

Can careless talk cost lives?

If denunciation of Islam is now acceptable, it is more important than ever to distinguish between robust debate and incitement to violence

FOR a few hours after the killings in Norway, when many people guessed that the perpetrators were Muslims, the blogosphere buzzed with told-you-so indignation from those who argue that the threat to the Western world from political Islam has been underestimated. Surely now, it was said, people would see the need for vigilance, not only against Islamically inspired violence but against any Muslim talk that abets such violence.

Soon after, as it emerged that the killer was a self-appointed warrior for the white Christian West, the boot was on the other foot: defenders of Muslim rights began arguing that xenophobic violence, even by the unhinged, was abetted by any language that demonised Islam and all those who practise it. Then it came to light that many of the best-known critics of Islam in Britain and the United States were cited in Anders Breivik's rambling 1,500-page manifesto. To some this seemed like proof that Islamophobic talk, even of the most cerebral kind, could have a cost in blood.

In response, critics of Islam were defiant, not embarrassed. In the sarcastic words of Mark Steyn, an Islamosceptic writer, posted in the *National Review Online*: "If a blond blue-eyed Aryan Scandinavian kills dozens of other blond blue-eyed Aryan Scandinavians, that's now an 'Islamophobic' mass murder?" Equally strident in self-defence was Robert Spencer, an American whose website Jihad Watch is widely read by adversaries of Islam.

But for better or worse, the word Islamophobia, implying an intense, potentially violent antipathy towards the Muslim faith and its followers, is now firmly in the world's political vocabulary. That may be one of the consequences of the Norwegian horror. Hitherto the term has often been called into question, especially if used to outlaw any strong dissent from Islam as a creed. A phobia suggests a prejudice, an irrational fear or hatred. Surely, some say, it is possible to criticise a religion, by disagreeing with its tenets or even arguing that they could have bad social consequences, without being malicious.

On the other hand, for those who do want to demonise a social group or pick a fight, appeals to religious sentiment can—as every rabble-rouser knows—be an effective rhetorical device. People who have never darkened the door of a church can easily be persuaded that minarets on a skyline are a threat to everything they hold



Islamophobia at its most vile

dear, to be resisted in every way.

Across Europe and America, the denunciation of Islam as such—as opposed to fundamentalist or radical readings of Islam—has gained respectability in the past few years, even as Muslim communities have grown in size and confidence. Lisa Bjurwald, a Swedish writer on far-right politics, points to three powerful strands of Islamophobia at work in Europe.

Bad, worse, worst

First, in almost every European democracy there are semi-respectable political parties which trade on antipathy towards Islam (and immigrants in general—especially dark-skinned ones). Second, there are street movements, such as Germany's Pro Deutschland, which might evolve into genuine parties. Third, on the fringe, there are groups such as the English Defence League (EDL), and its embryonic imitators in some other countries, whose supporters barely conceal the fact that they are spoiling for a fight on the streets. Mr Breivik claimed to have been in touch with the EDL—which does not imply any responsibility on its part.

For several years after the terror attacks on the United States in 2001, senior figures in both Europe and America held back from any denunciation of Islam as such; they were careful to distinguish between the faith and the people who practised vio-

lence in its name. When, in 2001, Franklin Graham, an American preacher, denounced Islam as "a very evil and wicked religion", the Bush administration was deeply embarrassed. That self-restraint—the sense that it is indecent or irresponsible to make a general attack on a religion that hundreds of millions of people practise—has now partly evaporated.

In 2009 the leader of Norway's Progress Party, to which Mr Breivik belonged for several years, made waves by saying: "The reality is that a kind of sneak-Islamisation of this society is being allowed... we are going to have to stop this." The Flemish-nationalist Vlaams Belang party laments in its manifesto that Muslims have made little or no attempt to adapt to "our Western lifestyle". In Denmark the People's Party leader, Pia Kjaersgaard, has deplored the arrival in her country of "thousands of persons who apparently civilisationally, culturally and spiritually live in the year 1005 instead of 2005." This week an Italian MEP from the Northern League caused outrage by calling Mr Breivik's ideas "good" and in some cases "excellent".

In America, where national culture is seen as a work perpetually in progress, and the constitution guarantees freedom of religion, it may be harder to make purely nativist arguments against Islam. But denunciations of Muslims and their beliefs have been couched in terms of security. A mosque, even an ostensibly peaceful one, could pose a terrorist threat; and America's constitution could be threatened by an attempt, however improbable, to impose the *sharia* code over the law of the land.

In the argument over whether to allow a mosque near the site of the 2001 attacks, much of the language implied the "collective guilt" of all Muslims, suggests John Esposito, a professor at Georgetown University. Mr Esposito, who advocates Christian-Muslim reconciliation, gets a torrent of abuse as a "fellow-traveller" with Islam. Herman Cain, a Republican with dreams of the presidency and also a Baptist minister, recently said that it was right to oppose the building of mosques (in Tennessee, for example) because they might be part of a plot to impose *sharia*.

Still, even as arguments over Islam get more intemperate, many people see a greater need to protect religious free speech, to distinguish clearly between outspoken theological dialogue and incitement to hatred or violence. The best way of defusing explosive religious tensions is to safeguard a "respectful, robust, religiously literate debate" between faiths, says Elizabeth Hunter of Theos, a British think-tank. Keith Porteous Wood, of Britain's National Secular Society, says the Norwegian tragedy must "not silence legitimate debate about Islam and Western values", because that would be a gift to deranged extremists such as Mr Breivik. •