

Reflecting on the issue of hate crimes



I chose to look at hate crimes as my topic for this reflective essay in the wake of the Christchurch shootings where 50 people lost their lives as a result of the actions of a self-described ecofascist and ethno-nationalist terrorist. The man who committed these crimes was a 28-year old Australian man by the name of Brenton Tarrant who was a known white supremacist. As a Muslim who was born in Australia, feeling unsafe and un-accepted was never a big issue for me as I embraced Australian culture and was therefore able to feel at home in what I perceived to be a socially cohesive society.

The Christchurch shooting has prompted me to become invested in this matter and upon reflection in the face of this massacre I reluctantly have to concede that discriminatory behaviour towards Muslims is an issue which had taken root long before the Christchurch events. Public expression against Mosques being built in communities and even the controversy surrounding having the Burka banned in Australia are some of the examples which demonstrate that social issues are prevalent. Although they are not in the same category as hate crimes they can be considered as the seed which grows into more serious problems.

Hate crimes are defined as a criminal offence against a person or property motivated in whole or in part by an offender's bias against a religion, race, sexual orientation, disability or ethnic origin (Stotzer & Hossellman, 2012). When considering the Christchurch shooting it can be clearly denoted as a hate-crime being committed based on the criminal attitude directed towards Muslims where 50 people were murdered. Negative attitudes towards Muslims including hostile feelings, social exclusion, suspicion and discrimination are all encompassed within the denotation of Islamophobia

(Hassan & Martin, 2015). To understand why Islamophobia is an issue it is first important to explore what has contributed to its notoriety.

As demonstrated in the week 4 material relating to the Apex gang, the media's power to influence societies perception on an issue is largely a cause for concern among the minority groups being targeted. In this example, like the Sudanese youth being targeted, Muslims encounter the same problem where they are portrayed through dangerously stereotypical and often misrepresented light. Admittedly, reporting's in the media where headlines are made about Radical Muslims have truth behind them as there have no doubt been occurrences of terrorist acts carried out by Muslims, the most noteworthy would be the attacks on the World Trade Centre on September 11th, 2001. Following the widespread media coverage of these terror attacks the number of instances of racial vilification of Muslims sharply increased in Australia and largely the West, as the media created a pattern where the terms ' Arab' or ' Muslim' were strongly connected with ' Terrorist' (Poynting & Noble, 2004). This would then generate public discrimination of Muslims and essentially widespread Islamophobia, where accounts of Muslims being assaulted also increased as they were the target of anti-Muslim prejudice (Poynting & Noble, 2004). Therefore, the medias role in perpetuating hate crimes can be shown as they take an issue, paint an exaggerated violent narrative and simultaneously make inaccurate generalisations connected to a target group which inevitably gives rise to violence.

Following the Christchurch shootings, Fraser Anning an Australian senator came out and publicly made links between Muslims immigration and

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violence as he was quoted saying that the real cause of bloodshed on New Zealand streets was the result of an immigration program which allowed Muslim fanatics to migrate to New Zealand. Now it is important to note that Senator Anning was heavily criticised in the media for his comments and was even accused of stoking extremism by spreading hatred and turning Australians against each other. Despite the strong backlash following these remarks, in a way the damage was already done, and what hate speech like this does is widen the already vast gulf between the ideological understandings of Muslims and non-Muslim populations. Fears concerning Islamophobia have always been prevalent, and the cause of this may not be solely due to the medias influence but also social issues which may occur as a result of different cultural responses.

Being vilified by the media and by members of the host country would naturally trigger a defensive response from the Muslim communities where they themselves may fear for their safety and as a result engage in Xenophobic behaviour. This type of behaviour can be demonstrated through social distancing which is characterised by the lack of personal and social relations that people have with members of different groups in society (Hassan & Martin, 2015). Apart from media attention another contributing factor to this separation would be government policies which exercise the monitoring and surveillance of social activities concerning Muslim groups with the interest of preventing negative outcomes such as the occurrence of terrorist attacks (Karimsha, Chimen & Skrbis, 2014). Muslims, in response to being targeted by the media and policy makers, may begin to unite within their own communities and what this does is create a malevolent image that

they are invading or taking over. This behaviour has been shown to incite manifestations of anti-Muslim prejudice among the general public including actions such as mosque protests and vandalisms with the fear that the Muslim community are scheming to carry out malicious actions (Lean, 2014). The behaviour shown by both Muslims and non-Muslims is a natural social reaction to difference, where misunderstanding and cultural barriers can lead to more serious issues such as hate crimes (Lean, 2014).

It was on beliefs such as this that Brenton Tarrant carried out his violent actions as he went on a personal crusade to remove all non-European immigrants who were “invading his land”. This tragic response contains its own fundamentally complex issue which can again be partly attributed to media influence. The media again plays into this in that once they have painted a violent narrative for Muslims they turn around and denigrate those people who are voicing their concerns about aspects of Muslim Ideology they find troubling and as such are labelled as hateful extremists. Thus, people feel personally attacked and this may reinforce a stronger stance for their beliefs which essentially acts as a catalyst that turns people against one another.

Ultimately, taking all of these factors into consideration should we really be surprised that these issues in society give rise to ecofascist and ethno-nationalist terrorists? Even when trying to understand what contributes to Islamophobia, it is a reprehensible concept which was formulated for ideological usage and applied to political conflicts between different identity groups. It is a word which has manipulation built into its structure so when it is coupled with media outlets and politicians who point out the cultural

differences of Muslims and the host nation then it will inevitably lead to conflict on both sides. Brenton Tarrant was largely a product of his own environment where his outright hatred towards Muslims was fanned by political dissent and media discourse.

Taking all of this into account I personally don't think that it is as simple as saying cultural appropriation and mutual understanding is the solution to bridging communities together and eradicating hate crimes. In an idealistic scenario there has to be a medium in which Muslims respect cultural norms and make an effort to be engaged in the wider community while non-Muslims don't expect Muslims to fully conform and adopt different identities.

However, it is unrealistic to expect a nation to be completely uncompromising in the rejection of racism and hate speech, because what makes a socially cohesive society is the ability to voice personal concerns over issues. That being said perpetuating and exaggerating issues in a sinister context will not help solve the issue of hate crimes in a peaceful and civil manner.

After exploring hate crimes in more depth I am left conflicted because although I have a greater understanding of the topic I also know that there are so many more factors beyond what I have discussed that play a part in creating these issues. More importantly, what researching this topic has allowed me to do is put my own bias aside and realise that the issues of hate crimes don't solely lie with anyone who opposes Islam, but rather if any solution is to be found then both parties must accept responsibility and begin to move forward.

References

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