Islamophobia as the racialisation of Muslims

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Introduction

Conditions for Muslims in Europe must be made harder across the board: Europe must look like a less attractive proposition. And of course it should go without saying that Muslims in Europe who for any reason take part in, plot, assist or condone violence against the west (not just the country they happen to have found sanctuary in, but any country in the west or western troops) must be forcibly deported back to their place of origin . . . Where a person was born in the west, they should be deported to the country of origin of their parent or grandparent.

(Murray 2006)

It has been argued that there are presently two discernible dynamics permeating hostile attitudes toward Muslims in Europe. The source of the first is located squarely in contemporary agendas of security and counter-terrorism (and associated anxieties that fuel a securitisation of ethnic relations more broadly). The second, it is argued, has been inherited from an ideological-historical relationship with notions of the Orient, one that is intertwined with legacies of imperialism (Geisser 2008). Neither dynamic is discrete and both can be seen to overlap in the public discourses of a variety of European societies. These macro political sentiments coalesce in the findings of Pew European attitude surveys which report worryingly high trends of representative samples of Hungarians (72%), Italians (69%), Poles (66%), Greeks (65%), Spaniards (50%), Swedes (35%), Dutch (35%), Germans (29%) and French (29%) and Britons (28%) who rate Muslims ‘unfavourably’ (Pew Global Attitudes Projects 2016).

Over a corpus of work, we have long argued that these sentiments and their implications need to be understood through a concept of racialisation and related processes of racialisation. While this has increasingly become commonly accepted, it was not so when we started making these arguments. There was instead much more interest in inscribing (or re-inscribing) the concept of Islamophobia with conceptual materials from the register of orientalism. As we argued then, and as the opening extract from Douglas Murray of the Henry Jackson Society betrays, there appear to be several components in contemporary anti-Muslim sentiment which go beyond orientalism, and that any concept of Islamophobia should seek to capture. For example,
in his prescription for ‘dealing with Muslims’, Murray relies upon an essential idea of Europe that is closed to Muslims, and where, concomitantly, Muslims’ civil and political rights are less meaningful, while their ethnic origins serve as important means of ascertaining where they really belong. His anti-Muslim sentiment, therefore, simultaneously draws upon signs of race, culture and belonging in a way that is by no means reducible either to Empire or to hostility to a religion alone, and compels us to consider how religion has a new sociological relevance because of the ways it is tied up with issues of community identity, stereotyping, socio-economic location, political conflict and so forth.

On the one hand, and especially given that religious discrimination in most Western societies does not usually proceed on the basis of belief but perceived membership of an ethno-religious group (e.g. Catholics in Northern Ireland, Muslims in the countries of former Yugoslavia, and Jews in general), Murray’s account is consistent with an established tendency of targeting religious groups and communities as opposed to beliefs and opposition to beliefs. For as his extract illustrates, these phenomena need not be a pure ‘religious discrimination’ phenomena but one which also traffics in stereotypes about foreignness, phenotypes and culture. Here there are obvious similarities between forms of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment that remain under explored (Meer 2014), and which may herald important differences as well as similarities (Renton and Gidley 2017). Of course how Muslims respond to these circumstances will vary. Some will organise resistance, while others will try to stop looking like Muslims (the equivalent of ‘passing’ for white); some will build an ideology out of their subordination, others will not, just as a woman can choose to be a feminist or not. Again, some Muslims may define their Islam in terms of piety rather than politics; just as some women may see no politics in their gender, while for others their gender will be at the centre of their politics.

One the other hand, the question that is nevertheless posed for any contemporary concept of Islamophobia is whether it can, among other things, analytically capture the contingent racial and cultural dynamics of the macro-historical juxtaposition between ‘Europe’ and ‘Islam’; sufficiently delineate the racialising component of Murray’s insistence from a potentially sedate critique of Islam as a religion; and more broadly summon enough explanatory power to stipulate how long established organising concepts within the study of race and racism may, in some Hegelian fashion, be developed and formulated in a sociologically convincing manner. In this respect we are happy to see more literature on race and racism engaged in the discussion on the Islamophobia.

This chapter then restates what purchase the ideas of ‘racialisation’ and ‘cultural racism’ can bring to bear on the conceptualisation of these matters. To examine the entanglements between race and religion as they apply to Muslims, the first part of the chapter explores the theoretical and normative issues raised by these questions, while the second half turns to interview data with journalists and opinion formers.

