

Open season on Muslims in the newest phobia

September 16 2002

One of the most significant ways the world has changed since the terrible crime of 9/11 has been the rise of an ugly strain of Islamophobia throughout the Western world. From this new ideological virus Australia has, unfortunately, proved far from immune.

On the far right of the political spectrum something sociologists have come to call "new racism" seems to be taking hold. Old racism argued that the intractable differences between human groups were rooted in biology and blood. This form of racism was discredited by Hitler and the Holocaust. A new racism took its place. It argued that differences between human collectivities were based on incompatibility not of blood and biology but of culture and religion.

After September 11, in Australia, this kind of new racism emerged with surprising swiftness. The former Treasury secretary John Stone had long been an opponent of Asian immigration. Now the focus of his concern shifted to Muslims instead. According to Stone, Australia was, from the cultural point of view, a "Judeo-Christian" country. Because of its supposed incompatibility with such a culture, he argued that all Muslim immigration must end.

Stone was aware, of course, that on account of his suggestion he would be accused of racism. Such accusations were, he claimed, both mischievous and wrong. He had no interest in the colour of a potential migrant's skin. The only issue which concerned him was "culture" and not "race". In light of the academic definition of new racism, Stone and his supporters unwittingly supplied an almost perfect textbook case.

The second recent strand of Islamophobia took place on more traditional Christian ground, in the writings of Andrew Bolt, the resident right-wing columnist at the Melbourne *Herald Sun*.

At first Bolt responded to September 11 in a decent way. Would it not, he argued, be "a disgrace if the terrorist atrocities in the United States made us lash out" at Australia's Muslim community?

As it soon turned out, no-one was more in need of such a warning than Bolt himself. Within days he wrote that he had no fight with Islam, only with "the terrorists who perverted its teachings", but was it not the case that the Koran was all "too easily interpreted to justify terrorism"?

Within three months of September 11, Bolt was experiencing "grave doubts about the role of Islam in a secular, multi-ethnic nation like Australia". By midyear, Bolt had involved himself in the defence of an anti-Islamic campaign waged by a fundamentalist Christian sect called Catch the Fire. The gloves were now completely off.

"Let's compare," Bolt wrote on June 3, "those two most holy of men - those founders of great religions. Unlike Mohammed, Christ did not slaughter unbelievers, execute women who sang rude songs about him, cut off the limbs of apostates, sleep with a woman whose family he had just killed, have sex with a nine-year-old, urge the murder of Jews, authorise the beating of wives ... and promise heaven above all to those who made war on infidels."

I do not know whether it was a matter of concern for Bolt or his editor that he was writing, thus, of the man who stood at the centre of the faith of 300,000 or so of their fellow Australians.

As it happens, Bolt was not the only journalist in Australia who had begun to play with fire. A third strand of Islamophobia appearing in the press after September 11 was rooted in something even deeper than religious soil - ethnic difference and sexual fear.

After September 11, *The Australian* columnist Janet Albrechtsen began to take considerable interest in the terrible rape cases in Sydney perpetrated by gangs of Lebanese Muslim males. Albrechtsen appears to have conducted a search for evidence with the intention of discovering as many instances as possible where Muslim males have been involved in rape. She began to write in a manner which suggested that rapes by Muslims of young women had reached epidemic proportions in the West.

In conjuring this moral panic, as *Media Watch* revealed last Monday, Albrechtsen, on more than one occasion, distorted her evidence. Where, for example, a French sociologist had written of rape as an initiation rite of young men, Albrechtsen claimed, quite falsely, that he had been writing specifically about Muslim males. To reveal the callousness of the local Muslim leadership on the question of the Sydney rapes, Albrechtsen claimed in a recent column that a leader of the Lebanese community had absolved the young men of moral responsibility for their crimes. In the article from which she quoted, the question of the rapes had not even been discussed.

No-one possessing an even passing acquaintance with the history of race relations could be unaware of the explosive potentiality of the question of inter-ethnic rape. Accordingly, no contemporary subject in Australia demands from a journalist greater wisdom, maturity and tact. Albrechtsen's writing has been factually careless, socially reckless and morally cavalier at once.

The emergence of Islamophobia in Australia in recent times is not difficult to explain. The ground was prepared with the rightward drift in Australian political culture during the period of Hansonism. Anti-Islamic feelings grew as a consequence of the denigration and incarceration of the mainly Muslim asylum-seekers. Those we mistreated we came to despise. With the coincidence of the Tampa "crisis" and the September 11 terrorist attacks a dangerous explosion of anti-Islamic feeling took place.

In a recent ABC TV program, a secular Islamic leader spoke about the wounds inflicted upon the Muslims of Australia by the continuous insults to their culture and religion experienced over the past year. His sentiments are easy to understand. Islamophobia now represents the most serious threat to the idea of multiculturalism, and even to the ideas of religious and ethnic toleration, that Australia has witnessed for very many years.

Robert Manne is associate professor of politics at La Trobe University.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/09/15/1032054711091.html>