

Violence and Vandalism

Summary: Hate crimes are motivated by prejudice against a group of people, often characterized by religion or race. At their most extreme, hate crimes are deadly, though even smaller acts, like vandalism and other forms of property destruction, can cause significant harm to the targeted communities. Responses to hatred and tragedy are often opportunities for bridge-building and displays of solidarity; for example, this was the case when #ShowUpForShabbat trended online after a 2018 mass shooting at a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The violent expression of hatred toward people of a different religion, race, or ethnic background is not new on the American scene. With each phase of America's broadening diversity, there has been violence against those labeled as "different." Stereotypes, prejudices, hate crimes against individuals, and wider backlash against religious communities have not been uncommon. The most readily available targets, even of racially motivated violence, have often been religious institutions—synagogues and black churches, now mosques, temples, and *gurdwaras*.

Vandalism may be described as an act of violence—a hate crime—perpetrated against property and, by proxy, against a community. Black churches, synagogues, and Native American institutions have had a long history of the broken windows, graffiti, and arson attacks that are the signatures of hatred and bigotry.

Religious institutions are often the most readily visible targets of a much more diffuse animosity. A 1991 publication, *Racial and Religious Violence in America: A Chronology*, listed 650 pages of acts of violence "perpetrated on the grounds of racial or religious prejudice from the discovery of North America to modern times." There was an act of arson at a Hasidic school in Brooklyn in 1982; a synagogue bombed in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1984; a synagogue pipe bomb explosion in Northbrook, Illinois in 1985; a black church attacked in Alton, New York in 1989; a Korean church vandalized in Anaheim, California in 1990; a black church burned in St. Louis in 1989. Between 1992 and 1996, a spate of attacks on African American churches resulted in more black churches being burned in four years than in the whole of the Civil Rights movement. Over a decade later, a 2008 Hate Crime Survey by Human Rights First documented over 60 cases of violence and vandalism against Jewish homes and cultural centers in recent years, including attacks on Holocaust memorials.

The tiny Cambodian Buddhist community in Portland, Maine had taken several years to secure its first temple, which it called Watt Samaki, or “Unity Temple.” But in August 1993, the door was hacked with an ax, the contents of the Buddha hall strewn about the yard, and everything of value destroyed or stolen. “This is why my tears keep dropping when I talk about the vandalism of the Watt Samaki with friends and caring people,” said member Pirun Sen. “It is a small house, but these people reminded me to take care of Watt Samaki as if it were diamond and gold.” The incident—heartbreaking for the struggling Khmer community in Portland—was added to a growing list of vandalism attacks directed against America’s newest religious traditions. In 1983, a small rural Buddhist community in Rockford, Illinois was the target: the fenced farmhouse that had become a Lao Buddhist temple was partially destroyed by a fire suspected as the work of arsonists. In 1986, in separate incidents, the temple was sprayed with rifle fire and pipe bombed. “Because the monks spoke little English, their cries for help were ignored,” remembers Stanley Campbell, Rockford’s Urban Ministries director at the time.

Like the Cambodian Buddhists in Maine or the Laotian Buddhists in Illinois, other newcomers on the American religious scene have also been targets. On February 8, 1983, a headline in the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* read, “Vandals toss paint, smash holy statues in Hindu Temple.” The new temple, built in a residential area in Monroeville, had been broken into, and vandals smashed five of the images of the Deities and tore up the sacred Guru Granth Sahib of the Sikhs which had a place on a side altar. Across the main altar was scrawled the word “Leave.” In 1987, vandals attacked the newly built Meenakshi Temple in the Houston suburb of Pearland, where dozens of the foot-high ornamental spires that added elegance to the roof of the temple were broken off and smashed on the walkway below. The spires were the work of Hindu craftsmen who spent many months on the temple’s ornamentation. In 1989, the Bharatiya Temple in Troy, Michigan was attacked on the anniversary of Kristallnacht, the day Nazis vandalized synagogues and smashed the storefront windows of Jewish merchants all over Germany. In 2011, the Pittsburgh Hindu community found themselves victim of yet another violation, when four men robbed Hindu practitioners at a Penn Hills temple. On New Year’s Day 2012, a lone arsonist in New York attacked a Muslim-owned convenience store, an Islamic cultural center, a Hindu home gathering, and the home of an African American Christian couple all in one night, throwing Molotov cocktails into the windows of each building.

Construction on a mosque in Yuba City, California was almost finished when it was destroyed by fire on September 1, 1994. The electrical wiring had not yet been installed in the building when it went up in

flames, and the five-alarm fire was determined to be of suspicious origin. This was only one of a number of attacks on American mosques, some of which seem to be provoked by world events. In 1985, for example, the Dar Es Salaam mosque in Houston was firebombed. Sayed Gomah, President of the Islamic Society of Greater Houston, speculated at the time that the attackers had acted in retaliation for the taking of forty hostages on TWA Flight 847 by Lebanese Shi'ite Muslims. Arson attacks against mosques in places like Joplin, Missouri and Toledo, Ohio made national news in 2012. In the Toledo, Ohio case, Randolph Linn—an ex-Marine and truck driver—drank 45 beers, saw an image of a wounded soldier on Fox News, and spontaneously decided to drive over 80 miles to the Islamic Center of Toledo, where he used burning gasoline to cause over one million dollars in damage.

