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JAMES CARROLL

The Boston Globe

The rising tides of xenophobia

By James Carroll

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"THE APPROACH [to build] a multicultural [society] and to live side by side and to enjoy each other . . . has failed, utterly failed." This statement at a political rally last week by German Chancellor Angela Merkel was greeted by a standing ovation from her listeners. She was speaking of how Germany's immigrant population, mainly Turks, remains socially marginal. Using "we" to refer to the nation's majority population, she continued, "We feel tied to Christian values. Those who don't accept them don't have a place here."

Hello? The 5 million Muslims living in Germany were on notice, but Merkel's remarks reverberated across the continent — and the ocean. On both sides of the Atlantic, a rising tide of xenophobic hostility toward immigrants is threatening to swamp the foundation of liberal democracy. As if out of nowhere, American politics, too, shows this. Merkel's overt affirmation of "Christian values" as a note of national identity, for example, has an echo in the sly deriding of the separation of church and state that came last week from Delaware Senate candidate Christine O'Donnell. Supposedly a gaffe, her "Where in the Constitution is the separation of church and state?" was actually code — a message to American Christian nationalists who understood her very well.

When Nevada candidate Sharron Angle told Hispanic students in Las Vegas, "I don't know that all of you are Latino. Some of you look a little more Asian to me," she was subtly upholding a white template of American identity. You "others" all look the same to "us." Code again, not a gaffe. Angle and O'Donnell can seem like fringe characters, but broad public discourse (Juan Williams, writer of the civil rights classic "Eyes on the Prize," flaunting his fear of Muslims) suggests that race and religion are back as notes of qualification for full citizenship.

The "approach to build a multicultural society" in the United States is not a postwar phenomenon, as in Europe. It has defined this nation for generations, going deep into the American ethos. Of course, the separation of church and state — protecting the principle that the magistrate must never coerce the conscience of the citizen — is essential to authentic pluralism. To date, no responsible American government figure feels free to openly echo Merkel's "Christian values" excommunication. But multiculturalism can fail in the United States, too, as mounting negativity toward immigrants ("aliens") suggests.

In Europe, the pressure comes from Muslim populations, and though American anti-Islamic prejudice has been sparked by the war on terror (and fueled by Fox News), the real point of contention here is the burgeoning Latino population. This year, in fact, marks a demographic tipping point, with more US children born to minorities than to whites. It won't be until about 2050 that the national percentage of whites will fall below half, but many already feel as though the privilege and power of being part of the dominant group are being ripped away. The political hysteria, including rampant hatred of the black president, that has seized the Republican Party is a result.

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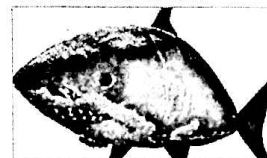
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We have been here before. Know-Nothing bigotry is nothing new. Chinese, Irish, Jews, Italians, Slavs, and others have had their turns on this hot seat, with African-Americans perennially warned that they "don't have a place here." Now Latinos, who make up more than 15 percent of the US population (expected to grow to a quarter by 2050), are all but explicitly told that they can never be real Americans.

Angela Merkel's denigration of Germany's newcomers extends to laying the "total failure" of the "multikulti" experiment at their feet, as if structures of dominance, class, and ethnic preference did not raise impossible barriers. *Schuld des Opfers* is German for blame the victim. In a time of high social anxiety, attached to real problems like economic collapse and imagined ones like global jihad, the hidden mechanism of scapegoating can kick into gear. Germany, in fact, has taught this lesson in the past. If the United States has one steady triumph, it is in having overcome such impulses again and again. (Who remembers the "Chinese Exclusion Act"? Who thinks Asians have not been a boon to the commonwealth?) The American idea is at risk again, and the world once more awaits its vindication.

James Carroll's column appears regularly in the Globe. ■

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