

Hate Spin

The Manufacture of Religious Offense and Its Threat to Democracy

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6 United States: Exceptional Freedoms, Fabricated Fears

Today, Alabama's cities are places of pilgrimage where Americans contemplate some of the country's most notorious incidents of racism as well as some of its most inspiring civil rights victories. For decades, African Americans were lynched with impunity in Alabama and the rest of the South. In 1963, a bomb placed by the Ku Klux Klan ripped through a Birmingham church, killing four African American girls. The same year, the governor placed himself at the doors of the state university as television cameras rolled, to tell the world that racial desegregation was not welcome. But Alabama also witnessed more positive moments. It was where Rosa Parks's act of defiance on board a public bus in 1955 spurred a boycott and a regional movement; and where a young preacher, Martin Luther King Jr., fashioned a civil disobedience campaign that eventually generated the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Fifty years later, these memories made Alabama a focus for national nostalgia. Readers of *USA Today* named the state capital, Montgomery, America's "Best Historic City" in 2014.¹ In early 2015, Americans from all over the country arrived to relive the drama of the Selma to Montgomery voting rights march. For those not inclined to make the trek, Hollywood served up its own recreation, *Selma*, complete with an Oscar-winning gospel-rap anthem, "Glory." Not to be outdone, Barack Obama stood before the Edmund Pettus Bridge and delivered one of the most stirring speeches of his presidency. He recalled how marchers had confronted police there in a "contest to determine the meaning of America," and that, thanks to them, "the idea of a just America and a fair America, an inclusive America, and a generous America—that idea ultimately triumphed."²

It has been said that those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it; but recent events in Alabama suggest that the memory of past injustices cannot totally forestall the rehashing of prejudice and hate. Thus, in 2014, the state's legislators approved a referendum for voters to decide on

an amendment to the state's constitution, called "American and Alabama Laws for Alabama Courts." The measure's innocuous title masked a years-long exercise in minority bashing through legislation. The amendment's sponsors told voters that the law was needed to defend the state from an existential threat—Muslims, whose religion compelled them to impose the tyranny of sharia law wherever they went. Placed on the ballot during the midterm elections that November, the proposition passed easily, with more than 72 percent voting in its favor.³

Islamophobia has taken root within a sizeable section of American society. In mid-2014, around 40 percent of Americans reported feeling "cold" toward Islam (compared with 17 percent feeling that way toward Catholics and 10 percent toward Jews).⁴ Roughly the same proportion favor the profiling of Arab and Muslim Americans by law enforcement agencies.⁵ The irony that these views were circulating even as the nation celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of a movement for minority rights was not lost on one Muslim Alabaman I spoke with. Had ethnic prejudice simply found a new target, I asked him? "Americans will always need a nigger," he smiled ruefully.

Some level of antipathy among Americans toward Muslims is to be expected, of course, after the trauma of the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. Long before that, there was the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979–81, perpetrated by an Islamic theocracy whose leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, came to power describing the United States as the Great Satan. More recently, the atrocities of the so-called Islamic State (IS) have strained cosmopolitan tolerance to breaking point. Even more than the beheading of captives in Syria and Iraq, IS attacks on "soft targets" in the United States and Europe have induced a siege mentality, as reflected in the support for presidential hopeful Donald Trump's declaration that the United States should close its borders to all Muslims until the authorities could figure out what to do about Islamic radicals. A significant minority of Americans surveyed—and a majority of Republicans—favored his idea, despite its disregard for the US Constitution as well as common sense.⁶

The ground sentiments that Trump cynically exploited cannot be explained by jihadist terrorism alone. Six months after 9/11, the proportion of Americans who said that Islam is more likely than other faiths to encourage violence was 25 percent. A decade later, in 2011, it was 35 percent. The percentage with favorable views of Islam fell from 41 percent in 2005 to 30 percent in 2010.⁷ Oddly enough, therefore, anti-Muslim feeling increased during the lull period between 9/11 and the emergence of IS.

Hatewatch groups attribute this rise to a misinformation campaign engineered by a small but identifiable group of agitators on the political

right. This group forms “a well-funded, well-organized fringe movement” pushing “discriminatory policies against a segment of American society by intentionally spreading lies while taking advantage of moments of public anxiety and fear,” says a report by the Center for American Progress, a progressive policy institute.⁸ While these hate spin agents are beneficiaries of preexisting stereotypes, the accentuation and politicization of these attitudes—turning ignorance into fear and fear into policy proposals—depends on their active machinations. The manufacture of offense and offendedness by far-right pundits and think tanks is so systematic and self-interested that analysts of intolerance have dubbed them the “Islamophobia industry.”⁹ The term “Islamophobia” refers to an unfounded fear of Muslims that operates at the individual, psychological level, but that can also be institutionalized as a set of policies and practices.¹⁰

The 2016 presidential campaign showcased the Islamophobia industry’s success in gaining access to the mainstream of national politics. One example is misinformation expert Frank Gaffney and his Center for Security Policy, a prolific source of anti-Muslim propaganda. Among other claims, the extremist think tank and its founder have called Barack Obama the first Muslim president of the United States and stated that the Muslim Brotherhood has penetrated the American public school system. When Trump called for a ban on Muslim arrivals, he cited a Center for Security Policy poll, debunked by experts, showing an alarming degree of support for violence among Muslims.¹¹ Trump’s rival for the Republican ticket, Ted Cruz, had deeper ties to the Islamophobia network and named Frank Gaffney to his national security team.¹²

Of course, those parlaying paranoia into political advantage would argue that a fear of Muslims is entirely rational. For an expert perspective on objective threats to peaceful coexistence in the United States, I turned to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), an independent watchdog organization. Located just across the road from the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama, the nonprofit was founded in 1971 to counter hate and bigotry. Initially, the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan kept SPLC’s hands full—as late as 1983, Klansmen torched its offices—but in the late 1990s the center widened its investigative work to cover all hate groups. In February 2015, I found Mark Potok putting the finishing touches to the latest issue of SPLC’s *Intelligence Report*, containing the results of its annual survey of hate groups in the country. As a newspaper journalist in the early 1990s, Potok had covered the deadly confrontation between authorities and the Branch Davidian Christian sect in Waco, Texas. He also covered the revenge attack in Oklahoma City two years later by Timothy McVeigh, which killed 168

people in the worst act of domestic terrorism prior to 9/11. Potok joined SPLC in 1997 and has been monitoring hate groups full time since then.

Hate against Muslims has shown a significant rise, he tells me. "I think we are entering a very bad moment."¹³ But, that begs the chicken-and-egg question. Which came first: anti-Muslim hate propagated through Christian talk radio, Fox News, and dubious think tanks; or, extreme anti-American sentiment that Muslims radicals are inciting through social media and mosques? Put another way, which is the bigger threat to American democracy today, Islamophobia or Islamic extremism? Potok answers without hesitation, "I think Islamophobia is a bigger danger in this country." This is not France, he points out. Muslim Americans form a small and relatively well-integrated minority, and they are no more likely than other groups to engage in hate crimes or political violence.

