A challenge for us all

Despite having established itself in the lexicon of both public and political discourses over the past two decades, Islamophobia remains something of a complex, much-contested and highly emotive issue. Having first raised political awareness following the publication of the Runnymede Trust’s ground-breaking report, *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all* (the Runnymede report) in 1997, it continues to be one of the most salient socio-political issues facing many contemporary Western societies, along with the role of Muslims and Islam more broadly. Defined as being little more than a fear or dislike of Islam that by consequence extends to all Muslims without differentiation (Commission on British Muslims 1997), some critics and detractors of the term – and of Muslims and Islam also, it must be stressed – contend that in the contemporary climate there is a clear rationale for being ‘fearful’ of Islam. Andrew Shyrock (2010: 9) agrees with this view, arguing that speaking about Islamophobia tends to be overly simplistic and impervious to nuance, while Salman Sayyid (2010: 1–4) and George Readings et al. (2011) stress the need for better articulation and for differentiating the analytical from the polemical, which are somewhat different and distinct from each other.

Within academic spaces, this contestation has become much less pronounced in recent years. As Brian Klug (2012) recently put it, Islamophobia studies have ‘come of age’. Leon Moosavi (2014) agrees, adding that it is no longer valid to contest Islamophobia as a phenomenon but better to work towards improving understanding about it. This is evident in the more critical approaches taken by Chris Allen (2010), John Esposito and Ibrahim Kalin (2011), Stephen Sheehi (2011), Raymond Taras (2012) and Nathan Lean (2012), among others. For them, Islamophobia has to be seen as more than a mere phobia; it is a socio-political as opposed to religious phenomenon that reflects contemporary hegemonic geopolitical relations, conflicts and ruptures. Within this, Allen and Sheehi argue that Islamophobia functions as an ideology, conceived and embedded within the individual, communal, social and global patterns of thought and meaning that exist about Muslims and Islam in the present-day setting. For them, that which becomes known – and subsequently understood – about Muslims and Islam is communicated through various systems of signifiers and symbols which seek to influence, impact and inform the social consensus, thereby resulting in the establishment of Muslims and Islam as the unequivocal and undeniable ‘other’ (Allen 2010, 2013).
For Simon Clarke (2003) discriminatory phenomena such as Islamophobia support and reinforce constructed forms of order in the social and political spaces, determining and identifying who ‘we’ are and, through processes of stigmatisation, marginalisation and intolerance, who ‘we’ are not. In populist discourses, this can be seen in the unquestioned homogeneity of such dichotomous monoliths as ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’. Eradicating the undeniable diversity and difference that exists within that monolith of ‘Islam’, Muslims in the contemporary setting become simplistically reduced to a series of negative and stereotypical attributions that appear to be irremovable and eternally fixed. According to Allen (2010), as these tend to remain unquestioned, so they become established as ‘normative truths’ about Muslims and Islam. These normative truths underpin a vast array of different actions, utterances, images and texts that function symbolically, thereby shaping, informing or indeed reinforcing what Allen terms ‘Islamophobia-thinking’ (2010).

Whilst Islamophobia is a contemporary socio-political phenomenon, as Allen notes, many of the negative and stereotypical attributions that inform today’s Islamophobia thinking do not have their origins in the here and now, not least because they are irremovable and eternally fixed. In fact, many of the negative and stereotypical attributions that inform today’s Islamophobia somewhat surprisingly have their origins in historical settings where the religious and theological were far more relevant and resonant. This chapter seeks to explore this, to try and illustrate the role that historical notions of religion and religious enmity between Islam and Christianity continue to have in relation to the manifestation and expression of today’s socio-political Islamophobia. In doing so, this chapter begins by reflecting on the extent to which Islamophobia is – or indeed is not – a specifically contemporary phenomenon. From here, and having sought to explain the relationship between the contemporary and the historical, some consideration will be given to early religious and theological encounters and interactions between Islam and Christianity. Focusing on the stereotypes and attributions of Muslims and Islam that evolved out of these early encounters, the chapter will conclude by reflecting on how these continue to shape and inform today’s Islamophobia.

