

Examining Islamophobia

By Jeff Warner and Dick Platkin, LA Jews for Peace, November 13, 2012

An abbreviated version of this report is published in the Levantine Review

<http://www.levantinecenter.org/levantine-review/articles/examining-islamophobia>

The latest *Progressive Conversations in the Middle East* event was an “Interfaith Dialogue on Islamophobia” held on Sunday, November 11, 2012, at the Culver-Palms United Methodist Church in Culver City, California. Over 100 people heard Rabbi Haim Dov Beliak, Shakeel Syed, and Reverend James Lawson discuss the current wave of hatred directed against Muslims spreading across American society. Shakeel Syed was a last minute replacement for Imam Muhammad Faqih, who fell ill and could not attend. Rabbi Beliak appeared by video link.

Rabbi Beliak has been involved in civil rights and first amendment issues for many years in the Los Angeles area. His presentation put Islamophobia in a larger American context. He said Islamophobia is a “pseudo-scientific word” for hate, in this case directed against Muslims and emanating mostly from the Christian and Jewish right. He pointed out that there is a long history of anti-Muslim hatred in the United States, but it has increased since the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.

Beliak did not attempt to find a root cause for Islamophobia. Clearly revenge for the events of 9/11 is just an excuse used by those who are fomenting this bigotry for deeper reasons. More likely Islamophobia is subtly promoted by the media and politicians as a cover story for maintaining American hegemony in the Middle East in a futile attempt to control two-thirds of the world’s petroleum reserves.

Beliak pointed out the similarity between Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, but he did not develop the analogy. He did point out that Sharia, Islamic law, is similar to Halakha, Jewish law. He highlighted as false the belief by some Americans that Muslims are attempting to replace the American constitution with Sharia law, in spite of legislation passed by the Oklahoma State legislature.

An LA Jews for Peace policy statement handed out with the event program emphasized the similarity between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Titled, “Islamophobia, the New Anti-Semitism” (<http://lajewsforpeace.org/Essays/IslamophobiaStatement.pdf>), it equated the two hatreds and presented several similarities. The statement ends by asserting the “Anti-Semitism was wrong then; Islamophobia is wrong now.” This is an important perspective in attempting to understand Islamophobia.

Shakeel Syed is head of the Islamic Shura Council of Southern California. He only had a few minutes to prepare his presentation. The thrust of his remarks was to place Islamophobia in the context of civil rights in the United States. He said he is dedicated to fighting Islamophobia because it undermines what should be American values.

Syed said that much of the fear prompting Americans to believe Islamophobic ideas is due to ignorance. They simply do not know Muslims, and perhaps never even met one. They even confuse Sikhs with Muslims because of their turbans. Syed called for Americans to get to know a Muslim. But he did not describe a program to accomplish that goal.

We wish Syed had described Islamic beliefs and Sharia to defuse some of the fear of Muslims and Islam that makes Americans susceptible to Islamophobia. We note that the Islamic Shura Council that Syed heads has an annual "Open Mosque Day" every year in Los Angeles. This is an attempt to get Muslims and Islam better known by non-Muslims, but the program is not well attended. More has to be done in this area.

Syed also said it is also important that programs to quell Islamophobia clearly identify the perpetrators, their funding, and their agendas since it is not enough to only counteract its effects. It is equally important to shed a bright light on its perpetrators, including those who are funding them for their own agendas, such as Pamela Geller, an extremely right-wing JDL-type Zionist.

As the Muslim on the program, we wish that Syed had personalized the Islamophobia experience by giving examples of how Islamophobia affects Muslims on a daily basis. We have heard other Muslim American leaders point out that they get "special," humiliating treatment every time that board an airplane.

This gap in Syed presentation was partly filled in during the Q & A when an Iranian woman suggested that every woman in the audience spend a day wearing a headscarf to experience the feel of bigotry and discrimination.

What Syed did was give an example of "institutional Islamophobia" by describing the ongoing fight for the Muslim community to build Islamic Centers and Mosques in and around Los Angeles. He related the experience in Temecula, California when a local Christian clergyman said he was not opposed to building a Mosque, but "not near his church."

But that was only half the story because the Temecula situation was a win for the anti-Islamophobia forces. The mosque was broadly supported by the local community and area Jewish and Christian clergy. Eventually the Temecula City Council approved the Mosque by a unanimous vote.

Reverend Lawson is a long time civil rights leader who walked with Martin Luther King and was the American civil rights guru of non-violence. Lawson's talk was about the prevalence of racism and hatred in American society in general, but he only touched on Islamophobia tangentially. Nevertheless, his remarks did place Islamophobia in the context of ongoing American class struggles, so that people could see that this phenomena doesn't exist in a vacuum.

What little Lawson said about Islamophobia was that it is caused by political-economic factors and not by religion. While true, this is a gross oversimplification. He was inadequately challenged on this point by the first questioner who focused on the Holocaust. The challenge would have been better if it asked about 1,000 years of anti-Semitism in Christian Europe, prompted to a great extent by the Christian teaching that Jews killed Jesus Christ. Or by

remembering the first Crusade when the Crusaders could not wait to get to Palestine to kill infidels, so they massacred thousands of Jews in the Rheine Valley because they also were considered infidels.

Lawson does have a point that the economic-political environment is a cause of Islamophobia. But he seemed to ignore the role religion plays in focusing hatred to a particular group and down played the process by which bigotry is systematically developed and injected into the world of ideas in the United States and other countries. As Rabbi Beliak said, Islamophobia in the United States is led by the Christian and Jewish right, but this should be the beginning, not the end, of that discussion.

Follow-On Islamophobia Discussions were promised by the event organizers, and we look forward to them. There is a lot more to say about Islamophobia than what was covered at this event. Here are some suggestions:

- It will be interesting to examine why anti-Semitism was much worse in Christian Europe in the past 1,000 years than it was in Islamic West Asia and North Africa? Jews in the Christian world experienced extreme hardships and about 10 million deaths when you factor in the Crusades, Inquisition, pogroms, and the Holocaust over that 1,000-year period. During the same 1,000 years it's been estimated that only about 5,000 Jews lost their lives in the Muslim world.
- It will be quite enlightening to examine the role of art and media plays in sustaining Islamophobia. How are Muslim's portrayed in film and TV, and what biases exist in TV, newspaper, and magazine coverage of news events involving Muslims?
- There should be a full examination of the Islamophobia industry, as outlined in the Center for American Progress report "Fear, Inc., The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America" (<http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/religion/report/2011/08/26/10165/fear-inc/>). This 2010 report documents funding and major players in Islamophobia, the most outrageous of which is probably Pamela Geller and the posters her group is erecting in public transportation facilities across America that equate Muslims with savages.
- Equally important, and related to the above, is to examine the role of White Supremacist in their use of 9-11 to redirect hatred of Muslims to hatred of Jews by alleging that the Israeli government was responsible for the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. One of these bigots attended the event, and his question was not adequately or properly answered. For example, he was not told that Islamophobia preceded 9-11 and it is hegemony, not revenge, that is the underlying agenda. And, he also needed to be told, that that overall theme of the event is to oppose hatred and scapegoating, not substitute anti-Semitism for Islamophobia.

Discussing these issues may help us understand and fight Islamophobia here in the United States in the 21st century.