For many people outside the United States, the country's democratic journey is an inspiration. Parallel to that road, though, has been a virtually uninterrupted stream of intolerance, directed at one minority community after another. Famously, the economic rise of the United States depended on ideologies of hate that dehumanized Africans and Native Americans, the better to rob them of their labor and land. Chinese, Japanese, Jews, Irish, Catholics, and gays have taken turns at being targets of gross prejudice, discrimination, and violence. Today, though, the merchants of Islamophobia are the preeminent practitioners of hate spin in the United States. They have manufactured indignation at the building of Muslim places of worship, the adoption of school textbooks containing respectful explanations of the religion, and the alleged encroachment of Muslim law. In this chapter I examine their motivations and methods. First, though, I look at how religion, democracy, and free speech relate to one another in the American political system.

The First Amendment and the Culture Wars

There are similarities between the United States, India, and Indonesia. In each, the giving and taking of religious offense has emerged as a potent political weapon. The policy battlegrounds are also similar: the writing of history textbooks and the siting of places of worship can be as controversial in the United States as they are in India or Indonesia. As with many other areas of social and political life, however, the United States also represents a giant exception. Its unique constitutional take on religious offense means that American hate spin exponents navigate a legal terrain very different from their counterparts elsewhere. No other democracy is as

convinced—both in its law and its political culture—that hate speech can be largely left to the marketplace of ideas to resolve. In American constitutional doctrine, the state has no business using its power to take sides in peaceful public debates between people who display civic virtues and those who are outright bigots.

Outsiders often perceive the US position as a product of an idolization of free speech and individual rights, and a callous disregard for sacred community values. This caricature misunderstands American secularism, which should not be confused with, say, French-style *laïcité* or what some call have called secular fundamentalism. It is worth recalling that the First Amendment to the US Constitution does not protect freedom of expression alone. Its opening clauses—“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”—embody two fundamental principles regarding religion. The portion known as the Establishment Clause prevents the state from adopting an official religion or singling out any one religion or sect for special treatment. The Free Exercise Clause bans the government from interfering with people’s right to practice or express their religious beliefs. The country’s religious minorities are therefore in the globally unique position of having to endure vicious insult with practically no protection from the state, while simultaneously being guaranteed that they will be safe from official oppression and discrimination.

These founding principles have not ended debates about the separation between church and state. Policies on polygamy, school prayer, abortion and same-sex marriage have required the US Supreme Court to make controversial judgments balancing different rights and interests. The question of where to draw these lines continues to generate some of the country’s most polarizing political debates. In Alabama, for example, the state’s chief justice Roy Moore was sacked over his refusal to comply with a federal order, based on the Establishment Clause, that he remove a monument to the Ten Commandments he had commissioned for the judicial building. Eric Johnston, the lawyer who drafted the state’s Amendment One to protect Alabamans from sharia, has spent decades resisting what he sees as the US Supreme Court’s antireligious interventions. In the view of Christian conservatives like Johnston, the Supreme Court has privileged the Establishment Clause over the Free Exercise Clause, thus allowing a secular worldview to trample on Americans’ religious freedoms.¹⁴

These contemporary tensions are deeply rooted in American history. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Europeans sailed to the New World in search of religious refuge as much as economic opportunity. When the founding fathers of the United States decided to keep their newly

constituted government at an arm's length from religious authority, it was not because of any conversion to some post-religious multicultural ideal or a vision of interfaith peace and understanding. Instead, a double distrust—both of one another's sects and of government—convinced them never to allow the state to be captured by any religious group. The desire to check tyranny, as much as any positive appreciation of diversity, undergirded the First Amendment's religion clauses. This background helps explain the republic's sometimes-paradoxical relationship with religion. The country has been capable of great popular intolerance toward religious minorities, but also affords them a degree of legal protection rarely matched elsewhere.

Like India and Indonesia, American democracy has careened between two compelling visions of nationhood. Primers on the United States tend to stress just one of them, the constitutional order that some have called "civil religion." While readily declaring that the United States is "under God," this perspective emphasizes that it is also "one nation"—diverse, equal, and inclusive. This narrative points out, for example, that Thomas Jefferson owned an English translation of the Quran—so keen was he to understand an alien civilization that could not be excluded if Americans were going to be serious about building a society on universal principles of civil rights.¹⁵ When State Department officials lead delegations from Muslim countries on tours of the nation's capital, they point to the mural on the interior of the dome of the nineteenth-century Library of Congress building, on which a ring of twelve figures representing the main contributors to Western civilization includes one labeled "ISLAM."

This spirit of openness emanates from an idea of nationhood that is anchored not in history or culture, but in transcendent political values. The US Constitution, as the ultimate expression of the will of the people, is the final word. "The principles of our Constitution unite all of us as a nation," intones the government's twelve-minute film introducing US history and civics for immigrants. The film acknowledges that American democracy was not born perfect and remains a work in progress, a matter for ongoing debate. But, in this liberal-secular view, the direction of the constitutional order is clear: "over time, its promise of freedom has included more and more people," it says. "Many groups of people were denied certain freedoms in the past, but have gained equality through amendments to the US Constitution. It took seventy-five years and a Civil War to end slavery. And it was another hundred years until laws were passed to make it illegal to discriminate against people based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin." The only advice in this video that impinges on immigrants'

cultural identity is, "Learn English." It is not race or religious tradition, but rather "common civic values that make us all Americans."¹⁶

This transcendental ideal is expressed with such inspiring eloquence that it is easy to overlook the competing paradigm—a more exclusive and intolerant religious nationalism rooted more explicitly in the white and Christian roots of the United States. This countercurrent has been part of the republic's history from the start, ebbing and flowing, but always there. With the possible exception of a liberal consensus in the first two decades after World War II, religious nationalism has remained a steady feature of American life.¹⁷ In 1992, presidential hopeful Patrick Buchanan trumpeted this worldview as a keynote speaker at the Republican National Convention. Highlighting the chasm between Republicans and Democrats on abortion, gay rights, and school prayer, his rousing battle cry came to be known simply as the Culture War Speech. "Friends, this election is about more than who gets what. It is about who we are," he said. "It is about what we believe and what we stand for as Americans. There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself. For this war is for the soul of America."¹⁸

By then, though, the Culture Wars strategy was at least twenty years old. Richard Nixon's 1968 and 1972 presidential campaigns successfully used cultural appeals to win over the white Christian majority.¹⁹ Nixon played the race, religion, and patriotism cards to trump social class in mobilizing voters. This strategy would become central to the Republican Party. "By consciously polarizing the American electorate along cultural lines, the Republican Party sought to minimize the salience of economic issues and draw working-class whites into a coalition that in actuality catered to the interests of the country's elites," argues the political scientist Scott Hibbard. "It was this type of right-wing populism that informed the culture wars of the 1990s."²⁰

Then, there were the epic events of September 11, 2001. Once shorn of inconvenient details—like the role US foreign policy played in the genesis of Al Qaeda and the radicalization of Osama bin Laden—the event fit elegantly into the master narrative of a Christian nation whose values were under attack by evil nonbelievers abroad and traitorous liberals at home.