To do this, it is necessary to use – albeit reluctantly – some broad descriptors. The reluctance comes from the fact that they homogenise and simplify the myriad identities and differences that exist within what is being described or referred to, noted previously in relation to ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’. Given the constraints of this chapter, however, this is unavoidable. In recognising this, some explanation is called for. Thus, the term ‘the West’ can be taken as largely equivalent to the medieval ‘Christendom’, or in the current setting ‘Western Europe and North America’ (see Yemelianova 2002: 193). In this chapter, the West’s political and cultural tradition is one that is understood to have been shaped by Christianity.

**It has a long memory**

Whilst the majority view among scholars is that Islamophobia is a largely contemporary socio-political phenomenon, there is some difference of interpretation. Ziauddin Sardar (1995), for instance, believes that contemporary manifestations of Islamophobia are little more than a re-emergence of what has occurred from time to time throughout history. As he puts it, ‘Islamophobia and prejudice against Muslims has a long memory and still thrives’, not least because it ‘resides so deeply in [the Western] historical consciousness’ (Sardar 1995: 7, 15). For him, the term (and also the phenomenon) has to be understood as necessarily transitory and used retrospectively to name, describe and conceive all historical expressions and manifestations of anti-Muslim, anti-Islamic sentiment, as well as points of conflict, confrontation and so on. He sees Islamophobia as characterising both historical and contemporary relationships and encounters between Islam and the West. Beverley Milton-Edwards (2002: 33) holds a similar view, that
today’s Islamophobia is merely one part of an ever-constant and ever-present phenomenon. For her, this means that the contemporary and the historical are interchangeable and indistinguishable, where the expression and manifestation of Islamophobia today is exactly the same as it has always been. Thus, the backlash against Muslims evident after the 9/11 attacks would have been the same as it was, say, at the time of the Crusades, something which is difficult to comprehend given the completely different conditions and paradigms within which each occurred.

For Hussain (2004), history can be understood as having manifested a number of different types of Islamophobia. Accordingly, he talks of a ‘plurality of Islamophobias’, each with characteristics derived from their time, whether religious, cultural, social, political or other, that were duly shaped and informed by and within particular historical circumstances, so that they would have specifically different characteristics but would also share common features. This understanding seems to resonate with the more contemporary studies of Allen (2010) and Sheehi (2011) and the view that Islamophobia functions ideologically. What is clear, however, is that there appears to be a functional relationship between the historical and the contemporary. Such a view is articulated by Fred Halliday, who states: 'To identify these relics and revivals [manifestations of anti-Muslim/anti-Islam phenomena] is not to prove a continuity of culture or politics... Instead, the past provides a reserve of reference and symbol for the present’ (1999: 179). He elaborates this later, noting that when it comes to understanding the relationship between the historical and the contemporary, ‘significant differences of emphasis, prejudice and engagement depending on the colonial histories, the geographical location and the composition of the immigrant community’ necessarily need to be taken into account (2002: 125).

In considering the contemporary, it would therefore seem that history cannot be ignored, though it would be wrong to regard attitudes as unchanging or as a single paradigm within which simplistic and superficial understandings about Muslims and Islam can be easily framed. History provides a reserve of meanings and understandings that are variously made known and also reframed, reinterpreted and represented within contemporary social, political, cultural and religious contexts in order to ensure they retain validity and resonance. It is this that underpins this chapter: the meanings and understandings of Muslims and Islam in the present have to be understood as drawing on a reserve of analogous meanings and understandings from earlier times.

