

Stereotypes and Prejudice

Summary: Waves of immigration throughout the history of the United States contributed to the nation's religious diversity, but minority religious groups have long faced misconceptions about their beliefs and practices, often combined with outright bigotry. Stereotypes, the "pictures in our heads" of other groups of people, can have social and legal consequences. This occurred when Sikhs were assaulted in the wake of 9/11, and when synagogues or other religious buildings are vandalized in acts of hatred.

The newsman Walter Lippman spoke of stereotypes as the "pictures in our heads," the sketchy and distorted images created by one group to describe, label, and caricature another. People "known" through stereotypes do not have the opportunity to define themselves, but are defined by others—often negatively. Prejudice is this prejudgment of people and groups on the basis of these images.

The roots of prejudice in both ignorance and fear have long been explored by social scientists and psychologists, some of whom study its extreme expressions—the slurs and epithets called "hate speech" and the violence called "hate crimes." Both prejudice and stereotyping have a long history in America. But just as long is the effort to overcome them.

European settlers established racist systems that relied on the dehumanization of Native Americans and Africans to justify genocide and slavery. Racial prejudice and stereotypes persist, and continue to affect American culture and politics. Additionally, immigrants of various European backgrounds held negative images and demeaning racial, religious, and cultural stereotypes of one another as well—whether Anglo-Saxons, Irish, Italians, Poles, or Swedes. And prejudice often shaped the attitudes of all peoples of European descent toward newcomers from Asia.

Religion has often been a factor in stereotype and prejudice as the key marker of "difference." In Billings, Montana, for instance, the *menorahs* in the windows of Jewish homes during Hanukkah made them the targets of antisemitic attacks in 1993. A decade earlier in New Jersey, the dot (*bindi*) worn on the forehead by many Hindu women stood for the strangeness of the whole Indian immigrant community in the eyes of a racist group who called themselves the "Dot Busters." All South Asian immigrants were the target of attacks during the 1980s—not just Hindus in particular. This was clear in the shouts of those who screamed "Hindu, Hindu" as they beat Navroze Mody to death in Jersey City in 1987, conflating race, religion, and culture in one cry of hatred.

These shouts—and the tragedy that accompanies them—echoed in the aftermath of 9/11. Balbir Singh Sodhi, a turban-wearing Sikh, was shot and killed outside of his Mesa, Arizona gas station because he “looked like a terrorist.” His murder was the first reported hate crime after 9/11 but it was, disturbingly, not the last. In November 2009, a Greek Orthodox priest in Tampa, Florida, was beaten with a tire iron when a United States Marine Corps reservist mistook him for an Arab Muslim. In August 2010, a taxicab driver in Manhattan was stabbed in the face and throat when his passenger discovered he was a Muslim. On August 5, 2012, a man with known white supremacist ties opened fire at a *gurdwara* in Oak Creek, Wisconsin during Sunday morning worship, leaving seven people dead, himself included. In December 2012 in Queens, Erika Menendez pushed Sunando Sen, an Indian American Hindu, into the path of an oncoming subway train. “I pushed a Muslim off the train tracks because I hate Hindus and Muslims,” she said. “Ever since 2001 when they put down the Twin Towers, I’ve been beating them up.” Sen was killed instantly.

American history has seen many episodes of destructive religious stereotyping, prejudice, and violence, beginning with the Anglo-Saxon newcomers who saw Native Americans as “pagans” with no religion at all. Many native peoples remain sensitive to this negative image: Anne Marshall, a Creek and a former executive in the United Methodist Church says, “Our native traditions are not pagan, they are sacramental. They have allowed our people to survive for five hundred years, no matter what was done to us. But people don’t even classify our religion as a religion, along with Hinduism and Islam.” The use of rituals by sports fans to cheer on teams named after Indian mascots is likewise telling of the persistence of stereotypes. According to Tim Giago, an Oglala Lakota activist and former Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, such actions “insult the traditions, culture and spirituality of the First Americans.”

