Help us share the knowledge that will stem this rising tide of hate

Law enforcement run with a person on a stretcher at the scene where multiple people were shot, Saturday, Oct. 27, 2018, at the Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh’s Squirrel Hill neighborhood.

By SARAH PESSION, NADER HASHEMI and ANDREA STANTON | Guest Commentary
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We watched Saturday’s terrorist attack on the members of the Tree of Life synagogue congregation in Pittsburgh with horror, sorrow, and little surprise. As scholars at the University of Denver, we have been speaking and teaching about the rising tide of hate directed at Jews, Muslims, and immigrants of all backgrounds.

We know the statistics and can recite them without checking our notes: 55 percent of U.S. hate crimes are motivated by anti-Jewish hatred and 25 percent are motivated by anti-Muslim hatred. (Jewish Americans make up just less than 2 percent of the U.S. population, while Muslims make up just about 1 percent.)

The number of hate crimes reported each year has been increasing: the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism reports that the number of hate crimes compiled from 38 major U.S. cities increased 12 percent from 2016 to 2017 — and in Denver, the number of reported hate crimes increased 74 percent.

As scholars and as citizens, we respond in solidarity with Jewish Americans around the country, who mourn the loss of 11 lives on Saturday, and are wondering whether the U.S. is a safe home.

Anti-Semitism is an ugly stain on this country, along with anti-Black and anti-Native racism, Islamophobia, and other forms of hatred and prejudice. We see in Saturday’s attack a deep and threatening hatred of Jews, compounded by a hate of immigrants and refugees.

In focusing on the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) — whose motto is “Welcome the stranger. Protect the refugee” — alongside a reference to immigrants as “invaders,” the killer combines a long history of treating Jews as unwelcome outsiders with more recent rhetoric about immigrants and refugees as “criminals and unknown Middle Easterners.”

We know from our work that there is deep danger in the additive logic of hatred, and that people who hate one group of people for their ethnic, religious, racial, sexual, or other identities tend to hate other groups as well.

We recognize that anti-Black, anti-Native, and anti-LGBTQIA sentiments circulating online and among the alt-right also play a role in increasing the hostility to Jews, Muslims, immigrants, and refugees — as do political discourses that encourage everything from imprisoning members of opposing political parties without due process to expelling or killing minority communities from the U.S.
We also know that ignorance breeds suspicion, and suspicion enables fear. Given the small numbers of Jewish and Muslim Americans in the U.S., it is unsurprising that many other Americans may never have had a Jewish friend or a Muslim neighbor. Stereotypes and demonization flourish in the space of the unknown.

As educators, we invite our friends and neighbors across Colorado and the Rocky Mountains to call on us when we can help. We believe in the University of Denver’s mission: to be a private university dedicated to the public good.

In connection with DU’s new Religious Inclusivity Initiative, this January we are piloting a new religious literacy project in partnership with local public libraries and community centers. We invite teachers, librarians, church groups, community center directors, and anyone else to connect with us for help with speakers, Skype sessions with student groups or classes, and teacher trainings around issues of religious literacy or American religious diversity. We can provide display and programming support. We can host classes or community groups at DU’s campus. We can recommend teaching modules that cover everything from the Holocaust to the arts of the Islamic world.

Stereotypes don’t disappear overnight. Hatred doesn’t evaporate in an instant. But together we can work to put knowledge in the place of ignorance and responsibility in the place of fear. If you’d like to connect with us, or know someone who might, please visit https://www.du.edu/ahss/cjs/initiatives/ for a menu of ideas and let us know how we can help.

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