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The King Hearings Begin

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Rep. Peter King made the statement that there was nothing "radical or un-American" about holding his hearings into the supposed radicalization of American Muslims. He is wrong, not complexly wrong, simply wrong.

Part of the American national character, observed sometimes in the breach, has been a commitment to the proposition, enshrined in our Constitution, that the government does not concern itself with a person's religion. But, these hearings are not focused on the radicalization of religious zealotry per se, only on the radicalization of American Muslims. That kind of singling out of a religious group is akin to the anti-Semitic slurs about the "Jewish lobby" in Washington and the charge of dual loyalty long leveled against American Jews.

One can also easily imagine similar hearings being sponsored by the Know-Nothing Party in the antebellum years, targeting the radicalization of American Catholics. But, we, as a nation, have largely overcome any such overt anti-Catholic animus. There are vestiges of that animus, to be sure. For example, the oath sworn by public officials (except for the President, whose oath of office is uniquely prescribed in the Constitution) includes a phrase about taking the oath without any mental reservation, a vestige of Elizabethan persecutions of Catholics and especially Jesuits.

There are other, more subtle, ways that the American ethos still excludes Catholics. Last weekend, noted historian Pauline Maier was on C-Span Book TV. A caller asked a pointed question about the religiosity of the American founders: The caller was clearly of the "Christian nation" school of thought. Maier stated, correctly, that most of the Founders considered religion a private matter. Of course, viewing religion as a private matter is a distinctly Protestant way of viewing the matter. For Catholics, religion is a distinctly non-private matter.

Another part of the American national character is a certain pragmatism, a desire for evidence, a concern with what works. Missouri is the only state called the "Show Me State," but we Americans tend to like solutions that work rather than political or social orthodoxies. Historically, Americans are not particularly ideological. But, what is most offensive about King's hearings is the lack of any necessity for them. Where is the evidence that American Muslims have been radicalized? King trotted out as one of the first witnesses a man, Dr. Zuhdi Jasser, who first burst on the national stage as a regular guest on the Glenn Beck show. Dr. Jasser practices medicine by training and vocation, not philosophy, or sociology, or theology. He produces no evidence for his claims that mainstream Muslim organizations share the goal of imposing sharia law on the United States which, I submit, is a fairly remote danger. But, that kind of talk is the bread-and-butter of Fox News. It has no place at a witness table in front of a congressional committee. Evidence or expertise should earn someone that spot in front of the microphone, not hysteria.

I do not believe that we can ignore the fact that the men who attacked America on 9/11 did so in the name of Islam, albeit a twisted notion of Islam. They were not Quakers. Looking at the ideology that informed their actions is not bigotry, it is common sense. But, what is unconscionable is to tar all Muslims, all American Muslims, with similar goals because both the terrorists and the nice Muslim family next door read from the same scriptures. Nor do I tar Mr. King, and his fellow Christians, because in our Scripture, we read the psalmist sing, "Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks."

Congressman Keith Ellison, who is a Muslim, also spoke before the committee. His heartfelt telling of the story of an American Muslim who lost his life trying to save others on 9/11 is the most eloquent rebuke to King's agenda. For every story of a stray radical, there is a story of an American Muslim who gave his life for his country. As he closed, Congressman Ellison put his papers in front of his face while he composed himself, but there is a place for emotion in this debate. Not the hate being stoked by King, but the pride in one's fellows shown in Ellison's tears.

Mr. King is a disgrace. And, I am still waiting to hear his bishop, or some representative of the American bishops, say so. If we expect American Muslims to protect us from the extremists in their community, who will protect us from extremists like Rep. King?

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