

Dangerous Speech

Americans have a constitutional right to free speech, and we have typically defended that right vigorously and at times with our own lives. But such hallowed rights are not absolute. No one has the right to yell “fire” in a crowded theater. Unfortunately, we are now experiencing a time in American history when the expression of inflammatory views—especially in regards to religion and race—is becoming a dangerous combination of intolerance and political ambition.

Examples are all too prevalent. Hundreds demonstrate against proposed mosques in New York and elsewhere. A Florida pastor threatens to burn the Koran. Radio entertainer Rush Limbaugh refers to the President as “Imam Hussein Obama.” Possible presidential candidate Newt Gingrich refers to the President as a “Kenyan anti-colonialist.” Should we be worried?

In a recent New York Times essay, conservative columnist Ross Douthat argues that liberals are paranoid about the paranoia they see on the political right. Recognizing that the left wing has had its own paranoid elements, he says we shouldn’t be alarmed about current rhetoric from the right. Instead, he suggests that we adopt libertarian Julian Sanchez’s idea that such views embody what he calls “symbolic beliefs” rather than “real convictions.” They’re held as “a kind of political and cultural statement,” rather than as beliefs one would act on. In other words, to say President Obama is a Muslim is merely to say that the President is somehow un-American. But whether this distinction between symbolic and real convictions even makes sense, the expression of a view with intent to foster or play on bigotry *is* morally repugnant.

Now we could be a bit more generous with people who hold such views, as columnist Nicholas Kristof suggests, and not label them bigots. Most don’t hate, he says; they’re afraid. Fear of difference, after all, is part of our human condition, as history reminds us all too well. In America, recall internment camps for the Japanese in WWII, for example. But fear of the other is not so distant from bigotry, and the bridge is easily crossed when factional leaders wish to take us there for their own purposes.

And that is exactly what we’re seeing, as such speech is not only not rejected by political leaders, but is also actually progressing into the political mainstream. A recent Newsweek poll found that *52 percent* of Republicans think it definitely or probably true that President Obama sympathizes with Islamic fundamentalists who want Sharia, or Islamic law, implemented around the globe. That’s a majority of a major political party. Anti-mosque rhetoric is coming from several of the possible candidates for president. Newt Gingrich said, [quote] “Nazis don’t have the right to put up a sign next to the Holocaust Museum in Washington.” [unquote] Never mind that there is already a mosque four blocks away, or that the people behind the building are strong advocates for women in Islam.

Which brings us back to free speech. Is what we’re seeing now simply an example of the diversity of opinion that makes America stronger, rather than weaker? Not at all. Philosopher John Stuart Mill argued that “a belief held independent of argument is held as prejudice.” Expression of prejudice divides a people and may cause even greater harm, especially in a political and social context that is already inflamed. While a strong defender of free speech, Mill argued that even opinions lose their protection when they are expressed in a way to instigate

harm. In short, it's one thing to speak an opinion; it's another to speak it to agitate an angry or fearful group. In fact, much of the current inflammatory speech is made or supported by those whose agenda is not the truth or the common good, but rather rallying a portion of the population for the sake of political power and mostly economic gain.

We should take no comfort that such views will burn out quietly while the truth prevails. Mill argued that [quote] "the dictum that truth always triumphs over falsehood is one of those pleasant falsehoods which men repeat after one another until they pass into commonplaces, but which all experience refutes. Men are not more zealous for the truth than they often are for error." [unquote]

America has a tradition of tolerance as well as intolerance. And in these times of cultural struggle, economic hardship, and wars, prejudicial expression should not be shrugged off as merely the "symbolic" beliefs of those with a certain political philosophy. We are right to be worried about that which promotes bigotry and intolerance. And that means speaking out in defense of freedom and toleration, whenever those values are threatened.

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