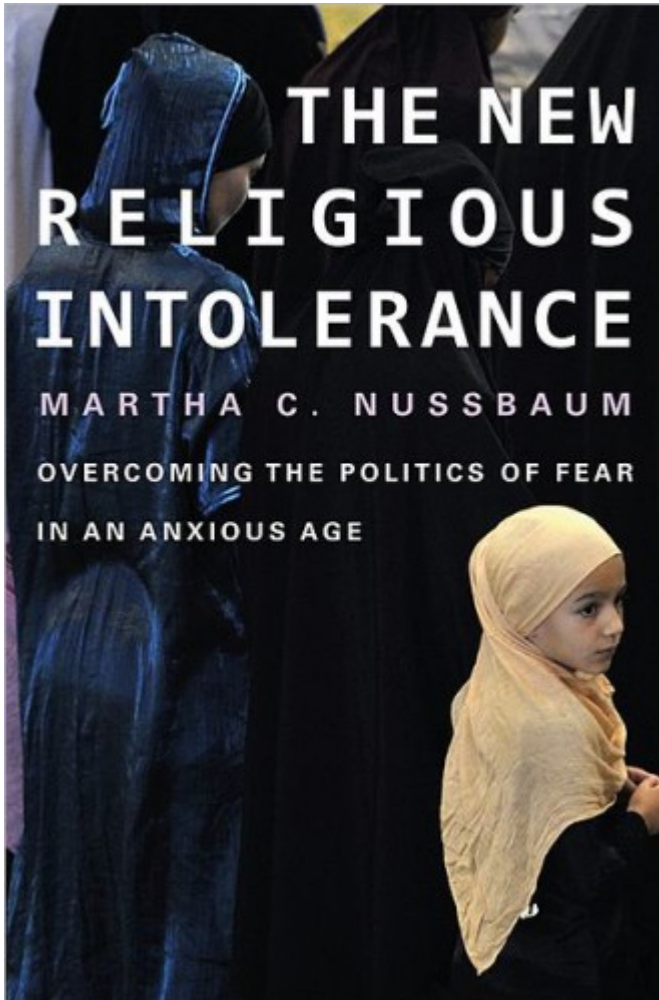


*The New Religious Intolerance*, by Martha C. Nussbaum

reviewed by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [October 3, 2012](#) issue

## In Review



## The New Religious Intolerance

By Martha C. Nussbaum  
Belknap

Martha Nussbaum continues her critical reflection on the ways in which a democratic society can practice justice and provide well-being for all its members. As we have come to expect, she compellingly combines erudite critical analysis with intense

moral passion. Her topic here is religious hate in the United States that targets Muslims. Her argument is not aimed at those who give themselves over to emotive ventilation, because such persons would not linger over her proposals. Rather, she addresses those who are responsible members of society and have an obligation and an opportunity to provide protocols, practices and procedures that will safeguard vulnerable people who are victimized by such hate.

Her book begins with two probes into the situation of intolerance. She focuses on the proposed debate over a mosque in lower Manhattan and on disputes over Shari'a laws and headscarves. She considers the passion for social homogeneity and the fear of others that is based variously in appeals to "blood, soil, ethnolinguistic peoplehood." She looks to Finland, India and Australia for examples of the capacity to imagine shared goals and ideals.

In an earlier book, *The Clash Within*, Nussbaum explored the capacity to entertain the other as key to a democratic society. Now she considers vigorous angry resistance to the other. Her acute analysis of social fear carries her all the way back to Aristotle, who pondered how people can manufacture fear by imagining that a threat is close at hand. She cites a number of cases in which a cascade of orchestrated fear has escalated into a frantic, narcissistic sense of free fall and loss. The outcome, in cases such as the opposition to minarets in Switzerland and Homeland Security's orange alert, is "a purely notional campaign against a threat that does not exist."

The remainder of *The New Religious Intolerance* consists of three carefully articulated responses to such indulgent fear. The first principle is an affirmation of human equality, according to which every person is entitled to dignity and respect. This nonnegotiable affirmation insists that government may do nothing that violates that elemental commitment. The claim is intensified by the need to respect the liberty of conscience, with particular reference to the most vulnerable in society. In her close reasoning Nussbaum distinguishes between the argument of neutrality championed by John Locke and the more radical commitment that she terms "accommodation." Locke advocated the protection of religious liberty, but the stronger view, remarkably voiced by George Washington, insists that tolerance is insufficient.

