

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# Taking a stand when others promote hate



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Last week I reflected on the prophetic warning from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks that civilizations are on the decline when they lose their social cohesion, fail to uphold justice and forget to care for the dignity of every citizen. Recent events seem to bear out that this prophecy may be a prediction that has already gone too far. Terrorist attacks in Spain shock us again, while in our own country a white supremacist has also used a car as his weapon of hate.

While the supposed protest in Charlottesville was about the removal of a Confederate statue, it soon became clear that this was a mere pretext to bring to the public eye an element of our society that has usually been hidden. The presence of Nazi symbols, KKK hoods, burning torches, hate signs and chants makes it clear that this is much more than an effort to preserve a bit of history. It was a blatant attempt to ignore the bigger history — the overwhelming story of our increasing diversity and commitment to respect all people, regardless of race or religion.

Don't miss the religious component of this attempt to normalize hate. The flags, Confederate and Nazi, are not just racial symbols but also weapons of hate against religions. Much of the recent hate talk and action are part of the increasing Islamophobia in our country. According to the South-

ern Poverty Law Center, which tracks various hate groups around the country, the number of anti-Muslim groups has tripled since 2015. The hate connection between religion and race has become increasingly obvious with recent violence against not just Muslims but against those who appear to be Muslim or just different. This has been demonstrated by the recent killings of Sikhs and Hindus from India because the killers thought they were from the Middle East.

## ANTI-SEMITISM BECOMES OPEN

The connection between racial hatred and anti-Semitism was also very obvious in the recent events where the neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and white nationalists were seen and heard chanting "Jews will not replace us" and "blood and soil" (the English translation of the Hitler slogan "blut und boden").

The marchers carried banners with swastikas, and one sign said "Jews are Satan's children." Hatred, wherever it begins, soon becomes anti-Semitic, and there is a long history as well as recent data to bear that out. According to the FBI Uniform Crime Report for 2015, more than 50 percent of all victims of religious hate crimes were targets of anti-Semitism.

The Department of Homeland Security, along with the FBI, issued a joint bulletin in May reporting that white supremacist groups had carried out more violent attacks than any other extremist group in the past 16 years. Furthermore, they said that they

"likely will continue to pose a threat of lethal violence over the next year."

There is a long history of political movements seeking to understand complex situations by finding a minority group to blame. Back in the 1960s, renowned historian Richard Hofstadter gave a lecture at Oxford University, which was then published by Harper's Magazine. Titled "The Paranoid Style of American Politics," it traced this role of blaming one group for all of society's problems.

He discussed the anti-Masonic movement and the alarmism about Mormons. When large numbers of immigrants arrived from Catholic countries, the anti-Catholic movement emerged, often leading to violence and deaths. Such an approach grows from the inability to deal with a complicated world. Blaming one group for all of the problems makes things simple.

How are we to respond in these threatening and disturbing times?

It is encouraging to note that more than 40,000 people showed up in Boston for a peaceful rally rejecting hate and xenophobia. It appears that while there is a movement to normalize hate, the counter forces for peace and acceptance become quickly mobilized. It is important that we take a stand on these vital issues, even if the highest levels in society are reluctant to provide the needed moral leadership. The response of most people sends a clear message that we as a society have not given up on what is morally right.

I'm reminded of the words from Elie Wiesel in accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986.

"We must always take sides," he said. "Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. ... Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must — at that moment — become the center of the universe."

## DON'T REPLY WITH HATE

Another response must be that we not fight hatred with more hate. One of the founders of the nonprofit organization "Life After Hate," dedicated to helping people leave neo-Nazi and other extremist groups, tells of his experience that planted the seed that eventually led to his leaving his white nationalist organization. As reported in the magazine *Sojourners*, he "was being served at McDonald's by an elderly African-American woman who saw the swastika tattooed on his hand. She looked at him, and said, 'Oh honey, you're so much better than that.'"

We must take a stand and not tolerate the normalization of hate. Can we also do this in a way that demonstrates a love that might just turn the hater into one who also will reject that hate? It will be the moral leadership that we are each called to take in these times of confusion and conflict.

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