In 2008, it looked as if the pendulum was swinging back. Barack Obama entered the White House speaking the old familiar language of civil religion once again, appearing to vindicate the self-correcting quality of functioning democracies. By then, though, American society had become too deeply polarized for Obama to unite. Religious nationalism flourished in the movement known as the Tea Party, alarming even many conservative

Republicans. The historian Robert Horwitz distinguishes the Tea Party's "antiestablishment conservatism" from previous mainstream Republican values. The Tea Party's uncompromising dogmatism and its stress on "faith over facts" is a radical effort to "overturn settled law, norms, and institutions."²¹ This tendency dominated the 2016 Republican primaries. Ted Cruz was deeply committed to Tea Party positions. In comparison, Donald Trump was hardly a true believer, but the fact that he chose to hitch his campaign to those same forces attests to the religious nationalists' success in changing the terms of the national conversation. Most worryingly, the Tea Party's brand of conservatism has infused politics with a sense of "victimhood, resentment, and anger about the perceived loss of individual autonomy," eating away at a culture of tolerance and inclusivity.²² The Tea Party is thus the inheritor of the "paranoid style" in American politics, which the late historian Richard Hofstadter identified when trying to explain how the nation could have been so spellbound by the irrational reactionary rants of Senators Joseph McCarthy and Barry Goldwater in the 1950s and 1960s.²³

Hofstadter's "paranoid style" thesis remains relevant today, but it is incomplete. Hofstadter focused on the social psychology underlying American political culture and its final expression in structural outcomes. What he missed, notes Robert Horwitz, was the middle level of analysis: how and why certain institutions channel and mobilize that fear and anger in a conservative direction. Horwitz highlights the active role played by "long-established networks of right-wing money, idea-generating political organizations, and mass media."²⁴ The same dynamics can be seen behind the manufacture of paranoia toward Islam.

The Cultivation of Islamophobia

In Birmingham, Alabama, seventy-six-year-old Larry Houck represents the face of anti-Islamic grassroots activism. Houck is a small-businessman in the real estate line, who drives a Toyota truck with a bumper sticker that reads "Get US out of the United Nations." A diligent student of Islamophobia ideologues, he heads the local chapter of the radical anti-Islam network, ACT! for America. He was seized by the cause around 2010, in the course of reading more and more books—fourteen in total, he says—about the threat that Islam poses to the United States and Europe. "Right now, there is a war going on," he tells me over coffee at a Starbucks off Interstate 65 in Alabama.²⁵

Houck is simultaneously alarmed and energized by the fact that most of his fellow Americans do not share his sense of dread, and he works hard

to awaken them to the reality as he sees it. In his view, Muslims plan to use sharia to eventually take over the West. Sharia, as Houck understands it, is a totalitarian system that enslaves women and governs every part of life. When Muslims claim that theirs is a religion of peace, non-Muslims must realize that the Quranic doctrine of *taqiyya* allows Muslims to deceive nonbelievers. When Muslims are in control, he adds, non-Muslim women will be told to cover themselves up, as they already do in France. Islam will eventually take over Europe, Houck predicts, because Muslim men can take four wives, resulting in a higher birth rate. There are already no-go zones across Europe; European mayors have denied their existence, but they can be located online, he says. Islam has already devastated India, taking over more than half of the land, he adds. According to Houck, President Obama has infiltrated Washington, D.C., with the Muslim Brotherhood. And so on.

Houck and other activists like him are the cottage manufacturers within the Islamophobia industry. To anyone, Muslim or not, who has had access to reliable facts about the religion, the picture of Islam they try to sell would be dismissed as belonging to the lunatic fringe. If you listen to the wider political conversation, however, you realize that their views have a familiar ring, echoing ideas being bandied about by pundits and politicians who have a national presence. Like Hindutva rhetoric in India, the tropes of the US Islamophobia network have grand narratives with recycled themes and factoids, which through sheer repetition have taken on the authority of common sense.

The good news is that this is “not a vast right-wing conspiracy,” according to the Center for American Progress (CAP).²⁶ The Islamophobia campaign could be effectively pushed back with robust counter-speech and naming-and-shaming, says Yasmine Taeb, a civil rights lawyer who co-authored CAP’s 2015 Islamophobia report.²⁷ Hate-watch groups like CAP identify half a dozen self-styled, mutually referencing experts generating most of the anti-Islam propaganda in the United States. These individuals work through ten key organizations whose core business is to sow hatred against Islam. Between 2001 and 2012, these groups received a total of almost \$57 million from eight major donors, according to CAP.²⁸ Employing slightly different yardsticks, the Council on American–Islamic Relations (CAIR) counted at least thirty-seven groups in the “inner core” of the Islamophobia network, with access to almost \$120 million in revenues between 2008 and 2011.²⁹

Misinformation is disseminated through sympathetic politicians and preachers. The Islamophobia industry’s media reach is considerable. It can generally count on Fox News and the *Washington Times* to reports its views

uncritically. Nationally syndicated radio talk show hosts Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck, and Mike Savage routinely propagate Islamophobic viewpoints. The core groups and individuals also operate their own platforms, notably the Jihad Watch (www.jihadwatch.org) and Middle East Forum (www.meforum.org) websites. These are not amateurish productions. Rich in content and optimized for search engines, their pages are routinely listed near the top of Google searches for information about Islam. (For example, MEforum's skewed entry was the top item, ahead of even Wikipedia, when I tried Googling "taqiyya" in Hong Kong.³⁰)

While American Islamophobia feeds off the war on terror, it does not necessarily help the cause. When American troops and counterterrorism personnel combat Muslim militants abroad, they need to work alongside Muslim allies and among Muslim civilians. Domestically, most tipoffs about suspicious activities among Muslims come from Muslim Americans. From a hard-nosed security perspective, therefore, the United States cannot afford to be perceived by Muslims as being at war with Islam. This probably explains why even President George W. Bush, not known for a nuanced view of the world, took pains to declare his high regard for the majority of Muslims and their faith. The Bush Administration's insistence that Islam was not the enemy may explain why, after its post-9/11 spike, hate crimes and negativity toward the religion briefly declined.

The Islamophobia network has a broader agenda than combating terrorism. Some of the most committed fearmongers are animated by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "The vast majority of the individuals and groups spewing anti-Muslim rhetoric in the United States are the ideological patrons of the Israeli state and its policies against the Palestinians," notes Nathan Lean, author of the 2012 book, *The Islamophobia Industry*. "In some cases, as that of the Clarion Fund, which has produced three or four anti-Muslim films, they are directly engaged with Israel."³¹ Demonizing Muslims is obviously one of the most effective ways to ensure that American citizens and their elected representatives never permit the US government to depart from its pro-Israel position to pursue justice for Palestinians.