Marked by confrontation

Numerous scholars have meticulously detailed the historical relationship and encounter between Islam and the West, Daniel (2000) being especially noteworthy in this respect. As Esposito puts it, ‘The history of Christendom and Islam has more often than not been marked by confrontation rather than peaceful coexistence and dialogue’ (1994: 59) – so much so that this continues to cast its shadow over interactions and encounters up to the present. This is traceable back to the very origins of Islam, or at least the decades which followed the death of the Prophet Muhammad, when the spread of Islam was unprecedentedly rapid and dramatic. Drawing on the Qur’anic doctrine of transforming the world through direct action in it, the spread of Islam was concerned not only with conversion but also with transformation: of people, their cultures and the way they were governed. As Islamic rule extended into Spain and the fringes of southern Europe, the West’s first encounter was one of threatening encroachment, informed by the experience of Eastern Christendom and the loss of the holy city of Jerusalem and other important centres across the eastern Mediterranean. With Europe in many ways united by the Roman Christian tradition, the perceived threat posed by Islam’s encroachment was threefold. First, given that Islam’s proclamation went beyond the religious to the social and political, it was perceived as having the potential to challenge Europe’s relative stability. Second, as Islam was a proselytising religion, it
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was seen to have the potential to issue a direct challenge to the ascendency of the Roman Church and its further expansion across Europe and beyond. And third, given Muslims believed Islam was a new dispensation from heaven – one that completed the Abrahamic revelation – it was argued that Islam’s message had superseded Christianity, thereby potentially confining Christianity to the spiritual, theological and social wilderness (Allen 2010). The threat posed by Islam was necessarily one to fear.

Damascus and Baghdad were two of the major places where theological dialogue between Muslims and Christians took place in the early centuries of Islam. An important figure during this period was John of Damascus (d. c. 750), who became renowned for giving a Christian voice against what he described as the ‘heretical Saracen’ (Allen 2010). Synonymous with the name ‘Muslim’ at the time, this term became associated with some of the most virulent anti-Islamic, anti-Muslim meanings, and it has had longevity, continuing to be used in certain contemporary contexts. Emerging from a setting where both the language of Islam and the people of Islam were known and encountered face to face, John’s polemical characterisation of Islam found form in Europe – where Islam and Muslims were largely known in absentia in the period before the Crusades – and began what might be described as a long history of subjectively informed scholarship about Islam. It is important to note that many of those who later attempted to give meaning and understanding to Muslims and Islam were only aware of them as something of an unknown ‘other’.

During the seventh and eighth centuries Islamic rule spread into nominally Christian regions with surprising speed, including parts of the Byzantine Empire and southern Europe. With fears that Islam would spread even further into Europe, in 1061 Pope Urban II not only gave his blessing to the Reconquista (the reconquest of Spain by Christian forces) but also sanctioned the liberation of Italy and Sicily. Within a decade, the Byzantine Emperor Alexius I called on the pope and the whole of Christendom to unite with him to fight back against advancing Muslim armies and the further spread of Islam. Pope Urban II duly called upon Christians to undertake a ‘militaristic pilgrimage’ – popularly and historically known as the Crusades – with the intention of defeating the advancing Muslim armies and of freeing Jerusalem from Islamic rule (Esposito 1994).

This intention was realised when in 1099 Crusaders reconquered Jerusalem. But, as Esposito notes, history perpetuates a number of myths about the Crusades, including the view that they were successful, that Jerusalem was permanently won over for Christendom and that Christianity triumphed over all. As he goes on to add, if success was understood as Christian control of Jerusalem, it was severely compromised, because in addition to engaging in the enterprise of fighting against the Muslim armies that Alexius had originally called for, as they marched towards Jerusalem the Crusaders also massacred vast numbers of Jews, as well as Christian communities regarded by the Roman Church as heretical. If this was a triumph, it must be seen as having a distinctly Roman Christian flavour as opposed to a Christian one per se. Still, history popularises the Crusades and reinforces the view that they unified Europe against the threatening, violent and barbaric Muslims, and in doing so they prevented Islam from ‘taking over’ Europe by force.

