Breaking the peace

The Quebec City terrorist attack

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Introduction

The majority of Canadians were no doubt shocked to hear on 29 January 2017 that a lone gunman entered the Islamic Centre of Quebec in a suburb of Quebec City, Quebec, intent on killing Muslims. And he did. He opened fire with his long gun, murdering six Muslim men and injuring 19 others while they prayed in the Centre (Perreaux and Freeze 2017). By all accounts, he only quit shooting when he ran out of ammunition. The shooter was described by his friends as a moderate conservative who, over the past year, had become an apparent xenophobe and racist, one who overtly supported Donald Trump and far-right French politician Marine Le Pen (Dougherty 2017). In other circles, he was described as an extremist troll who frequently posted alt-right rhetoric on the Web (McKenna 2017). From these descriptions, it seems apparent that his violence was not random; nor was the time of his attack insignificant, coming as it did fast on the heels of Donald Trump’s inauguration as President of the United States. In light of Trump’s virulent Islamophobia and apparent fear of “Islamic terrorism”, it is tragically ironic that the first act of terrorism in North America after his election was perpetrated by one of his “fans” against their shared targets of opprobrium.

While such extremist violence is not something to which Canadians are accustomed, it is nonetheless possible to make some sense of how and why Quebec came to be the site of such a tragic event. A perfect storm of global, national, and provincial patterns conditioned an environment in which Islamophobia could grow to murderous proportions. In this chapter, I will unpack the ways in which global and “home-grown” xenophobia and anti-Muslim hatred coalesced to provide the climate for the elevated rates of anti-Muslim violence that culminated in the deaths of six men of peace. I examine, first, how Trump’s campaign rhetoric and subsequent policy directives have provided one level of influence. I follow that with consideration of the ways in which conservative politics at the national level in Canada and provincial level in Quebec provided fertile ground for his xenophobia and Islamophobia to take root here. The manifestations of culturally embedded Islamophobia are revealed in consistently negative polling around Islam, and high – and increasing – rates of anti-Muslim hate crime. Unexpectedly, I end the paper with cause for optimism. The impact of the Quebec shootings among diverse communities and among many political leaders has been to direct attention and resources to reversing the tide of hate.
The Trump effect

It is no coincidence that the explicitly anti-Muslim attack occurred shortly after Trump’s inauguration, and on the weekend that he imposed the entry ban on those arriving from seven “majority Muslim” nations. Almost from the outset of his campaign for leadership of the Republican party, Trump promoted a populist agenda shaped by misogyny, xenophobia, nativism, and anti-elitism. Arguably, however, he placed Islamophobia at centre stage. It became clear early on that this approach struck a chord with embattled and embittered elements of the nation, particularly white men who perceived a recent loss of privilege (Inglehart and Norris 2016). In a synergistic loop, Trump fed off the Islamophobia that he himself helped to exacerbate. Up to and even after his shocking victory over Democrat Hillary Clinton, Trump relied on political and policy discourse that separated “us” from “them”. By the time of the election, he had appeared to whip up such a fervour of anti-Muslim hatred that Islamophobic attacks were widespread across the US.

It is also important to note that Trump was not alone in his disparagement of Islam. His position was in fact strengthened by his opponents during the party leadership campaign. Giroux (2017, p. 31) summarizes a litany of anti-Muslim proposals, by which candidates attempted to outdo one another in their Islamophobic fervour:

Ben Carson announced that no Muslim should be allowed to assume the presidency. Jeb Bush refined this religious test by insisting that only Syrian Christian refugees and orphans fleeing from ISIS should be admitted to the United States. Marco Rubio has said that not only would he consider shutting down mosques, as would Trump, but that he wants to shut down “any place where radicals are being inspired”. Before he dropped out of the presidential race, Scott Walker said that only a handful of Muslims were moderates.

