



First They Came for the Communists

First, they came for the communists, then the gays—now the Muslims?

SOURCE: AP/Steve Helber

By **Bishop Gene Robinson** | September 2, 2010

What is most disturbing about recent attacks by the political and religious right on Muslim Americans and their religion, Islam, is that it feels so depressingly familiar.

Christian and American conservative politicians and the religious right needed a new enemy that would mobilize their base in the 1990s when they were faced with the fall of the Soviet Union and the loss of “godless Communists” as the enemy of everything civilized. Televangelists needed a new “evil” to rail against—a threat dire enough to convince Social Security pensioners to send in their \$5 and \$10 checks and keep them on the air.

So gays became the new communists.

Jerry Falwell, head of the Moral Majority, and other religious right leaders deliberately determined that gays would be the new enemy. Their tactics are documented in a memoir, *Stranger at the Gate*, by Rev. Mel White, a former conservative who was Falwell’s ghost writer but lost his job after coming out as a gay man.

Rev. White writes:

During the 1990s, when the religious right shifted the focus of their fund-raising appeals from the 'evil communist empire' to the 'homosexual agenda for the destruction of America', I began collecting samples of their terrible lies against us. One of my early hate-mail 'treasures' was an emergency Jerry Falwell fund-raiser sent in an oversize envelope (five by fourteen inches) with a bold red banner across its face stating simply: 'Declaration of War...Official Notice'. Jerry Falwell was officially declaring war against gay and lesbian people.

Since that time we’ve seen this scapegoating’s devastating effects on the gay community. There’s been incitement of hate and discrimination to the enactment of the Defense of Marriage Act, active opposition to reforms such as the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” and well-funded efforts to forestall marriage equality.

Now, however, it appears that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people’s success in achieving equal rights in this country is impending and virtually assured. It makes me wonder, then, if a new “enemy” is now being chosen—Muslim Americans and Islam.

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The search for scapegoats is as old as humankind. The word “scapegoat” itself comes from the ancient Hebrew practice of symbolically placing the sins of people onto a goat, and then sending that goat and its attendant sins into the wilderness on Yom Kippur, presumably to perish. Such a practice is always easier than taking responsibility for the sins that belong at home and making the behavioral changes necessary to undo them.

I’ve been searching for a rational explanation for the fierce and widespread opposition to the so-called Ground Zero Mosque, which is neither at Ground Zero nor principally a mosque. Combined with the outrageous tenacity with which many hold the clearly erroneous belief that President Barack Obama is himself secretly a Muslim, there has to be more here than political expediency.

I fear we are seeing the next mass target for scapegoating. Will the obsession with Muslims “too near” Ground Zero disappear with the midterm elections? Sadly, I think not. Have political operatives and religious right leaders decided that Muslim Americans and Islam are the next scapegoat? That they are a sure vehicle for getting conservative voters to the polls and for opening the wallets of religious right contributors?

I hate to get caught up in conspiracy theories, but the current hate speech against Muslims that portrays them as dangerous to America, our security, and values has the ring of intentionality to it that I cannot shake.

Demonizing all Muslims based on the irrational and despicable actions of violent extremists would be sad enough if it were only a domestic problem. But the fact is we are handing Al Qaeda the most effective recruitment tool they could ever hope for. We live in a wired world where mosque burnings, attacks on Muslim Americans, and hate speech against Muslims by national politicians and preachers are instantly seen by millions around the globe. These attacks serve to convince the Muslim world that despite America’s rhetoric, we really are waging war on Islam and we really do hate Muslims.

Americans of all stripes—religious and nonreligious—need to stand up for our fellow Americans who are Muslim. Embedded in the Bill of Rights is the right to practice our religion. Countless patriots have fought and died for this freedom. When religious freedom and tolerance is attacked for some, it is threatened for all. All of us must work tirelessly to undo the suspicion, hatred, and xenophobia directed toward our Muslim fellow citizens.

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(continued below)



V. Gene Robinson was elected Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire on June 7, 2003, having served as Canon to the Ordinary (Assistant to the Bishop) for nearly 18 years. He was consecrated a bishop on All Saints Sunday, November 2, 2003, and was invested as the Ninth Bishop of New Hampshire on March 7, 2004.

Robinson graduate from the University of the South in 1969 with a B.A. in American studies and history. In 1973 he completed the M.Div. degree at the General Theological Seminary in New York, and was ordained deacon and then priest, serving as curate at Christ Church, Ridgewood, New Jersey.

He is the co-author of three AIDS education curricula for youth and adults, and has done AIDS work in the United States and in Africa (Uganda and South Africa). He has also been an advocate for antiracism training in the diocese and wider church. Robinson helped build the Diocese of New Hampshire's close working partnership with the New Hampshire Community Loan Fund, advocated for debt relief for the world's most impoverished nations, and lobbied for socially responsible investment within and beyond the church.

He is a past member of the Board of the New Hampshire Endowment for Health, which works for access to health care for the uninsured, and he currently serves as a trustee of the Church Pension Fund. He holds two honorary doctorates and has received numerous awards from national civil rights organizations. His story is featured in the 2007 feature-length documentary, "For the Bible Tells Me So," and his book *In the Eye of the Storm: Swept to the Center by God* (Seabury Books, New York) was released in 2008.

Bishop Robinson has been active particularly in the area of full civil rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. Working at the state, national, and international levels, he has spoken and lobbied for equal protection under the law and full civil marriage rights. He has been honored by many LGBT organizations for this work, including the Human Rights Campaign, Lambda Legal, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, GLAAD, and the Equality Forum.

Bishop Robinson was invited by Barack Obama to give the invocation at the opening inaugural ceremonies at the Lincoln Memorial on January 18, 2009.

Robinson enjoys entertaining and cooking, gardening, music, and theatre. He is the father of two grown daughters and the proud grandfather of two granddaughters. He lives with his husband, Mark Andrew, who is employed by the State of New Hampshire's Department of Safety.