Whilst many Europeans spent years in the Middle East fighting during the Crusades, their experiences appear to have resulted in few improvements in knowledge or understanding about Islam and Muslims. Instead, what became generally known seemed to derive from the many folk stories and mythical accounts that were brought back, many of these comprising lurid tales of Muslims’ pagan and idolatrous practices alongside legendary tales about great warriors such as Saladin (the Ayyūbid Sultan Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, d. 1193). These were embellished by fantastic accounts of promiscuity, riches and luxury, confirmed by the treasures many Crusaders had brought back with them. Consequently, images of a far-off fantasy world were constructed where the luxuries
of temporality and worldliness appeared to reinforce the view that the heretical infidels were wicked and ungodly, whereas European Crusaders were doing God’s work (Daniel 2000). Given that the vast majority of Europeans at the time found themselves living lives of bleakness, this reinforced the view that Islam and Muslims were Europeans’ opposite. And by opposite, this also meant enemy.

A key feature of the stories and accounts that were brought back and became popular following the Crusades was the centrality of the Prophet Muḥammad (this name was reproduced in a great variety of forms). Prior to the twelfth century, there is little evidence of much being written about him by European authors, while after the Crusades this changed significantly, with a much greater eschatological focus being placed upon Muḥammad, reinforcing the heretical nature of Islam. He was routinely framed as the Antichrist, evidence of the approach of the end times. Not only did this serve the function of ensuring that Islam remained the enemy of Christianity, but it also lent support to the claims of Christianity because it was seen to fulfil one of the New Testament’s promises. As Muḥammad became increasingly imbued with characteristics that included licentiousness and lust for power, he was seen as the opposite to the figure of Christ, who stood for love, forgiveness and peace. Masquerading as a false prophet, Muḥammad was portrayed as the total antithesis to Jesus.

Aberrant, undeveloped and inferior

Reference to even a handful of early interactions and encounters between Islam and the West demonstrates that many of the negative and stereotypical attributions expressed and manifested as part of Islamophobia today appear to have been in circulation for many centuries. Surprisingly, maybe, unlike today’s phenomenon, which is distinctly socio-political, the context within which these attributions originated was distinctly religious, theological (possibly quasi-religious and quasi-theological) and cultural. Seen as violent, barbaric and deceitful, Muslims and Islam were the heretical enemies threatening to take over ‘our’ lands in order to destroy ‘our’ religion. Today’s equivalent sees Muslims and Islam as still violent, barbaric and deceitful, though now as terrorist enemies threatening to take over Europe in a bid to destroy ‘our’ values, way of life and so on (Allen 2010a). There are two dimensions to this which require further explanation. First, it would seem that the normative truths remain largely the same – irremovable and fixed – quite irrespective of any clear and distinct paradigmatic shifts. For Maxime Rodinson this is evident in Voltaire’s representation of Muḥammad in Fanatisme, ou Mahomet le prophete (Rodinson 1987: 3). Although he was writing for a post-Reformation audience – when Europe was struggling towards the ascendency of rationalism, the separation of the state from the church and the decline in religiosity – Voltaire appeared merely to reframe the same stories and myths about Muḥammad, Islam and Muslims that had been popular centuries before for a different audience. Indeed, today the same may be true concerning similar notions that underpin the publication of the Muḥammad cartoons in Jyllands-Posten in Denmark in 2007 and in Charlie Hebdo in France more recently.

Second, while the normative truths remain largely the same, the process of reframing them demands further embellishment to ensure relevance and resonance with audiences in any given setting or context. For Edward Said (1979), so successful was the reframing of Christendom’s earlier religious and theological attitudes towards Islam for a post-Reformation audience that the normative truths became embedded without question in the newly emergent Europe’s cultural, social and political norms. This was achieved through justifying the normative truths from a rationalist perspective, thus reframing earlier enmities in order to assert Europe’s superiority so that it should remain far removed from its inferior and inherently backward Islamic counterpart. Coined by Said as the Orientalist tradition, at its most simple this meant that the Islamic
world (the Orient) became firmly established as everything that Europe (the Occident) was not or, more pertinently, did not want to be. As Abid Hussain (1990: 1–30) puts it, the Orientalist legacy established ‘an absolute and systematic difference between the West . . . and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped and inferior’. An example of how this might be expressed or manifested today can be seen in how notions such as democracy and human rights are attributed almost solely to the West and, as though to reinforce the point, are at the same time typically contrasted with some of the more extreme elements of sharīʿa law.