American Muslims launched the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) in 1994 to document and investigate such incidents. In 2012, CAIR released its annual report report highlighting the spike in anti-Muslim incidents during Ramadan of that year. The Southern Poverty Law Center, a civil rights think tank, reported that the number of anti-Muslim hate groups in the United States tripled between 2010 and 2012.

However, the chasms opened by hate crimes often become the sites of new bridge-building. Sometimes incidents of violence and vandalism become the tragic occasions for knitting together a wider community. For example, in the aftermath of the Pittsburgh incident in 1983, Swami Chidananda of the Hindu-Jain Temple sent a letter of friendship to everyone in the neighborhood after the vandalism at the temple. At Christmas and Easter, he sent flowers and baskets of fruit. He started yoga classes at the temple as well. “People began to get to know us and discovered we’re not so different,” he said. “We are not alligators or something to be afraid of.”

When the Islamic Center of the South Bay in Lomita, California was struck by vandals twice in 1986, leaders of the Muslim community decided to become active in interfaith activities. They reached out to the South Bay Interfaith Clergy which, at that time, included only Christians and Jews. Similarly in DuPage County, Illinois, the Islamic community became active in the DuPage Interfaith Resource Network when the mosque in Villa Park was repeatedly attacked with graffiti. Said one of the members, “Every time there was an uproar in the Middle East or a plane hijacking, paint would be thrown on our cars while we were inside praying or there would be graffiti on the building. We wanted to participate in

the Interfaith Network because we felt we were not doing justice to the people we lived among in order to dispel their misunderstanding of Islam.”

In 1990, Boston’s oldest Islamic center, located near the same Quincy shipyards that had employed Muslim workers from Lebanon early in the century, was devastated by a three-alarm fire during the holy month of Ramadan. It was a shock not only to the Muslim community, but to the whole metropolitan area. The Massachusetts Council of Churches responded swiftly. Diane Kessler, then executive director, said, “This is yet another tragic reminder that the whole community must be ever-vigilant to safeguard the freedom of worship of all religious groups, to confront and condemn any act which stems from hatred and religious intolerance. When part of the community is scorned, all are diminished.”

In 1991, every window of the West Springfield, Massachusetts mosque was broken; in 1992, one of its leaders was hit with stones as he arrived at the mosque for evening prayers during the month of Ramadan. The Springfield newspaper found out about this incident and published a story with the headline “West Side Mosque Pelted by Stones.” For many who read the article, it was the first they knew of a Springfield mosque. The minister of the neighboring Methodist church came to the mosque for the first time to ask how he could help. The president of the Springfield Council of Churches called the mosque, called the television station, and brought people from the churches to visit. A local rabbi came forward on television and said that whenever there is a crime of hatred, Jews must speak out forcefully.

After violence and vandalism struck Portland’s Cambodian Buddhist Unity Temple, the community moved to a new site in rural Buxton, Maine, where they have continued to struggle with the opposition of a few neighbors. Now, some twenty years later, there is a much stronger civic consciousness of Portland’s diverse communities. For the Cambodian New Year in April 2012, for example, Maine schoolchildren learned about Cambodian and Cambodian American history and religious identity. The students drew New Year’s cards for Cambodian families and created paper lotus flowers as gifts for the Buxton, Maine temple.

On a Sunday morning in August 2012, shots rang out inside a *gurdwara* in Oak Creek, Wisconsin leaving six worshippers dead and four others wounded before the gunman took his own life. As news spread about the tragedy and more information came to light about the gunman’s ties to white

supremacist organizations, Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike mobilized. Visitors made their way to *gurdwaras* in record numbers to show their support as the Sikh community emphasized that their doors had been and would continue to be open. In Milford, Massachusetts, for example, over 300 people gathered for a service and candlelit vigil at the *gurdwara*. The evening included messages of support and condolences from representatives of local Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu groups. Just over two weeks later, more than 1500 people gathered at Trinity Church in downtown Boston for a service of solidarity hosted by the Islamic Council of New England, the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston and the Massachusetts Council of Churches featuring Sikh musicians and a *langar* meal organized by local Sikh communities.

Again and again, Americans have struggled to respond meaningfully to violence, particularly gun violence, in religious spaces. Three years after Oak Creek, a white supremacist killed nine worshippers at the historically black Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. That shooting was the deadliest at a house of worship in the United States—until two years later, when a gunman in Sutherland Springs, Texas fatally shot 25 people at a Baptist church.

In 2018, violence motivated by racial and religious hatred broke out again at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where 11 people died at the hands of a gunman who had repeatedly expressed antisemitic and anti-immigrant views online. As in the wake of other massacres, nationally and globally, people worked to counter religious animus and to support the communities that had been attacked. The hashtag #ShowUpForShabbat trended, encouraging Jewish and non-Jewish people around the world to stand in solidarity with Pittsburgh’s Jewish community and attend Shabbat services the next week. The Friday night following the attack, synagogues around the country were filled with Jews and non-Jews, praying and mourning together.

The destruction of buildings and attacks on worshipers are extreme examples of the impact of religious intolerance and prejudice on American society. These tragedies illustrate how pressing the need for pluralism is when lives are at risk—and the instances of interfaith engagement and activism that emerge in response to these tragedies exemplify pluralism in action.