An outer ring of supporting organizations with different missions add to Islamophobia's firepower (and financial resources). These varied groups on the religious Right bring diverse motivations to the fight against Islam. Some evangelicals feel a messianic zeal to defeat what they see as a false religion. For most, however, this religious mandate is probably outweighed by the frustration and anxiety that conservatives have long felt about social trends in their country—the same trends that Buchanan condemned in his Culture War speech. The ever-wider application of individual rights has

led to conservative defeats on hot-button issues, most recently on same-sex marriage. Meanwhile, immigration has changed the complexion of the country; white Americans will make up less than half the population in a few decades. "White people are going to lose their majority for the first time since the Europeans arrived. That is a huge thing," notes Potok.³² "It's changing everyday life for people where they live. How do we transition to a truly multicultural country in which no one group predominates for the very first time in our history? I think it's a very rough ride." The image and rhetoric of a conservative white Christian president in the form of George W. Bush seemed to help cushion that ride, but Barack Obama's presence in the White House offered no such sensory comfort.

Muslims make up less than 1 percent of the US population, which is perhaps why they are useful scapegoats for Americans' cultural anxiety.³³ Latinos, in contrast, have enough electoral clout to require politicians to frame the immigration debate as a problem with illegal aliens instead of a cultural issue. Conservatives seeking office also need to be careful in what they say about sexual minorities, who now have enough support in the media to strike back at homophobic politicians. Indeed, by late 2014, some media commentators were declaring an end to, or at least a shift in the tide of, the Culture Wars. "For a younger generation of voters, the old right-wing nostrums about the 'sanctity of life' and the 'sanctity of marriage' have lost their power, revealed as intrusions on human freedom," the *New York Times* wrote in an editorial.³⁴ Around the same time, a *Politico* commentator claimed that Republicans had lost the Culture War: "Indeed, on issue after cultural issue, Republican positions poll miserably, especially with younger voters."³⁵ The Muslim American population, as the scholar Saeed Khan argues, is "one of the only remaining communities in America that is the object of derision and lacks social and political capital."³⁶ The taking of offense against mosques, textbooks, and Muslim traditions can be seen within this wider context.

Opposition to Mosques

The Islamophobia industry's breakout performance came in 2009–10, when a local Muslim businessman decided to build a community center in Lower Manhattan. The center would include a much-needed prayer hall for the thousands of Muslims living and working in the area. Opponents of the plan labeled it the "Mosque at Ground Zero," condemning it as an affront to the memory of the 3,000 lives lost to Muslim terrorists at the World Trade Center a few blocks away. The controversy was a test for America's

rule of law (which it passed) and its culture of tolerance (which emerged somewhat bruised).

For middle-of-the-road politicians, the most common response was to express support for diversity, including Muslims' freedom to worship, while also suggesting that the particular choice of location for the building may have been unwise and insensitive. The site, however, was not initially perceived as objectionable. When the Park51 project, also known as Cordoba House, was first announced, the subsequent outrage was not foreseen. "In December 2009, the Cordoba House was not seen as a scandalous project, but rather as a non-controversial, safe and legal undertaking, and furthermore as a positive initiative for relations between different religious communities," notes the political scientist Nadia Marzouki.³⁷ In the first article on the plan in the *New York Times*, political and religious leaders were quoted as responding positively.³⁸

The cordial response was not surprising, given the actual facts of the case. The developer, Sharif el-Gamal, wanted to address a crying need for prayer space in the neighborhood. Rather than build a dedicated mosque, he conceived of it as a multipurpose community facility, open to all faiths. He drew inspiration from a Jewish community center on the Upper West Side where he had taught his children how to swim. As had been the case for so many other New Yorkers, 9/11 had been a life-changing experience for el-Gamal; he had volunteered at Ground Zero, spending two days handing out water to emergency crews and victims. The Sufi Muslim imam he appointed, Feisal Rauf, was well known for his promotion of interreligious peace. Even the conservative political commentator Laura Ingraham welcomed the project when she hosted a segment on Fox News about it. Interviewing Rauf's wife Daisy Khan, Ingraham said that she had not found many people who had a problem with the idea. "I like what you're trying to do," she said on air.³⁹

Offense had to be manufactured, largely by hate spin agents from outside the local community. On December 21, 2009—almost two weeks after the first report in the *New York Times*—the virulently anti-Muslim blogger Pamela Geller attacked the Park51 plan. Next came Robert Spencer, director of the Jihad Watch organization and one of the sextet of leading misinformation experts identified by CAP. By May 2010, Islamophobia agents had mounted a full-blown campaign against the center. They built their opposition on a series of extreme allegations. That these allegations were almost entirely false should come as no surprise at this point: hate spin never lets the facts get in the way of righteous indignation.

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum's analysis of the controversy systematically debunks the falsehoods, which start with the name itself.⁴⁰ The "Mosque at Ground Zero" was no such thing; rather, it was planned as a community center with a Muslim prayer hall. Ground Zero is three blocks away, and not visible from the site. Even if the facility had been a mosque, it would not be a concept alien to Lower Manhattan. There was already a mosque on Warren Street nearby, and the abandoned building where the center was to be built was already being used as a temporary Muslim prayer venue. Nor did protesters apply their sensitivity about Ground Zero's sacredness consistently: a betting facility and two strip clubs, New York Dolls and Pussycat Lounge, were both located closer to the site than the planned Park51 site. And of course there was no basis in fact for the idea that the place would somehow be used to celebrate or inculcate the kind of extremist thinking behind the 9/11 attacks. Both el-Gamal and the imam he appointed "are moderates who strongly condemn radical Islam in all its forms, and they have guaranteed that such opinions will have no place in the proposed center," Nussbaum notes.⁴¹

None of these details could pierce through the wall of generalized prejudice promoted by members of the Islamophobia network. Some Muslims had murdered New Yorkers, so Muslims could not be treated like everyone else. On June 6, 2010, a demonstration organized by Stop Islamization of America took place in Lower Manhattan. The sponsoring organization was new, having been created by Geller and Spencer in the model of an equivalent organization in Europe. The demonstration attracted speakers with a wide variety of grievances and goals. "Opposition to the Islamic cultural center's construction became an opportunity to defend a range of causes as disparate as the rights of Copts in Egypt, the rights of Muslims to leave the faith or convert to another religion, Israel's security and the survival of Christianity in the Western world," says Marzouki.⁴² With midterm elections just five months away, politicians entered the debate. Rival Republican contenders for the state governorship, Rick Lazio and Carl Paladino, engaged "in a contest of one-upmanship, continuously escalating their condemnation of the Islamic cultural center."⁴³ Paladino, the eventual winner of the Republican primary, promised that he would, if elected, use his powers of eminent domain to "stop this mosque and make the site a war memorial instead of a monument to those who attacked our country."⁴⁴

