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## Islamophobia & Democracy

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I'd like to tell you a story that happened to the poet Naomi Shihab Nye:

Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning my flight had been delayed four hours, I heard an announcement: "If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately." Well — **one pauses these days**. Gate A-4 was my own gate. I went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing. "Help," said the flight agent. "Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this."

I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke haltingly. "Shu-dow-a, shu-bid-uck, habibti? Stani schway, min fadlick, shu-bit-se-wee?" The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. **She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely**. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, "No, we're fine, you'll get there, just late, who is picking you up? Let's call him."

We called her son, I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a

while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought **just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her?** This all took up two hours.

She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies— little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts — from her bag and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single traveler declined one. **It was like a sacrament.** The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo— we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie.

Then the airline broke out free apple juice and two little girls from our flight ran around serving it and they were covered with powdered sugar too. And I noticed my new best friend— by now we were holding hands— had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. **Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.**

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate — once the crying of confusion stopped — seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too.

**This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.**

I begin with this simple story of human connection because **the normal everyday lives of most of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims too often gets lost** amongst headlines about the horrifying acts committed by a few.

An extensive study of media coverage of Islam showed that in the first decade of the twenty-first century, **stories about Islam related to Muslim militants and extremists rose from 2 percent to 25 percent. But the number of stories about ordinary Muslim lives remained the same at 0.1 percent.** As the religion professor Todd Green has showed in his important book [The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West](#) (Fortress Press,

2015), while we are increasingly confronted with the worst aspects of Islam, we continue to learn almost nothing about the lives of the vast majority of Muslims (239-240).

As Eboo Patel, an Muslim interfaith leader, said:

I gave a talk in Kansas City some years ago, and somebody stood up and said, “What the heck is wrong with you Muslims?” My response was **if the only thing I new about Kansas City was the first minute of the local news every night, I would say to you, “What the heck is wrong with you people in Kansas City?”** If the only thing I know is the murders and [other crimes] I hear about on the evening news, then I have a very skewed view of who you are. (316)

When thinking about the words Muslim or Islam, the first association for many Westerners is someone along the lines of Osama bin Laden. Most Americans don’t think of **Tawakkol Karman, who in 2011 became the first Arab woman, and the second Muslim woman, to win a Nobel Peace Prize** for her work as a Yemeni journalist and human rights activist during the Arab Spring — or **Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London and the first Muslim to become mayor of a major Western capital** (Green 319).

Sadly, the media covers extremists on all sides of religions and ideologies often to the exclusion of the huge numbers of moderates in the middle. I’ll limit myself to two examples, drawing on sociologist Christopher Bail’s excellent study Terrified: How Anti-Muslim Fringe Organizations Became Mainstream (Princeton University Press, 2014). On the *extreme Islamophobia* side, a few years ago it was disheartening to witness all the media attention given to Terry Jones, a fundamentalist pastor of a congregation with only a handful of members, when he decided to try and create “International Burn a Koran Day.” **Why do we amplify the voice of obscure hate mongers (1-3)?**

On the other side of *extreme Islamism*, most of you can likely recall the video of a small group of Palestinians celebrating in the streets after September 11, 2001 (54). Yes, that small group should be condemned, but the clip was frequently replayed as if it were representative of how all Muslims felt. Here’s the missing context: **“Of the twenty-seven press releases produced by U.S. Muslim organizations that condemned terrorism between 2001 and 2003, only two received any media influence.** One of those two was released the day of 9/11, but it

was overshadowed by the coverage of 9/11 generally (55).

In the years since 9/11, there has been regular criticism of moderate Muslims for failing to condemn radical Islam. Here's the problem: **many moderate Muslim have frequently condemned radical Islam, but often no one is paying attention (or remembering) when they do:**

*The New York Times* published a full-page ad one month after the attacks that contained statements from prominent Muslim leaders denouncing the attacks.... Three days after the attacks, more than forty prominent Muslim scholars released a statement [that], 'We condemn, in the strongest terms, the incidents, which are against all human and Islamic norms....' Signatories included the general guide of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt...and a founder of Hamas in Palestine.... Moreover, according to a Gallup poll, **93 percent of Muslims in Muslim-majority countries believed the attacks to be unjustified.** (Green 125)

Tragically, we in the U.S. have squandered much of that goodwill in our extended response to 9/11. Fifteen years later, we are still embroiled in wars in the Middle Eastern countries whose citizens are resentful after years-long occupations by foreign soldiers.

Now, don't get me wrong, **there are legitimate criticisms to be made of fundamentalist Islam**, just as there are legitimate criticisms to be made of the literalist, absolutist, and reactionary aspects of fundamentalist Christianity, fundamentalist Judaism, or fundamentalist Hinduism (xi). But **Islamophobia is not about legitimate criticism; it is about unfounded fear, anxiety, and hostility about Muslims** (3). I am interested in defusing Islamophobia because it is irrational, encourages anti-Muslim hate crimes, and increases misunderstandings that unnecessarily embolden potential future terrorists.

