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Undoing Islamophobia

Author:

Bert de Ruiter, EEA Consultant for Christian-Muslim Relations

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European Evangelical Alliance

info@europeanea.org

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www.europeanea.org

This is the title of the last chapter of the book *Xenophobia and Islamophobia in Europe* by Raymond Taras. In the first chapter the author stated that Islamophobia entails “the spread of hostile public attitudes towards Muslims...across Europe...”....and “...a cultural racism that sets Muslims apart.” (4) Subsequently Taras offers “a comparative, data-driven, even-handed account of why many Europeans are receptive to Islamophobia.” (5)

In the book, Taras looks at the sources and consequences of Islamophobia. He traces the process that leads from the growth of anti-immigrant attitudes to anti-Muslim attitudes. His examples of anti-Muslim attitudes in Europe are predominantly taken from France and Germany.

Because I deal a lot with the subject of islamophobia, I have studied this subject quite a bit. I am particularly interested to help my fellow Christians to overcome their Islamophobia, and thus was particularly interested in this last chapter ‘Undoing Islamophobia’, because that is what I seek to do.

I was disappointed by Taras’ suggestions, however. Throughout the book, Taras argues that *prejudice*, which is a key component of islamophobia, is built into human nature. I would think that in undoing islamophobia, one would need to deal with this prejudice. Alas, Taras states: “*The simplest way to undo the chain of events that has produced Islamophobia would be to introduce a miracle counterfactual (=facts that runs contrary to the established facts), whereby human nature is altered so that prejudice is absent from people’s psychological make-up. Imagining such an alternative world is not a realistically anchored thought experiment and enters the realm of ..social science fiction.*” (204)

Taras’ suggestion instead is to encourage governments to not disregard hostile public opinion when developing immigrant policies. He believes that if governments had demonstrated to their people that they are in control of the composition and scale of immigration and have acknowledged and addressed the concerns of their people about immigration, the building up of anti-Muslim sentiments would not have taken place in the same dramatic way.

Whether or not this hypothesis is true cannot be proven. Nevertheless, I was intrigued by his comments on how governments should influence public opinion. Quoting from proposals of the Transatlantic Council of Migration, he states that because public opinion is based on (and influenced by) values more than by statistics, politicians should appeal to values and emotion, when creating sympathy for their contentious policies. Also, when addressing concern public concern for immigrants, they should acknowledge peoples’ fear of change, instead of trying to ‘counter’ that fear with facts and statistics.

I find this to be true in my teaching on dealing with Islamophobia. Because Islamophobia is often based on inflation of numbers, facts and statistics, it seems natural to counter false facts with true facts. But I have not seen this to be effective. Ultimately, people see what they want to see and usually find justification for their point of view. Therefore, I believe that we need to dig deeper and address human nature.

Taras recognizes that this is often at the heart of Islamophobia. The ultimate solution is alteration of human nature. The author dismisses this as 'social science fiction'. But, I believe our Creator, who is also the Redeemer is 'an expert' in changing human nature. I believe that God can help us deal with our natural prejudice and develop in us a different attitude, that of grace, which doesn't see the other as a potential threat, but as a future friend and brother in Christ.

In his book, Taras points out that our predisposition towards prejudice goes back to our childhood. He refers to the attachment theory, pioneered by John Bowlby. This theory points out that in situations of distress or anxiety, infants seek proximity to an attachment figure (often mother or father), cultivating an affective bond and thereby establishing a secure base. The absence of a secure base develops a stronger disposition to fear and prejudice.

This is also addressed in the book *God Attachment* by Dr. Tim Clinton and Dr. Joshua Straub. They point out that for a Christian, God is his or her ultimate secure base. In Christ, we are reconciled with Him, forgiven, adopted. Clinton and Straub write:

"When we feel insecure, not safe, we feel compelled to control ourselves, others, situations, and even God. Keeping our clamps on any threats, we are convinced, is the only way we can protect ourselves. The grace of God is the ultimate statement of God's incredible love. The more we grasp it and let it sink deep into our hearts, the more we will be willing to let go of our death grip on ourselves and everything around us. The compulsion to control seems to promise safety, but it brings only heartache, self-absorption, and distrust. God's grace lets even anxious, avoidant, and fearful people relax, enjoy God's love, and find the security and significance they've always wanted." (153)

I believe this is the Christian answer to Islamophobia in Europe. Not in the first place a change of policy but changed hearts and changed people.