

Hate crimes against religion are on the rise

A plague of threats and attacks on religious people and institutions in Canada is challenging believers to stand up for one another, faith leaders said in the wake of a new Statistics Canada report on hate crimes.

A 151-per-cent increase in hate crimes against Muslims leads the way in a massive 47-per-cent year-over-year increase in Canadian hate crimes reported in 2017.

“All of us, as people of faith, we have to stand in solidarity with each other and realize the moment that we’re in,” Imam Muneeb Nasir told Canadian Catholic News.

The annual Statistics Canada summary of “Police-reported hate crime in Canada” released April 30 shows religion as a major driver of hate, violence and vandalism across the country.

Religiously motivated attacks grew by 83 per cent in 2017, with attacks against Muslims and Jews leading the way. Hate crimes motivated by race rose 32 per cent and those motivated by sexual orientation increased 16 per cent.

Muslims, who are just 3.2 per cent of Canada’s population, were the targets of 349 reported incidents in 2017, up from 139 in 2016. Canada’s much smaller Jewish community, just one per cent of Canadians, was hit with 360 incidents, a 63-per-cent increase over the 221 attacks in 2016.

There were 39 Catholic-motivated incidents, up from 29 the year before.

Recalling that 2017 was the year of the Quebec City mosque massacre that killed six and injured 19 while they prayed, Nasir was expecting the numbers to be high.

“It’s not very surprising, but of course very disturbing,” said Nasir, the co-chair of the National Muslim-Christian Liaison Committee and president of the Olive Tree Foundation which promotes community development in Canada.

While social media plays a role in boosting hate, Nasir is more worried about the state of political debate and leadership.

“If you’re going to address it, you have to find out why it’s happening,” he said. “A lot of it is based on political expediency. There are voices seeking to divide for their political benefit.”

“Social media does become a very useful tool for people who like to dehumanize

others and to demonize people who are different and who believe different things," said Deacon Andrew Bennett, program director for religious freedom and legal issues at the Christian think tank Cardus.

But Bennett also believes blaming social media is too easy.

"I think what is driving the increase is an increasing privatization within our society, where there's a breakdown in community," he said.

"People who are deeply religious, people who wear outward symbols of their faith, people who worship in different ways or worship at all are seen to be odd, or are seen to be the other. Ignorance is very much a foundation for hate."

Bennett cites Quebec's Bill 21, which would prevent Muslims, Sikhs, Jews and others who wear religious symbols above a certain size from being hired in some civil service jobs. The proposed secularism bill is one example of political leadership making extremist and hateful views more mainstream.

"What's happening in Quebec is so egregiously wrong," he said. "And it's so contrary to what we should have learned from the attacks on the mosque in Quebec and ongoing anti-Semitic attacks."

When Western societies lose touch with religion, or fail to see the positive contribution of religion, it is more likely religion will be targeted, said Nasir.