Conceiving Islamophobia

The origins of the term Islamophobia have been variously traced to an essay by two French Orientalists (Dinet and Baamer 1925), ‘a neologism of the 1970s’ (Rana 2007, p. 148), an early 1990s American periodical (Sherridan 2006), and, indeed, to one of the present authors (see Modood 2005). What is less disputed is that the term received its public policy prominence with the Runneymede Trust’s Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia (CBMI) Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All. Defined as ‘an unfounded hostility towards Islam, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims’ (CBMI 1997, p. 4), the report conceived of
eight argumentative positions to encapsulate its meaning, and through which the members of the commission sought to draw attention to their assessment that ‘anti-Muslim prejudice has grown so considerably and so rapidly in recent years that a new item in the vocabulary is needed’ (ibid.). This, of course, was before global events had elevated the issue to a prominence previously only hinted at, and which resulted in a second sitting of the commission which heard testimonies from leading Muslim spokespeople of how ‘there is not a day that we do not have to face comments so ignorant that even Enoch Powell would not have made them’ (Baroness Uddin quoted in CBMI 2004, p. 3).

What the commission perhaps did not fully anticipate was how the term would be criticised from several quarters for, among other things, allegedly reinforcing ‘a monolithic concept of Islam, Islamic cultures, Muslims and Islamism, involving ethnic, cultural, linguistic, historical and doctrinal differences while affording vocal Muslims a ready concept of victimology’ (Ozanne 2006, p. 28; see also Afshar et al. 2005). To others the term has neglected ‘the active and aggressive part of discrimination’ (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, p. 6) by conceiving discrimination as a collection of pathological beliefs, inferred through the language of ‘-phobias’; with the additional complaint that the term does not adequately account for the nature of the prejudice directed at Muslims. This complaint was advanced in the late Fred Halliday’s (1999) thesis and is worth examining because Halliday accepted that Muslims experience direct discrimination as Muslims. He nevertheless considered Islamophobia misleading because:

It misses the point about what it is that is being attacked: ‘Islam’ as a religion was the enemy in the past: in the crusades or the reconquista. It is not the enemy now […] The attack now is not against Islam as a faith but against Muslims as a people, the latter grouping together all, especially immigrants, who might be covered by the term.

(Halliday 1999, p. 898; original emphasis)

So in contrast to the thrust of the Islamophobia concept, as he understood it, the stereotypical enemy ‘is not a faith or a culture, but a people’ who form the ‘real’ targets of prejudice. Halliday’s critique was richer than many others but what it ignored was how the majority of Muslims who reported experiencing street level discrimination recount – as testimonies to the 2004 Runneymede follow-up commission (CBMI 2004) bore witness – that they do so more when they appear ‘conspicuously Muslim’ than when they do not. Since this can result from wearing Islamic attire it becomes irrelevant – if it is even possible – to separate the impact of appearing Muslim from the impact of appearing to follow Islam. For example, the increase in everyday personal abuse since 9/11 and 7/7 in which the perceived ‘Islamicness’ of the victims is the central reason for abuse, regardless of the validity of this presumption (resulting in Sikhs and others with an ‘Arab’ appearance being attacked), suggests that discrimination and/or hostility to Islam and Muslims is much more interlinked than Halliday’s thesis allows (and, in all fairness to Halliday, may not easily have been anticipated at his time of writing). In contrast we contended that, instead of trying to neatly delineate social tendencies that are inextricably linked; they should instead be understood as a composite of ‘racialisation’. This requires some elaboration.

**Muslims and racialisation**

The idea of racialisation boasts a long pedigree even if the term itself does not, and although it was perhaps first encountered in British sociology through the work of Michael Banton, arguably in his *Race Relations* (1967), it was Robert Miles (1982, 1984, 1986, 1988, 1989, 1993) who for a long time offered its most sustained exposition. Reminiscent of a Du Boisian tradition
in which the psychic and the social are intertwined, Miles’s conception of racialisation sought to capture the ways in which racial processes can attribute ‘meaning to somatic characteristics’ in a way that ‘presumes a social psychological theory which explains the nature and dynamics of the process’ (1989, p. 75). As a Marxist, of course, Miles anchored his conception of racialisation in an account of material relations and an ideologically driven conflict borne of the contradictory impulses inherent to circumscribed nationhood and labour migration (Miles 1982, pp. 170–173). What is important for our discussion, however, is that Miles never insisted that processes of racialisation must be premised upon a ‘biological inherentism’ (an issue elaborated below) and which informed his resolve that scholars ‘must not restrict the application of the concept of racialisation to situations where people distinguish one another by reference to skin colour’ (ibid., p. 121; see also the discussion of Miles in Modood 1996). More specifically, what he maintained that we should be studying instead are the ways in which ‘signifying processes’ interact to ‘construct differentiated social collectivities as races’ (Miles 1989, p. 79).

To facilitate such inquiry, and because he recognised that the social dynamics of racism can in practice be mixed-up with a host of different kinds of ‘-isms’, such as nationalism, ethnicism and sexism and so forth, Miles (ibid., p. 87) put forward a conceptualisation of ‘racial articulations’.

