

The Risk Professional: USA fails to act on anti-Islam preacher

In February this year, The University of California, Irvine (UCI) arrested eleven people who were suspected of disrupting a speech given by Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren. This week a radical, nominally Christian, cleric is inciting racial hatred by declaring he will stage "Burn a Koran" day on 11 September, yet the authorities are doing nothing to stop him. Surely it can only end in tears, says Nigel Morris-Cotterill

When a college blog reported on the events at UCI, dozens of comments were posted, mostly attacking the students who were arrested declaring that they were against freedom of speech or the opposite: i.e. using the right of freedom of speech to protest against the Ambassador's appearance. . Examples: "Just another example of how these people use "Freedom of Speech" as an excuse for their rude, disrespectful behavior. (sic)" and "UCI should not tolerate students that block our First Amendment rights, especially when they are invited guests on campus."

The First Amendment is the refuge of all extremists in the USA. They claim it allows them to express whatever outrageous views they hold.

But the First Amendment is not absolute.

In 2005, a vigilante group called "The Minutemen Project" (previously "Civil Homeland Defense(sic) and later "The Minutemen Civil Defense (sic) Corps") roamed the border between Arizona and Mexico, capturing and returning anyone they found making an illicit crossing. That wasn't too bad, in principal: but before sending them back they delivered a brutal beating to some, it is alleged. When The Minutemen announced that they planned to extend their activities to the borders between Mexico and California and, later Mexico and Texas, things started to get heated.

Then came the allegations that The Minutemen were racially motivated: why, it was asked, were they not also seeking to operate on the border with Canada?

Then US President Bush proposed The Wall.

But it was in March this year that the situation came to a head and The Minutemen were officially disbanded. They claim that Washington had "pushed amnesty down our throats." But the reality was that "The mental attitude of many Americans is turning meaner ... and we are concerned that this could cause problems." What Carmen Mercer, self-styled President of The Minutemen meant was that people had had enough. And that they were not winning anyway: Robert Krentz, a rancher in Arizona, was shot and allegations that his murderer was suspected of being an illegal immigrant were never validated.

The real problems were ill-discipline and shortage of funds. The ill-discipline came from a section of the membership who, allegedly, took the view that all Hispanic residents were legitimate targets. But another problem was that many members found the border patrols "damned boring" according to a report in The Arizona Daily Star. But it was worse: Mercer told the same newspaper "people were coming locked and loaded." Indeed, the group's founder Shawna Forde has been indicted on charges that she murdered a Mexican man and his nine year old daughter in Arizona.

Under Mercer, the group's rules required that members report suspected illegals to the authorities - although she had expressed a desire to change that to include tracking and detaining them - and also to include drug smugglers of any origin, if they identified them.

But none of the Minutemen were ever, so far as we can tell, ever prosecuted for any form of hate crime.

The USA has a special name for offences against, well, anyone who can claim they are being singled out: queer-bashing is a crime against homosexuals and therefore a hate crime; Jew-baiting is a crime against Jews and therefore a hate crime.

The Department of Justice says " the victim of a hate crime may be an individual, a business, an institution, or society as a whole. The Nation's law enforcement agencies reported that there were 9,691 victims of hate crimes in 2008."(1)

It goes on: "An analysis of 2008 data for victims of single-bias hate crime incidents showed that:

- 51.0 percent were victimised because of the offender's bias against a race. 17.9 percent were targeted because of a bias against a religious belief. 17.6 percent were victims because of a bias against a particular sexual orientation. 2.7 percent were targeted because of a bias against an ethnicity/ national origin. 0.9 percent were victimised because of a bias against a disability.

For religious bias (which is relevant to the instant discussion), the DoJ says

Of the 1,732 victims of anti-religious hate crimes:

- 66.1 percent were targeted because of an offender's anti-Jewish bias. 7.5 percent were victims because of an anti-Islamic bias. 5.1 percent were victims because of an anti-Catholic bias. 3.6 percent were victims because of an anti-Protestant bias. 0.8 percent were targeted because of an anti-Atheist/Agnostic bias. 2.8 percent were victims because of a bias against other religions (anti-other religion). 4.0 percent were victims because of a bias against groups of individuals of varying religions (anti-multiple religions, group).

Research by adherents.com shows that, for 2004, the estimated number of Jews in the USA was 3,999,371 and the number of Muslims 1,558,058. The latest figures from the recent US census are not yet available. However, the figures are supported by The Pew Report on Religion in America which found 1.7% of the adult population professed Judaism whilst 0.6% professed Islam. (2)

But the figure suggests that just over twice as many Jews as Muslims suffered approximately nine times the number of attacks. It is not our place to interpret these figures and so we merely pose a question: how likely is it that this - or at least a significant proportion of this - disparity is attributable to a belief in the Muslim communities that they will not receive appropriate treatment if they make a report?

That brings us to the self-styled Reverend Terry Jones. Jones runs a decrepit "church" he calls "Dove Outreach Center" in Gainesville, Florida. On a busy day, he has a congregation of, perhaps, 50. But now he has a global audience as he stands in front of a banner that reads "Burn a Koran Day" and pretends humility in his endless TV interviews.

