



BOOMERANG: THE MOSQUE CONTROVERSY AND OTHER IMMIGRATION EXCESSES

Posted on August 30, 2010 by Cyrus Mehta

By Gary Endelman and Cyrus D. Mehta

There is growing Islamophobia engulfing the country combined with a rise in xenophobia, <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2011798,00.html>. The Islamophobia has been unleashed as a result of the unfortunate controversy over the Islamic center and mosque that will be built within two blocks of Ground Zero. Much has been written about this controversy, but there has been scant commentary about its impact on immigration and immigrants. It is time to step into this lacuna, which we do so in this blog post to link this Islamophobia to the xenophobia against immigrants. We are especially motivated to write after an immigrant Bangladeshi cabbie in New York last week was almost stabbed to death after the passenger, his assailant, realized he was a Muslim. More recently, arson has been suspected at a proposed construction site for a mosque and Islamic cultural center in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Strangely, anti-Islamic sentiment, which was largely absent after September 11, has suddenly flared in New York City after the controversy surrounding the proposed Islamic center, even though two strip clubs, liquor stores and criminal defense attorneys who represent suspected terrorists thrive within two blocks of the WTC site, <http://blogs.wsj.com/metropolis/2010/08/26/anti-muslim-bias-absent-after-911-surfaces-in-new-york/>. Ironically, two mosques have always existed in the vicinity for years and not a word was said about them.

An anti-Islamic sentiment seeped into immigration enforcement policy immediately after the September 11, 2001 attacks. Non-citizens from Muslim countries were rounded up, and when they could not charge them with links to terrorism, they were detained and deported in secret for immigration violations

unrelated to terrorism. In late 2002 and early 2003, the immigration agency, under Attorney General Ashcroft, and his lieutenant Kris Kobach (who has also helped draft Arizona's SB 1070), invented Special Registration to target only males from countries with mainly Muslim populations. They were required to report within a short time frame or face both immigration and criminal consequences. Those who faithfully reported, thinking they were helping law enforcement, but were found to have immigration violations, were quickly put in removal proceedings. Although more than 80,000 males reported for Special Registration, no one was caught for terrorism. But over 13,000 men were put in removal while their wives, sisters and daughters were not. The program was a spectacular flop, a waste of resources for the immigration agency and tax payer, and most problematic of all, it antagonized immigrant communities who trusted that the government was neutral even after the September 11 attacks. Even though overt immigration policies against Muslims were disbanded, one still could not help notice the occasional visa applicant from a Muslim country not being approved for a visa or being denied naturalization for a flimsy reason.

But all this pales in proportion to the recent hate and invective we have seen against Muslims after political leaders such as former Alaska Governor and Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, have made political capital of the mosque near Ground Zero controversy in the Summer of 2010. Gingrich has even equated Islam to Nazism, forgetting that those who caused the September 11 attacks hijacked Islam in the same way as the pastor of a Christian church in Florida has just hijacked Christianity by organizing a Koran burning day on September 11, 2010. Also note the nauseating description of Islam by Franklin Graham on national television calling it a devilish faith and his discussion of the "Muslim seed" of Obama.

Islamophobia is not growing in a vacuum and cannot be understood or appreciated without a reference to the pervasive economic anxiety gripping this nation and others in the developed world. It is the dramatic difference in economic conditions that accounts for the upsurge in Islamophobia now and its relative absence at the time of 9/11. This is not strange at all. Remember when Hitler came to power? The link between xenophobia and economic anxiety is a global rather than merely an American phenomenon, http://www.businessworld.in/bw/2010_07_31_Xenophobia_At_Work.html. A dark

tribalism has also engulfed Europe, with Switzerland constitutionally banning minarets and France outlawing the burqa, <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/02/18/europe-s-big-choice.html>. Migration itself is a global phenomenon and no country can frame immigration policies purely in a domestic context without reference to this wider movement of peoples across national boundaries. This is particularly the case throughout the developed economies of Europe, Japan and the United States where the population is aging, birth rates are dropping and only immigration can supply sufficient workers young enough to support complex and costly social systems. However, the very dependence on such migration in a time of economic anxiety also fuels a latent but increasingly emergent social dislocation, a sense that cultural realities are changing in a way that seems both menacing and hard to understand. This is what you see in the many tea party rallies when people bring signs saying they want to take their country back. Once again, this is an international problem. Even countries like the Netherlands that have long and proud traditions of humane immigration policies are changing in response.

The link between immigrants and radicalism goes back to the earliest days of the Republic. Federalists roundly condemned French immigrants as dangerous Jacobins and pressed President John Adams to sign the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798 as a way to turn back the rising tide of Jeffersonian democracy. The nativist appeal of the Know Nothing movement in the 1840's and 1850's was fueled, in large measure, by the economic anxiety that swept through the industrialized North, especially among working class voters most fearful about competition for low-wage jobs that the enormous wave of recently arrived Irish immigrants presented. Throughout our history, the tenor of our immigration laws reveals a great deal about the national mood. The adoption of the first immigration restrictions in 1924 arose out of the disillusionment with foreign entanglements in reaction to the First World War. After the Pearl Harbor attack on December 7, 1941, 120,000 people of Japanese American ancestry were kept in internment camps from 1942 to 1946 (and approved by Cal. AG Earl Warren of all people!), which illustrates how the scapegoating of immigrants can come back to eviscerate the rights of citizens as well, <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/special-reports/have-we-learned-lessons-history-world-war-ii-japanese-internment-todays-secret-detention>. The numerous ideological exclusionary grounds in the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act, unsuccessfully vetoed by President Truman, spoke of a frightened nation in the

grip of Cold War hysteria. The abolition of the national origins quota in 1965 should properly be considered one of the hallmark civil rights measures of the Great Society. Passed the same year as the Voting Rights Act and only a year after the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 immigration law was the product of a confident and prosperous nation ready to embrace the world. The American Competitiveness in the 21st Century Act, passed at the peak of the dot.com boom in 2000, displayed an economic vitality whose expansion seemed to know no limit. The Schumer assault on H/L fees against companies that hire more than half their work force on H-1B and L visas, mainly Indian IT companies, most recently speaks of a frightened people who feel that they can no longer compete and worry that their time has past.

