

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Polarization leading to religious hatred



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Why are acts of hate increasing against the most admired religious group in America?

The Pew Research Center regularly reports on religion and public life, including recent studies tracking the attitudes Americans have about various religious groups. In the past few years, the center reports increasing “warm feelings” toward all religious groups, including Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Hindus, Mormons, Muslims and other religious identities. At the same time, the number of hateful actions — especially toward Jewish and Muslim groups — have increased.

I would like to think that the broad efforts of interfaith understanding have helped in the increasing warm feelings and acceptance of all religious positions, but why the increased acts of violence?

In the various studies, the Jewish community has consistently emerged as the most admired among the various religious groups. Three of the current justices on the Supreme Court are Jewish, more than 20% of Nobel Prize winners have been Jewish. And yet anti-Jewish activity has increased in the past two years, including the deadliest anti-Semitic attack in American history, at Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life Synagogue, while congregants were in worship.

Has our increasingly polarized society pushed us to extremes even in our attitudes about religious groups?

In our country’s history, the Jewish and the Catholic communities were often the targets of widespread persecution.

Anti-Catholicism was prevalent in the mid-19th century with increasing immigration from Ireland and Germany. In some places, it led to mob violence, church burnings and even death. It became prevalent again in the 1920s when Catholics became targets of the Ku Klux Klan.

Anti-Semitism has a long history in America as well as in Europe. It also reached a peak in the 1920s as Jews were a primary target of the white supremacists, including the

Ku Klux Klan.

While the attitude toward Jews has been much more positive in the general population, as evidenced by the Pew reports, neo-Nazi groups and other white supremacists still are purveyors of hateful violence.

In today’s debates over immigration, refugees and diversity, we need to be reminded of the vision included by the framers of our U.S. Constitution.

They had not yet achieved the full inclusion of all identities. Blacks and women did not have the vote. But when it came to religious inclusion, the framers came closer to getting it right.

Eboo Patel, author and founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, was a speaker at last year’s Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Grand Rapids. In his book, “Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity and the American Promise,” he writes about the founders,

“These (generally) wealthy, (loosely) Christian, (presumably) straight, (most assuredly) white male slaveholders managed to create a constitutional system that protected freedom of religion, barred the federal government from establishing a single church, prevented religious tests for those running for political office, and penned more than a few poetic lines about building a religiously diverse democracy.”

This vision has been tested in our history as waves of Catholic and Jewish immigrants came to our country to find a better life. For both communities, persecution and prejudice was prevalent, even to the point of violence. And yet today, these were the two communities that the Pew study found to have the highest levels of respect by the population at large.

Today our religious heritage is often described as Judeo-Christian, and in the 1950s Will Herberg’s book “Protestant, Catholic, Jew” that became the classic description of our national religious profile. Patel, however, points out that this didn’t happen by accident or by normal progress; it was a concerted effort especially by the National Conference of Christians and Jews.



African dance and drums were part of the 2019 Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration on Nov. 25 at the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Grand Rapids. In the past few years, the Pew Research Center reports increasing “warm feelings” toward all religious groups. At the same time, the number of hateful actions have increased. Broad efforts of interfaith understanding have helped — but why the increase in violence? Submitted by Douglas Kindschi

Patel notes that this might not be completely clear from an historical or theological perspective, but “as civil religion, however, Judeo-Christian is genius. It expands the national narrative in a manner that dignifies previously marginalized occupants, and it makes the process feel ... like the rediscovery of a great sacred truth.”

Patel expands his analysis to call for a response to the current Islamophobia, similar to the anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish prejudice that motivated the NCCJ. Can we expand our national narrative to include Islam and other religious groups with dignity and respect as consistent with what it means to be American?

He shares a story about how Muhammad Ali was vilified after he embraced the Muslim faith, which in turn led him to refuse to fight in the Vietnam War. He was not only severely criticized but convicted of a felony, lost his boxing license, and was sent to jail. The Supreme Court, however, took seriously his religious claim as a conscientious objector and reversed his conviction, leading to his continued boxing career.

At his funeral in 2016, Ali was considered a national hero, and then-Attorney General Eric Holder said, “His biggest win came not in the ring but in our courts in his fight for

his beliefs.”

Patel also relates his favorite story from that event told by comedian Billy Crystal. Once, when Crystal was visiting Ali in his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky, he was invited to join him for a workout at his country club, which Crystal declined. The reason: The country club did not allow Jews. Ali was incensed and vowed never to set foot in that club again.

Patel concludes, “Just as his Muslim faith moved him to stand his ground on the Vietnam War, so it moved him to stand up for a Jew in Louisville.”

America throughout its history has been challenged to do the right thing when confronted with prejudice, discrimination, hatred and even violence. It is particularly loathsome when it is religious discrimination and violence that erupts when our founders sought to establish religious freedom for all. Our current polarization has threatened that vision in ways that even our most admired religious communities face fear of violence because of hatred.

Let us seek our better angels, affirm our founders’ vision, and follow our religious precepts to love all of our neighbors.

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