

# TODAY'S "SHORT TOPIC" IS "PHOBIA" REALLY THE CORRECT TERM?



By Stephen L. Bakke  December 20, 2015

*Phobia: a persistent, irrational fear of a specific object, activity, or situation that leads to a compelling desire to avoid it ..... used in the names of MENTAL DISORDERS that have the general sense "dread of, aversion toward" that specified by the initial element – e.g. agoraphobia.*

## *Here's what provoked me:*

*The use of the term "phobia" has saturated our society as an emphatic expression of disdain associated with an accusation of something close to evil. A friend made an observation that this is a corruption of the definitions of tolerance and intolerance. I decided to pick that theme up after reading a particularly scathing article about the Islamophobia of Trump and Republicans.*

## *Here's my response:*

### **Is "Phobia" Really the Correct Term?**

Pankaj Mishra offered an interesting analysis of "Islamophobia" in "Why Muslims should be grateful for Trump," in the Opinion Exchange, on 12-18-15. The goal of this opinion was to point out the Islamophobia of Trump and Republicans. Arguing about that opinion isn't my goal here. Rather, I would put more focus on the recent proliferation of the term "phobia/phobic" in our society.

Going back in time, the use of phobia was in the context of extreme fears of something such as: flying, insects, heights, or small spaces, etc. A similar term, but one used more exclusively to describe interpersonal feelings or relationships, was "intolerance" – and obviously the "flip side" of intolerance was "tolerance."

Tolerance was a feeling about a person, group, organization, opinion, policy, etc. It was a reflection of feelings that while not enthusiastic, was more positive than negative – i.e. not something one would take a stand against. Tolerance was true acceptance, but not necessarily agreement or approval.

In recent years, the definition of tolerance evolved and expanded – now, not only acceptance is required, but also agreement, approval, and (for some) vocal endorsement. A willingness to just peacefully accept something is no longer enough to be called tolerant. And what are these formerly tolerant individuals now called? Well.....INTOLERANT of course! And they haven't even changed their opinions!

And then someone must have said! "What we have here, folks, is obviously a manifestation of a phobia – it's somehow an understatement to call these formerly tolerant bigots merely 'intolerant.'" Whence cometh phobias such as xenophobia, Islamophobia, homophobia, et al.