Cumulatively, these proscriptions created an environment in which Islamophobia was not just tolerated, but in fact promoted, opening up spaces for public expressions and performances of hatred and contempt. It did not take Donald Trump long to capitalize on the apparent support for his especially toxic brand of hatred. Inaugurated on 20 January, on 27 January he imposed the first of what would be several attempts to ban travelers from Muslim-majority countries. Widely seen as a targeted assault on the mobility of Muslims specifically, it was his first official policy to institutionalize Islamophobia. It is no mere coincidence that the murder of six Muslim men at prayer occurred just two days later. The shooter was allegedly an ardent follower of Trump, as well as France’s Marine Le Pen. His online activity indicates support for their anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy proposals. It is also telling that, first Trump offered no words of condolence for the murders, and second, that the only statement to come from the White House – from Sean Spicer – inexplicably used the attack to justify the ban. For Canadians, it was shocking that this deadliest North American act of anti-Muslim violence occurred in Canada. It was taken as evidence that normalized hatred had settled in not just in the US, but in Canada as well.

State hate

Porous borders are part of the explanation for the apparent upswing in Islamophobia in Canada. As consumers of American media, and as users of globalized social media platforms, we have been fed the same steady diet of Trump’s hyperbole. His Twitter feeds reach us; his sound bites have made front-page news in the Toronto Star and Globe and Mail; the Alt-right forums are
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accessible – and emulated – here. In short, hate that has flooded across the border to infect public discourse in Canada. Moreover, Trump’s political rhetoric of hate does not fall on deaf ears. Consider Gramsci’s (1971, pp. 181–182) assertion that the appeal of any rhetorical formation depends upon “previously germinated ideologies . . . [which] come into confrontation and conflict, until only one of them, or at least a single combination of them, tends to prevail”. Trump’s appeal to the people finds fertile ground in Canada. Neither the populism nor nationalism that allowed Trump’s victory are foreign to Canada. We must also look inwards to account for the ready uptake of “Trumpism” among an albeit small contingent of Canadians. His discursive and practical assaults merged with political strains of Islamophobia that had already emerged in Canada at the national level, and significantly, within Quebec specifically.

First, at the federal level Stephen Harper’s Conservative administration ushered in a turn to the right unlike any we have seen since at least the early 1900s. It is important to note that Harper emerged out of the Reform party, which had been modeled on the ultra-conservative wing of the Republican Party – akin to the Tea Party. The indicators of Harper as precursor to Trump are many and varied. Anti-democratic and anti-immigrant rhetoric and practice, and a retreat from the discourse of rights, for example, meant that Harper’s politics of fear mongering created spaces where it became acceptable to hate. Rhetorically, Harper became especially notorious for his vilification of Muslims, claiming that “Islamism” is the greatest threat to the West. After the “terrorist” attacks in Quebec and on Parliament Hill in 2014, Harper exploited the opportunity for fear-mongering, introducing Bill C-51 with the claim that

Violent jihadism is not just a danger somewhere else. It seeks to harm us here in Canada . . . through horrific acts like deliberately driving a car at a defenceless man, or shooting a soldier in the back as he stands guard at a War Memorial . . . They want to harm us because they hate our society and the values it represents.

During his last election campaign, Harper ratcheted up his xenophobia, pandering to our basest prejudices, which he deemed good campaign strategy. It was during that campaign, for example, that Harper called the wearing of hijab “offensive”, and said:

We do not allow people to cover their faces during citizenship ceremonies. Why would Canadians, contrary to our own values, embrace a practice at that time that is not transparent, that is not open and frankly is rooted in a culture that is anti-women.

Harper’s rhetoric was matched by his regressive social policy regime. His administration ushered in the shrinking of funding for human rights groups, the elimination of S. 13 hate speech protections, expanded surveillance powers, and increasing restrictions on immigrants and refugees (Mallea 2001; McDonald 2011). Consider the following sample of Harper’s policy initiatives targeting Muslims specifically:

• Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act (2015) – allows revocation of Canadian citizenship of those born outside Canada, or holding dual citizenship without judicial oversight for “national security” reasons.
• Oath of Citizenship Act (2015) – introduced at nearly same time as Quebec introduced Bill 62 (Religious Neutrality Act), both of which were intended to constrain religious observance.
Cumulatively, these strategies mapped out an agenda that seemed to hit a chord with Canadian voters. It coalesced into a populist movement with fear-mongering at its core (Chwalisz 2015; Prince 2015). The 2016/2017 race for the leadership of the Conservative party following Harper’s electoral defeat in 2015 saw Kellie Leitch poised to take on Harper’s mantle. Prior to the leadership race, while campaigning for her local seat – and while serving as Status of Women Minister – it was Leitch that announced the intent to create a tip line for reporting “barbaric cultural practices”. Early on in her leadership campaign she distributed a survey among her supporters asking “Should the Canadian government screen potential immigrants for anti-Canadian values as part of its normal screening for refugees and landed immigrants?” The space opened up by this question would become a defining issue for the race. Despite harsh criticism, she did not back down from this position. In fact, she defended it stating

Screening potential immigrants for anti-Canadian values that include intolerance towards other religions, cultures and sexual orientations, violent and/or misogynist behaviour and/or a lack of acceptance of our Canadian tradition of personal and economic freedoms is a policy proposal that I feel very strongly about.

(CBC News 2016)

Ironically, while Leitch has not explicitly stated what is meant by “Canadian values”, she has implied that “tolerance” is one such value – a sentiment that is belied by her positions. Emboldened by Trump’s success to the south, she appeared to “double-down” and in fact increase the intensity of her rhetoric during and immediately after his election. Interestingly, in the immediate aftermath of the mosque murders, a banner was unfurled outside of Leitch’s Collingwood, Ontario, office which read in part “hate puts us all at risk” (Toronto Star 2017a). Also calling for her resignation, the banner clearly suggests that her rhetoric formed part of the landscape that enables Islamophobic violence.

At the provincial level, Quebec has long been the “epicentre” for institutional challenges to Muslim identity. There is a lengthening history in that province that would restrict Muslim markers of identity. Beginning in the mid-1990s, there was considerable controversy around schools – and even the province’s largest teacher’s union – barring women and girls from wearing the hijab in school. The Reasonable Accommodation debates – some would say crisis – of the mid-2000s exacerbated the trend, such that many French speaking Quebecers feared that recognition of minority cultures had “gone too far” (Allan 2014, p. 17). Such targeted restrictions reached their zenith under then Premier Pauline Marois, who exploited the anxiety expressed among Quebecers. She first proposed her Charter of Values (originally Charter of Secularism) in 2012. The provision would have banned the wearing or display of religious symbols among public sector institutions. That the Christian crucifix would nonetheless still be allowed in public buildings highlights the selective nature of the proposal. The rhetoric surrounding the Charter was “dressed in the guise of narratives of gender equality and secular values” (Ameli and Merali 2014, p. 39). It would also claim to underpin “religious neutrality” while nonetheless “making allowance, if applicable, for the emblematic and toponymic elements of Québec’s cultural heritage that testify to its history”. As Goldman (2015, p. 55) observes:

The Charter thus demonstrates what is considered neutral. Western cultural norms are understood as neutral. Westernized bodies that do not threaten hegemonic whiteness are considered neutral. On the other hand, bodies that physically represent foreign cultures (read: non-white) are posed as offensive and furthermore, punishable.
Far from neutral, it was clear from the outset that the Charter was targeted at Muslims and their “failure” to have assimilated into the “distinct society” that is Quebec. Populist supporters drew on an array of stereotypes of Islam to defend the Charter, focusing especially on veiled Muslim women. Marois claimed that the hijab was an unequivocal symbol of women’s oppression; the Minister for Democratic Institutions argued that the ban was a necessary defence against the “Islamization of Quebec;” a television commentator said she wouldn’t trust a nurse wearing a headscarf; a popular actor/director stated that women who wore the headscarf were “insane;” and perhaps saddest of all, the former president of the Quebec Women’s Federation stated that she would change lines in order to avoid being served by a covered woman (Mathelet 2015).

It is no coincidence that right wing extremist groups informed by cultural nationalism are probably most visible in Quebec. More so than segments of the movement elsewhere in the country, Quebec hate groups define themselves through the lens of culture rather than race per se, and specifically Quebecois culture. Their rhetoric parallels that of Marois, focusing on the “threat” posed to the French language and culture by the increasing presence of immigrants and especially Muslims. A current indicator of this is the appearance in Quebec of a German based Islamophobic group known as Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West (PEGIDA) (Toronto Star 2015). One of the Quebec group’s members told the Toronto Star that, “the incompatibility of Islam with the West is flagrant and that’s the reason that PEGIDA and the Western patriots are rising up. It’s not just to counter Islam but to say that if Islam doesn’t reform itself, Islam needs to get out of the West” (Woods 2015).

