

Remember, Remember — bonfires, fireworks, religion

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From UNESCO to London

On the evening of Monday 5 November 2029 I returned to London from an international conference in Paris. As the plane made its descent towards Heathrow, the city landscape beneath me was alive with the sparkle of fireworks.

The conference had been at UNESCO's headquarters and had been about addressing racisms, particularly the form of racism known as Islamophobia, in and through European and North American education systems. The fireworks across London were a sparkling reminder, anyway potentially and anyway in principle, that racisms containing a religious component have been alive and kicking in Europe for many centuries.

Action against such racisms, as indeed against all racisms, has been a constant struggle.

'Remember, remember,' we have said annually to children in Britain over the years, 'the fifth of November, gunpowder, treason and plot.' And we have added, sternly if ungrammatically, that we 'see no reason/ why gunpowder treason/ should ever be forgot.'

We have too rarely, though, remembered to tell our children that there was a strong religious element in the mutual hostility that existed between King James on the one hand and the Gunpowder Plot 'traitors' on the other. And we have not remembered to refer, even obliquely, to present-day prejudices and intolerance which similarly are imbued with a religious component, for example Islamophobia. Nor have we remembered to point to the similarities and differences between Islamophobia and colour-based racisms.

The nature of racism is not, admittedly, an obvious topic for conversation and clarification at your average bonfire night party. But certainly it needs to feature elsewhere in settings and contexts where adults and young people interact to reflect on their shared history, and on the shared history of the land – and the continent and the power-bloc ('the west') where they live. It is certainly a topic for consideration in schools, as was forcefully emphasised at the UNESCO conference on 5 November.

Islamophobia Awareness Month

November 2012 has been designated Islamophobia Awareness Month, and is being observed not only in Britain but also in several other European countries, including France. The topics being discussed at various meetings, seminars, exhibitions and rallies include academic research, public policy analysis, law and legal frameworks on equality and diversity, the media and popular culture, new media, the far right, hate crimes, religion in public life, data collection and monitoring, policing and securitisation, formal and informal education, and the respective roles of and challenges for Muslim and mainstream organisations.



And not least, there are issues to do with what we say, as parents and as educators, to the young Muslims whom we know, whether professionally or personally. The issues were poignantly introduced in a recent article published in the United States. 'Raising a child is a difficult feat,' said the author. 'Raising a brown child in America is even trickier. Raising a brown, Muslim child in America seems almost impossible.'

The author's own child, she mentions, is at present seven months old. 'I know my son's greatest problem right now,' she says, 'is whether or not a teething ring will calm his sore gums. But from a mother's perspective, his future looks gloomy. All the articles I read, the books I studied, the mothers I emulated, the advice I heard, and the Baby Center updates I subscribed to are suddenly not enough. My responsibility goes beyond the norm: I have to not only raise a healthy and happy child, but I have to do so in a hostile environment.'

Five points

We must 'remember, remember' in the meetings and conversations this month the following five points, amongst others:

- 1) The tasks of promoting tolerance and cohesion inside European countries are not new. People have been wrestling with them for centuries. The relatively new Muslim communities in western Europe have not created conflict but have entered it, bringing with them distinctive insights to arguments and struggles that long predated their arrival and development.
- 2) When religion is a component in violent conflict there are fundamental questions about human nature and society. Do human beings hate and fear each other in these circumstances because they are religious? Or are they religious because they hate and fear each other? In other words, do they really fight essentially about religion or do they fight about politics, power and access to resources?
- 3) The essential task is both political and educational. It is to help people live together – help *vivre ensemble* – without violence and without oppression in a globalised world in which ecological, cultural, financial, commercial and political boundaries and borders are in constant flux and dissolution.
- 4) The struggle against cultural racism, for example Islamophobia, must not marginalise the struggle against colour racism, also sometimes known as biological racism. This point is well made, albeit in highly academic and abstract

terms, in a new journal launched this month, *Islamophobia Studies Journal*. In the history of Europe, writes the distinguished scholar Ramon Grosfoguel, the first markers of otherness in what he calls 'the westernised christian-centric capitalist/patriarchal modern/colonial world-system' were around religious identity. Jews and Arabs were characterised as people with the wrong religion, while the indigenous peoples of the Americas, and later of Africa and Australasia, were constructed as people without any religion at all. Antiracism, it follows, must deal simultaneously with both cultural and colour racism.

- 5) The task of challenging Islamophobia through education, to return to the themes of the UNESCO conference on 5 November 2012, does not primarily require teaching about Islam. Rather, it primarily requires teaching about Islamophobia. And, more generally, about colour and cultural racism, and about the causes of these. The causes do not lie in the characteristics of the Other, and certainly not in the characteristics of the Other's religion. Rather, they lie in the culture, history and practices of ourselves. As Sivanandan famously said three decades ago, 'just to learn about other peoples' cultures is not to learn about the racism of one's own. To learn about the racism of one's own culture, on the other hand, is to approach other cultures objectively.'

On bonfire night in Britain every year, and on every other night and day, and in Islamophobia Awareness Month in Europe, and in every month and every continent, there's so much to remember, remember.



Written for the Left Central blog by Robin Richardson. There are many other articles and materials about Islamophobia, particularly bit not only in the field of education, at www.insted.co.uk.