ON THE UTILITY OF LABELS
Some reflections on “Anti-Semitism” and “Islamophobia”

The question I want to pose is whether or not labels such as “anti-Semitism” and “Islamophobia” are useful. I will suggest that these labels tend to confuse more than enlighten, and divert from the critical task of finding truth.

Let me begin with some definitions. The Oxford dictionary defines anti-Semitism as “hostility to or prejudice against Jews,” while an influential British report defines Islamophobia as “unfounded hostility towards Muslims.”

A definition highlighting the common features of both phenomena might be a generalization targeting a group, or the targeting of a group’s core beliefs, that is hurtful and irrational.

Some typical examples of these bigoted beliefs are generalizations such as Muslims are terrorists and Jews are cheap, or denigrations of a group’s core beliefs such as the Holocaust never happened and Islam is a backward religion.

Let me now turn to each of the three integral components of this definition. It is sometimes asserted that any generalization about a group of people is wrong, even if it is harmless and even if it is fact-based. This strikes me as an untenable position.
A generalization is simply something that is generally true. We all live, and cannot but live, on the basis of generalizations. If the morning weather report forecasts a 70 percent chance of precipitation, it means that in weather conditions like today, it has generally rained. The sensible thing would be to take an umbrella along.

At the level of human interaction, if you were a Black man in the American South in the 1950s, it would not have been smart to walk into a bar on the White side of town with a White woman because most Southerners were racists. Indeed, towards the end of his life, Martin Luther King, Jr. concluded that most White Americans, not just Southerners, were racists. It almost certainly was, and probably still is, an accurate generalization.

The fact is, in some circumstances the sensible thing is to generalize about a group of people, whereas the foolish thing is not to generalize about them.

On a related note, in some instances negative generalizations about a group might be legitimate, or at least understandable. The wonder would be if Jews after the Holocaust did not hate Germans, the majority of whom were and perhaps still are anti-Semitic, and if Palestinians after Israel’s creation did not hate Jews, the majority of whom did and perhaps still do support the dispossession of Palestine’s indigenous population.

Is it also legitimate, or at least understandable, if Germans nowadays hate Jews, many of whom have exploited and manipulated the Holocaust at Germany’s expense, or if Israelis nowadays hate
Palestinians, who have perpetrated or supported terrorist attacks against them? It’s a tough question.

But do instances exist where it is clearly wrong to generalize about a group of people? One answer is, when the generalization is inaccurate or the practical harm resulting from the generalization cannot be reasonably justified.

For example, New York City, where I’m from, has a policy called “stop and frisk.” In effect, it means that police routinely stop Black people in the street and search them. It is justified on the grounds that violent crime is generally committed by Black people. But, a federal judge just ruled that this “racial-profiling” policy is unconstitutional. She said that, although most violent crimes might be committed by Black people, it was wrong to generalize from this fact that most Black people are criminals, and that even if it could be shown that arbitrarily stopping Black people reduces crime, the harm inflicted on them as a group outweighed the good: far too many innocent Black people suffered humiliation as a result of the policy. On analogous grounds, it would probably be unconstitutional to racially profile Muslims at airport security.

My first contention, then, is that, although in many instances generalizations about Jews or Muslims are wrong, dismissing out of hand all negative generalizations about these groups is also wrong.

Returning to our original definition, it is often asserted that opinions hurtful to a particular group should be prohibited. On the other hand, it is also argued, especially in the United States by First Amendment fundamentalists, that even if a generalization targeting a group, or targeting a group’s core beliefs, causes psychological and emotional harm, these consequences do not justify silencing the
hurtful opinions. The only relevant concern, it is said, should be whether or not the generalization is true.

On the whole, I am more sympathetic to the First Amendment fundamentalists’ argument. What’s called “political correctness” in the West—that is, the censoring of opinions because they might offend a particular group of people—has had an intellectually stifling effect. Many areas of inquiry have been closed off on the grounds that mere mention of them is offensive.

The fact that an opinion offends cannot in itself be grounds for censoring it. There’s an English expression, “Truth is often a bitter pill to swallow.” If we are committed to truth, then it must be accepted that some of the truths we discover might be painful ones. The scientific consensus that human beings descended from apes deeply offends many Christians, but does that mean evolution should not be taught in schools?