Such was the immediate environment in which a young white male found permission to lay siege to a mosque during prayer, killing six men. Taking his cues from a broader culture that vilified and Othered Muslims, he sought to violently suppress the “threat” that was so widely identified in Quebec’s political climate. Religious leaders and politicians alike drew the connections between the extant social norms and the killer’s individual actions. The Canadian Council of Imams responded to the attack proclaiming that “Islamophobia has killed innocent Canadians.” MP Michael Chong similarly observed that “This mosque attack is no accident. It’s a direct result of demagogues and wannabe demagogues playing to fears and prejudices” (Kassam 2017). Exacerbating the political climate of Islamophobia are the media, who are also complicit in stoking the noted “fears and prejudices”.

Radio Poubelle

Many commentators have suggested that Arabs and Muslims, especially Arab Muslims, may represent the last “legitimate” subjects of slanderous imagery and stereotypes (Said 1997; Amiraux and Araya-Moreno 2014; Bonilla-Silva 2013; Helly and Dubé 2014). The widespread perpetuation of such caricatures – by the media and by public figures in particular – fuels sentiments of suspicion and mistrust by shaping public perceptions in less than favourable ways. Media assessments undertaken by the Canadian Islamic Congress (2004) and other authors (Stockton 1994; Biles and Ibrahim 2002; Morgan and Poynting 2012) consistently reveal such imagery associated with Muslims. There are few, if any, positive images of Muslims, Arabs or Middle Easterners generally. Rather they are portrayed collectively as wholly evil and warlike.

Among the potential effects of the tendency to devalue a group or social category is that it contributes to a culture that bestows “permission to hate”, indeed, permission to engage in hate crime. For example, a 2002 report remarked on the “startling similarity between media myths on Islam and Muslims and the hate-text of many documented anti-Muslim incidents” (Khan, Saloojee and Al-Shalchi 2004). In a 2002 nationwide survey of some 300 Canadian Muslims of South Asian, Arab, African and European background, CAIR–CAN found that 55% of respondents thought the Canadian media were more biased since 9/11. Moreover, work by Ismael and
Measor (2003), by Helly and Perry (2016), and by the Canadian Islamic Congress (2002, 2005) all point to the uneven distribution of media bias across news sources. For example, a survey of nine Canadian newspapers by the Canadian Islamic Congress (2005) noted an increase in anti-Muslim stereotypes after September 2001. “Negative or biased information on Islam” appeared 10 times more often than in the previous months in the Toronto Star, 18 times more often in The Globe and Mail and 22 times more often in the National Post. All of these authors single out The National Post as especially likely to engage in disparaging and inflammatory coverage of Islam, tending to emphasize extremist “tendencies”. More recently, Navigator Research found that, across Canadian mainstream media, 59% of news articles featuring Muslims were negative in tone. Ismael and Measor (2003) observe that, after 9/11,

The blend of the xenophobic fears of the “other”, and that of terrorism, provided media consumers in Canada with a clear path to the conclusion that Islam was a faith in which acts of unspeakable violence were acceptable and that terrorism was endemic to Muslim and Arab culture. This framed Arab and Muslim societies and individuals as somehow fundamentally different from the average Canadian. By refusing to represent the diversity of Islam as a faith, the obfuscation of its tenets, and through their lack of coverage of the articulated ideas of Muslims the world over endorsing peace and supportive of human rights, the media conducted reductive exercises of the highest order.

Quebec media have been especially complicit in these negative constructs of Islam. Indeed, following the murders in Quebec City, media have turned the mirror on themselves and their peers, admitting some responsibility for creating a toxic environment that has shaped Islamophobia in that province, what the Toronto Star (2017b) called “an atmosphere of suspicion and hostility toward Muslims”. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau also called both politicians and the media to account, remarking during one of the funeral services that “It’s high time those behind these messages – whether they are politicians, radio or TV hosts or other public personalities – realize the harm their words can cause” (Toronto Star 2017c).

