of each other, a genuine concern for the well being of the other is implied.
- c) Commitment to the common good: Interfaith leadership here awakens in others to the possibility of a common good and we all have a collective interest to uphold.⁴⁴

[Seeking Allies in Reconciliation](#)

Finally, the enormous energies in healing the wounds of Islamophobia in America today are wide and varied in national advocacy organizations, schools, civic centers, churches, mosques, temples and synagogues, and the growing field of scholarship around Islamophobia. The resources and possibilities these entities provide is crucial for interfaith leadership who wishes to bring their faith communities as a balm of healing in the divides around us. Some key partners include:

- [Council for American Islamic Relations](#)
- [Islamic Network Group](#)
- [Islamic Society of North America](#)
- [Shoulder to Shoulder](#)
- [The Bridge Initiative from Georgetown University](#)
- [Islamophobia Studies Journal](#)

There are many who are actively working for interfaith understanding in our populist environment today, and many more who are sympathetic. Seeing ourselves as a small part of a much larger movement is enormously important to consider. As a Catholic leader, I am very conscious of our distinct and crucial Christian contribution to building interfaith bridges in a culture where choices reign supreme, but no real ability to discern them, and silo thinking, feeling, and acting characterizes our fragmentation and alienation from one another. But, as the *Interfaith Youth Core's* slogan indicates, we are all certainly better together. The common good in a liberal democracy is shaped may many things: cultural, religious, and national values. It is our religious institutions and entities, along with our secular friends, that help us navigate our overwhelming multiplicity, rooted in our spiritual and worldviews for a common good.

⁴⁴ Ibid, Kindle Edition (Location 1360, 1378, 1422 of 3124)

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