In light of this disturbing trend, noted columnist Tom Friedman in a recent New York Times Op-Ed best explains why it is important from a US immigration policy perspective to support the building of the Islamic Center, which will essentially be a 13 story building taken up by an auditorium, pool, gymnasium, offices and an exhibition space:

That resistance to diversity, though, is not something we want to emulate, which is why I'm glad the mosque was approved on Tuesday. Countries that choke themselves off from exposure to different cultures, faiths and ideas will never invent the next Google or a cancer cure, let alone export a musical or body of literature that would bring enjoyment to children everywhere.

When we tell the world, "Yes, we are a country that will even tolerate a mosque near the site of 9/11," we send such a powerful message of inclusion and openness. It is shocking to other nations. But you never know who out there is hearing that message and saying: "What a remarkable country! I want to live in that melting pot, even if I have to build a boat from milk cartons to get there." As long as that happens, Silicon Valley will be Silicon Valley, Hollywood will be Hollywood, Broadway will be Broadway, and America, if we ever get our politics and schools fixed, will be O.K. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/04/opinion/04friedman.html>

We also admire Mayor Bloomberg for standing firm to his convictions and not retreating like other politicians have. How far will such a "no-mosque" zone stretch from the WTC site? Mosques that are being proposed in Staten Island, NY, and even as far in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, have met with virulent resistance. Even though President Obama admirably defended the right of Muslims to build the center, the next day he somewhat retreated by indicating

that he was not commenting about the wisdom of building the mosque near Ground Zero. The following extract from Bloomberg's no-compromise address at Gracie Mansion on August 24 is worth noting, <http://blogs.wsj.com/metropolis/2010/08/24/bloomberg-on-mosque-a-test-of-our-commitment-to-american-values/>:

Nonetheless, it was not so long ago that Jews and Catholics had to overcome stereotypes and build bridges to those who viewed them with suspicion and less than fully American. In 1960, many Americans feared that John F. Kennedy would impose papal law on America. But through his example, he taught us that piety to a minority religion is no obstacle to patriotism. It is a lesson that needs updating today, and it is our responsibility to accept the challenge.

The ill-conceived sacrifice of religious toleration will neither ensure our safety nor promote our security. As Benjamin Franklin reminded the Pennsylvania Assembly in February 1775, those "who would give up Essential Liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety." *Memoirs of the life and writings of Benjamin Franklin* (1818). Think of this when former House Speaker Newt Gingrich pollutes the national discourse by comparing those who advocate the Muslim cultural center with Nazis. Remember well when Senator Schumer slanders major Indian IT giants like Infosys or Wipro and compares them to criminals who steal cars and chop them up for parts, <http://cyrusmehta.blogspot.com/2010/08/world-according-to-senator-schumer-if.html>. Indeed, the very use of the term "job shop" suggests illegitimacy and even the concept of an "H-1B dependent" employer, not to mention the refusal of Congress to expand manifestly inadequate immigrant visa quotas, derives in no small measure from an unspoken but powerful bias against the "threat" of Indian migration. Popular frustration over federal inaction metastasizes into state-sanctioned bigotry like that directed against illegal immigrants through SB 1070 in Arizona.

<http://cyrusmehta.blogspot.com/2010/07/no-room-at-inn-sb-1070-and.html>.

Nativist excess has a price tag. Here is a great example. <http://www.azcentral.com/community/chandler/articles/2010/06/24/20100624chandler-arizona-immigration-california.html>. An Arizona construction company lost out on a major construction contract to expand LA international airport precisely because the LA City Council boycotted Arizona in the wake of their state immigration law. Moreover, the Immigration Policy Center reports

that over 35,000 businesses in Arizona are Latino-owned and had sales and receipts of \$44 billion in 2004, which employed over 39,363 people in 2002, the last year in which such data was available,
<http://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/newsroom/release/how-much-will-arizonas-immigration-bill-sb1070-cost>. "Gov. Brewer should keep in mind that, if significant numbers of immigrants and Latinos are actually persuaded to leave the state because of this new law, they will take their tax dollars, businesses, and purchasing power with them."

The demonstrable willingness of our political leadership to demagogue against immigration contributes to a willingness in the body politic at large to equate all immigrants with a malignant terrorism against which our heralded commitment to diversity must and will give way. It is not that far a walk from portraying immigrants as the source of our economic malaise to depicting all Muslims as silent accomplices in 9/11. Nor is this the first time in our history when such a sad state of affairs has come to pass. As Abraham Lincoln wrote to his great good friend Joshua Speed on August 24, 1855:

Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that "all men are created equal." We now practically read it, "all men are created equal except negroes." When the Know-nothings get control, it will read, "all men are created equal except negroes and foreigners and Catholics." When it comes to this, I shall prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty--to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.

Yet, all is not lost for we have emerged from other times of torment and returned to what Lincoln's First Inaugural so rightly and famously called "the better angels of our nature.". In time, the fever will break and America will regain its moral balance. The crusade against Islamophobia and all forms of nativist excess can only be won if America once again believes in itself. F. Scott Fitzgerald had it right:

France was a land, England was a people, but America, having about it still that quality of the idea, was harder to utter.... It was a willingness of the heart. The Crack-Up (1936).