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Congressman King's Hearings

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 7, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

In her last semester of college, my mother was student teaching at the Horace Porter Elementary School in Columbia, Connecticut. She was teaching a lesson on the Soviet Union. One of her less bright students unhelpfully went home and told his parents that Miss McDermott was ?teaching communism.? This was the early 1950s, so predictably, my mother was removed from her student teaching assignment and hauled before the president of her college. Fortunately, in the classroom that day was another student teacher, a decorated veteran of World War II who assured the college authorities that my mother was teaching about communism not advocating for it. She was allowed to graduate.

I recall this story because, this week, Congressman Peter King will begin holding hearings [1] to examine the ?radicalization of the American Muslim community? and it seems to me that these hearings have the same potential to unleash unreasonable fear and scapegoating as did the House UnAmerican Activities Committee and Sen. Joseph McCarthy?s Senate hearings in the 1950s. Indeed, because Congressman King has been fast and loose with allegations regarding American Muslims, that potential seems to be the goal of the hearings. King has, in the past, suggested that a majority of the mosques in America were run by extremists even though a recent study at Duke University showed that religious observance actually diminished instances of radicalization in the Muslim community.

The Washington Post, on Saturday, had an article recalling King?s earlier support for the Irish Republican Army [2], which many people considered a terrorist organization. King suggests that the IRA was more like the African National Congress under apartheid. There is a coarseness in the adage ?one man?s terrorist is another man?s freedom fighter? that arouses suspicion. Certainly, the nihilism of Al-Qaeda bears little resemblance to either the IRA or the ANC. But, King?s prior support for the IRA has, nonetheless, raised some eyebrows. ?My problem with him is the hypocrisy,? a counter-terrorism specialist at Amnesty International told the Post.

My problem is not the hypocrisy. My problem is deeper. My problem is that the Congressman is taking a real issue and fanning the flames. Suppose the Duke study is wrong. Suppose there is a radicalization of American Muslims occurring in America. Why would you hold public hearings? Would it not be better to investigate the possibility of such radicalization in absolute secrecy, with the FBI, instead of showing your hand about how much you do or do not know about the supposedly nefarious activities?

After all, during the 1950s, there were communist agents in the United States. The Rosenbergs were not innocent. But, creating a nationwide panic did nothing to ferret out the true evil-doers and, instead, created a climate of fear that ensnared many perfectly innocent people. Fear rarely invites discriminate action. And, in that climate, those who really seek to harm the United States are likely to be more on their guard, more clandestine, and harder to identify and prosecute.

These hearings have the potential to unleash the kind of unreasoning fear that only aids the terrorists in their objectives. How many times need it be said: Al-Qaeda is not Nazi Germany. It does not possess the resources of a large industrial nation of several millions of people. It cannot overrun Belgium, Holland and France in two months nor bomb London night after night with a well-armed Air Force. Al-Qaeda can only succeed if it scares

us into abandoning our way of life, including the First Amendment protections and cultural dispositions against religion discrimination. Rep. King?s fear-mongering plays into Al-Qaeda?s hands.

I have been waiting for one voice to stand up in protest against these hearings, but I have been waiting in vain. Mr. King is a Catholic. Bishop William Murphy, of Rockville Center, is one of the smartest bishops in the American hierarchy. Bishop Murphy can see the ugly potential of these hearings to unleash the kind of anti-Muslim hatred once reserved for Catholics in America. According to a letter to the editor [3], published in the newspaper of the diocese of Rockville Center, The Long Island Catholic, a woman named Barbara Androu wrote of a recent meeting, ?On behalf of Bishop Murphy, Rev. Gregory Rannazzisi prayed, ?We will enjoy a just peace when hatred and injustice yield to mercy and understanding ... The dignity of every human being and his or her freedom to worship must be at the center of all our decisions, public or private.?? Bishop Murphy would be well advised to make such a statement himself, in public, and to invite Congressman King to reflect on the Church?s commitment, as well as America?s, to religious freedom.

This week, look for Fox News to carry many reports on the King hearings. I suspect the content of those reports will be different from what one reads in the Post or the Times. King is engaged in a dog whistle, but many people can hear this whistle and will draw their own conclusions. The one way to demonstrate that America is not at war with Islam, that we are not abandoning our commitments to religious liberty, is for prominent religious leaders, including King?s own bishop, to stand up for American Muslims and their rights. In the effort to defeat radicals, we must isolate them. In the effort to keep these hearings from staining America?s proud heritage of religious freedom, we must isolate Rep. King.

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