In contrast, citizens entrusted with representing the local community's interests continued to support Cordoba House. On May 25, 2010, the Lower Manhattan Community Board voted in favor of the project by a large margin. Then, on July 13, the city's Landmarks Preservations Commission

unanimously refused to cede to protesters' demands that the building site be given landmark status, which would have blocked the redevelopment plans. Politicians who felt no need to pander to the religious Right were equally firm in their backing. Michael Bloomberg, who had been elected to his third and final term as mayor in 2009, voiced his unequivocal support, both for religious freedom and the property rights of the site owners. The district's politically secure congressman, Democrat Jerrold Nadler, joined him. Andrew Cuomo, who was running an uncontested campaign for the Democratic governor's ticket, also spoke up for diversity and tolerance.⁴⁵

The United States' steadfast commitment to religious freedom and property rights ensured that the legal disputes were eventually resolved in favor of Park51. Even so, however, many moderate commentators continued to point out that, even if Muslims had a legal right to practice their faith and build a mosque in the vicinity of the 9/11 site, they should have acknowledged the special sensitivities associated with the area and moved the project elsewhere. Such views—assuming they aren't rooted in prejudice themselves—smack of a tendency among multicultural-minded liberals to make excuses for the intolerant, due to their instinct to empathize with the perspectives of others. They assume good faith on the part of hate spin exponents—as if assuaging reasonable-sounding concerns about the location of Park51 would unlock opponents' hearts and allow their inner pluralists to emerge.

The Murfreesboro Mosque

It is not hard to test the theory that a mosque project would have a warmer reception if it were located a respectful distance from Ground Zero. One just needs to travel to the city of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, about eight hundred miles southwest of Manhattan. Around the same time that Park51 was being conceived, Murfreesboro's Muslims were looking to build a new mosque. They were following events in Manhattan with interest, but never expected that they would be victims of the same intolerance. "In New York, you had a reason to oppose the plan," Murfreesboro's imam, Ossama Bahloul, says. "Here, what is your reason?"⁴⁶ In hindsight, they realize that key players in the national campaign against Islam looked at Murfreesboro as a growth opportunity. Says Saleh Sbenaty, a mosque board member, "This is the buckle of the Bible Belt. They think they can continue their campaign here."⁴⁷

Murfreesboro's Muslim community comprises about 250 families and 500 students, many of them enrolled at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU). They used to worship at a small mosque downtown, but had

outgrown it: during Friday prayers, the congregation spilled out onto the pavement and parking lot. In 2009, community leaders found, on the outskirts of town and at a reasonable price, a nondescript plot of land where they could build a larger mosque. Members of the community responded immediately to the appeal for donations—on a single Friday, they contributed \$300,000, enabling the board to pay for the land in full.⁴⁸

The first hint of trouble appeared in January 2010. On a sign erected to indicate the site of the proposed Islamic Center of Murfreesboro, someone spray-painted the words “NOT WELCOME.” “We didn’t think much of it, as we had no experience of Islamophobia,” recalls Sbenaty, who has lived in Tennessee since the 1990s and works as an MTSU engineering professor. By the middle of 2010, however—simultaneous with the Park51 protests—the hate spin circus had come to town with its usual tricks, from legal challenges to fearmongering and personal attacks. “We were bullied, we were harassed, we had arson, we had bomb threats, we had lawsuits,” says Sbenaty.

After the county’s planning authority approved the site plans, opponents voiced their unhappiness at the county’s board of commissioners meeting in June. In July, they marched in the hundreds to deliver a petition to the county courthouse, demanding that approval for construction be withdrawn. In September, they began their court challenges, filing a lawsuit against county officials, allegedly for violating the state’s open meetings law. In May 2012, a judge ruled that officials did not give adequate notice of their meeting, which stopped construction in its tracks. Federal prosecutors came to the rescue with a discrimination lawsuit, as a result of which a federal court enabled the new mosque to open in time for the holy fasting month of Ramadan that August. Other higher courts also protected the rights of the Murfreesboro Muslims. In 2013, a state appeals court overturned the earlier judge’s decision against the county’s approval. The mosque’s opponents tried to appeal, but the Tennessee Supreme Court declined to hear the case. The US Supreme Court decided likewise in 2014.⁴⁹

During this time, Murfreesboro’s Muslim community also had to endure more personal attacks. “They hired people to investigate us,” says Ossama, the mosque’s imam. He holds a PhD in comparative religion from Cairo’s prestigious Al-Azhar University, engages in interfaith dialogue, and is deeply respectful of the US constitutional order. But the county’s newspaper, the *Rutherford Reader*, published advertisements accusing the imam of being a Muslim Brotherhood radical. Laurie Cardoza Moore, a Nashville-based pro-Israel activist who was a spokesperson for the protesters, falsely claimed on CNN’s *Anderson Cooper 360°* that Ossama’s previous mosque in Texas was

under investigation for terrorism-related activities. To the program's credit, reporters did some quick fact-checking, after which Cooper debunked the claim.

As in Manhattan, the 2010 midterm primaries figured into the campaign. Tennessee lieutenant-governor Ron Ramsey, gunning for the Republican nomination for the gubernatorial elections, was among those promoting anti-Muslim views in the midst of the Murfreesboro debate. Lou Ann Zelenik, a Tea Party Republican vying for a seat in Congress, was another. In 2010, and even more shrilly in 2012, Zelenik tried to use her rabid opposition to the mosque to distinguish herself from her conservative rival in the Republican primaries.⁵⁰ Her anti-Islam stance drew the support of a sympathetic multimillionaire backer.⁵¹ Whether or not the issue itself was a vote winner in its own right, is unclear—neither Ramsey nor Zelenik succeeded in their bids—but Islamophobia certainly earned the candidates media attention and raised their profiles. “They know we are a small community and it is difficult for us to defend ourselves,” Ossama says.

“There is some kind of injustice about allowing some group to say whatever they want to say,” Sbenaty muses. “Is it freedom of expression to intentionally hurt and intimidate? They just throw mud, and even if it doesn't stick, it leaves a mark.” Despite these misgivings about the American marketplace of ideas, the mosque leaders were convinced that the best policy was to remain accessible and engaged. They threw open all meetings, allowing critics to drop by without prior notice and observe their practices. “We assured individuals that our door is always open, and that we will stand with you against radicals,” says Sbenaty. When they received specific allegations, they invited law enforcement agencies to investigate.

Their trust in the American system was vindicated. Thanks to the US Constitution and most Americans' sense of fairness, the Muslim community of Murfreesboro ultimately won their battle to worship at a new mosque. The collateral damage from this and the Park51 disputes, however, has been significant—both incidents produced a rash of anti-Muslim propaganda, which captured media attention, energized activists, and put ideological opponents on the defensive. This may have been the hate spin agents' goal all along. “They don't care whether the mosque exists or not,” notes Ossama. Their larger purpose was to exploit the controversy to communicate key Islamophobic talking points.

