

Faith in Inaction

A Christian Critique of Islamophobia

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An Opinion

[1] Writing from a jail cell in Jim Crow Alabama, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., said to America then, as he does now: “We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people.” That same message emanates today throughout our country and beyond from jail cells housing Muslims who are guilty of nothing more than fitting the fabricated stereotypes of a terrorist. That guilt by association and fabrication also smears free Muslims by the millions who are struggling faithfully to love God and country in face of a growing demonization of Islam and Muslims – the madness of our times. Once again, a witch-hunt in America is upon us; once again, the mission of this witch-hunt is to fabricate, not find, witches in America and elsewhere; and once again, the church in America is largely silent. As always in such times of great moral crisis, silence is the voice of complicity.

[2] In one very revealing case, that of Imam Fawaz Damra, the roaring silence speaks volumes about faith in inaction, a social sin of omission. Imam Damra, originally from Palestine, was the spiritual leader of Ohio’s largest Muslim congregation, the Islamic Center of Cleveland, for well over a decade. During that time, Damra not only grew his own congregation and oversaw the construction of the Grand Mosque, one of the most magnificent edifices in mid-America, but he almost single-handedly brought the world of Islam into the mainstream of religious life in northeastern Ohio and beyond. His work within the interfaith community was phenomenal. Damra actively participated in the Midwest Islamic-Catholic Dialogue since its inception in 1995 by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops; he played a prominent role in the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the National Council of Churches in Christ in the USA, an event held in Cleveland in 1999 and

attended by over 900 registered people of faith; he brought an annual conference of the Islamic Societies of North America to Cleveland; and he taught courses on Islam at several local colleges while simultaneously serving as the Muslim Chaplain for prisons in Ohio and Pennsylvania. Due to his grand vision of beloved community and deep commitment to vibrant interfaith relations, he regularly hosted open houses at the Grand Mosque on Islamic Day and annually invited Christians and Jews to join his Muslim congregation in the festive Iftar dinners held at the end of Ramadan (Holland). What started modestly with only a handful of non-Muslim participants, grew by the onset of this century to become the largest interfaith gathering at a mosque on America's North Coast. Either laity or ordained clergy represented just about every Christian denomination at these joyous occasions, and several prominent religious leaders attended, including the Suffragan Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Ohio and the former Bishop of the Cleveland Catholic Diocese.

[3] Then came 9/11.

[4] Within a week of the terrorist attack, someone smashed a car at full speed into the front door of the Grand Mosque hoping to destroy it. In response, religious leaders from the Jewish and Christian communities joined Imam Damra at the mosque in publicly denouncing this anti-Muslim violence (Townsend, *et al.*; O'Malley). Prominently displayed on the front page of the *Plain Dealer*, Cleveland's major newspaper, was a photo of the Bishop of Ohio's largest Catholic Diocese publicly embracing the Imam of Ohio's largest Muslim congregation. About a week later, someone mailed a video to local media outlets depicting a much different Damra hoping to destroy him. In this video from over a decade earlier, Damra made anti-Semitic remarks, ones repeatedly broadcast or printed in nearly every subsequent story about him. Many of those same religious leaders who had come to the mosque now denounced Damra, even after his penance and public apology (see Damra 2001), as dangerous and abandoned or attacked him (see Caniglia). None were seen at the mosque again, and no prominent local religious leader ever spoke up in defense of Imam Damra as a nightmare descended upon him, his family, and his congregation (see Moyers 2002).

[5] After being routinely defined and treated as a terrorist by the propaganda machine (see Campbell), though never charged as such by the government, Damra was stripped of his U.S. citizenship in 2004, jailed for two months (*New York Times* 2004a), and ordered deported. The day after Thanksgiving 2005, he was suddenly whisked away outside his home while on his way to early morning prayers at the mosque. Though not charged with any crime, he nevertheless languished for over 14 months in a federal prison in Michigan, far from his beloved family, until early this year (*New York Times* 2004b). Then on January 2, without any notification to his family or lawyer, government agents took Imam Damra from his jail cell and put him on a plane that he was told was bound for New York City for a hearing regarding his status. Instead, he was flown across the Atlantic and handed over to Israeli authorities who promptly jailed him for interrogation at the notorious Kishon prison (*New York Times* 2007a; Smith 2007a; Lange; Goodman; Katz). For days his distraught family in America knew nothing about his whereabouts, only to discover that our government had, in effect, extradited him to Israel. By what appears to be nothing less than a miracle, an Israeli military judge released Imam Damra after 15 days of detention based upon a total lack of evidence against him (Melman; *New York Times* 2007b; Smith 2007b).