He did so to preserve the analytical clarity of racism while recognising that in social life exclusionary discourses and prejudices are rarely discrete and, to the contrary, frequently overlap in ‘sharing a common content or generalised object which allows them to be joined together or interrelated, to be expressed in ways in which elements of one are incorporated in the other’ (ibid. 87). This is an astute conceptualisation and a good contemporary illustration of its explanatory purchase may be found in the summary report on Islamophobia published by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia shortly after 9/11. This identified a rise in the number of ‘physical and verbal threats being made, particularly to those visually identifiable as Muslims, in particular women wearing the hijab’ (Allen and Nielsen 2002, p. 16). What is of particular note is that despite variations in the number and correlation of physical and verbal threats directed at Muslim populations among the individual nation-states, one overarching feature that emerged among the fifteen European Union countries was the tendency for Muslim women to be attacked because of how the hijab signifies a gendered Islamic identity (ibid. 35). Indeed, and to return to the earlier point concerning the distinction between antipathy toward Muslims and antipathy toward those appearing to follow Islam, these overlapping and interacting ‘articulations’ of anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic prejudice can also be illustrated further in the attitude polling of non-Muslim Britons one year after 9/11. This showed that

... there could be little doubt from [a YouGov poll, 31 October–1 November 2002, n = 1,890] that 9/11 had taken some toll. Views of Islam since 9/11 were more negative for 47%, and of Britain’s Muslims for 35% (almost three times the first post-9/11 figure in [an NOP poll, 10 October 2001, n = 6008]). . . . Dislike for Islam was expressed by 36%, three in four of whom were fearful of what it might do in the next few years. One quarter rejected the suggestion that Islam was mainly a peaceful religion, with terrorists comprising only a tiny minority . . .

(Field 2007, p. 455)

If these examples and the preceding discussion begin to make manifest a number of confusions contained within working references to racial and religious antipathy toward Muslims and Islam, then – as debates concerning racism and other religious minorities, not least with respect to anti-Semitism, betray (Meer and Noorani 2008) – this is not uniquely problematical in the conceptualisation of anti-Muslim sentiment.
Religion and racialisation

More precisely, the interactions between racial and religious antipathy can be helpfully drawn out through Modood’s (2005, pp. 9–10) description of anti-Semitism as ‘a form of religious persecution [which] became, over a long, complicated, evolving but contingent history, not just a form of cultural racism but one with highly systematic biological formulations’. Now this should not be read as an endorsement of the view that all racism can be reduced to biological inferences. Indeed, in the example above modern biological racism has some roots in pre-modern religious antipathy – an argument that is supported by Rana (2007). The implication is that non-Christian religious minorities in Europe can undergo processes of racialisation where the ‘otherness’ or ‘groupness’ that is appealed to is connected to a cultural and racial otherness which relates to European peoples’ historical and contemporary perceptions of those people that they perceive to be non-European (Goldberg 2006). This means that how Muslims in Europe are perceived today is not un-connected to how they have been perceived and treated by European empires and their racial hierarchies in earlier centuries (Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008). This is because their perception and treatment clearly has a religious and cultural dimension but, equally clearly, bares a phenotypical component. For while it is true that ‘Muslim’ is not a (putative) biological category in the way that ‘black’ or ‘south Asian’ (aka ‘Paki’) or ‘Chinese’ is, neither was ‘Jew’. In that instance it took a long non-linear history of racialisation to turn a faith group into a race (Modood 2006). More precisely, the latter did not so much as replace the former but superimposed itself because even though no one denied that Jews were a religious community, with distinctive language(s), culture(s) and religion, Jews still came to be seen as a race, and with horrific consequences.

As Bunzl (2005, p. 537) maintained, ‘the move from Judenhass (Jew hatred) to anti-Semitism marks a crucial turning point of the late 19th century. It was understood both by contemporaries and later observers as marking a momentous transformation, characterised by the rise of an organised political movement as well as a shift in alterity from religion to race.’ Similarly, Bosnian Muslims were ‘ethnically cleansed’ because they came to be identified as a ‘racial’ group by people who were phenotypically, linguistically and culturally the same as themselves. The ethnic cleanser, unlike an Inquistor then, wasted no time in finding out what people believed, if and how often they went to a mosque and so on: their victims were racially identified as Muslims.

Biological and cultural racism

So race is not just about colour, for while racialisation has to pick on some features of a people related to physical appearance and ancestry (otherwise racism cannot be distinguished from other forms of groupism) it need only be a marker, and not necessarily denote a form of determinism. This is illustrated in the conceptualisation of cultural racism as a two-step process (or, alternatively, a second step, with colour racism being the first step) (Modood 1997). The interesting question arises as to whether it could be a one-step racism: could colour racism decline and fade away and yet cultural racism remain and perhaps even grow?

