

excerpted

# Dangerous Religion

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Which religion has proved the most violent and destructive in US history? The answer should not be a surprise.

**By Gary Laderman**

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## **What is the most dangerous religion in America?**

**A slightly loaded question that no one in their right mind would attempt to answer, no? But it is a question at the heart of the debates surrounding mosques and Muslims in America today. The opposition against building an Islamic center near the site where the World Trade Center once stood, and the growing outcry around the country about the creation of other Muslim places to gather and worship, suggests that many Americans are not afraid to answer the question without hesitation.**

**In the post-9/11 world we now live in, Islam poses the greatest threat to American lives and security; a nefarious, fanatical religion that can bring death and destruction to innocent people, that disregards our laws and codes of conduct, and that is prone to acts of violence beyond the pale of civilized society. At least this is the message we are hearing more and more frequently in the news, especially in the wake of President Obama's recent statements; views espoused by religious and political leaders as well as average American citizens fearful of Muslims abroad and at home.**

## **Hatred of Infidels, the Subhuman, the Different**

**But perhaps it might be worthwhile to take a step back from all the heated rhetoric and passionate emotions fueling the fires of hatred and distrust in the current moment and take a brief look into the past. In the pre-9/11 world and backward through time to the founding of this great country, a historical perspective leads to a very different picture about religious violence and what religion poses the greatest threat to American lives. Anyone who takes the time to research and reflect on the nation's past might be led to believe that Christianity has been the most dangerous and violent religion in the United States: that it is a religion inspiring bloodshed and discrimination, hatred and terrorist acts against people understood to be infidels, subhuman, or simply different.**

**"Christianity" of course is a meaningless label, as I've written before. Like "Islam" it is too broad a category to cover the radically diverse practices, beliefs, and interpretive communities associated with it. So let me be even bolder and say that Protestants, and even more specifically, Anglo-European Protestant men, would appear to be the most dangerous religious individuals in American history. Without question white Protestant males from the colonial era to the dawn of the twenty-first century have inflicted more pain, more suffering, more terror than any other individuals in this so-called "city on a hill."**

**This historical perspective is placed in sharp relief by a new book that coincidentally arrived in the mail as I was preparing to write this piece last week. *Religious Intolerance in America: A Documentary History*, edited by John Corrigan and Lynn S. Neal, is chock full of fascinating documentation pointing to this interpretation, providing evidence that throughout US history the perpetrators of religiously-inspired violence have usually been white Protestant men fearful of non-Protestant communities. It's an easy case to make with or without the book when commonly known events from historical eras are brought to mind:**

- In colonial America, Protestant men burned witches at the stake, hanged Quakers on the gallows, destroyed indigenous surrounding cultures, and supported the heinous slave trade bringing Africans to North America.
- In the early national period and through the antebellum era, white Protestant males continued the wanton devastation of Native American tribes as the American territories expanded; inflicted horrible suffering on slaves by tearing families apart, raping innocent women, and killing blacks as if they were not human beings; murdered Joseph Smith and harassed early Mormon followers; and discriminated against Catholics in both subtle and overtly hostile acts of violence.
- In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, men associated with Protestant churches espoused awful anti-Semitic views that led to the lynching of Leo Frank and a host of discriminatory practices against Jews, harassed freed blacks and others by wearing white hoods and engaging in despicable, cowardly, and murderous acts, and enacted numerous policies that forced Native peoples to convert to Christianity.
- From the early decades of the twentieth century on through to the end of the twentieth century, white Protestants made sure that Japanese Americans were placed in internment camps on the West coast, joined a variety of Christian militia movements spread across rural America that promoted violence against the federal government, and participated in a range of hate crimes against blacks, gays, and others deemed to be enemies worthy of discrimination and brutality.

#### Is it Fair to Generalize?

Throughout American history white Protestant men enjoyed privilege and opportunities not available to others, and asserted that the destiny of the nation belonged to them under the providential power of their God. And they had no qualms about creating laws to oppress those less fortunate or taking the law into their own hands to lash out against the perceived threats to their version of a Christian nation. Racist views, economic injustices, and political machinations were rationalized by religiously-inspired, divinely-sanctioned hatred emanating from the home, the streets, and even, at times, from the churches they attended.

Did every single white Protestant male share exactly the same perspectives on blacks, Native Americans, Catholics, gays, and others? Were all white Protestant men guilty of heinous actions based on the cruelties and violence perpetrated by segments of the Protestant communities? Is it fair to generalize about an entire religion by singling out the acts of specific individuals associated with that religion?

Using the same logic as those who group all Muslims under one America-hating banner, the answer would appear to be yes. And if we follow this same ignorant logic, it would indeed make sense to begin protesting the building of Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist churches near hallowed sites that are supposed to symbolize the highest ideals and values of the American experiment: religious freedom, opportunity for all, equality before the law, sacrifice for a greater good, and so on. Forget about diversity within white Protestantism—the Social Gospel and pacifists, or communitarian movements and Unitarianism—in this worldview.

But no one in their right mind would use the kind of simplistic, odious, ill-informed logic we hear so frequently in the news and originating from the blogosphere and mainstream media about Muslims. Muslim-Americans who worked and died in the World Trade Center, who are pillars of their local communities, who participate in significant interfaith efforts—all of these religious human beings are utterly and completely disregarded in the vile rhetoric spewing from those who oppose ensuring Muslims have the same rights as other Americans. Even white Protestant Americans who belong to the same religion as those in the past who have been killers, fanatics, and terrorists.

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