

Speech by Jacob Bender: “Reflections on Islamophobia”
Masjidullah Symposium on “The Muslim Future in America”
June 15, 2014

As-Salam Aleiykum.

I would like to thank Masjidullah and the Center for Human Excellence for inviting me here today as a representative of the Philadelphia Chapter of CAIR — the Council on American Islamic Relations — to speak to you today about “Personal Reflections on Combatting Islamophobia.”

I am indeed honored to be standing before you today as a white man among African Americans, a Jew among Muslims. Permit me to briefly narrate the journey that brought me to this moment.

My grandparents came to this country at the beginning of the 20th century fleeing the persecution and poverty of the Czar’s Russia. My grandmother was blind in one eye from a bullet fired by mob that rode through their village on Easter, shooting, and burning, and looting, and shouting, “Kill the Jews.” Embarking upon the shores of the New World, with its promise of freedom and opportunity, they found instead the sweatshops and stinking tenements of New York’s Lower Eastside and became involved in the labor struggles to establish an 8-hour day.

It was this same Jewish faith in the obligation to repair a broken world (“Tikkun Ha-Olam” in Hebrew) that led by parents to become active supporters of the African American struggle for civil rights, already in the 1930s. I grew up listening to my mother tell stories of her youth when she walked the streets of Coney Island with a donation can yelling “Free the Scottsboro Boys!” And my parents took me to hear Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. preach in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles in 1962.

It was with this family heritage in my memory that I enrolled in UCLA at the end of the tumultuous sixties. One of my adored professors was Dr. Angela Davis, and when she went underground, and was later in prison and on trial, I became involved in the campaign to secure her freedom.

It was also at UCLA that I began my study of the history of religions, specifically how my own faith of Judaism was connected and cross-fertilized by Christianity and Islam. It was thus that I first came to know of a time in history known in Arabic as “Al-Andalus”, those centuries in Spain when Muslim rule allowed Muslims, and Jews, and Christians to create an astounding creative culture that made the Spanish city of Cordoba the most advanced metropolis in all of Europe in the 10th and 11th centuries; an era which today is described with the Spanish word “convivencia”, meaning religious coexistence. I fell in love with this time, and visited Spain often, marveling at its mosques and synagogues, and savoring a time when the children of Abraham lived together in peace.

And then came the morning of September 2001, when I was walking in New York’s Central Park near our home with my wife and then infant daughter, and we heard a great noise

and lookup to see a jet plane flying low over the trees, its wings wobbling back and forth like this. We rushed home, turned on the TV, and the rest, as they say, is history.

In the weeks and months that followed 9/11, we heard many neo-conservative commentators and public intellectuals proclaim that there existed a so-called “clash of civilizations” between the Muslim World and the West. This thesis, together with the false claims of Iraq’s “weapons of mass destruction,” became part of the justification for the United States-led invasion of Iraq, and in early 2003 millions of Americans took to the streets of their cities to warn of the dangers and the costs of an American invasion of Iraq. (Now, over a decade later, as I watched the TV reports on the collapse of the Iraqi state in the last few days, I contemplated the trillions of dollars and the thousands of lives wasted in America’s arrogant attempt to restructure an entire Muslim nation.)

But back in 2003, as the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld war machine was getting in gear for its self-described “crusade,” I felt obligated to respond to the bigotry, the distortion of Islam that was being propagated in the American media, an attempt to portray over a billion Muslims around the world as current or potential supporters of terrorism.

As a filmmaker, I therefore began to conceive of a documentary film that would respond both to the terror attacks of Al-Qaeda, as well as to neo-conservative claims of a continuous conflict between the West and the Muslim World. I had decided upon a documentary film that would explore the historical and contemporary influences of the two most illustrious personalities to emerge from Al-Andalus: Rabbi Moses Maimonides, or Musa Ibn Maimun, as he was known in this time. Maimonides had an immeasurable impact upon Jewish culture for centuries to come, in theology, philosophy, law, and medicine. He is widely considered the most influential Jewish thinker of the last millennium.

My second choice was Maimonides’ counterpart, Averroes the Muslim, his Arabic name being Abu Alwaleed Muhammad ibn Rushd, with the Latinized “Averroes” being the name he was destined to be known in the West. The writings of Ibn Rushd, especially his commentaries on the Greek philosopher Aristotle, when translated into Latin and read in the great Christian universities of Europe, helped to lay the foundation of Western philosophy and led directly to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.

I called my film “Out of Cordoba”, and it took 10 years to make. But know this, I could not have made this film without the scholarly and financial support that I as a Jew received from Muslims around the world, particularly through my association and friendship with the leadership of ISNA, the Islamic Society of North America. My largest single donation came from Prince Alwaleed bin Talal of Saudi Arabia. And so one morning in 2007, I opened up my email and read: “The Prince ABTF is pleased to announce that we are contributing the amount of \$250,000 to your film production ‘Out of Cordoba.’” You don’t receive emails like this every day.