One such message, printed on signs in the July 2010 protest, said, “Islam is not a religion.” This was a legal strategy as much as an political slogan. A house of worship was the only authorized nonresidential use of the site that the Murfreesboro Muslims had purchased. If Islam isn't a religion, a

mosque isn't a house of worship, and one could not be built there. There was, of course, never any chance that the authorities would accept that argument. Judges dismissed the claim, and just in case, the federal government filed a legal brief affirming the seemingly obvious point that Islam is a religion.⁵² But beyond the Murfreesboro dispute, casting doubt on Islam's status as a world religion is also part of the Islamophobia network's wider agenda. Doing so makes room for the claim that Islam is really a violent political ideology, and that discriminating against Muslims does not violate the principle of religious freedom.

Challenging Books

In late 2013, Larry Houck of ACT! for America petitioned the Alabama State Board of Education, objecting to its proposed selection of social studies textbooks. The offending volumes—published by such mainstream houses as Pearson, McGraw Hill, and Houghton Mifflin—were in keeping with the secular, multicultural approach to teaching children about other religions. The textbooks described Islam's contributions to the world and the common values that it shares with other faiths. Houck, however, alleged that these materials were examples of the “infiltration of Islamic falsehoods and deceptions into our nation's school textbooks.”⁵³

The intervention was neither as intimidating as the mosque dispute just up I-65 in Tennessee, nor as successful as the sharia-blocking constitutional amendment that was being drafted in Alabama. Houck's lobbying delayed, but did not alter, the school board's decision. Nevertheless, the Alabama textbook dispute is worth a closer look. It is an example of the Islamophobia network's grassroots activism, designed to turn administrative processes at the local level into opportunities to engage in hate propaganda through campaigns of righteous indignation.

ACT! for America is a single-issue citizens action network founded in 2007 by a leading Islamophobia peddler, Brigitte Gabriel. The organization aims to do with the anti-Islam cause what the National Rifle Association has done with gun rights—influence legislation and electoral contests and become a pillar of the Republican Party. As a relatively new organization, it was able to borrow from the religious Right's established repertoire of contention. The book challenge has long been a classic item on that repertoire. It is part of the religious Right's decades-old battle “to shape what children learn by controlling their access to books in school libraries and curricula, and the content of their textbooks,” notes the progressive think tank, People For the American Way (PFAW).⁵⁴ Conservatives have tried to

keep school libraries and curricula uncontaminated by books containing open-minded discussions of sexuality, race, and history, or by fiction with supernatural themes, like *Harry Potter*.⁵⁵

The religious Right's desire to control what children read is not surprising, given its concerns about values and education. Besides, the process of selecting library books and school textbooks presents political opportunities for the manufacture of righteous indignation. These openings are highly decentralized, since education in the United States is a local matter. Book challenges thus allow the religious Right to think cosmically and act locally.

In 1982, the US Supreme Court weighed in to ensure that students' free speech rights are not shortchanged by local authorities who stray beyond their educational mandates when making decisions about library books. The court opined that the First Amendment implies a right to receive information and ideas, and "students may not be regarded as closed-circuit recipients of only that which the State chooses to communicate."⁵⁶ The justices were ruling in favor of a group of students who challenged their school board's decision to remove from the school library certain books that it considered "anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic and just plain filthy."⁵⁷ The court said that a school board wanting to remove library books should assess them solely on educational suitability.

On the other hand, local authorities cannot simply ignore the opinions of ideologically driven pressure groups. School boards and public libraries have had to establish transparent procedures for selecting materials and handling complaints. These forums and protocols allow conservatives to influence, and in some cases control, what children read in public schools and libraries. This is nowhere close to the situation in India, where groups have derived a de facto right to be offended from laws prohibiting the wounding of religious feelings. But there is enough of an opening for hate spin agents to exploit.

ACT! for America entered the textbook wars in earnest in 2011, launching a detailed guide for its activists.⁵⁸ Its report on thirty-eight commonly used textbooks alleged that they contained historical inaccuracies and theoretical misrepresentations that, together, painted too rosy a picture of Islam. "More often than not, the typical treatment of Islam amounts more to indoctrination than to education," it said.⁵⁹ In Alabama, ACT! for America was alerted to the opportunity for a textbook challenge by Eagle Forum, a more established religious Right group. Eagle Forum was founded in 1972 to counter the feminist movement and continues to champion traditional social values. It began working with the Islamophobia network in 2009 or

so.⁶⁰ Houck says a member of the Eagle Forum asked him to lead a textbook challenge on the Islamic front.

After locating the titles in the local university library, Houck and half a dozen helpers worked “day and night” scouring through them. They identified sixteen books containing information about Islam that made them “very dangerous.”⁶¹ Introducing himself to the school board as a “lay expert in the study of political Islam and its brutal, barbaric, and anti-constitutional Sharia law,” Houck warned of the “infiltration of Islamic falsehoods and deceptions into our nation’s school textbooks.”⁶²

In his letter to the Alabama’s State Board of Education in December 2013, Houck wrote, “Islam was spread by the sword in most every case. The Muslims have killed millions in their 1,400-year history and enslaved millions more.”⁶³ His review of a Pearson title for eighth graders, *My World History*, said that it was “laced with lies, deception, propaganda, and indoctrination about Islam.” He criticized the book for not teaching children that 7 percent of Muslim’s obligatory charitable giving is used to fund holy war; that one-half of the Quran teaches Muslims to slay or subjugate nonbelievers; that sharia allows men to beat their wives; and so on.

Noting that forty-four pages were devoted to Islam and only fourteen to Christianity, Houck said that *My World History* “serves as a powerful influence to convert school children to Islam one day.”⁶⁴ He later told the press that he wanted to warn Americans that there was a nonviolent jihad going on in the United States, perpetrated by influencing textbook publishers. The protesters also said that some statements in the book offended Christianity. “Jesus is presented as a man who decided to preach to people about his ‘ideas.’ No mention of his virgin birth or of his deity as the Son of God. This is offensive and an insult to the Holy Bible scriptures,” read one review sent to school board members.⁶⁵

Ordinarily, the State Board of Education relies on the recommendations of its twenty-three-member Textbook Selection Committee, which is made up mainly of teachers and subject-area experts. In this case, however, the board postponed its vote by a month to consider the complaints from Houck’s group. In January 2014, the board approved the list by a 5–2 vote. The only one of the twelve books dropped was a title that was accidentally duplicated.

