

Anti-Muslim America!
The Meaning of our Current Political Anger
By Bishop John Spong

Early in my career, I had a colleague, now deceased, named The Rev. Joseph Kellerman, known to his friends as "Jody." This man served then as the rector of the Episcopal Church of the Holy Comforter, a suburban middle-class congregation on Park Road in Charlotte, North Carolina. He was also a well-trained specialist in the counseling and treatment of alcoholism. What was remarkable to me about Jody, however, was his understanding of human nature, which was best displayed in his ability to move his congregation effectively without alienating those rooted in yesterday's value systems.

One way he did this was to provoke a major debate each fall in his congregation about the choice of curriculum materials to be used in the Church School. Jody favored an avant garde, experience-oriented curriculum known as the Seabury Series. Vocal members of his congregation leaned toward a more content-centered, Bible-based curriculum that would introduce the children to the "historic faith."

Every fall this fight would be waged with the same results. Jody Kellerman always lost and the traditional members of his church always won. From the outside this annual rite looked very much like an ecclesiastical game, prompting me to ask him on one occasion why he insisted on fighting this battle every fall. In his answer he said, "Jack, a congregation can usually manage only one serious debate a year. So I focus the debate on a subject, the outcome of which I can tolerate either way. I fight, they win and then it's over. They then don't get upset about any other issue or anything else that I do." That was a new insight for me. People are not emotionally capable, nor do they have sufficient internal energy to do battle on several fronts at the same time or to have more than one enemy at a time.

When I was an active bishop I took a leaf from Jody's book. At the annual convention of the Diocese of Newark, to which about 800 people were in attendance, I made sure we had one major debate on the agenda, on a subject about which people had strong feelings. We advertized these issues widely prior to the convention and sometimes even got major media coverage because the media always seems to think a conflict within the church is newsworthy. Among the topics debated were: "Is physician-assisted suicide a moral option for Christians?"; "Why can women not serve as priests and bishops?" (They can now, but not in the seventies when I became bishop); "How can the Bible be called 'The Word of God' when it affirms slavery, justifies war discriminates against women and calls for the execution of homosexual people?"; "Is corporal punishment of children ever appropriate parental behavior?"; "Should the church offer a liturgical service to mark a divorce and the end of a marriage or make the sacrament of marriage available to its gay and lesbian members?"

What people never seemed to recognize was that the Diocese had no real power and that the purpose of these debates was not to settle this issue by majority vote. What mattered was the quality of the debate, for a moving debate is the process in which the consciousness of the people was raised. When these delegates returned to their local congregations they would in turn make the debate occur again in 130 different settings. It also meant that once great amounts of emotional energy got expended in this debate almost anything else that came before this gathered assembly would pass with little or no controversy. Jody Kellerman was correct; people do not have the ability to fight more than one major battle or have more than one enemy at a time.

I have thought about this principle a great deal as I have observed our nation's political behavior in recent months. There is a sub-stratum of anger in our society today and a desire to blame someone for the

perceived malaise as this nation climbs slowly out of the jaws of a very deep recession. Irresponsible political operatives, ever seeking that wedge issue which will propel them into power, have mined this anger in search of their own success. The symptoms of the problems facing this country are easy to attack. The national, state and local debt is high, brought on by two as yet unpaid for wars, the necessity of rescuing major banks, insurance companies and automobile makers from financial ruin, which would have plunged the entire world into a great depression. In addition to these traumas jobs are fragile, spendable income is down and the house valuations, in which the biggest percentage of most American's wealth is located, are today at rock bottom levels. With anxiety so high and tempers so short our politics, reflecting the national mood, have become frightening and insecurity is rampant. The national tendency is to look for victims to blame. George Bush, the target in the last election, worked for a while, but he has faded from sight. President Barack Obama is a new, convenient and available target. As the first African-American president, he is a visible receptacle into whom we can pour our still repressed racism, hiding it under the camouflage of worrying about such things as "the expansion of government" or the national debt, topics which worried us not at all in the earlier and greedier years of this century as we lowered taxes, extended drug benefits and fought wars with no consideration of what these actions did to the nation's economy. Today, however, anyone who is in power is destined to be the recipient of this anger, making it difficult for members of either party to run for office as incumbents. There is a great need to project that anger outward. Adolf Hitler once rose to power during the great depression by funneling German anger into a white hot hatred of the Jews. Arab states like Saudi Arabia maintain political power in the family of the House of Saud by focusing their schools, and thus the lives of their children, on fundamentalistic Islamic fury against "the godless infidels of the west." Previous Republican administrations maintained power by hyping the color-coded alerts against "the terrorists" and when the terrorists began to fade,

they began to attack "activist judges" and gay and lesbian people who were beginning to demand equality and justice. If it is true, however that one can only fight one major battle or have only one enemy at a time, these scattershot negativities were not emotionally satisfying so this nation's anger began to look for a popular enemy who could be identified as the cause of our fear and distress, around which all could rally. That is exactly what I see happening in the United States at this moment.

Look with me at the evidence! Homosexuality and homosexual persons no longer have much appeal as a target for our anger. Our consciousness and sensitivity on this subject has grown, making attacks on the homosexual quest for equality seem like little more than primitive ignorance, making this battle look antiquated. In recent weeks the California vote in favor of Proposition 8 was struck down by the courts. The long and detailed opinion of Judge Vaughn Walker actually ridiculed the arguments of opponents as little more than undocumentable fear and irrationality. The court, for example, discovered no evidence that opening marriage to gay couples would weaken marriage, destroy family life or that children raised by gay couples would be somehow impaired. The fascinating thing was that there was little public reaction to this opinion. Conservative political voices were almost mute, rising only to the level of whimpering. Clearly the nation has moved on. Yes, that opinion will be appealed until it reaches the Supreme Court where it could even be reversed, given the conservative makeup of that court, but it almost doesn't matter. All that reversal could do is to postpone the inevitable. That battle is over. Marriage will ultimately be declared to be a constitutional right, guaranteed to all citizens regardless of sexual orientation. Lost causes do not drain hostility!

The next revelatory moment came with the surprising announcement that Ken Mehlman, who ran the Bush campaign for the White House in

2004, was a gay man. Please remember that the 2004 Bush campaign, with Mehlman's support, put gay marriage on the ballot in closely contested Ohio to maximize the evangelical vote and thus win a second term for Bush. Now this man has indicated that he is working for gay rights and equality in marriage for homosexual people! Once again, it was a one-day story, hardly commented on even by the 24-hour news channels that maximize ratings by hyping every story to "end of the world" proportions. Negative energy is still rampant in our country, but homosexual people are no longer its target.

Where has it gone? Look at the passion aroused by the plans to build a Muslim community center two blocks from the former site of the World Trade Center. This project has been called by one politician "a dagger aimed at the heart of every American mother." Newt Gingrich began to campaign against "Sharia Law," as if anyone was trying to impose it on this country. Then there was the story of the deluded preacher with a 50-member church in Florida, who was going to commemorate 9/11 by burning the Quran in a public ceremony. We no longer have the time to hate homosexuals because we are busy hating Muslims and Islam. Some even try to tie them to President Obama by hinting that he is himself a Muslim and an illegal alien.

It is a scary time in American history and I hope our sanity and equilibrium will return before we vote some of this crowd of crazy politicians into office. So long as we can hate an external enemy we do not have to face such things as our own corporate greed, our insensitivity to the poor and our suppressed racism. We can have only one major battle or enemy at a time. So it is now "hate Muslims" time in America. Someday maturity and wisdom will be restored to our national discourse. We wait for that day!