“Out of Cordoba” was finished in 2012, and since then I have screen the film over 130 times at universities, mosques, churches, synagogues, and conferences throughout North America and around the world, including a screening at United Nations Headquarters in New

York for over 500 diplomats. The film has won many awards and Aljazeera bought the film and his making an Arabic-language version to broadcast throughout the Middle East.

Yet documentary filmmaking, unlike the Hollywood movie business, is not a particularly lucrative field. And so, after 10 years of making “Out of Cordoba”, and an additional 2 years of presenting it for thousands of people in the US, Europe, and the Middle East, it was time for me to search for what my wife calls a real job. And it was that search that led me to be hired last October as the Executive Director of the Philadelphia Chapter of CAIR, the Council on American Islamic Relations, the nation’s preeminent Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization.

CAIR, through its legal department and staff attorneys represents Muslims who have faced discrimination in their work places, or bullied in their schools, or harassed or intimidated or profiled or spied upon by police and security agencies of the government of the United States of America. CAIR also works to educate the American public about Islam, to participate in interfaith coalitions that seek to make these United States live up to its promise in the Declaration of Independence, that “all humans are created equal,” and to combat the surge of Islamophobia spreading through our land.

When I first started to read about the phenomena of anti-Muslim prejudice, I immediately noticed how many of the Islamophobic canards now regularly thrown at Muslims were previously directed at Catholic and Jewish immigrants in the last century — that these groups owe their allegiance to a foreign power; that Islam, like Catholicism and Judaism, is incompatible with democracy; and that therefore Muslims, like Catholics and Jews before them, are simply not able to be assimilated into the white Protestant culture of these United States.

Prejudice is a complicated phenomenon. At times, it postulates that those affiliating with a particular ethnic or religious group all share some common trait. African Americans are prone to criminality, Mexicans are lazy, Jews are cheap, Muslims are terrorists, etc. At other times, this bigotry takes the form of celebrating some supposed innate trait of the Other: Jews are good in business, Asian students are good in math, Blacks have ingrained athleticism. Years ago, NBC Sports broadcast a special one-hour program, hosted by Tom Brokaw, and including African American scholar Prof. Harry Edwards, examining why Blacks dominated American sports. During the program, Brokaw played a brief clip from a professional basketball game during the 1930s, when Jews were heavily represented in the game. Brokaw then read a piece of an article from the time that argued that Jews were prevalent in basketball because the game made use of the Jew’s natural proclivity for sneakiness and deception. That Jews predominated in basketball, only to be replaced a few decades later by African Americans, because of their social context, is a concept apparently too complex to be grasped by those attempting to prove the essential traits of one group or the other.

At its root, racism separated people from their social context, essentializing them into what the mainstream wished them to be, and what the mainstream wished Catholics, and Jews, and the Irish, and African Americans, and the Chinese to be were threats, dangerous foreign infections into the pure white body of America. To prove a group is a threat, a myth must be created.

And so, much like previous expressions of American, or rather Western bigotry, Islamophobia was itself composed of several myths that really erupted into the public sphere immediately after 9/11. It is the position of this lecture that, upon examination, these Islamophobic foundation myths can all be easily deflated, and shown to be distorted, or hypocritical, especially when compared to U.S. society.

Myth 1: Islam is a Monolithic Religion. Western commentators constantly refer to the “Muslim World” if it were a unified, single entity, reducing nearly 1.5 billion Muslims around the world to carbon copies of each other, rather than seeing the diversity of Muslim life on every continent on the earth.

Viewing all Muslims as having like-minded views leads to **Myth 2: That Islam is a religion based upon violence, and therefore believing Muslims, are themselves intrinsically violent.** These anti-Muslim activists dedicated to marginalizing Muslims in American, and, in their words, defeating the “Muslim savage,” can point to dozens of terror attacks around the globe — in the U.S., London, Paris, Madrid, Casablanca, Egypt, Israel, Turkey, Moscow, Mumbai, and Bali — by extremists claiming the religion of Islam as their justification.

