

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 24 October, 2010

This Is America: To Bigotry No Sanction

In honor of my new friend, Bilal Kaleem

(**Bilal Kaleem**, Executive Director of the Muslim American Society of Boston, spoke first in our shared sermon)

Kim:

Islam is a rich and complex faith tradition, but Eboo Patel's grandmother explained everything.

Eboo Patel is the founder and executive director of the Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Core. He and his friend, Kevin, visited his grandmother in Bombay. His grandmother loved Kevin. She would call for him in the morning to come sit with her. He would put his head in her lap, and she would stroke it and whisper Arabic prayers over him, asking G*d to keep him safe on the straight path. “You are a Jew?” she asked him. Kevin nodded. “Masha'Allah,” she responded, meaning, “Thanks be to G*d.”

Eboo Patel's grandmother spent most of her days sitting in the living room, clad in white, beads flowing through her fingers as she recited the name of g*d over and over: Allah, Allah, Allah. She wept as she prayed, as the love overflowed from her heart.

She also provided safe harbor to women and children escaping domestic violence. Over the course of forty-five years, a hundred or more made their way to her door. One arrived when Eboo and Kevin were visiting. Eboo was worried; what if the man who had hurt this woman came looking for her? “God is with us,” his grandmother said.

“Why do you do this?” Eboo asked, exasperated and fearful. His grandmother looked shocked by the question, but answered anyway. “I am a Muslim. This is what Muslims do.”¹

*

Since even before that September morning nine years ago, when nineteen

1 Eboo Patel, *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*, pp. 97-100

fundamentalist terrorists claimed to be acting in the name of their g*d, many Americans have confused Islam with terrorism. If America is going to live up to its greatness, if we are all going to live up to the great command to love our neighbor as ourselves, we will need to commit to understanding Islam.

George Washington, in a letter written in August of 1790 to the Hebrew Congregation at Newport, Rhode Island, said,

“The citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy – a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.

He continues, “... for happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should [conduct²] themselves as good citizens....”³

This is America: To bigotry no sanction.

This past week, Juan Williams, a senior news analyst for National Public Radio, was fired for making an anti-Muslim remark on Fox news. As NPR ombudsman Alicia Shepard writes, Juan Williams, who is African American, somehow missed the fact that what he said was absolutely equivalent to saying, "... when I get on the plane, I got to tell you, if I see an African American male in [a] dashiki with a big Afro, I get worried. I get nervous."⁴

We expect that kind of ignorance and prejudice from uneducated people. But Juan Williams is not only educated; he has chronicled and championed the Civil Rights movement. And he is, most unfortunately, in very bad company.

The New Republic magazine is known for its left-leaning political commentary. But in a September 4th blog post, owner and editor-in-chief Martin Peretz questioned whether Muslims should be afforded the freedom guaranteed by the First Amendment to our Constitution. It was so debased that I will not repeat it from this pulpit.

I am grateful to the *New York Times'* Nicholas D. Kristof, who exploded, as did *The*

2 George Washington wrote “demean”

3 Please see pbs.org/georgewashington/milestones/hebre_congregation_read.html

4 Please see npr.org/blogs/ombudsman/2010/10/21/130713285/npr-terminates-contract-with-juan-williams

Atlantic's James Fallows.⁵ Nicholas Kristof said, “This is one of those times that test[s] our values, a bit like the shameful interning of Japanese-Americans during World War II, or the disgraceful refusal to accept Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe.”⁶

Religious leaders were also quick to denounce the anti-Muslim frenzy, which is, I want to emphasize, an *anti-American* frenzy.

Cardinal Theodore McCarrick said, “This is not America. America was not built on hate.”

Rabbi David Saperstein said, “We know what it is like when people have attacked us verbally ... attacked us physically, and others have remained silent. It cannot happen here in America....”

And Rev. Richard Cizik, an evangelical Christian, said, “Shame on you. You bring dishonor to the name of Jesus Christ. You directly disobey his commandment to love your neighbor.”⁷

Juan Williams is without remorse. Martin Peretz later apologized, saying he “do [es] not believe” what he wrote.⁸ I don't even know where to begin with that kind of apology, especially since it is vitriol, not regret, that sells.

My spiritual companions, Unitarian Universalists covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Let us educate ourselves; add our names to the *To Bigotry No Sanction* online petition; and open our minds and hearts and hands.

Now is the time to stand up, speak up, and speak out
for our nearly seven million Muslim neighbors.

Now is the time for us to say no to intolerance and love our neighbors.

Now let us begin.⁹

5 In *The Atlantic*, James Fallows wrote, “I can't think of another mainstream publication whose editor-in-chief has expressed similar sentiments – whether about Muslims or blacks or Jews or women or any other class – and not had to apologize and step down.”

6 Thanks to Nicholas D. Kristof, *Is This America?* Please see nytimes.com/2010/09/12/opinion/12kristof.html?partner=rssnyt&emc=rss

7 Nicholas D. Kristof, *op cit*

8 Please see mediaite.com/online/new-republics-martin-peretz-i-wrote-that-but-i-do-not-believe-that/

9 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter but beautiful struggle for a new world.” Please see *Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence*, 4/4/67

This is America: to bigotry no sanction.