Anti-Catholic prejudice in America began in the colonial period with the Puritans, who maintained the anti-Catholic attitudes of the English Reformation. In the 19th century, the growth of the American Catholic church, increasing its population with immigrants from Ireland, Italy, and Eastern Europe, set in motion a new wave of anti-Catholic sentiment. Catholics were stereotyped as “subversive,” suspected of being more loyal to Rome than America. In 1834 a Protestant mob burned a Catholic convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts, and the “Know-Nothing” party of the 1850s, with its virulent anti-Catholic rhetoric, elected candidates to office. Even during the 1960 Presidential campaign of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the image of the American Catholic as subservient to the authority of the Pope—and therefore

potentially un-American—lingered in some minds. Kennedy’s election was a landmark in the effort to lay many of these stereotypes to rest.

Anti-Catholicism was often linked to antisemitism. In the 1920s both Jews and Catholics came under attack from the newly reorganized Ku Klux Klan. The KKK’s publication, *The Fiery Cross*, claimed “Jews dominate the economic life of the nation, while the Catholics are determined to dominate the political and religious life. The vast alien immigration is, at the root, an attack upon Protestant religion with its freedom of conscience, and is therefore a menace to American liberties.” The persistence of antisemitism is a sobering fact of American life, made tragically evident in October 2018 when 11 Jews were shot while attending Shabbat services at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The attacker had expressed antisemitic comments online before his violent attack, and his act of domestic terror was the deadliest attack on the American Jewish community in U.S. history.

Despite this—and many other—act of violence and hate, there is ample evidence of efforts to protect the rights of religious minorities and to educate others. In September 2010, Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) and the feast Eid al-Fitr (concluding for Muslims the holy month of Ramadan) converged the day before the ninth anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks. Rabbi Mark Schneier and Imam Shamsi Ali drew from the connection a call to action for a nation that was wracked by vitriolic commentary about the proposed building of Park51, a Muslim community center in Lower Manhattan (dubbed by opponents as the “Ground Zero Mosque”). In the *Washington Post*’s “On Faith” blog, Schneier and Ali wrote: “If we can rise to the occasion at this fraught moment, our two communities can play a significant role in stopping the disturbing spread of bigotry and intolerance in this country.”

Hate crimes against African Americans, fueled by racial stereotypes, have cast the longest shadow—from the overt brutality of slavery to the many forms of discrimination, prejudice, and racism that persist in American society today. The focus of anti-black prejudice has clearly been race, not religion, for most blacks came to share the dominant religion, at least until the resurgence of African American Islam in the 1930s. However the term “Black Muslim” coined in the 1960s engendered a powerful image that combined two largely negative stereotypes in one.

The Black Muslim movement had its own negative image of whites. The “white devil” was seen to be a weak and deviant species, genetically degenerate, while the original man, the first to walk the earth, was

black. In the last decades of the 20th century, the use of strong antisemitic language by some leaders within the Nation of Islam fueled a bitter war of words between African American and Jewish leaders, both sides enraged and hurt by the barbs of the other. Yet in 2011, Laila Mohammed, daughter of the late Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, joined several other Muslim leaders who visited Nazi concentration camps in issuing a statement condemning attempts to deny the Holocaust and vowing to fight injustice.

Muslims are especially vulnerable to stereotypes that so readily pair the word “Muslim” with “fundamentalist,” “terrorist” or “holy war.” As Mary Lahaj, a third generation Muslim American, explains, “Muslims are stereotyped as terrorists, fanatics. These kind of labels, I would say, dehumanize us. This means that you literally don’t look at the Muslim as another human being.”

In 1994, when a Muslim woman in Gaithersburg, Maryland found her car marked with a swastika, an official from the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee explained to a reporter from the Washington Post that “underneath hate crimes lies a whole culture of prejudice.” In his view, the way to combat hate crimes was to get involved in the community, for people are less likely to fear or hate the familiar. However, the Muslim woman did not agree with this analysis. She had indeed gotten involved in the community and in the school, and had worked to get Ramadan recognized as a school holiday for Muslim children. Was she the target of attack because she hadn’t gotten involved, or because she had?