Houck was bitterly disappointed when the State Board of Education stood by the professional decisions of its educators. He called the board’s dismissive treatment of his appeal a “bad joke.” He felt that his research went over the members’ heads—showing how much more work needs to be done to wake up Americans to the threat of Islamization.⁶⁶ Having lost

the battle at the state level, the campaigners vowed to approach the state's more than 130 city and county school districts, whose committees and boards are free to omit books on the state's recommended list. At this stage, Eagle Forum activists took over.

Such pressure may affect the future decisions of publishers, school boards, and libraries that want to avoid controversy. The American Library Association has warned of this harmful side effect of persistent book challenges. "In these cases," the association says, "material may not be published at all or may not be purchased by a bookstore, library, or school district."⁶⁷

The Islamophobia network's textbook campaign amounts to an assault on the very idea of multicultural religious education—to promote greater mutual understanding, respect, and reciprocity among different religious communities in secular, pluralist societies—as well as the role schools play in support of those efforts. Such education usually emphasizes shared values and the common ground of various belief systems, without privileging any of them. It is one of the solutions most commonly suggested for the global problem of religious conflict. Unfortunately, religious hard-liners with exclusive visions consider the multicultural approach a betrayal and a threat.

Houck was undoubtedly committed to his assigned task of removing offending textbooks from Alabama's schools. As with all hate spin, though, the campaign's mission as interpreted by a foot soldier like him may not be what its leaders really have in mind. Their hidden agenda was to cultivate Islamophobia. That objective can be achieved even if the targeted books emerge unscathed. "Organizing a protest of a textbook that they claim 'promotes jihad' may not accomplish its stated goal, but might still succeed in stoking fear and resentment against Muslim Americans in that community," PFAW says. The same is true of the next example of hate spin we'll look at. The campaign for anti-sharia laws was, on its surface, a pointless safeguard against a nonexistent threat; but it nonetheless served as an effective vehicle for anti-Muslim propaganda.

Targeting Sharia

The Islamophobia network has called sharia "the preeminent totalitarian threat of our time."⁶⁸ Its campaign against sharia is a particularly sophisticated form of hate spin, whipping up moral panics over what independent legal experts say is an imaginary threat. Ted Cruz, on the road to the US Senate in 2012, was among the politicians who lent his voice to the

cause, calling sharia an “enormous problem.”⁶⁹ That year, the Republican National Convention adopted the cause in its platform.⁷⁰

The campaign’s success can be measured in part by the number of states—eleven as of early 2016—that have changed their laws or constitutions to protect against sharia. The campaign’s real effect may be even wider. More than twenty other states have debated the need for a legislative or constitutional ban on sharia. Although they ultimately rejected the idea, the debates themselves may have succeeded in changing the way Americans think and talk about Islam. Putting sharia on trial in legislatures and in the press mainstreams pejorative rhetoric about Muslims, and adds to the perception that the threat of Islam is real—and, of course, that the Islamophobia experts are worth funding.⁷¹

Oklahoma was one of the first states to legislate against sharia. State Question 755—the “Save Our State Amendment”—sought to introduce language into the state’s constitution that would insulate the courts from the influence of Islamic law. The amendment would require courts to uphold and adhere to American laws, including, if necessary, the laws of other states, as long as those laws did not include sharia. “The courts shall not look to the legal precepts of other nations or cultures. Specifically, the courts shall not consider international law or Sharia Law,” it read.⁷² In May 2010, a resolution to put SQ 755 before the voters was adopted by the Oklahoma House of Representatives by a 91–2 vote, and in the Senate by a 41–2 margin. That November, more than 70 percent of voters supported the proposition. The wording of the amendment clearly violated the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause, which prohibits discrimination among religions. The head of the Oklahoma chapter of the Council on American–Islamic Relations duly challenged the legality of SQ 755. A federal district court, followed by the federal court of appeals, agreed that the measure was unconstitutional.

The law reformers did not give up. To get around the Establishment Clause, they simply substituted the religious bias with a national one, proposing that American laws should be insulated from un-American influences. The main political entrepreneur behind this more successful anti-sharia franchise is the lawyer David Yerushalmi, a former resident of a Jewish settlement in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.⁷³ His work in the United States has earned him a place in CAP’s rogues’ gallery of “misinformation experts” in the Islamophobia network.⁷⁴ The Anti-Defamation League, the leading American Jewish civil rights organization, says Yerushalmi has “a record of anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant and anti-black bigotry.”⁷⁵

Although he has no formal training in the subject, Yerushalmi has become convinced that observing Islamic law is akin to sedition. In 2009,

Yerushalmi found a way to operationalize his paranoia. He developed a model statute to be disseminated to right-wing groups across the country. He worked closely with Frank Gaffney, who provided the connections to neoconservatives among former and serving officials, security analysts, and political activists.⁷⁶ Gaffney's Center for Security Policy has produced voluminous reports that supposedly provide justifications for the campaign. Their book, *Shariah: The Threat to America* (downloadable for free at shari-althethreat.com), likens US government policy toward Islam to 1970s-era détente with the Soviet Union, a policy they consider equally misguided. The report rejected "the policies of coexistence, accommodation, and submission," which it believed underestimated the Islamic threat as being confined to violent extremism. The enemy, it clarifies, is "not just al Qaeda, but also a significant percentage of the hundreds of millions of Muslims who are dedicated to the imposition of shariah on us by violence or by stealth."⁷⁷ Yerushalmi's response to this imaginary threat, the "American Laws for American Courts" template legislation, does not explicitly mention sharia, but its preamble and supporting literature makes clear that sharia is its main obsession.⁷⁸ In 2011–2012, Arizona, Kansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee passed bills with language credited to Yerushalmi.⁷⁹

Meanwhile, in Alabama, Eric Johnston took up the cause. Since the 1980s, he had been working on countering what he saw as the loss of religiosity and Judeo-Christian influence in the United States.⁸⁰ A large framed copy of the Bill of Rights hangs alongside biblical verses and portraits of Ronald Reagan in his law office in a business park on the outskirts of Birmingham. In 2015, Johnston would be actively involved in Alabama's legislative campaign to resist the US Supreme Court's historic ruling on gay marriage. In 2014, however, his main triumph was the adoption of Amendment One to the state's constitution. Johnston had offered his services to legislators after witnessing Republican senator Gerald Allen fail to pass an anti-sharia bill in 2011.⁸¹ Modeled on the Oklahoma law, Allen's bill never progressed because of the specific mention of sharia. In response, Johnston drafted a constitutional amendment that would "prohibit the application of foreign law in violation of rights guaranteed natural citizens by the United States and Alabama Constitutions."⁸² In 2013, pressed for time at the end of a late-night session, the Alabama legislature approved with no debate a ballot measure that would enable the electorate to vote on the amendment.⁸³ An overwhelming majority of voters passed the resolution when it was placed on the ballot in the November 2014 midterm elections, with more than 72 percent voting yes.⁸⁴