One way of explaining this might be to consider processes of reification (Allen 2010), according to which meanings and understandings function as part of an almost continuous process that appears to be natural and is unaffected by constraints of time. In any particular situation these meanings, e.g. that Islam is opposed to ‘our’ religion and wants to destroy ‘our’ values, way of life and so on, are deployed in individualised form to reinforce and reify anti-Islamic sentiments. The underlying message is that Islam presents ‘us’ with a threat to our existence, while any Muslim is unthinkingly linked with terrorism and atrocities on the basis that Muslims have always been seen to be naturally violent, barbaric and more. The association between Muslims and terrorism that is typically made today therefore reifies what is already known and understood, as opposed to providing anything new or unknown. This has the potential for dangerous outcomes, because as Morey and Yaqin (2011) rightly note, even if Muslims are not ‘actual’ terrorists the view is that all are driven by the same rabid zeal, meaning that in principle all are ‘potential’ terrorists.

Irremovable and fixed

Halliday (2002: 59) is correct when he suggests that history provides as much a reserve of reference for the past as it does a symbol for the present. While what is known these days as Islamophobia is shaped to the here and now and informed by the geopolitical conditions of European states and the changing demographics of their multicultural societies, it also remains ineluctably shaped, influenced and informed by what have become stereotypical, normative truths established over many centuries. Thus, while current Islamophobia is predominantly socio-political in nature, the religious and theological have not entirely disappeared. Across the diverse landscape of today’s Europe, an increasing number of far-right and neo-Nazi movements are appropriating motifs associated with Christianity to exemplify the threat they believe Muslims and Islam currently pose and to justify their reactions to it. With many having previously attributed the same threat to the presence and role of Judaism and Jewish communities as they do to Islam and Muslim communities today, discourses and symbols associated with Christianity have become as much a mainstay of their ideology as their visual image. Crosses present images of the medieval crusader battling against the infidel: a reserve of historical references providing symbols for the present.

Maybe the most chilling contemporary manifestation of this is the rhetoric and ideology of Anders Behring Breivik in Norway. In July 2011, after launching a bomb attack on government buildings in Oslo, he embarked on a mass shooting at a youth camp on the island of Utøya and eventually killed 77 people, many of them teenagers. Rooted in the broad ideologies of the far right and neo-Nazism, Breivik’s rationale for committing these atrocities was derived from a wide range of sources, including various extreme forms of Zionism, white nationalism and right-wing populism and a most virulent form of Islamophobia. He believed that Islam and Muslims posed the greatest threat to the ongoing existence of modern Europe and that a rampant multiculturalism was providing the seedbed that enabled this threat to become embedded within individual
states. Describing himself as a Christian, Breivik explained how only the violent and wholesale destruction of multiculturalism could preserve Europe and, most importantly, its Christian culture, identity and heritage. He killed those he saw as the future of multiculturalism in Norway, in the belief that his actions would be a call to arms for others in Europe to rise up and begin the fight back against the eternal enemies, Islam and Muslims. Reiterating and drawing upon what he believed were Christian qualities, Breivik later argued during his trial in April 2012 that his actions were motivated by ‘goodness, not evil’ (Pidd 2012).

Although Islamophobia is a contemporary socio-political phenomenon, it is shaped and informed by those normative truths that were constructed and embedded centuries ago. Today’s Islamophobia is therefore inspired by (it is not exactly the same as) some of the very earliest religious and theological encounters and interactions that have taken place between Islam and Christianity. Whilst the religious and theological may – in the contemporary setting at least – play little more than a bit-part in how we give meaning to the expressions and manifestations of Islamophobia today, they remain vitally important in providing meaning and understanding. The picture of violent, barbaric and deceitful enemies threatening to take over or destroy what is ‘ours’ can be traced back to the very earliest origins Islam. Eternalised as irremovable and fixed, though reframed and reified to remain relevant and resonant for each new socio-political context and setting, Islamophobia will – for the foreseeable future at least – continue to be a challenge for us all, and one that is as much about the future as the past.

References

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Further reading