But contrary to the Islamophobic spokespersons appearing regularly in the media, and especially on Fox, each terror attack listed above has been extensively condemned by Muslims around the globe, including the highest Islamic religious authorities, motivated, in no small part I believe, by the Islamic teaching that one should: “Speak out against injustice, even against yourself, or your family, or your relatives.” (Surat al Nisa, 135)

White Americans should be especially sensitive to the possibility of hypocrisy when criticizing violence by Muslims. As Black Power activist H. Rap Brown famously intoned in the 1960s, “Violence is as American as apple pie.” We all owe Howard Zinn our deepest gratitude for clearly laying out for us, in his magisterial “People’s History of the United States,” the long history of American state-sponsored violence: from the genocide of First Nation (Native American) peoples, to the millions of captured African slaves who perished during “the Middle Passage” to the New World; from the terror of the KKK in the resurgent Jim Crow South to the American occupation of the *Philippines*; and from the horror of Vietnam to the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan.

And though as a Jew deeply grounded in the history and traditions of my people, and all too cognizant of the history of Jewish suffering from the stories of my own family, I am also keenly aware of the violence perpetrated against the Palestinian people in the Jewish nation-building enterprise in Palestine.

The Third Islamophobic Myth is that Islam, of all the world’s great religions, is a uniquely sexist faith. This led to all sorts of “white man’s burden” justifications for European colonialism and empire, as the pillaging and raping of the under-developed world (a good part of which was Muslim), was defended as a “civilizing” crusade to save the “Oriental” woman from the oppression of her native society. Of course, this crusade was often conducted by white American and English men firmly committed to denying the right to vote to their wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters.

In explaining my job at the Council on American Islamic Relations to my fellow Jews, I am still surprised by the persistent questions about women and the veil. This from people who would never question the wearing of a yarmulke, or the shaving of the heads of Orthodox Jewish women, and as if these people are simply not able to comprehend how independent Muslim women, on their own volition, could voluntarily accept the veil as a way to self-consciously identify with their faith and tradition.

But, yes, the Taliban are indeed brutal misogynist fundamentalists. And yes, women cannot drive in Wahhabi Saudi Arabia. And yes, female genital mutilation happens in many Muslim communities in Africa. But are these practices intrinsic to Islam, or the result of cultural practices deeply ingrained in the surrounding societies? Those claiming that Islam is, by definition, sexist to its core, should take a visit to the ultra-orthodox Jewish neighborhoods of Brooklyn or Tel Aviv, where women routinely have 10+ children, and where domestic violence, and child abuse, are rampant, according to Jewish social service agencies, but rarely talked about in public.

And then there is the Catholic Church, with tens of thousands of recorded cases of priestly pedophilia in the past decades.

Sexual violence, and the oppression of women, are indeed some of the most serious problems facing humankind. But these crimes are not the sole problems of Muslims, but, rather, we can argue, the problems of men intoxicated by the abundance of power.

Myth 4 claims that Muslims, alone among the peoples of the planet, are incapable of democratic governance, and that Islam is incompatible with democracy. This racist view is firmly implanted in the Western tradition, being, again, one of the foundations of European colonial domination and its self-justifying notion of the selfless civilizing efforts of the “white man’s burden.” When President Teddy Roosevelt said in 1907: “It is impossible to expect moral, intellectual and material well-being where Mohammedism is supreme,” he indeed was intoning the spirit of the age.

And for those in the Islamophobic network who still claim that Islam is contrary to democracy, a view back to the Arab Spring, and the Green Rebellion in Iran before that, should give them pause.

And finally, **Myth 5: That Islam is intrinsically irrational and anti-scientific.** This final myth was of particular interest to me because as an undergraduate at UCLA, I studied the history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, particularly in Al-Andalus, medieval Muslim Spain, and I learned of a time in the Middle Ages when Islamic science and Muslim thinkers helped lay the foundations of Western learning in numerous fields of human endeavor, such as astronomy, mathematics, medicine, philosophy, optics, grammar, poetry, and music.

As CAIR’s first non-Muslim director of one of its 30 chapters around the country, something I feel both great pride and gratitude about. My appointment prompted over 20 interviews with me on local, national, and international TV and radio and in the press, as well as literally over 10,000 separate internet postings and blogs. The great majority of these were positive, but some in my own community called me “traitor” and “self-hating Jew” and “Nazi

lover.” This was also because of my decades-long public criticism of Israeli policy towards the Palestinians, and my support of the right of the Palestinians to a free and independent state of their own. As we read in the Holy Qur’an, *“You who believe! Be upholders of justice, bearing witness for Allah alone, even against yourselves or your parents and relatives.”* (Surat an-Nisa’, 135)

Again, I am most honored to be speaking before you today, and I often feel I am living a scene out of my movie about Al-Andalus, and like Musa ibn Maymun walking through the gardens of Cordoba eight centuries before me, a Jew among Muslims. Indeed I am blessed.

I would like to close with one of my favorite quotes from the Qur’an:

“To each of you, We have prescribed a law and a method. Had Allah willed, He would have made you one nation [united in religion], but that He has not done, so that you may compete with one another in the doing of good works.” (5:48)