

Equality & Diversity Hot Topic - May 2011

Testing Assumptions about Religion

What a strange Bank Holiday Monday! Firstly, the sun was shining. Then we didn't really need the break as we'd already had three public holidays and a weekend within the previous 10 days. Finally, we awoke to the news that Osama Bin Laden, America's most wanted terrorist, had been found in Pakistan and killed during a Special Forces raid.



America reacts to the news of Osama Bin Laden's death. The moment was hugely symbolic and the crowds were euphoric.

American citizens were celebrating in the streets, as this picture from the BBC News website shows.

Once the crowds had congregated, the chanting began: 'U-S-A! U-S-A!'

It is, perhaps, understandable for the nation directly targeted by Al-Qaeda in the 9/11 attacks to feel a sense of relief and justice.

What is worrying is the implication from some of those celebrating, and from some of the media, that Al-Qaeda and Islam are one and the same; that being a Muslim meaning being a terrorist.

There is no available breakdown of the religious beliefs of the close to 3,000 victims of 11th September 2001, but we do know that some of them were followers of Islam.

One was Salman Hamdani. He had moved to America from Pakistan as a baby in 1980; his two younger brothers were born in the United States. Salman graduated from Queens College in June 2001, where he majored in chemistry. He hoped to eventually go to medical school, so trained as an Emergency Medical Technician and drove part-time for an ambulance service. He had also joined the New York Police Department's cadet program.

He was a typical young American. When he left for work on the morning of the attacks he had a Qur'an in his backpack and a date planned for later.

He did not arrive home that night. It became clear later that he had seen the unfolding tragedy and rushed to the World Trade Centre to offer his skills as an EMT and police cadet; to help. His family, like many others, began a frantic search.

But, some of their flyers were torn down. Police began asking them about Salman's politics and his computer. A *New York Post* story about him was headlined "Missing – or

Hiding?" The implication was clear: because Salman was a Muslim, people thought he was a perpetrator and not a victim!

It was not until March 2002 that Salman's parents were advised that his remains had been identified in the rubble of the North Tower. They had not only lost their eldest child but also watched as fellow Americans slandered his name and cast suspicion on his reasons for being at the World Trade Centre.

'People of all faiths died that day, including Muslims', said his mother, Talat. 'It is not fair to hold us responsible.'



Talat Hamdani, whose son Salman died when the World Trade Center collapsed on 9/11, feels like a 'double victim'.

At his funeral, the police commissioner called Salman a hero. 'Most people would have gone in the other direction during the aftermath of the attacks' said New York's Mayor, Michael Bloomberg, 'He went in to help people.'

Last year, Talat Hamdani supported the plan to build an Islamic cultural centre near Ground Zero because she felt that it would promote religious tolerance. President Obama has also called for unity. He said, 'It was not a religion that attacked us that September day. It was al-Qaeda.'



The Holy city of Makkah, birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon Him). Hajj, or Pilgrimage, to Makkah is one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

Do YOU make assumptions about people based only on their religion?

The word 'Islam' means peace and submission in Arabic. It is not a new religion. It stems from the covenant between God and Abraham, as do both Christianity and Judaism.

All three Holy books, the Qur'an of Islam, the Jewish Torah and the Christian Bible, give a similar message of hope, faith and peace. They also promote tolerance, respect and unity; as do Beneast Training.

May dates for your E&D diaries are:

14th May Fair Trade Day

15th May International Day of Families

17th May International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia

21st May Diversity Day

There are also religious festivals in May, from the Buddhist, Jewish and Wicca calendars.