Why I don't understand Islamophobia

Bert de Ruiter

Tomorrow I hope to attend a meeting in Amsterdam, entitled *"Working Together against growing Islamophobia."* The meeting is organized by two Islamic organizations and an organization called "Collective Against Islamophobia and Discrimination."

The term "Islamophobia" is used for all kinds of different forms of discourse, speech and acts about Islam and Muslims, such as discrimination, aversion to Islam and Muslims; anti-Muslim rhetoric, derogatory attitudes towards Muslims, criticism of Islam, socio-economic disadvantages to Muslims, exclusion of Muslims, anti-Islamic racism, verbal insults to Muslims based on appearance, physical acts of aggression against Muslims and their symbols (e.g. mosques) etc.

I'm concerned about the growing anti-Muslim sentiment that can be seen across Europe. The practices, referred to by the term Islamophobia go back a long time in Europe's history, but have intensified since the 1990s, as more Muslims have come to live in Europe and also terrorist activities have taken place in Europe. In the aftermath of the recent terrible terrorist attacks in Paris, Muslims have experienced more verbal assaults, discrimination, physical violence and death threats.

Some people might not understand why I as a Christian am concerned about how Muslims are spoken about and treated in Europe.

I have two main reasons for this concern. First of all, because I believe Muslims are people, created by my heavenly Father, in His image and for an eternal relationship with Him. I believe that Jesus died for the salvation of all men, not only for Christians, but also for Muslims. I believe God loves Muslims as much as He loves me. I want to live in accordance with the Word of God, in which God gives His people clear guidelines about how we should deal with our neighbors. Among other things, we should love them, pray for them, forgive them, serve them, live in harmony with them, seek their welfare, provide for them, be hospitable to them, speak kindly about them; treat them as I would like to be treated etc.

The second reason is that I am concerned about how many Christians in Europe share this anti-Muslim mindset that we see in Europe. Of course, most Christians would not paint insulting texts on walls in mosques, or speak angry words to women wearing a headscarf in the streets, or physically attack Muslims or set fire to their houses, but in their thoughts and when speaking about Muslims among one another, there often is the same anti-Muslim rhetoric that we read in the newspapers or that we hear from extreme right-wing political parties.

I am concerned by the number of Christians that share the negative perception of Muslims that is prominent in Europe. Many Christians consider Islam as anti-democratic and anti-western,

and view Muslims with suspicion, believing them to be violent individuals who are supportive of terrorism (if not verbally, than certainly in their hearts).

I am concerned that Christians, who rejoice in, and sing about the love of God in their Sunday services, can be so judgmental, harsh, and prejudiced, and negative about Muslims during the week.

I am concerned that Christians who thank God for the variety seen in His nature and Church, stereotype Muslims, failing to see how unique each Muslim is, and failing to see the variety of ways they express their religion.

I am concerned that Christians, who sing *"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me…"* find it impossible to extend this grace to Muslims, as if Muslims have to earn our grace to them by behaving the way we do, learning our language and cultural values. We should not attach strings to passing on grace to Muslims, because we have received grace freely.

That's why I don't understand Islamophobia, particularly when expressed by followers of Jesus, who said: *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."* (Matthew 5:9).

This is what the world needs, this is what Europe needs. Making peace is hard work, and might need to begin with overcoming islamophobia in my own heart.

That's why I'm going to the meeting tomorrow.

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