One can certainly imagine a future in which a group could continue to have their culture vilified while colour racism simultaneously declined, and the distinction between what might be called racism proper and ‘culturalism’ is commonly held and continues to be argued for (Blum 2002; Fredrickson 2002). Yet while it appears that to discriminate only against those perceived to be culturally different might be borderline racial discrimination, where cultural essentialism and inferiorisation may be involved it would certainly share some of the qualities of what we know of racist stereotyping and practice today. Even then, however, it may still be regarded
as a cultural prejudice or cultural exclusionism rather than racism per se, so that if persons are targeted only on the basis of their *behaviour* and not on the basis of their *ancestry*, then might we not have something we should call culturalism rather than racism?

While this is an interesting question, it appears to go against what we should expect from communities and social dynamics, since cultures and cultural practices are usually internally diverse, containing and omitting various ‘authentic’ elements, and adaptations and mixes. It follows then that the culturalised targeting could very easily be expansive, rather than purist, and so in one way or another catch most if not all cultural minorities in that group. This means that it is not clear that culturalism, where it is associated with distinct communities, can really be distinguished from racism in practice, even if it can be in theory. But if we accept that racism does not necessarily involve inherentism then we do not have to rule out cultural racism as an example of racism. *This means that cultural racism is not merely a proxy for racism but a form of racism itself, and that while racism involves some reference to physical appearance or ancestry it does not require any form of biological determinism, only a physical identification on a group basis, attributable to descent. As such we should guard against the characterisation of racism as a form of ‘inherentism’ or ‘biological determinism’ which leaves little space to conceive the ways in which cultural racism draws upon physical appearance as one marker, among others. As such, and consistent with our interpretation of Miles (1989), we maintain that formulations of racialisation should not be solely premised upon conceptions of biology in a way that ignores religion, culture and so forth.*

**Framing racism discretely**

Our data suggests that one of the explanations for the degree of ambivalence attributed to anti-Muslim sentiment reflects a commonly held narrow definition of racism which assumes that the discrimination directed at conventionally, involuntarily, conceived racial minorities cannot by definition resemble that directed at Muslim minorities. This reckoning is premised upon the assumption that Muslim identities are religious identities that are voluntarily chosen (see the case study of Incitement to Religious Hatred legislation in Meer 2008). So it is frequently stated that while gender, racial and sexuality based identities are ascribed or involuntary categories of birth, being a Muslim is about chosen beliefs, and that Muslims therefore need or ought to have less legal protection than these other kinds of identities. What this ignores, however, is that people do not choose to be or not to be born into a Muslim family. This is not to impose an identity or a way of being on to people who may choose to passively deny or actively reject their Muslim identity because, consistent with the right of self-dissociation, the rejection of Muslim identification or adoption of a different self-definition should be recognised where a claim upon it is made. The point is that no one chooses to be born into a society where to look like a Muslim or to be a Muslim creates suspicion, hostility, or failure to get the job you applied for. One frequent reaction to this complaint, however, is the charge that Muslim minorities are quick to adopt a ‘victim mentality’. These two separate but interlinked issues are illustrated in the following comments of a very senior journalist with editorial and commissioning responsibilities at the *Daily Telegraph*:

It [Islamophobia] doesn’t mean anything to me. No, it’s a device or a construct that’s been used to cover an awful lot of people and censor debate . . . The racism thing is a bit difficult to sustain because we are talking about a religion here, not race and you have plenty of people who are not Muslim, if you are trying to equate Muslims with South Asians, obviously that’s not necessarily the case at all.

*(Personal interview)*
This extract conveys the view that the term Islamophobia is used politically to silence potential criticism of Islam and Muslims, and is particularly invalid because racism is only plausible where ethnic groups – not ethnically heterogeneous religious groups – are concerned. The journalist continues:

I think I probably went to the first press conference where the phrase came up, I think it was about five or six years ago . . . Since we were the ones that were being accused of it, it just seemed rather difficult for me to get my head around, because if Islamophobia means a fear of, literally, that was not what we were talking about. We were talking about fear of terrorists who act in the name of Islam; it’s a different thing altogether.