Islamophobia, like homophobia, plays on the word *phobia* because it is a fear that is *exaggerated* out of proportion to reality. I want our government to investigate terrorist threats, but not in an unreasonable, phobic way that sacrifices our freedom, civil liberties, and ability to recognize that **the "inherent worth and dignity of every person" includes Muslims.**

The case of Islamophobia that has gotten the most attention recently is the bans on "burkinis" in France. A burkini (from the words "burqa and bikini") is a full body swimsuit for

women that maintain modesty standards according to some interpretations of Islam. As someone who identifies as a feminist, I *both* think it is sexist when a culture requires women (and not men) to dress with extreme modesty *and* I think women should ultimately have the freedom to dress however they want. And here's the more important point: you can tell that French politicians are being irrational and phobic when they began empowering police to order women wearing burkinis on beaches to *take off more of their clothes* or be expelled. **The only way it can seem like a good idea to have police officers ordering women to take off *any* layer of clothing is from a warped perspective like Islamophobia, in which *fear* is overriding rationality.**

All that being said, I strongly support the liberal turn in religion for both Islam and other traditions: the turn toward individual *freedom* in religion — **taking religion “*seriously, but not literally*” and incorporating the insights of twenty-first century science into our practice of religion and spirituality.** And as I seek to reflect on the future of Islam, from a *more* rational, informed — and *less* Islamophobic — perspective, I look to books such as Islam and Democracy After the Arab Spring by John Esposito, *et al* (2015):

**by summer 2013 it had become evident that the Arab Spring uprisings had failed to produce democracy everywhere except where they began, in Tunisia.**

- **Egypt’s** first democratic government had been overthrown in a military coup that was ostensibly popularly supported.
- **Syria** had descended into a brutal and protracted civil war....
- And **Libya** has simply fragmented; it has two mutually hostile elected governments, one in Tripoli and one in Tobruk, while various militias control different sectors of the country.

These developments demonstrate...that **there is no inevitable transition from a popular uprising— youth bulge and new social media or not — to a sustainable social or political movement....** And, as the queue of ISIS videos indicates, not all tech-savvy youth are pro-democracy. (3)

It is also, however, not the case that Islam and democracy are incompatible, despite what misinformed Islamophobic pundits will sometimes claim. After all, **“The world's third-largest**

**democracy is Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country” (116).**

As I said two years ago about “The Future of Islam,” not only are the overwhelming majority of Muslims not terrorists or terrorist sympathizers, but also — contrary to the popular stereotypes — **most Muslims aren't Arab, only 20% are. And the countries with the largest Muslim populations (Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and Nigeria) are all democracies.** Along these lines, consider that, “**Saudi Arabia...has only the sixteenth largest Muslim population**, behind countries such as Uzbekistan, Ethiopia, Turkey, and Iran.... **Saudi Arabia's Muslim population is roughly equivalent to China's....**” The huge numbers of Muslims *outside* the Middle East show both the diversity of Islam in the present as well as hope for an increasingly pluralistic and progressive Islam in the future.

And here's an even more important twist. Many commentators and politicians claim from a biased, Islamophobia perspective that Islam and democracy are incompatible. But one only has to look around the world — from North and West Africa to Southeast Asia — to see many examples of Muslim-majority countries actively engaged in democracy (254). However, I invite you to consider that the question of whether Islam is compatible with democracy is itself a distraction from seeing that the opposite is the case: **Islamophobia and democracy are incompatible.** Islamophobia is a poison on our body politic being used in both Europe and the U.S. to **scapegoat Muslims and other immigrants.** Yes, terrorism is a threat to democracy. But the next time you hear a politician or pundit scapegoating Muslims (or other immigrants), notice the ways that their demagoguery is **fueling nativist, authoritarian politics, undermining civil liberties, and decreasing pluralism, diversity, and tolerance** — all of which are also serious threats to our freedom and democracy (Green 214-217).

In contrast, what might we do to help bring about a more hopeful future? On the systemic level, **supporting the transition to clean, renewable energy is not only vital to slowing climate change, but also necessary to stop petro-dictators, who fund radical Islam** using money from our oil-based cars and economy (Green 330). On the individual level, we can:

- (1) **Speak out whenever we witness Islamophobia,**
- (2) **Cultivate interpersonal and interfaith relationships** between Muslims and non-Muslims,

(3) **Educate the public about Islam**, particular its diversity and the common ground it shares with the West and other religious traditions. (312)

Perhaps the greatest hope that Islamophobia will be increasingly overcome is our **history of anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish, anti-same sex marriage, anti-interracial marriage, and other forms of intolerance, bigotry, and prejudice slowly giving way to acceptance, inclusion, and eventually celebration** (332-333).

Do you remember our opening story from the poet Naomi Shihab Nye? Do you remember what opened up as strangers — separated by language and culture and in the midst of a stressful situation — found simple ways to connect and communicate? In Nye's words:

I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate— once the crying of confusion stopped— seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other [people] too. **This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.**