So entrenched is xenophobia and Islamophobia in Quebec talk radio programming in particular that it has come to be known as radio poubelle, or trash radio. Potvin (2010) traces this to the religious accommodation debates of the mid-2000s, when media pundits led the way in reconstructing the conflict as a “social crisis” so as to polarize the French majority and ethnic and religious minority groups. Playing to notions of “privileges” accruing to minority groups, and the subsequent threat to Quebec values, the media succeeded in demonizing and vilifying Jews and Muslims alike. Islam, in particular was constructed – and misconstrued – as entirely incompatible with Quebec values of secularism, equality, and especially gender equity (Bakali 2015). Potvin’s (2010, p. 81) review of the media (mis)representation of accommodation, for example, found that over half of the media sources assessed highlighted “populist and (neo)racist discursive devices” such as us–them dichotomization, over-generalizing, and the promotion of French “victimhood”.

Given the breadth of these negative images, it is perhaps not surprising that almost one in five Muslims in Canada believes that most Canadians are hostile towards Muslims, with even higher proportions in Quebec (Environics 2006). And indeed, additional survey evidence would seem to support this.

**Popular expressions of xenophobia/Islamophobia in Canada**

Over the past ten or so years, annual surveys have shown that Canadians “do not feel comfortable” with people associated with Islamic culture. Also consistent has been the trend whereby
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these negative valuations are considerably higher in Quebec than other parts of the country. In July 2002, according to a CROP poll of people aged 16 to 35, 76% of Quebec respondents and 55% of other Canadian respondents felt that religions are sources of conflict between peoples, and 17% of the former and 13% of the latter felt that Islam fosters conflictual relations (Helly and Perry 2016). Moreover, in August 2002, 45% of Quebecers, 37% of Albertans, 33% of Ontarians and 22% of British Columbian residents agreed with the statement: “The September 11 attacks made me more mistrustful of Arabs or Muslims coming from the Middle East.” By November 2002, a survey by Maclean’s magazine, Global TV and The Ottawa Citizen indicated that 44% of Canadians wanted to see a reduction in immigration from Islamic countries (48% in Quebec, 45% in Ontario, 42% in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, 43% in the Maritimes, 39% in British Columbia, and 35% in Alberta). This trend continued in the following years. According to a Sun Media poll in December 2006-January 2007, 51% of Canadian insisted that they were not racist at all, but 47% confessed that they were, and while most Canadians polled held a high opinion of Italian, Asian, Jewish and Black communities, only 53% thought well of Arabs.

Moreover, Canadians have a more positive view of Christians and Jews than of Muslims. According to a July 2006 poll by the Association of Canadian Studies, 24% of respondents had a negative view of Muslims (compared with 10% having a negative view of Christians and 9% having a negative view of Jews). Two years later, another poll (Leger Marketing, September 2008) showed that 36% of Canadians had an unfavourable view of Muslims (increasing from 24% in 2006 and 27% in 2007). In April 2009, according to a Canada-wide poll by Angus Reid Strategies, 72% of Canadians had a favourable opinion of Christianity, 57% of Buddhism, 53% of Judaism, 42% of Hinduism, 30% of Sikhism, and only 28% of Islam (17% in Quebec) (Helly and Perry 2016).

More recent survey results available – from Maclean’s (Geddes 2013) – underscore the persistence of widespread antipathy toward Muslims, finding that 54% of Canadians held an unfavourable view of Islam, up sharply from 46% 2009. To put this in perspective, 39% held an unfavourable opinion of Sikhism; all of the other religions were regarded unfavourably by less than 30% of Canadians. Another indicator of the negative perception of Muslims is that those who found the thought of a son or daughter marrying a Muslim unacceptable rose to 32% from 24%; this attitude was much lower for a child marrying into any of the other religions was considerably lower (Geddes 2013).

The 2006 Environics poll sheds some light on the connection between the negative stereotypes described above and public opinion. It found that Canadians who believe that a growing sense of Islamic identity in Canada is bad for the country most often cite perceived poor treatment of women and girls (36%) in Islam as their main worry. An additional three in ten (30%) say that the possibility of violence perpetrated by Muslims is their main worry. These sentiments are confirmed by a 2012 study by Navigator Research, which also found that participants voiced their beliefs that Islam in Canada was connected to oppression of women, violent extremism, and an unwillingness to integrate into Canadian society.