(Personal interview)

The first sentence of this extract reveals this journalist’s first interaction of the term, and their sense of grievance in ‘being accused of it’, while the second sentence invokes a criticism also made by Reisigl and Wodak (2001) who insist that it is analytically problematic to cast perceptions of prejudice or discrimination as the language of ‘phobias’. The last sentence in this extract, which focuses upon terrorism, is particularly instructive and so will be addressed separately below. In the meantime the characterisation of Islamophobia may be contrasted with another that emerges in the less definitive account of a senior BBC news editor with responsibilities across broadcast, internet and radio journalism. This journalist expresses a similar anxiety to that of our Daily Telegraph respondent, in reconciling what he considers to be a ‘full and frank’ account, with the potential charge of anti-Muslim bias in BBC reporting:

[T]here are certainly quite vocal groups of Muslims who are very quick to stress the problems that Muslims can face in this country and work very hard to encourage journalists like me and others to reflect a particular view which might be described as a victim mentality . . . I am personally not persuaded that it [Islamophobia] is a huge issue in Britain. It is, racism in all its forms is a problem . . . I think for the most part it’s really a very tolerant country so I’m kind of conscious that we mustn’t allow ourselves for the sake of a good story to start painting a picture of a slice of British society which does suffer more than it really does . . .

(Personal interview)

While the latter half of this passage reveals a critical perspective on the prevalence of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment, it is interesting to note how, in a marked contrast to the Daily Telegraph journalist, the BBC respondent comfortably places the issue of Islamophobia alongside issues of racism which ‘in all its forms is a problem’. This may in part be due to the insistence of ‘vocal groups of Muslims’ that this respondent refers to, for the BBC does have a significant policy of diversity awareness training, but the proactive inclusion of Muslim voices is a moot point and is returned to below; as is the characterisation of Muslim complaints forming part of an alleged ‘victim mentality’. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most Muslim-friendly attitude is to be found in the words of a senior figure at The Guardian who describes how treating anti-Muslim sentiment with ‘less seriousness’ can bias the framing of news-items:

I think it is easy to slip into . . . I saw it the other day, and it was three headlines together on one page of the Daily Telegraph, and the headline said something like ‘Foreigners live in 1.3 million houses’ . . . Then there was a headline where the word Muslim was being used in a pejorative sense and I thought these things to my mind are quite dangerous . . . I think that’s where some papers make a really big mistake time after time after time.

(Personal interview)
One development that might alleviate this tendency is the greater presence of Muslim journalists working across news items on different newspapers. This is a point that is also raised by a senior correspondent with the *Daily Mirror* who contrasts the public service requirement of the BBC with the commercial imperatives of newspaper – and particularly tabloid – journalism which pursues an aggressive drive for sales:

> Because the way newspapers in particular work, I don’t know that that’s their job to reflect Muslims *per se* – do you know what I mean? . . . In my time at the *Mirror* I remember the *Sun* hired a Muslim commentator not long after 9/11 and she did a lot of discussion about whether she was going to wear her veil in the picture – Anila Baig. That was all a bit self-conscious. The *Mirror* had a few first person pieces and features and so on . . . if there was a story that involved Muslim groups being invited to No. 10 then you would call the Muslim group to see how it’d gone but I wouldn’t say it would go any deeper than that . . . . I just report as I do every story. I’m not self-consciously having to check myself or judge myself. *(Personal interview)*

This extract illustrates the dynamics involved in nurturing ‘Muslim voices’ within newspapers in a way that can draw attention to how issues of importance to some Muslims, such as the wearing of the veil, may be reported in an educative manner. So even though it may be perceived as ‘a bit self-conscious’, it appears much more substantive than seeking ‘Muslim comment’ that – by this journalist’s own admission – would not penetrate the framing of a story in much depth. This is then related to the final issue that emerges from this paragraph and which concerns the absence of reflexivity in this respondent’s conception of journalism, something that is evidently in a stark contrast to our *Guardian* respondent.

**Placing the role of religion**

What the last extract also touches upon is a related issue concerning the ways in which religion *per se* is met with anxiety. One particular implication is that while curbs on defamation of conventionally conceived ethnic and racial minorities may be seen as progressive; the mocking of Muslims is seen to constitute healthy intellectual debate (for a discussion of these sentiments in Danish cartoon affair see Modood 2006 and Levey and Modood 2009). This tendency is perhaps heightened when the religion in question takes a conservative line on topics of gender equality, sexual orientation, and progressive politics generally; leading some commentators who may otherwise sympathise with Muslim minorities to argue that it is difficult to view Muslims as victims when they may themselves be potential oppressors. As Parekh (2006, p. 180) describes, this can be traced to a perception that Muslims are ‘collectivist, intolerant, authoritarian, illiberal and theocratic’ and that Muslims use their faith as ‘a self-conscious public statement, not quietly held personal faith but a matter of identity which they must jealously guard and loudly and repeatedly proclaim . . . not only to remind them of who they are but also to announce to others what they stand for’ (ibid., p. 181). It is thus unsurprising to learn that some attitude surveys report that 77% of people in Britain are convinced that ‘Islam has a lot of fanatical followers’; 68% consider it ‘to have more to do with the middle ages than the modern world’, and 64% believe that Islam ‘treats women badly’ (see Field 2007, p. 453). These assumptions are present in our BBC journalist’s insistence that ‘the nature of the debate is such that some Muslims most certainly will be offended (interview).’