Moreover, in practice “political correctness” is often hypocritical. Teachers who are liberal take care to avoid topics in class that might offend racial minorities or women. But they also advocate a woman’s “right to choose” an abortion, which many Christians find deeply offensive. In other words, depending on one’s politics, in some cases it is purported to be wrong to cause group hurt, whereas in other cases it is not.

The claim that a certain opinion is offensive also often serves as a pretext for political censorship. For example, Jewish groups on many college campuses have sought to prevent me from speaking on the grounds that my opinions on Israel are hurtful to Jews and cause them to be fearful. Even if true, these grounds plainly cannot justify
denying me a platform to speak in an institution avowedly devoted to seeking truth.

But it cannot be denied that some opinions can create a hostile classroom environment that makes learning nearly impossible. If a German professor points to evidence that Jews exaggerated the Holocaust, if a Dutch professor points to evidence that Islam is a hateful religion, if an American professor points to evidence that Black people are intellectually inferior to White people, the lone Jewish, Muslim or Black student in the class would have be of extraordinarily resilient character not to be shattered.

Where, then, does one draw the line? Which topics are “fair game” in a classroom—that is, however offensive, still valuable areas of intellectually inquiry—and which topics cause so much personal hurt that mere mention of them creates an intolerably hostile learning environment for some students?

Although I have devoted much time to studying and pondering this question, and much of my professional life to directly confronting it in the classroom, I confess not to have a good answer. I know of no abstract rule or principle that provides practical guidance on where to draw the line. The decision on how to proceed in each concrete situation must be left to the empathetic judgment of a skillful teacher.

My second contention, then, is that, although potential offense to the feelings of Jews or Muslims should be taken into account, causing emotional or psychological hurt is an unavoidable byproduct of searching for truth.

Let me now turn to the last part of the original definition. To qualify as bigotry, the generalization about a group must not only be hurtful
but also false. A phobia, as in Islamophobia, after all, is an “irrational fear.” If the generalization is factually accurate, it cannot be said to be bigoted, however much hurt it might cause. For example, the opinion that short people cannot successfully compete in professional basketball might be painful to them, but it also happens to be generally true. Facts just are; they do not carry a value-judgment.

One critical implication of this uncontroversial point warrants close attention. If a negative generalization about a group, or a negative assessment of one of the group’s core beliefs, cannot qualify as bigotry so long as it is factually accurate, and if the precondition for knowing truth is unrestricted speech—“a standing invitation to the whole world to prove” you are wrong, as John Stuart Mill famously put it—then it cannot be justified to bar public expression of an opinion on the grounds that it is anti-Semitic or Islamophobic.

It cannot be known if the said opinion is a slander or a truth before it is fully debated, and it can never be known for certain and forever because new evidence might overturn old “truths.” For the longest time, it seemed literally plain as day that the Earth was flat—wasn’t the edge of the planet’s surface on the horizon visible to the naked eye? Truth, as Jean-Paul Sartre once observed, is always an “indefinite approximation.” To be human is to be fallible, and to be fallible is to concede the possibility of being wrong even in one’s deeply held beliefs.

My third contention, then, is that, whereas the vast preponderance of evidence might support the opinion that a hurtful generalization about Jews or Muslims is false, and whereas in order to rationally support the hurtful generalization, one would have to refute the vast preponderance of contrary evidence, only through free and open debate can
it be known for certain that a hurtful generalization is false, while if it is true, it cannot be legitimately suppressed, however hurtful it might be.

My overall conclusion from this brief discussion is that labels such as “anti-Semitism” and “Islamophobia” are not useful. It might be much more difficult but it is also much more useful to assess the factual accuracy of a proposition than to dismiss it outright as bigoted. Our ultimate value ought to be truth.

Many Jews have blindly supported Israel’s criminal policies while a large part of the Muslim world is currently imploding. Instead of seeking to neutralize, deflect and silence criticism with labels such as “anti-Semitism” and “Islamophobia,” it would perhaps be more prudent to calmly examine in order to learn from what is valid in the criticism.

“In the opinion not of bad men, but the best of men,” Mill wrote, “nothing which is contrary to truth can be useful.” We should be careful that the resort to labels such as “anti-Semitism” and “Islamophobia” does not hinder the search for truth.