Jones is a rabid anti-Islamist, all the more surprising as he adopts that stance from a cloak of Christianity. He claims he is in fear for his life after receiving more than 100 death threats. Today the BBC World News carried footage of him sitting in his grubby office with a pistol on the desk. Jones has written a book called "Islam Is of the Devil" (his capitalisation) and sells T-shirts and mugs as well as the book on his website (we are not going to give its address). Or at least he did: the website has been taken down in the past few hours.

A rising tide of criticism has been voiced by religious leaders of all the major communities. That has not stopped Jones. General Petraeus, recently sacked from his job in Afghanistan for criticising Obama's policies has told Jones that his actions are putting American lives at risk, especially in Afghanistan where protests are building. Jones pays no heed to him, either.

But US Secretary of State (which job includes foreign affairs) Hilary Clinton, not known for coming anywhere near support of Muslims, appeared to accept Jones' right to say and do as he likes: she said "It is regrettable that a pastor in Gainesville, Fla., with a church of no more than 50 people can make this outrageous and distrustful, disgraceful plan and get the world's attention, but that's the world we live in right now. It is unfortunate, it is not who we are."

Jones has timed his attack to perfection: 11 September is, this year, not only the anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon (and a field in Pennsylvania) but also Eid: the end of Ramadan. For Muslims, it's like having Christmas, Easter, New Year (and for the USA Thanksgiving) all rolled into one. It's a very big deal - and everyone wants to be home with their families.

But instead thousands are planning marches on American embassies and American owned businesses in countries with large Muslim populations. That, Jones might like to know, includes much of Europe and quite a few large US cities.

All over the world, leaders of all religions are now issuing statements distancing themselves from Jones, trying to ensure that they are not seen as in any way associated with his idiotic actions; the statements (search Google news to find them) are increasingly frantic.

For tomorrow is Friday, the last Friday of Ramadan. Almost all Muslims will be in prayers tomorrow and while the vast majority of preachers will urge Muslims not to take the actions of the lunatic Jones as indicative of the actions of a wider world, some will capitalise on Jones' position as an excuse for fire and brimstone railing against that nebulous concept "The West."

And a minute percentage will take those words as a call to arms.

And the ridiculous thing is that the actions of those few madmen will produce far more anti-Muslim feeling than will be produced against lunatic clerics by the actions of the madman Jones.

Part of the reason for this is that, in most Islamic countries, there are restrictions on freedom of speech, there are laws to combat heresy (even, in some cases, heresy in relation to religions other than Islam). There are laws to simply carry away and lock up someone who is fomenting racial hatred.

And many Muslims cannot understand why the USA does not do that.

And, frankly, nor do I. The laws appear to be in place to prevent crimes based on race or religion.

But similarly, I do not understand why he is not arrested on the simple basis of public order offences: his actions are clearly designed to inflame passions and to create division, fear and anger.

Why has no application been made to a court for a gagging order and an injunction preventing him from burning a Koran?

The simple answer, distasteful as it seems, is that the USA authorities have not tried hard enough to get him out of the public eye despite the imperative to do so.

Free speech? The principle has already been diluted. It's time to take action against him to prevent retaliation which it would be hard not to justify.

US Embassies are already issuing notices to Americans in countries with large Muslim populations. In Algeria the notice says "media reports of the upcoming threatened Quran burning by a small Gainesville, Fla., group could affect the security of U.S. citizens overseas. If the event proceeds, it could trigger reaction and protests in Muslim countries around the world, possibly including Algeria."

They are not wrong.

(1) <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/hc2008/victims.html>

(2) US Religious Landscape, Pew Forum on Religion, February 2008
<http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>

Additional information

Arrested students (source: police via freedomblogging.com)

UC Irvine

- Joseph Tamim Haider Osama Ahmed Sabry Shabaik Mohamed Mohy Eldeen Abdelgany (President of UCI Muslim Student Union, according to New University newspaper) Ali Mohammad Sayeed Asaad Traina Mohammad Qureashi Aslam Akhtar Hakim Nasreddine Kebir

UC Riverside

- Taher Herzallam Shaheen Waleed Nassar Khalid Bahgat Akari

UPDATE 10 September 2010

Since this article was published, Jones has announced that he is suspending - but not cancelling - his plans to burn the Koran. However, he says that his decision to do so was based on a commitment from Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, the leader of Muslims in New York, to relocate the proposed Mosque and Islamic Cultural Centre away from its presently proposed site two blocks from the former World Trade Centre site in New York. Feisal, however, has issued a statement saying that no such commitment has been made. Jones insists that Imam Muhammad Musri, who heads the Islamic Society of Central Florida, has confirmed that the proposed mosque will be relocated and that he and Musri have agreed to travel to New York to meet Feisal to confirm the arrangement. Musri accompanied Jones when he made the statement.

But the ambivalent stance of the US Authorities was reinforced by a message posted on the Facebook page of Sarah Palin: the post says ""People have a constitutional right to burn a Qur'an if they want to, but doing so is insensitive and an unnecessary provocation – much like building a mosque at Ground Zero." In August, US President Obama said "Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as everyone else in this country. That includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property in lower Manhattan, in accordance with local laws and ordinances," he said. "This is America, and our commitment to religious freedom must be unshakable." But a few days later, he appeared to mitigate against the strength of those words: "I was not commenting and I will not comment on the wisdom of making a decision to put a mosque there. I was commenting very specifically on the right that people have that dates back to our founding." His second speech was made in Florida.