The recent furore that accompanied the Archbishop of Canterbury’s lecture on civil and religious laws in England, and which touched upon the availability of recourse to aspects of Shar’ia for Muslims who seek it in civil courts in Britain (see Modood 2008), provides a good
illustration of the implication of this journalist’s position. Indeed, at the height of the storm one of the authors received an email from a *Daily Mail* journalist which stated: ‘I was wondering if you might talk to us about sharia [sic] law in the UK, and the effects it might have on our society. . . . What we do need is someone saying that Sharia [sic] law would not necessarily be a good thing, so if this is not for you, then don’t worry!’ (email received 8 February 2008). This sort of approach is anticipated by our respondent from the *Daily Mirror* who describes how it is widely accepted that concerns of accuracy and validity come second to getting a story on Muslims into circulation:

> If you were being accurate you would be going to communities . . . and speaking to people. What we tend to do is report what is happening . . . someone from the Beeb might be if they are doing a story on whether or not Muslim women should be allowed to wear a veil when they go to see their MP. I would have talked to Jack Straw and someone from the organisation.

(*Personal interview*)

The optimism informing the view that it should be left to the BBC to play the role of an honest broker, in reporting emotive stories concerning Muslims with impartiality, is not something borne out by our interview data. Indeed our senior BBC respondent considers the portrayal of difficult stories concerning religious affairs generally, but particularly stories focusing upon Muslims, as constituting a necessary part of a public conversation which, in the example below – proceeds by questioning for example the legitimacy of the wearing of a face-veil (*niqab*). As the extract highlights, this is informed by this journalist’s view that visible markers of difference and diversity are intrinsically tied to broader, in this view legitimate, public anxieties over immigration that should not be silenced in the interests of maintaining what the respondent describes as an artificially harmonious conception of multiculturalism:

> It needs to be something that we do discuss and think about and have a national conversation about because from it flows all the other discussion about our expectations of those who come from other countries to live and work here. . . . I’ve talked about the veil endlessly over the last year because I do think it’s been a really interesting one . . . suddenly people began to say, well hold on, is it right that somebody can teach a class full of kids wearing a full veil? And I think it’s a perfectly reasonable question and one that we need to discuss.

(*Personal interview*)

In a significant contrast to the public questioning – as an editorial line – of the visibility and indeed legitimacy of religion, our *Guardian* respondent describes how their newspaper seeks to incorporate religious coverage in an educative manner. One example may be found in its ‘Comment is Free’ section which had a section on ‘blogging’ the Qu’ran through serialisations penned by the writer and intellectual Ziauddin Sardar. Another example includes that of the appointment of a young Muslim woman as its religious affairs correspondent, which ‘probably raised eyebrows in one or two places’. The journalist continues:

> [S]he went on the hajj and did some video for the website, and what I thought was terrific as well, she was able to report pilgrim voices, and these were young British people, they were from the north of England, from London, and so on and so forth, and what the *hajj* meant to them, what their Muslim identification meant i.e. voices you don’t normally get in a national newspaper.
While these examples perhaps take us away from a direct discussion of racism and Islamophobia, in the way that was elaborated earlier, it is still worth noting how much importance the paper attributes to the value of embedding plural constituencies within its journalism – perhaps as a prophylactic against unwitting anti-Muslim sentiment. The Guardian is, then, unique in its approach for not only does it seek to afford space in which to cultivate the representation of religion in public discourse, but it does so through a consciously Muslim interlocutor.

The impact of anxieties over terrorism

With a significantly different interest in the meaning and implication of Islam to its British adherents, other respondents place little importance upon garnering an empathetic understanding of the spiritual role of religion. The focus instead appears orientated toward an assumed relationship between religion and issues of terrorism; issues that are deemed to be specifically pertinent in their respective coverage of Islam and Muslims. As our Daily Mirror respondent reiterated: ‘there’s a global jihad going on that we’re all involved in . . . everything changed after 9/11 and again after 7/7’ (personal interview). This sentiment is repeated in the words of the Daily Telegraph journalist who summarises how 7/7 ‘was a surprise because what we were looking at in the late 90’s and up to 2004 was the belief that it was going to be imported terrorist attacks . . . the big surprise was that they were going to attack their own country which was a bit of a turning point I think. It was a bit of an eye opener’ (personal interview). There is evidence to suppose that this is a widely held view, with Field (2007, p. 459) concluding that post-7/7 there has been an increased ‘tendency to criticise the inactivity of the Muslim population as a whole, and not just its leaders’; a sentiment arising from the belief that ‘the Muslim community had not done enough to prevent support for terrorism in its midst’. Indeed, he makes the finding that this belief has given rise to a wide-spread view that it is legitimate to proactively target Muslims for reasons of national security:

[T]hree-fifths argued that Britain’s security services should now focus their intelligence-gathering and terrorism-prevention efforts on Muslims living in Britain or seeking to enter it, on the grounds that, although most Muslims were not terrorists, most terrorists threatening the country were Muslims . . .

