

Be not afraid

Seeking to understand – and end – Islamophobia

BY ALICE HARDESTY
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Homa Miazad and her daughter Nadia Najim are anxious. “The internet has affected me most,” Miazad explained. “It’s like road rage. Behind a computer, people can really be hateful, and I carry that fear with me through the day.”

Miazad and her daughter were members of a panel on Islamophobia held at the City Club of Portland this past January. She wore the two-piece hijab, a closely fitting purple cap under a black scarf, tucked neatly around her shoulders. As she talked she gestured with her hands, fingers bright with red nail polish.

Nadia, her high-school-age daughter wore a longer, gray hijab, draped loosely around her shoulders. The two women are among the approximately 20,000 American Muslims living in the Portland area.

The panel was moderated by Somali-American Kayse Jama, founder and executive director of the Center for Intercultural Organizing. In addition to the mother and

daughter were Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, originally from Iran, now professor of religion and humanities at Reed College and author of “A History of Islam in America,” and Wadji Said, who immigrated to the U.S. from

Yemen in 1987, and is co-founder and president of Portland’s Muslim Educational Trust.

Miazad had emigrated from Afghanistan at age 9 and grown up in New York, watching *The Brady Bunch* on TV, and, as she recounted, living the American dream. After the Paris attacks, followed by some of the most vicious political rhetoric, it must have felt more like a nightmare.

“For those first couple of weeks, my husband and I were thinking, ‘where should we go?’ Those were the thoughts my parents had when Russia invaded Afghanistan.”

But after talking to their friends and supporters, she changed her mind. “We were no longer thinking about where we should go, but what we could do to make a change.” She considers herself lucky that she lives in Beaverton where she feels a lot of support from local people.

“People do the smallest things without saying it, like they know what I am going through. They make eye contact, hold the

door, and tell me to have a wonderful day. I feel like hugging them.”

Miazad worries about her children, who don’t always tell her what they experience day-to-day. Long after the fact, she found out about an incident in Target where a woman noticed Nadia’s hijab and told her son, easily within earshot, that Nadia was a terrorist.

Nadia, who is now a senior at the Oregon Islamic Academy, admits that she lives in a protective “bubble,” and for that reason she is reaching out to students outside her community. For example, she has gone to Temple Beth Israel to hang out with Jewish youth. “Every time people reach out to each other, it’s another bridge built,” she told the City Club audience.

According to GhaneaBassiri, anti-Muslim sentiment in America is not new, whereas Islamophobia is.

“This is not about fear of Islam,” he explained. Those who foment Islamophobia, he said, “tend to concoct this fear for reasons of political gain, for economic gain, for marginalizing Muslim minorities.” In other words, politicians use it as a campaign strategy: make people afraid. As an example, he pointed out that Islamophobia got ramped up around the plans for building an Islamic center near Ground Zero in New York City. Once the 2008 election was over and the center was built, nobody talked about it anymore.

Said brought up the blatant double standard that exists. “One hundred and eighty international Muslim leaders have signed a condemnation against ISIS,” he said. But when Anglo-Saxon Christian fundamentalists (one could say terrorists) bomb a clinic or a government building, nobody expects Christian clergy to express regret that someone of their faith has committed murder. “Why don’t we say that the Christian bodies have to condemn this?” Similarly, when Buddhists massacre Muslims in Burma, we don’t ask Buddhists around the world to apologize. “Violence is violence!” he declared.

Muslim clerics everywhere, in the U.S. and abroad, have stated emphatically that ISIS in no way represents Islam. Said deeply regrets that these terrorists have called themselves the Islamic State. “They are thugs, and we should call them thugs,” he said. “Extremism has no religion.”

The truth is that ISIS has completely misnamed itself. The word “Islam” means “Peace,” the antithesis of what ISIS stands for. Said spoke eloquently about the Golden Age of Islam, or the Age of Medina, centered in the Middle East. For 500 years, between the 8th and 13th centuries, science, trade, the arts and culture flourished in a very heterogeneous society while Europe was

mired in the Dark Ages. The history of this rich, multi-cultural society should teach us how ethnic and religious diversity can lead not only to peace but also to prosperity.

A month before the City Club panel, Stephanie Potter, for KBOO’s Recovery Zone, had interviewed Waji Said, along with Ned Rosch and Jan Elfers, all of them recognized leaders in the interfaith effort to promote understanding, tolerance and peace. These participants represented Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, the three religions comprising what is known as the Abrahamic tradition. The discussion revealed not only their common ground but their passion about how interfaith communication can lead to a better world.

On KBOO, Elfers pointed out how each of the three Abrahamic faiths calls us to stand up for anyone who is stigmatized because of their religion, race or ethnicity.

“What I find so discouraging,” she said, “is how many people are living in fear when our scriptural texts are so clear ... Faith is about courage, it’s about compassion and love, and fear is the opposite of that,” she said.

In fact, as she would remind us, some variation of the phrase “be not afraid” is used in the Bible more than 100 times. She did report that Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon (EMO), the organization she directs, has received many phone calls from people in Christian organizations asking how they can support their Muslim brothers and sisters.

Said suggested that we be more careful about our use of language. Not many people know that the original meaning of the word jihad is the process of becoming a better human being. In other words, jihad is a daily, personal spiritual journey, not at all the way the media uses it. In today’s media frenzy, words like “Islamists” and “Islamofacists” are thrown around much too glibly by politicians and pundits. Instead of the term “Islamic terrorists” what about just “terrorists”?

I phoned Ned Rosch for a brief interview. He is an active member of the Portland chapter of Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), an organization committed to fighting Islamophobia. He deplored the American media’s preoccupation with linking horrific events to the Muslim faith.

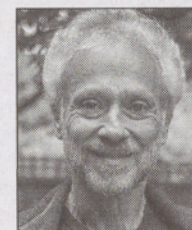
“This is just what ISIS wants,” he pointed out, “to stir things up and make everybody afraid.” He also said that we need to dispel the propaganda about the historic “Clash of Civilizations” between Muslims and Jews, which is not historic at all.

Propaganda against Muslims has been inherent in our foreign policy over recent decades, Rosch noted, including the misperception in the West that Islamic civilization is out to destroy us all. With the break up of the U.S.S.R., our military-industrial complex needed a new enemy to justify our bloated defense budget, so we invaded Iraq. “We also fired all of their civil servants and ruined their society. All this led to huge resentments. ISIS came out of the destruction of Iraq,” he said.

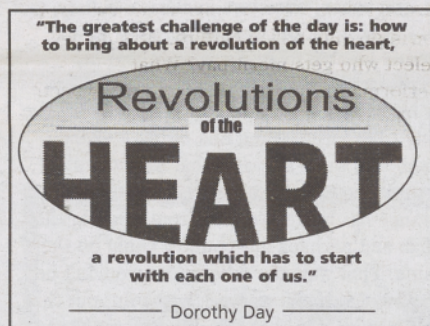
The Portland chapter of JVP held rallies in



Waji Said



Ned Rosch



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The Revolutions of the Heart series originates from a workshop taught by Martha Gies, whose students are profiling people in the community who inspire us. The title comes from Dorothy Day: “The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us.” (Loaves and Fishes: The Inspiring Story of the Catholic Worker Movement)