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# Guest Bloggers

*January 3, 2013 1:19pm*

## NY Subway Killing a Case of Blind Hatred?

*Post by* LAURIE PATTON Last week we saw yet another hate crime viciously interrupt the everyday business of a world trying to come to grips with its own diversity.

On the morning of December 27, Erika Menendez pushed Sunando Sen in front of a 7 train in Queens. She told the police: “I pushed a Muslim off the train tracks because I hate Hindus and Muslims ever since 2001 when they put down the twin towers I’ve been beating them up.”

A native of India, Mr. Sen had saved enough money to open a small copy shop. While he had no family in the U.S., he had friends and associates who were part of this new life. While he was a Hindu, Sen had a Muslim roommate with whom he frequently discussed matters of belief. And when they did, Mr. Sen expressed his deep disappointment that there was so much violence in the world on account of religion.

No matter Ms. Menendez’ psychiatric state, her hate crime is based on a conflation of religious and racial identities: while Sen’s religion (Hindu or Muslim) was the motivation, his racial make-up was the deciding factor for the murder.

This confusion is nothing new among haters. Wade Michael Page, the

gunman in Oak Creek Wisconsin who began his white supremacist career in the Neo-Nazi underground at Fort Bragg, had a particular hatred for Jews and blacks, in addition to the “dirt people” who made up all non-white groups. And we have heard about the post 9-11 attacks on Sikhs as “rag heads” from the Middle East.

But as Jack Mirkinson noted in HuffPo in the wake of the Oak Creek shooting, even news reporters have a hard time getting a “lesser-known” religious tradition right:

A Fox News analyst asked if there had been any “anti-Semitic acts” in the past against Sikhs; CNN’s Don Lemon wondered if Sikhs have “traditional enemies,” or if the shooter had a “beef with the Sikhs”; a local Wisconsin station reported that the religion is “based in northern Italy.”

Corrective guidelines were immediately issued by the Asian American Journalists’ Association. But the damage was done.

However the media handle it, scholars of religion have long argued that religious literacy —knowing who is who—is intimately connected to tolerance of religious diversity, to a climate in which the stranger no longer seems strange. We are not talking about ideal harmony here; just a way of living together in which diversity becomes nothing special, simply a fact of our lives.

Yet simply rushing to correct a confusion, or conflation, has a downside. For Hindu groups to say they are not Muslims, or Sikh groups to say they should not be confused with Jews, implies that if the attacker had just gotten the religion right in the attack, all would be well.

Recall the debate after 9/11 about the fact that Sikhs should not be confused with Muslims, and whether such clarifying statements would actually help or hurt the fight against religious prejudice. In an insightful essay Simran Jeet Singh also points out some of the other problems with the theme of “mistaken identity”:

A number of people have challenged the moniker of “mistaken identity” on different grounds. Some have problematized the notion

because it implies the “correctness” of targeting Muslims. Some have suggested that a neo-Nazi and white supremacist would not care to distinguish between Muslims and Sikhs. Others have argued that Sikhs fit into the new racialized identity of Muslims and that the targeting of such minority groups is completely intentional.

On the one hand, members of a wrongly targeted minority should clarify and teach about their traditions, preferably, as I have written **before**, in alliance with others who are not part of the tradition. On the other hand, Singh and others argue against the idea that education alone will cure violence. It is unlikely that a course in comparative religion would have prevented the Oak Creek shooter or Erika Menendez from murdering innocent people going about their daily lives.

What is necessary, then, is a two-pronged approach. In the first case, we can and should clarify religious racial and ethnic identities as a matter of course. Education must continue. But we should not delude ourselves into thinking that education is enough.

A second focus is necessary: we might view such confusions of identity as opportunities to make common cause with other victims of hate crimes in America. The fact that Erika Menendez included both Hindus and Muslims in her rage means that both groups continue to be vulnerable in the United States. The fact that Sen’s brown skin was the single cause of his being targeted means that religious minorities must continue to make common cause with racial minorities. The fact that Wade Michael Page included Sikhs in his murderous rampage, when his “preferred” white supremacist targets were black and Jews means that Sikhs, blacks, and Jews remain linked in the white supremacist imagination.

Last week’s tragedy is a stark reminder that when it comes to hate crimes, religious minorities continue to be confused with each other—and they continue to be racialized. Just as racial and ethnic minorities continue to be “religion-ized.”

These post-9/11 hate crimes provide us a particularly twenty-first century reason for the creation of coalitions across racial and ethnic

and religious lines.