(Field 2007, p. 459)

These perceptions are perhaps embodied in terminologies that collapse different issues together; a good example of which may be found in attitudes towards the term ‘Islamist Terrorism’. Our Daily Telegraph journalist, for example, remains convinced that terrorism by some Muslims is primarily an outgrowth of Islamism:

I think we still edge around certain issues . . . For instance the Government is reluctant to talk about Islamist terrorism even though somebody like Ed Hussein whose book The Islamist makes the point that there is a fundamental difference between Islam and Islamism. Unless you understand the ideological basis of it you don’t understand anything.

(Personal interview)

It is worth noting how despite the contested and relational nature of terms such as ‘terrorism’ and ‘Islamism’, which invite qualification and contextualisation, that it is increasingly common to find the portrayal of a seamless association between the two. This is a good example of what Jackson (2007) has called a culturally embedded ‘hard’ discourse since so many other
assumptions compound and reinforce it. One example of what is meant by this can be found in how Melanie Phillips (2006a) has stated that ‘after the Rushdie affair, Islam in Britain became fused with an agenda of murder’. This characterisation conceives the violence that is committed by Muslims as ‘something inherent in the religion, rendering any Muslim a potential terrorist’ (Poole 2002, p. 4). While some scholars and journalists have gone to great lengths to argue that most Muslims consider violence and terrorism to be an egregious violation of their religion (see Halliday 2003, p. 107), attempts to de-couple the two are sometimes dismissed as oversensitive (cf Phillips 2006b; Gove 2006; Cohen 2007; Anthony 2007). It is worth remembering that in Field’s (2007, p. 457) analysis 56% of a survey believed that a strongly held Muslim identity could lead to violence. The terms ‘Islam’ and ‘Islamism’ are therefore variably used and contested but in at least one dominant discourse emotive conflation rather than careful distinctions are the order of the day and generative of dangerous stereotypes. While media discourses can be seen as contributing to this racialisation, practitioners in some part of the media are also under pressure to question their role in it. The BBC respondent said of its internal debates over the issue of terminology:

In the end we’ve used a number of terms and you have to appreciate this is always tricky because in journalism you have to find more than one way of saying everything otherwise it becomes boring. So we talk a lot about Al Qaeda inspired terrorism; the word Islamist has become reasonably accepted as a way of describing a certain type of person who takes a view . . . but all these terms are tricky because there are people who might well describe themselves as an Islamist but who would never dream of wanting to blow people up . . . . I’ve certainly been in meetings with . . . Muslims who have challenged the BBC . . . . I suppose that’s what I mean by we’ve come a long way, we have been forced quite rightly to think about all these issues and I think we still wrestle with it but I think we are better.

(Personal interview)

This is an instructive account because it suggests that the BBC in particular can be lobbied to take account of minority sensitivities and the risks of stigmatisation. Not only that, but that they have also undergone an internal process of learning which leads them to continue to ‘wrestle’ with these issues. The respondent balances their statement, however, with another in which they reiterate that the ‘real dangers for us and for all journalists in shying away from some of the real challenges that Al Qaeda inspired philosophy presents for British society as a whole and indeed for all Muslims within British society’. On this issue even the Guardian respondent shares a similar concern, elaborated in the following extract:

I went to see Musharaf [the President of Pakistan on a visit to London] earlier this week and he got quite belligerent about this and he was saying ‘don’t you point the finger at Pakistan, most of your home grown people [terrorist suspects] are home grown, that means they were born, they were bred, they were educated here . . .’ Of course, he’s got a point; he’s got a very good point!

(Personal interview)

It is arguable that these perceptions give rise to the minority in question being perceived as a threat rather than in terms of measures designed to eliminate discrimination. This may of course stem from the ways in which it is difficult to sympathise with a minority that is perceived to be disloyal or associated with terrorism. There is also a political imperative to deny the victimisation of such a minority, to argue that racialisation is not taking, that evidence for discrimination
is negligible, that there are no reasons for acting against Islamophobia – for the sake of prioritising security, even at the expense of equality.