Alabama's small Muslim community felt powerless in the face of this tide of Islamophobia. Ashfaq Taufique, the president of the Birmingham Islamic Society, gave several interviews trying to explain that sharia posed no threat to Alabamans. His outreach was nothing new. The society's centers had for years thrown open its doors to visitors and worked regularly on interfaith community projects. Within these more progressive circles, Muslims, Christians, and Jews participate in one another's functions and forums. Like the Muslims in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, those in Birmingham, Alabama, had been accepted by their neighbors and made to feel at ease in their surroundings, even after 9/11. This made the anti-sharia legislation all the more of a shock. To Ashfaq, who had emigrated from Pakistan two decades earlier, the dynamics are reminiscent of geopolitics in South Asia. Just as Pakistan and India use each other as bogeymen, Islam is the "other" in American political culture, it seems to him.⁸⁵

Muslim Americans were not alone in trying to resist the wave of anti-sharia legislative activity. Many other individuals and organizations recognized it for what it was—"a thinly concealed attempt to inflame anti-Muslim attitudes," in the words of a report by New York University's Brennan Center for Justice.⁸⁶ Both religious and legal experts pointed out that sharia was a nonexistent threat. There is no evidence of US courts being seduced by real or imagined sharia, or of any Muslim group attempting to introduce it. Proponents of anti-sharia laws have not cited a single case in which the US justice system has resolved a dispute by relying on Islamic law. There is no danger of the country's freedoms being corrupted by contact with foreign legal systems. American courts have well-established and uncontroversial rules governing how they cite laws from abroad, experts note.⁸⁷

The American Bar Association (ABA) felt concerned enough to adopt a resolution against "blanket prohibitions" that stopped courts from using foreign or international law, or the "entire body of law or doctrine of a particular religion."⁸⁸ The ABA argued that while it might be proper to regulate specific practices of a particular religion, "initiatives that target an entire religion or stigmatize an entire religious community, such as those explicitly aimed at 'Sharia law,' are inconsistent with some of the core principles and ideals of American jurisprudence." The ABA cited the example of Mormonism: "Thus, while the Supreme Court upheld the conviction of a Mormon on a polygamy charge in 1898 (at a time when polygamy was an accepted tenet of Mormonism), the law in question did not embody a broader 'anti-Mormon' legislative initiative, but rather one aimed at specified conduct that was deemed socially harmful."⁸⁹

Christian groups are among those who have spoken up against the anti-sharia hysteria. The most notable voice was Randy Brinson, the head of the conservative Christian Coalition of Alabama and a prominent Republican. He felt the initiative sent the wrong message about Alabama. "Other cultures would see us as bigoted and unsympathetic to their cultures," he told me later.⁹⁰ The amendment's proponents were exploiting people's fears and built-in biases, he said. Although committed to the cause of shoring up the country's traditional Christian values, Brinson could see that the existing legal system could take care of itself without anti-sharia legislation. "We don't need it any more than we need a constitutional amendment to hunt and fish," he said. Appearing on the *Daily Show's* segment lampooning Amendment One, Brinson pointed out that even Christianity could be adversely affected by such laws, since Jesus and the Bible were foreign imports.

Eric Johnston is unmoved by such criticisms. His amendment, he says, did not introduce any substantive new rights or restrictions. It merely gives "guidance" that, while not necessary now, could be required in the future, as the US Muslim population grows. Judges needed a warning not to be swayed by lawyers who might use religious arguments when representing Muslim clients, he says. Although he claims that there exists a "a compendium of several hundred" such cases, he states that the amendment is mainly a "prophylactic" in anticipation of a looming problem. "The unique aspect of sharia law compared to, say, Protestantism or Catholicism or Judaism, is that there is a political and legal component to it. And that tends to come into conflict with the freedoms that people enjoy under the Constitution of Alabama and of the United States," Johnston says. "We live in a world now where news is immediate across the globe. And that brings us to a more homogeneous people; we become more and more alike. If we want to maintain our separate existence and our separate identity, we have to maintain our laws and protect them."⁹¹

Adapting to Exceptional Conditions

Before leaving the United States, we should pause to reflect on how hate spin operates in the exceptional context of the First Amendment. First, the country clearly allows a level of hate speech that would be subject to criminal sanction or at least civil defamation suits in other democracies. In recent years, some politicians have called Muslims "enemies of America," likened them to Nazis, suggested that they be removed from the US military and denied their freedom of speech, and asked for mosques to be banned or

burned down.⁹² Commentators and legal analysts the world over have criticized the lack of legal protection against hate speech in the United States. From the perspective of critical race theory, First Amendment doctrine's vision of a marketplace of ideas is not sensitive enough to the structural inequalities that limit minorities' participation.

The Murfreesboro controversy shows the unfairness of that marketplace. Volunteers in a small community with no prior experience in political lobbying suddenly found themselves having to confront the well-oiled misinformation machinery of national hate groups. Although local politicians led the assault in Murfreesboro, the campaign drew supporting fire from Islamophobia salespersons fresh from the "Mosque at Ground Zero" campaign, where they had cut their teeth fighting heavyweights like New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg. "You're talking about big-name outsiders," says Saleh Sbenaty. "When the issue of Park51 quieted down, they moved their fight over here." The community had not budgeted for this kind of contingency. "We did not expect this at all."⁹³

Second, though, that same First Amendment places a ceiling on how much harm hate spin can inflict on religious communities. The Establishment Clause and especially the Free Exercise Clause provide strong protections for religious minorities. Despite vocal popular opposition to mosque building, even Muslims in the Bible Belt have been able to count on the courts to protect their rights to express and practice their faith. "The Constitution was on our side," says Ossama Bahloul. Besides, Islamophobes don't represent the majority of Americans, he adds. "That's why this mosque exists."⁹⁴

As for anti-sharia laws, overtly discriminatory versions have either been struck down by the courts or are likely to be when challenged. Alabama's Amendment One, by its architect's admission, is a piece of legislation that has no effect on the law. Book challenges are often successfully resisted by public bodies and professional associations that, informed by First Amendment doctrine, do not recognize offense as a compelling justification for censorship. What makes hate spin so pernicious, though, is that even when attempts to suppress a book, minority practice, or building project are thwarted, the claims that hate propagandists make along the way may still achieve the objective of vilifying the target community and heightening the level of fear. Over time—as Donald Trump demonstrated in the 2016 presidential race—such discourse can pollute the center of the public sphere, corroding the civic values on which American democracy is built.

Speaking in March 2015 at Selma, Alabama, Barack Obama paid tribute to the marchers who confronted racist authorities half a century earlier:

“Because of what they did, the doors of opportunity swung open not just for black folks, but for every American. Women marched through those doors. Latinos marched through those doors. Asian Americans, gay Americans, Americans with disabilities—they all came through those doors.”⁹⁵ For Muslims in the United States, that history must seem bittersweet, offering both the promise of an America that grows steadily more inclusive, and the despair that, after all this time, equal dignity is not guaranteed but must still be fought for.

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