Washington saw that it is not enough that "a privileged group says that we will indulge you but retains the power not to do so, should it change its mind." Rather,

he insisted, society is based on equal inherent natural rights that are not negotiable. This latter claim was at the heart of Roger Williams's venturesome social experiment in colonial New England. Nussbaum values Locke's position but urges the more radical position of Williams and Washington: "'Even if I am more numerous and hence more powerful, I will try to make the world comfortable for you.' It is the spirit of a gracious hostess. A good hostess needs a good imagination."

Her second principle is that consistency must be practiced both in conduct and in policy. This principle is in contrast to the temptation to see the splinter in the eye of the other and to miss the log in one's own eye—an attitude that "gives latitude to the familiar but refuses the unfamiliar a similar concern, a similar liberty." Nussbaum offers an extended analysis of the various proposals for burqa laws, observing that in certain situations, such as cold winters in Chicago or sports that require special equipment, we may dress in ways that cover more of the face than does a burqa. Moreover, she is convinced that dressing in a burqa would be "a dumb strategy" for a terrorist in the United States or Europe:

If I were a terrorist, I think I would dress like Martha Nussbaum in the winter: floor-length Eddie Bauer down coat, hat down over eyebrows, extra hood for insulation, large sunglasses, and a bulky Indian shawl around nose and mouth.

Nussbaum's third principle is "sympathetic imagination" that has the capacity to see the other as alongside one's self. This requires, she observes, following the "invisibility" voiced by Ralph Ellison, the nurture of one's eyes to see the other differently—and eventually a "willingness to move out of one's self and to enter another world." She makes the case that we remain blind unless our "inner eyes" are educated to practice a "participatory imagination" that is an antidote to fearful narcissism.

I find the discussion to be especially helpful as she takes up the solidarity that Roger Williams had with the Narragansett Indians: he found the "Christian savages" to be much preferable to the "savage Christians" of the Bay Colony. Nussbaum introduces readers to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's 1779 play *Nathan the Wise*, which encouraged religious tolerance by portraying a Jewish person as a flesh-and-blood reality beyond stereotype.

Nussbaum suggests important parallels "between yesterday's anti-Semitism and today's suspicions of Muslims." We can learn from the treatment and stereotyping of

Jews in the past about how we are tempted to treat and stereotype Muslims now. In George Eliot's 1876 novel *Daniel Deronda* she finds a combination of moral failure and "laziness of the imagination":

The same narcissism that makes us think we can go through life without making any effort at imagination is also a central form of moral error, the form that makes laws only for ourselves and denies the reality and equality of others.

Her book concludes with a close study of the political and social crisis concerning Park51, the proposal for a mosque in Lower Manhattan. She shows how a series of missed communications and mixed messages from the two leaders of the project led to hysterical hype that, in turn, produced a cascade of misinformed reaction.

The most moving testimony of sympathetic imagination that Nussbaum cites is an affirmation from Cassandra, a stripper on Murray Street, around the corner from the proposed mosque. Cassandra says of the project, "I don't know what the big deal is. . . . It's freedom of religion, you know?" This must surely be the kind of democratic inner eye that Nussbaum champions.

Nussbaum summons us not to abdicate responsibility in the face of programmed hysteria. Important steps can be taken to counter such amorphous anxiety, but those steps require resolve, imagination and engagement. Nussbaum's appeal is not only to government policy makers but also to religious types who have responsibility for nurturing sympathetic imagination and for disciplining the inner eye.

The book is a winner not only because of Nussbaum's steady, thoughtful analysis, but also because the author discloses so much about herself. We learn that she is an avid White Sox fan and that she grew up in a home of intense bigotry. She is a convert to Reform Judaism, which hosts her social passion. The human side of the author is an appeal to the human dimension of the reader and to the common humanity that lies beneath our individual mantras. Nussbaum does not doubt that positive steps can be taken. Taking back religious and political discourse is an immediate task. As the term *overcoming* suggests, the task is still before us.