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Anti-Muslim Bias as a Social Justice Issue

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Anti-Muslim bias manifests in antagonism or ill will towards Muslims and often builds upon white-supremacist, xenophobic, and racist tropes. Anti-Muslim bias can sometimes manifest as Islamophobia, which is antagonism towards the religion of Islam or towards regions of the world historically associated with Islam.

Anti-Muslim bias can be experienced by religiously practicing Muslims as well as those of an ethnic or racial background *associated* with Muslims. Hence, anti-Muslim bias does not just affect Muslims, it can impact North Africans and Arabs (including Christians) and brown people who present with perceived similar characteristics as Muslims (e.g., Sikhs). White Muslims of non-Arab backgrounds, Black, Latinx, and Muslims of East Asian backgrounds experience the effects of anti-Muslim bias as well.

In the North American and European context, there are several motivating factors for anti-Muslim bias. Some of them are explicitly geopolitical, others are rooted in the historic encounter and—in some respects, direct competition—between Islamic and Christian faith-

based civilizations. Still others are seemingly rooted in an existential discomfort with human difference. In other words, anti-Muslim bias serves simultaneously as an expedient mobilization technique, as a theological polemic, and as a means to sow animosity and mistrust for personal gain.

These motivating factors can overlap and be mutually reinforcing. For instance, many American and European politicians have ignited a political base by that is largely white and Christian by appealing to stereotypes of Muslims as invaders who are frenzied, culturally unsophisticated, nonsensical actors with a propensity toward violence. The white, Christian-identified politicians can then depict themselves as savior-protectors who are poised to guard territory, religion, and national identity. In this way, anti-Muslim bias becomes a lever of ethnic nationalism.

Such strains of anti-Muslim bias have foreign policy implications beyond their domestic utility; it is much easier to wage a war in a territory if constituents supporting the war effort believe that their enemy is culturally and religiously inferior and a legitimate existential threat. Likewise, it becomes easier to morally justify news of mass civilian casualties abroad if those bearing the brunt of the suffering are seen as not like “us” in fundamental ways. Their suffering then becomes, in this paradigm, an unfortunate but ultimately unavoidable result of “our” need to protect “our values” from being attacked.

Thus, the gross prejudice and bigotry undergirding much anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic sentiment is readily disguised as noble patriotism. Political discourses that are hostile toward Islam and Muslims—and especially those promulgated and propagated at a national level—readily feed into everyday prejudices and implicit biases against the individuals of minority race, ethnicity, and/or religion; after all, these minorities only tenuously belong to the conceived “we” of the dominant national identity. False narratives, gross generalizations, and academically ungrounded analyses all serve to support notions that Muslims, or those appearing Muslim, are to be regarded circumspectly.

Often anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic sentiments are promoted with coordinated talking points through prominent media outlets and personalities who stand to benefit personally from stoking the flames of bigotry. Rather than appearing as hate-mongers, trafficking in destructive stereotypes, these media personalities can cast themselves as patriots who stand for freedom and democracy over and against the repression and theocracy supposedly valued by Muslims (as a result of their purported collective disposition and religiously mandated convictions).

Anti-Muslim bias is a social justice issue because it tears at the civic fabric in a way that exacerbates ideological divides and makes minorities particularly vulnerable to the violence of vigilantes and the mentally unstable. It does not just impact civic life. Like other bigotries, it clouds collective moral judgement. Education about anti-Muslim bias and Islamophobia should include discussions of its effects on targeted individuals and groups, clarification of the stereotypes and false information that propel it, and exploration of the media and financial

networks that enable it. Anti-Muslim bias can be taught in the context of how other large-scale religious and ethnic prejudices have led to blatant injustices, crimes, and other morally questionable actions. The topic of compound social marginalizations, the ways in which gendered stereotypes operate, and the niche roles of so-called native informants are all relevant topics to explore in depth.

There are many provocative works on these subjects. For instance, for understanding anti-Muslim biases in the United States, I recommend Stephen Sheehi's *Islamophobia: The Ideological Campaign Against Muslims* (2011) which covers the nuances of anti-Muslim sentiment with extensive coverage of the approaches of the Bush and early Obama administrations. I also recommend Peter Morey's *Islamophobia and the Novel* (2018) for an exploration of how Islamophobic tropes are imbedded in English literature. Sara R. Farris contributes an excellent analysis of how gendered and racially biased assumptions impact European social policies in her book, *In the Name of Women's Rights* (2017).

The sheer magnitude of the systemic issues and their complexity can be daunting and even depressing, but many creative and entrepreneurial efforts have taken root to try to ameliorate biases and disparities. In this regard, one of my favorites for classroom use is *The Secret Life of Muslims*, a short-form, web-based series of first-person documentaries that was Emmy-nominated and a Peabody finalist. I have mainly referenced the American and European context here, but Islamophobia and anti-Muslim bias, of course, have a global reach; at present, India, Myanmar, and China are areas of elevated concern.

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