

After Orlando

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June 14, 2016

Can Orlando mark a change in the way that secular progressives in the West conceive and talk about our relations with Islam? I think that it has to. Not because of the particularities of Omar Mateen – who is looking more and more unhinged as detail comes in – but because this event brings into the foreground the relationship between Islam and homosexuality, a relationship that puts great pressure on the way things have been handled.

A common way debates about Islam have been conceived, on the progressive side of political discussion, has included viewing criticism of Islam as racist, or as akin to racism. That is how it has been treated especially in the progressive newspapers of the English-speaking world, such as the *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and the Fairfax press in Australia. This association seems pretty recent. Historically, the fact that Islam is a belief system that can be chosen by anyone, and has adherents of just about every ethnicity, has been vivid from both the inside and outside, and this has been the source of one of its powerful themes – Islam as beyond race. This is exemplified in the image of Malcolm X going to Mecca in 1964 and, as expressed in his autobiography and "Letter from Mecca," rapidly shifting his views about race as he was surrounded by people from all over the world ("I have been utterly speechless and spellbound by the graciousness I see displayed all around me by people of all colors.")

At some point, though, Islam came to be presented as *race-like*, with criticism of it denounced as racist. We have all seen the signs carried by marchers: "Stop anti-Muslim racism." One response to this newer way of talking is that it is just an error; given that anyone can become a Muslim regardless of background, and people of a great many backgrounds do, there is nothing like a racial category on the table. Others think there is a broad and coherent category of "racism" that does include opposition to Islam; now that the idea of races as real biological categories has been abandoned – they are no longer seen as "natural kinds" – the targets of racial animosity have to be understood differently,

in terms that include culture.¹ I am sympathetic to the first of these views, but think there is also another way of looking at the situation. The treatment of opposition to Islam in racial terms is a sort of fictional or metaphorical extension of the way we're used to talking about race, and to say that is not yet to say the extension is bad. One reason I think of the situation this way is the fact that the race-based modes of description have been taken on board by people who are not at all steeped in the elaborate social-scientific theorizing aimed at making literal sense of this usage. A sort of fictional extension of the category of "racism" has been accepted without that sort of backing.

Why have progressives acquiesced in the extension? One thing it has done is make us think; it has been a prod to reflection. When reacting against some doctrine, we might think we are rejecting only a set of ideas, but are we sure? Is it possible that we're using opposition to ideas as cover for rejection of a huge group of people who are unlike us? To use the term "racism" makes us wonder about this, and it's good to wonder.

For a Western progressive, one of the central elements of progress over the last century or so has been the rejection and marginalization – official, at least – of racist conceptions of humankind. The great negative role models, the people who remain vivid as examples to avoid, are often people who stood in the way of such advances: in the US, those who rejected the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s; in Australia, those for whom it was thinkable to deny the indigenous population citizenship and the vote. A guiding idea has become the great error of mistaking a judgment based on race or ethnicity for something more defensible, something based in principle. No one wants to be remembered as being on the wrong side of a line of that kind.² Everyone has their eye on the ghost of Bull Connor.

So I see this race-derived way of thinking about Islam as a probing of the secular Western progressive mindset. But it has another side, which is the reduction of diverse forms of encounter between people into a single framework – a prism through which many different cases are seen. Use of this racially-derived prism sometimes now leads to real incoherence. A recent article by Thomas Edsall in the *New York Times* about supporters of Donald Trump used the category of "ethnocentrism" to describe a set of

¹ One poster I saw in Sydney featured an explanatory placard, being carried for the puzzled: "Yes, Islam is a religion. You are still a racist."

² The French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut, quoted in the *New York Times* in March of this year, referred to a different set of memories: "Today, when some, like me, speak of the problem of Islam, we are denounced as the successors of Maurras and Barrès" – these were far-right thinkers of pre-World War II France. "There is a refusal to think about this era on its own terms." From "Once Hopeful for Harmony, a Philosopher Voices Discord in France" *New York Times*, Saturday Profile, by Adam Nossiter, March 11, 2016.

attitudes said to be common in that group.³ Ethnocentrism was defined in a chart caption as "the belief that whites are superior to others." But ethnocentrism was then said to be *measured* by scoring animosity to: "blacks; Hispanics; Muslims; gays and lesbians; and transgender people — as a whole, relative to whites." This makes no sense. A white Republican might feel similar distaste for black people and gays, but their dislike for gays cannot be seen to reflect a "belief that whites are superior to others." (I wondered if this was a piece of unfortunate editing, but the same way of talking comes and goes through other articles written about the study in different venues.)⁴ This example is extreme, but continuous with many others, especially in its lumping-together of religious and racial categories.

The racially-derived model also has the problem that it recognizes only two categories of response to difference: respectful engagement and intolerant rejection, along with minor variants of these. But when the issue is differences of belief, that is not the right model. With differences in belief, disagreement comes in many forms and degrees, reasons can be given, and minds can be changed. Judgment and evaluation are not out of place.

Muslim attitudes to homosexuality are beliefs, not aspects of a race-like category, and here there seems to be a good deal of intolerance. I don't have in mind so much the grandstanding imams on YouTube, but facts like the recent survey finding that 52% of British Muslims think that homosexuality should be illegal.⁵ There seems to be intolerance as a "center of gravity," and such intolerance is also likely to lead to catastrophic consequences from time to time, due to people on the fringes.

I recognize that opposition to homosexuality is far from unique to Islam, but Islam does seem to have the problematic combination of punitive antagonism to homosexuality in its central texts, together with widespread contemporary commitment to the truth and completeness of those texts with regard to central moral issues. This combination is one that has to be confronted and not evaded, and the evasions derive in part from the continuing application of a racially-derived model of difference to a doctrinal, non-racial phenomenon.

The evasion is present in the laboriously worded twitter posts and statements from mainstream politicians, especially those of the center-left, in the aftermath of Orlando.

³ "How Many People Support Trump but Don't Want to Admit It?" Thomas Edsall, *New York Times*, May 11, 2016. This is in other ways a good and thoughtful article.

⁴ [to come]

⁵ "Half Of All British Muslims Think Homosexuality Should be Illegal, Poll Finds," *The Guardian*, April 11, 2016.

Most, including President Obama, have avoided mentioning any connection between Islam and the murders.⁶ Barney Frank, the former US congressman, noted yesterday that it would irk his friends on the left when he made even a highly qualified connection between the two. Peter Singer – also hardly a man of the right – commented last year in *Project Syndicate* on the political avoidance of any association between current terrorist violence and Islam: "it is never a good idea for a politician to appear to be denying what we can all see before our eyes."⁷ Those denials open new paths for people who *will* acknowledge the obvious. Singer was writing in March last year, before Donald Trump was a serious political presence. Unfortunately, Trump will now reap great benefits from being the one politician to describe – in repugnant and clumsy terms – what we can see before our eyes.

The tragedy in Orlando will generate more discussion of Islam and homosexuality than we've been before – that seems inevitable as well as desirable. How will we discuss this topic, and all the topics around it? Viewing criticism of Islam in a race-derived way has outlived its usefulness. For me, Orlando is the end of acquiescence in the fiction.

⁶ *New York Times*, June 13: "Mr. Frank also said, commenting that this would irk his friends on the political left: "There is an Islamic element here. Yes, the overwhelming majority of Muslims don't do this, but there is clearly, sadly, an element in the interpretation of Islam that has some currency, some interpretation in the Middle East that encourages killing people — and L.G.B.T. people are on that list."

⁷ "Countering Islamic Extremism," *Project Syndicate*, March 10, 2015.