

Generalized symbol of hate

By MARTIN COHN

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The Anti Defamation League came out with its annual survey this week and reported that anti-Semitic incidents in Vermont decreased slightly in 2009. The ADL survey showed that there were three reported harassment incidents in 2009 compared to 2008 in which there were four harassment occurrences and one vandalism incident.

However, in April 2010, I learned of two incidents of vandalism and one incident of harassment in Windham County. And, this month there were two incidents of vandalism in Dummerston.

While the Vermont Partnership and houses of worship are busily working on a public service advertising campaign to denounce these recent hate messages, it is interesting to note that the painting of a swastika -- that dark, ubiquitous signature of hateful vandals everywhere -- is no longer automatically considered an act of anti-Semitism under new guidelines for recording attacks against Jews by the Anti-Defamation League.

The most prominent Jewish defense agency in the country announced that it has revamped its guidelines for recording anti-Semitic incidents in its annual survey for the first time in 30 years, taking a more conservative approach.

"We know that the swastika has, for some, lost its meaning as the primary symbol of Nazism and instead become a more generalized symbol of hate," said Abraham Foxman, the ADL's national director in a statement. "So we are being more careful to include graffiti incidents that specifically target Jews or Jewish institutions as we continue the process of re-evaluating and redefining how we measure anti-Jewish incidents."

Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a Jewish educational and human rights group based in Los Angeles, said he understood the reasoning behind the Anti-Defamation League's move.

"The swastika is shorthand for every racist and bigot on the planet," Rabbi Cooper said. "It is amazing that 60 or 70 years later that symbol has not lost any of its potency."

Using its new accounting, the ADL still logged 1,211 anti-Semitic incidents in the United States in 2009. That was down from 1,352 incidents in 2008, in part because of the new approach to swastikas.

Was the swastikas painted on the Dummerston Bridge an act of anti-Semitism or just general hate?

Researching the history of the symbol, one finds that Adolf Hitler and the Nazis stole it from the Hindu and Buddhist religions and perverted its meaning. Ironically svastika is Sanskrit for "all is well" and is seen throughout Asia today--including emblazoned upon Buddha statues around the world. It was intended to be a message of harmony and well being to all those who gazed upon its satisfyingly balanced shape. In Buddhism it is almost always seen pointing left, whereas the Nazis used it facing right. It became the defining motif of anti-Jewish hatred and is still the contemporary calling card of many neo-Nazi groups.

So, regardless of the motivation of the vandals in Dummerston, we must continue to be vigilant toward intolerance and speak out as a community whenever hate messages appear.

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