After the 1995 bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, the Council on American Islamic Relations compiled a record of more than 200 incidents in which Muslim families and centers experienced harassment because of the mistaken assumption, broadcast only for a few minutes, that the bombing was linked to “Middle-Eastern-looking” men. In point of fact, while the perpetrators of the attack were not Muslim, there were Muslim firemen involved in the rescue efforts, Muslim doctors working in the city’s emergency rooms, and Muslim organizations donating money and time to the relief effort. Similarly, Navinderdeep Nijher, a surgeon, recounts his experience as a Sikh wearing a turban in New York City after the September 11th attacks. Despite being a first responder to Ground Zero just hours after the planes hit the World Trade Center, Nijher recounts several instances of heckling as he and his roommate made their way home. As filmmaker Valarie Kaur documents in *Divided We Fall: Americans in the Aftermath* (2008) across the city and around the nation experienced an increased number of attacks, including several murders, in the days, weeks, and years after September 11th, 2001.

Ignorance is certainly part of prejudice, as social psychologists affirm. Lata Venkataraman, a Hindu of Boston, explains: “People have a prejudged opinion about the other culture. Just seeing you, they already know who you are. Even though they never want to take the time to really know who you are.” Scholar Paul Rutledge’s research on the Vietnamese community in Oklahoma City involved recording the comments of neighbors of one of the city’s Vietnamese temples. Both their lack of knowledge and their negativity are clear. An older man admitted, “People here have given them lots of trouble. We don’t like them practicing that funny religion.” The mother of two elementary school children said, “The kids went down there a couple of times until I knew they were worshipping those statues. I don’t want my kids around that stuff.”

Stereotypes are often linked to words or phrases which allow speakers to conjure specific images in the minds of their audience by employing “coded language” or “dog whistles.” Islamophobia, for example, is often expressed using rhetoric that provokes anxiety about “Sharia law” instead of about individual Muslims. Legislators in Missouri and Kansas, among others, have gone so far as to try to explicitly ban “Sharia law” in their states. Some protestors opposed to the construction of Park51 wore t-shirts that read “No Sharia in America.” Though this rhetoric is concerned only with an abstract idea, it has the effect of bolstering fear of Muslim immigrants and strengthening stereotypes.

But the new and negative “pictures in our minds” are not the whole story. One of the most remarkable movements of the past several decades has been the concerted effort to build bridges of understanding and cooperation across the chasms created by mutual prejudice and ignorance. In Washington, D.C. the Metropolitan Washington Interfaith Conference has drawn from thirty years of experience and created three program centers that aim to advance justice, build community, and nurture understanding. In Chicago, the Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions extends its reach to a national and international audience through webinars on topics such as “10 Strategies to Respond to the Rising Hate in the U.S.” and “A Holiday Sermon for Every Faith: Tools for Teaching Tolerance.”

Meetings between Jews and Muslims, including African American Muslims, are increasing. As Rabbi Herbert Bronstein and Imam W. Deen Mohammed embraced in a 1995 interfaith meeting in Chicago, they made clear that a new day starts with personal contact, the face-to-face recognition of mutual humanity and mutual concern. On Long Island, where Muslims and Jews began meeting together in the early 1990s in a concerted effort to build relationships, Dr. Afra Khan, a local pediatrician, expressed the

view of many: “It has been wonderful to get to know these people and see how warm and friendly they are,” he said, “I used to think that all Jews were against Muslims, but now I see that is untrue.”

Learning what it’s like to be marginalized and seen only for one’s racial or religious identity is one of the lessons of a remarkable summer camp program. In dozens of cities all across America, “Camp Anytown” brings high school students from different cultural, racial, and religious backgrounds together for an intensive week devoted to grappling with their differences. Whether in New York, Nevada, Oklahoma, or Tennessee, Camp Anytown trains young people to recognize and overcome stereotypes and prejudice.