Across studies, there are consistent patterns associated with the demographics of those who hold negative views of Muslims. The Environics (2006) poll highlights this, revealing that educational attainment is positively correlated with perceptions of Muslims, such that those with higher levels of education tend to hold more favourable views of Muslims. Young adults (18–29) are generally more accepting of diversity generally, and Muslims specifically, while those over 60 tend toward the opposite end of the continuum. Religion also has an impact, in that Catholics tend to hold the most negative views of Muslims. This is noteworthy given the high concentration of Catholics in Quebec. It is, then, no coincidence that the sorts of negative perceptions of Muslims noted above are especially elevated in Quebec.
As indicated above, the concerns around the growth of the Muslim population in Quebec has been consistently reflected in myriad public opinion surveys. It is no coincidence that these less than favourable public perceptions coincided with the proclamation of a 2007 Statement of Values in Herouxville, and another in 2011 in Gatineau which would ban religious symbols and attire. Ironically, at that time, there were no Muslims resident in Herouxville. Exclusionary practices such as these local policy responses are accompanied by actions in the streets in the form of anti-Muslim hate crimes.

**Anti-Muslim violence**

There are limited data on anti-Muslim hate crime in Canada, where hate crime data have been officially collected on an annual basis only since 2006. In a 2003 survey of twelve major police forces across Canada, 921 incidents of hate crime were recorded for 2001 and 2002; 57% of these were designated as motivated by race-ethnicity, and 43% by religion (in Silver et al. 2004). More recent data for 2014 by Statistics Canada (Allen 2015) show that hate crimes declined slightly from 2012 to 2014. However the number of police-reported hate crimes targeting Muslim-Canadians more than doubled over this same three-year period. In 2014, police forces across the country recorded 99 religiously motivated hate crimes against Muslims – up from 45 in 2012. That they are over-represented as victims of hate crime is suggested by the finding that Muslims represent 20% of all victims of hate crime motivated by religion, while representing only 3.2% of the population as of 2011 (Allen 2015). Added to this is the fact that 17% of racially motivated hate crimes were perpetrated against South Asians, and Arab/West Asians – ethno-racial groups typically perceived by the general population as likely to be Muslim. Indeed, approximately 90% of Muslims in Canada are also members of a visible minority group (ibid.): roughly a third of Canadian Muslims are of South Asian background, a third of Arab background and a third of other backgrounds. This ethnic diversity suggests that religion may elide with race/ethnicity in hate crime targeting.

Additional evidence of the risk of hate crime confronted by Muslims comes from a number of “unofficial” measures. For example, a survey of Canadian Muslims in 2002 by the Canadian Council on American–Islamic Relations (2002) found that 56% of respondents experienced at least one anti-Muslim incident in the twelve months since 9/11. The Canadian Islamic Congress (2002) noted a 1600% increase in the annual incidence of anti-Muslim hate crime reported to them in 2002, albeit from a low base of 11 cases in the year prior to 9/11. A decade later, in a study among Ontario and Quebec Muslims, Ameli and Merali (2014) found that 11% of respondents had experienced some form of physical assault. In 2013, The National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM), which has recently replaced CAIR-CAN, established an online hate crime reporting portal for targeted Muslims. The website maintains an ongoing count of such reported incidents (www.nccm.ca/map/#). Since its inception, the monitoring project has recorded dozens of hate motivated incidents ranging from verbal harassment to physical assaults to the destruction of personal and community property.

Perry’s (2015a, 2015b) pilot study in Ontario and Quebec offered preliminary insights into the patterns of victimization experienced by Muslims, as well as the subsequent impacts of these. The cumulative results from surveys, interviews and focus groups paint a picture of the nature and dynamics of harassment and violence experienced by Muslims in three cities (Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal) (Perry 2015a, 2015b). They study also explored what these experiences have meant for both individual victims and the broader Muslim community. Hate crimes are message crimes, intended to remind a community – not just direct victims – of their “place” within society. They are threats and actions that, as shown in the study, often render communities fearful and, thus,
hypervigilant. Hate crime can also invoke behavioural changes, wherein group members change their ways of being in the world, from changing patterns and routines, to changing expressions of Muslim identity. Yet on the positive side, such forms of violence can also mobilize individuals and communities against such attempts to silence them (Perry 2015a, 2015b).