Conclusions

This chapter has explored why there may be little sympathy for the notion that Muslim minorities are subject to racism by virtue of their real or perceived ‘Muslimness’. It finds that the reasons are four-fold and includes, firstly, a conceptualisation of racism, which assumes that the protections afforded to conventionally, involuntarily, conceived racial minorities should not be extended to Muslims because theirs is a religious identity that is voluntarily chosen. One salient, discursive, trope germane to this view laments Muslim minorities for the adoption of a ‘victim mentality’. Secondly, the way in which religion per se is frowned upon among contemporary British intelligentsia invites the ridiculing of Muslims as healthy for intellectual debate and not, therefore, an issue of discrimination. Thirdly, while ethnic identities are welcomed in the public space there is much more unease about religion. This means that some commentators, who may otherwise sympathise with Muslim minorities, argue that it is difficult to view Muslims as victims when they may themselves be potential oppressors. Finally, some find it difficult to sympathise with a minority that is perceived to be disloyal or associated with terrorism, a view that leads to a perception of Muslims as a threat rather than as a disadvantaged minority subject to increasingly pernicious discourses of racialisation. Each of these findings invites further study and underscores the need for a greater exploration of anti-Muslim discourse.

Acknowledgement


Notes

1 See also Grossberg’s (1993: 31) idea of how racial articulations can contain ‘a multiplicity of ways in which different meanings, experiences, powers, interests, and identities can be articulated together’.

2 For example, Polly Toynbee, writing in The Guardian, has stated that she reserves the ‘right’ to affront religious minorities on matters of faith because ‘race is something people cannot choose and it defines nothing about them as people. But beliefs are what people choose to identify with … The two cannot be blurred into one/which is why the word Islamophobia is a nonsense’ (see Polly Toynbee, ‘My right to offend a fool’, The Guardian, 10 June 2005). Elsewhere she has proclaimed: ‘I am an Islamophobe and proud of it!’ (see Polly Toynbee, ‘In defence of Islamophobia’, The Independent, 23 October 1997).

3 Of course how Muslims respond to these circumstances will vary. Some will organise resistance, while others will try to stop looking like Muslims (the equivalent of ‘passing’ for white); some will build an ideology out of their subordination, others will not, just as a woman can choose to be a feminist or not. Again, some Muslims may define their Islam in terms of piety rather than politics; just as some women may see no politics in their gender, while for others their gender will be at the centre of their politics.

4 Also writing for the Daily Telegraph, Michael Burleigh has stated: ‘Those claiming to speak for the Muslim community have played to the traditional Left-wing imagination by conjuring up the myth of ‘far-Right extremism’. In reality, evidence for ‘Islamophobia’/as distinct from a justified fear of radical Islamist terrorism or a desire to protect our freedoms, institutions and values from those who hold them in contempt/is anecdotal and slight’ (see Michael Burleigh, ‘Religious hatred bill is being used to buy Muslim votes’, Daily Telegraph, 9 December 2004).
5 The Guardian is probably the only national newspaper where the issue of anti-Muslim sentiment is taken seriously. Yet even here prevailing opinions are clearly divided among its columnists, with Madeline Bunting, Gary Young, Seamus Milne and Jonathan Freedland considering it to be an issue of real concern, and Polly Toynbee, Catherine Bennett, and Timothy Garton Ash, among others, considering it to be much less so. This is in contrast to its sister paper, The Observer, particularly in the writings of Will Hutton and Nick Cohen, who view it as a misnomer (see Meer 2006).

6 This is also supported in survey evidence which reports anxiety over the intensity of Muslim religiosity. Field (2007: 457) notes that ‘in G-2004h, 70% acknowledged that they seemed to take their faith more seriously than Christians, while in G-2005b, 28% had a concern about the presence of those with strong Muslim beliefs. In G-2005c, 80% felt that British Muslims had a keen sense of Islamic identity which was still growing (63%) and which had to be reckoned as a “bad thing” (56%), with the potential to lead to violence and loss of personal freedoms and to act as a barrier to integration.’ G-2004h, G-2005b and G-2005c are polls; see Field (2007) for full details of each of these.

7 In another part of the interview they state: ‘I think the BBC has been through an interesting phase which echoes that slight change that I’ve been talking about in the last few years which is I think there was a belief that we had to promote multiculturalism; that it was our job to try and do lots of stories about how lovely it was to have lots of people from different cultures in Britain and not report too much what tensions there were, certainly not allow the voices of those people who had concerns about the changing nature of their high street or whatever it was. I think that has changed over the last couple of years. I think there has been, quite rightly a change of view that we do need in the corporation to ensure that we reflect whatever tensions and anxieties and indeed prejudices that may exist within British society and a recognition that for people to question, for instance the level of immigration into this country is not of itself, beyond the pale. That is a legitimate position for someone to hold and indeed, has become a pretty central political discussion right now.’

References
Islamophobia as racialisation of Muslims