

American mosques trying to protect bodies and spirits from hate

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(RNS) Following a surge of attacks on mosques and Muslims—a backlash against recent extremist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino—Islamic leaders have been installing more security cameras and hiring more security guards. But as they worry about the physical safety of their flocks, they are also paying attention to the spiritual damage Islamophobia can inflict.

Hate crimes penetrate Muslims deeply and widely, said Kameelah Rashad, Muslim chaplain at the University of Pennsylvania.

“It erodes their sense of identity and their sense of their spiritual selves,” she said.

And numbers are rising. According to a study by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, 63 hate crimes targeted mosques and Islamic centers through December 8 of this year—a threefold increase from the previous year and the highest number since the group began tracking such crimes six years ago. Two mosques were vandalized in California this month. A severed pig’s head was thrown at a Philadelphia mosque. Anti-Muslim graffiti has marred others.

The sad irony, Rashad continued, is that deepening one’s faith and expanding spiritual practice can be a healthy coping mechanism for those faced with bigotry—but Muslims may be afraid that spending more time at the mosque will raise the suspicions of those who equate religiosity with extremists.

“In the back of their minds, they wonder, ‘Will people see this as radicalism?’”

What Rashad offers her students is perspective, a reminder—as a new *Washington Post* poll confirms—that they do not face a solid wall of hatred. Taking pains to point out that most Americans accept Muslims, imams and other Muslim religious leaders hope to quell the fear that can undermine the sense of purpose and peace that

draws so many to their faith.

At Friday prayers after the San Bernardino massacre, for example, an act perpetrated by a couple that admired the Islamic State terrorist group, Rashad invited university officials and chaplains from other religious communities to address her students and reassure them that they are valued at the university.

Many accepted the invitation, and she read a letter from the university president and provost to the Muslim students assuring them “of the absolute commitment that Penn has to providing a safe and welcoming environment for you to practice your faith and feel that you are fully accepted and embraced within the Penn community.”

Imam Ossama Bahloul, at the Islamic Center of Murfreesboro, in Tennessee, similarly seeks to present his congregation with a big-picture view of American attitudes toward Muslims.

The Islamic Center is hardly ignoring the recent spike in anti-Islamic crime and rhetoric—which includes Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump’s plan to bar Muslims from entering the U.S. The school associated with the mosque recently hired security guards to watch over its children. Bahloul knows there are those who wish Muslims harm. But he also wants his flock to resist giving in to that fear.

So Bahloul talks about the outpouring of support for the Murfreesboro mosque, even in the face of vehement opposition from some in the local community before the mosque’s new building opened in 2012. Yes, there were loud anti-Muslim voices then and there are loud anti-Muslim voices now, but “I do not recognize this voice as an American voice,” he said.

Bahloul emphasizes the “beautiful messages of support” sent to the Islamic Center from Americans around the country, and the Christians and Jews who have visited the center and invited its members back to their own houses of worship. In the end, he said, those who oppose bigotry will prevail.

It is not just Muslims who have reason to fear in their houses of worship. Some Christian churches across the nation also have heightened security, particularly after a gunman killed nine parishioners at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston six months ago.

And followers of Sikhism, a faith born in India about 500 years ago, have also girded themselves in the wake of terrorist attacks committed by Muslims. Sikhism is not related to Islam but its adherents are sometimes mistaken for Muslims, chiefly because they wear turbans.

American Sikhs have responded quickly and resolutely in the wake of the Paris and San Bernardino attacks with expressions of horror and solidarity—but also to protect themselves.

Because of the turban, “any Sikh could be a target,” said Rajwant Singh, chairman of the Sikh Council on Religion and Education. “He is carrying his religion on his head.”

Gurdwaras, or Sikh houses of worship, have unfurled banners and put up signs in recent weeks for passers-by to read.

“Sikhs pray for the victims of San Bernardino Tragedy,” reads the one outside Singh’s gurdwara in Rockville, Maryland.

And like Rashad at the University of Pennsylvania and Bahloul in Tennessee, Singh says despair is not an appropriate response to hatred. In fact, he added, Sikhs are encouraging each other these days to proudly wear their most brightly colored turbans.

“There is a term, *chardhi kala*,” he said, and then translated from the Punjabi. “It means ‘remain in high spirits in the face of adversity.’”