The very mosque in which the murders occurred had itself been a frequent target of Islamophobic hate crime. Less than a year prior to the murders, a pig’s head was deposited on the front step during Ramadan, with a note that read “bon appetit”. Not long after that, local mailboxes were stuffed with pamphlets describing the mosque as a “hotbed of radicalism”. On a regular basis, graffiti littered the walls outside. Perhaps if local leaders had spoken out against this campaign of harassment earlier, the tragedy of 29 January might have been avoided.

One might have thought that the attacks in Quebec City would stall subsequent violence, that the shock of the shootings would be seen as too extreme even for extremists. Instead, the attack was followed by yet another uptick in anti-Muslim – and, ironically, anti-Semitic – violence in Quebec. It was as if the event galvanized or emboldened others into similar action – a call to arms, so to speak. Both law enforcement and community organizations noted a rash of anti-Muslim violence and property damage. In just the first three days after the killings, Montreal saw more than 20 incidents. In one of these, another mosque that had experienced previous incidents of graffiti and vandalism was pelted with eggs.

Sharing the pain

There are abiding lessons to be learned from the climate that inspired the murders in Quebec, in particular around public discourses that perpetuate negative perceptions of Muslims and the “Islamic threat”. Sadly, not everyone has taken the lessons to heart. The day after the six men were killed, Premier Couillard acknowledged that Quebec was plagued by the “demons” of “xenophobia, racism, exclusion”. Yet less than eight months later he would sign into law Bill 62 (an Act to foster adherence to State religious neutrality and, in particular, to provide a framework for requests for accommodations on religious grounds in certain bodies), banning the wearing of the niqab when accessing provincial services. And on the day of one of the largest gatherings of a coalition of far-right groups espousing exactly those demons, he had “no comment”. Moreover, the presence and activism of far right Islamophobic hate groups has grown dramatically over the course of 2017, with particular strength in Quebec. The fall of that year was punctuated by large rallies featuring a coalition of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim groups such as PEGIDA, Storm Alliance and the III%ers.

Nonetheless, there is reason for hope. The January shootings were followed by comforting signs of solidarity and community building across the nation. Multi-faith and multicultural marches and vigils marked the losses, reminding Muslims that they did not stand alone. The rallies noted above have been met with similarly vocal anti-racist organizing. Local, provincial and national leaders have begun to speak out against systemic Islamophobia. What distinguishes the current Canadian context from that of the US has been the resolve shown by Canadian media and politicians to counter the hatred. Federal and provincial governments are actively promoting anti-hate initiatives and programming. We have quite literally said “not in our town”. Politicians, businesses, private individuals have shared this message on billboards, protest signs, Facebook pages, Twitter feeds – anywhere they can. Perhaps most powerful have been explicit statements condemning the acts of hatred we have seen across the country. The province of Ontario has passed a motion which affirms its condemnation “against all forms of hatred, hostility, prejudice, racism and intolerance; rebuke(s) the notable growing tide of anti-Muslim rhetoric and sentiments; denounce(s) hate-attacks, threats of violence and hate crimes...
against people of the Muslim faith; condemn(s) all forms of Islamophobia”. At the federal level, MP Iqra Khalid introduced a similar motion, passed in March 2017:

That, in the opinion of the House, the government should: (a) recognize the need to quell the increasing public climate of hate and fear; (b) condemn Islamophobia and all forms of systemic racism and religious discrimination and take note of House of Commons’ petition e-411 and the issues raised by it.

Such a public statement sends a powerful message. It hints at an empowering climate of inclusion rather than a destructive climate of hate. In the months to come, observers and activists must persist in holding governments accountable to the promises embedded in these gestures. In particular, pressure must be brought to bear on Quebec’s leaders and media pundits to reverse their history of demonization of Muslim communities.

References


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