He is now with his extended family in Nablus, Palestine. On January 28, the Women's Committee of the Islamic Center of Cleveland hosted a dinner celebrating Damra's freedom. No rabbi, no priest, and only two ordained Christian ministers – a retired United Methodist chaplain and a purged United Church of Christ pastor – attended. Lies and stigmas are resilient, but they are not forever. So what lessons, if any, can we learn from all this?

[6] Readers of these pages are undoubtedly familiar with the colossal difference between a good shepherd and a hired hand as described by Jesus in John 10:11-18. Unlike the good shepherd, a hired hand abandons the sheep upon the approach of a wolf. Jesus goes on to say that he, the Good Shepherd, also has sheep in other pens to protect from wolves, statements that among some of his Jewish listeners earned him the accusation of being demon-possessed. When Imam Damra was demonized and attacked by the wolves of our times and society, the Church almost completely abandoned him; indeed, some prominent church leaders even actively joined the attack and extracted their pound of flesh from this innocent man. For such as those, Jesus had far less kind words to say than for the hired hands who care nothing for the sheep. Matthew 23 offers a stinging indictment by Jesus against the hypocrites and blind guides of his times and ours. The indictment concludes with a prophecy poignantly relevant to our failing democracy today. As was the case for Jerusalem and other societies, should contemporary America continue to jail and deport the prophets sent her and foolishly reject God's will to gather us all together safely under the wings of divine security in a nation under God, then our house of democracy will be left desolate (compare Matthew 23:37-39).

[7] We came dangerously close to that desolation of democracy during the witch hunting days of McCarthyism. One of its many victims, the great American playwright Arthur Miller, who died during Damra's persecution, captured the ugliness of the times in his prophetic play, *The Crucible*. In it, the judge of the Salem witch trials directs his venom at the accused and innocent John Proctor saying, "your soul is the issue here, Mister, and you will prove its whiteness or you cannot live in a Christian country." Those words, in essence, are now being directed not only at Imam Damra, but the entire Muslim community in America today.

[8] How should we explain the secret monitoring by government officials of possible radiation levels at Muslim businesses, mosques, and even homes throughout our nation? (Kaplan). How should we explain the sharp rise in hate crimes directed against Muslims and vandalism of mosques? (CAIR). How should we explain the enormous amount of time, energy, and money expended by the government to prosecute an innocent Muslim professor in Florida, who was exonerated but still remains incarcerated awaiting deportation or worse? (Laughlin). Or the extraordinary rendition of innocent German, Canadian, and Italian Muslims simply kidnapped by our government and sent away to torture centers? (Whitlock). Or the widespread anti-Muslim sentiment commonly expressed by such influential religious figures as Franklin Graham, who unrepentantly called Islam a "very evil and wicked religion"? (Associated Press; Cox; CBC News). It is in this context of Islamophobia, stretching from the White House to Main Street, that the official obsession to deport Imam Damra and demonize Muslims needs to be understood, and resisted. His is not a case of criminal prosecution, but rather religious persecution. As such, the Church should be the first line of defense for Muslims. However, aside from a few voices in the wilderness, there is largely silence by the Church regarding this witch-hunt of our times. Even in the few

resolutions adopted by a handful of ecclesiastical bodies addressing the current erosion of our civil liberties, there is no explicit reference to a witch-hunt or Islamophobia, just general calls to “avoid succumbing to hate, revenge, and violence,” as found in the official response to 9/11 by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). The appalling silence Rev. King warned us about is still upon us.

[9] A similar warning comes from another prophetic Christian voice, one directly victimized by an enormous evil that engulfed much of the world with the colossal collapse of democracy in fascist Germany. A former President of the World Council of Churches, Pastor Martin Niemöller, who helped organize the Confessing Church before the war and co-authored the “Stuttgart Confession of Guilt” in which German Protestant churches formally accepted guilt for their complicity in Hitler’s atrocities, captured the ultimate dire consequences of a silent church within a society run by wolves:

First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak up, because I was not a Communist; then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak up, because I was not a trade unionist; then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak up, because I was not a Jew; then they came for the Catholics, and I did not speak up, because I was a Protestant. And then they came for me, and by that time, there was no one left to speak up for me (quoted in Littell).

[10] These words of warning need to be inscribed in these dark days upon the hearts of all Americans, particularly those of us who profess to be Christians and are thereby to “live as children of light” (Ephesians 5:8). Let it be said of us, at some bright day in the near future when this Islamophobic madness has ended, that the people walking in the light, have seen a great darkness, and put their faith in action to shatter that darkness before it engulfed us all.

Postscript

[11] In addition to his university post, the author is pastor of The Bonner Chapel in Hiram, Ohio. He first met Imam Damra in 1991 in his capacity as a staff member of the Interchurch Council of Greater Cleveland and worked closely with him building interfaith relations until Damra’s incarceration.

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