

Black Muslims hear echoes of Jim Crow

Adelle M. Banks Religion News Service | Sep. 13, 2010

WASHINGTON -- Imam Mahdi Bray is feeling a sense of déjà vu these days, with threats and attacks on Muslims reviving memories of his younger days working and marching alongside civil rights activists.

"For me and for America, these types of things have happened over and over again," said Bray, of the Muslim American Society.

He and other African-American Muslim leaders say the recent verbal and physical attacks against Muslims because of their faith are painful reminders of past discrimination felt by blacks because of their skin color.

Threats to burn Qurans recall the bombings of black churches, they say, and anti-Muslim activist Pamela Geller's crusade against the proposed Park51 Islamic cultural center near Ground Zero summons memories of Bull Connor's orders to aim fire hoses at civil rights marchers in Alabama.

"When people are talking about exclusionary zones where Muslims cannot build houses of worship or cannot freely assemble, then it evokes memories of those exclusionary politics and exclusionary laws African-Americans had to deal with," said Imam Zaid Shakir, a professor at Zaytuna College, the nation's first Muslim college, in Berkeley, Calif.

The Coalition of African American Muslims, saying their voices had been missing from the debate around Park51, declared recently that they would not "silently accept a return to Jim Crow exclusionary practices and policies that relegate either ourselves or our coreligionists ... to second-class citizenry."

The coalition includes leaders such as Nation of Islam leader Minister Louis Farrakhan and Asma Hanif, the founder of an organization that helps homeless Muslim women.

Hanif sees parallels in how all black people -- "it didn't matter if you had one drop of black blood" -- were treated in the 1960s when she was a teenager in a small town in North Carolina.

"Now it doesn't matter what type of Muslim you are, they are treating you the exact same way," said Hanif, executive director of Baltimore-based Muslimat Al-Nisaa.

Lawrence Mamiya, a professor of religion and Africana studies at Vassar College, said there are parallels between the treatment of blacks during the civil rights movement and the backlash over Park51, but there are differences, too.

"The civil rights movement was dealing with a system of legal segregation and here, at least Muslims do have the freedom of religion," said Mamiya, an expert on African-American Muslims. "But in terms of the kind of opposition they're meeting, certainly the parallels are there."

Akbar Muhammad, a retired international representative for the Nation of Islam, faults ignorance about Muslims and the Quran for the recent wave of anti-Muslim bigotry, just as lack of understanding resulted in racially based bigotry decades ago.

"They thought we were either inferior or ... that we deserved to be relegated to a corner or lynched," he said. "Now, Muslims are profiled as black people are profiled."

Aminah McCloud, professor of Islamic studies at DePaul University in Chicago, estimates that at least 40 percent of leaders of predominantly black mosques were active in the civil rights movement or were born soon after. She hopes their perspective, and experience, can be a "reflective voice" in the current controversies.

"It draws people's attention away from the hysterics and back to the history of who we are in this country ... a remembrance of how many Americans, white and black, brown and of all religious traditions, have worked so hard to make multiculturalism, multireligious existence work," she said.

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