



## *Discrepancies Around the Use of the Term “Islamophobia”*

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**Abstract:** In this article we shall deal with criticisms and/or discrepancies around use of the term Islamophobia, though not without making clear that from our standpoint the term was coined because there is a new reality which needs a name. This reality must be described and defined, for objectively the prejudice against Muslims has grown considerably and so quickly and exponentially that in recent years a new term had to be coined into the vocabulary, able to identify and act against a wide range of acts and attitudes which particularly oppose the Arab and/or Muslim communities residing in Europe and the West. Criticism voiced around the term Islamophobia is diverse in form and content, although closely linked both internationally and in the Spanish national context. Such criticism over ‘acceptance’ or not of the term in turn makes use of alternative concepts based on three major critical currents: religious, racial and ethno-cultural. To this are added etymological, identity and political aspects, and those regarding freedom of expression or even ideological discourses.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The systematic distortion of the Arab and Muslim world’s image, along with the processes of essentialization and homogenization of a population otherwise increasingly plural and diverse, has given way to the appearance of a number of concepts and/or terms meant to describe new processes and new social realities.

Events such as the Iranian Revolution, the ‘Gulf Wars,’ the GIA attacks in France, the Taliban, the Salman Rushdie Affair, the murder of Theo van Gogh and the caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed, etc., have put forth a violent image and a militant

Islam totally opposed to Western values of civilization and democracy. This image and the historic stereotypes have often shaped a single justification, based on which the various prejudices and acts ‘prior’ to what is currently known as Islamophobia<sup>1</sup> are con-

<sup>1</sup> We hereinafter take Islamophobia to mean: “[...] the fear of or prejudiced viewpoint towards Islam, Muslims and matters pertaining to them. Islamophobia is not a new phenomenon but we know that today many Muslim communities in Europe are experiencing an increasingly hostile environment towards them characterized by suspicion, deep-rooted prejudice, ignorance, and, in some cases, physical and verbal harassment.” For more details, cf. Ramberg, I. (2004). *Islamophobia and its Consequences on Young People*. Budapest, Council of Europe.

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sciously or unconsciously justified.

Nowadays and as a result of the September 11, March 11 and June 7 attacks, the “circle has closed” vis-à-vis Western prejudices, greatly strengthening the “essentialist stigmatization of the Muslim world”<sup>2</sup>: the entire immigrant population living in neighbourhoods and cities has come to be identified and compared with ‘the terrorist,’ and a national and international alarmism has emerged, leading to the rejection of Muslim communities and anything associated to Islam. For this reason Muslims in Europe have been particularly liable to be targeted by diverse prejudices and stereotypes, gradually consolidating use of the term Islamophobia and hence Islamophobic acts.

However, although the concept is increasingly widespread, it seems especially hard to define in practice just what Islamophobia is, as it is often put on a par with other processes such as racism (anti-Maghrebi, anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, etc), hostility to Islam and xenophobia, etc., and confused with or likened to terms such as ‘Maurophobia,’ ‘Moorophobia’ or ‘Arabophobia.’ This has given way to a wavering definition, with no consensus as to either its definition or legal formulation, reaffirming both the emerging and changing social reality and the broad ignorance at different levels over what is taking place in our societies, regions and neighbourhoods, etc.

Parallel to this a line of thinkers and academics has emerged<sup>3</sup>, who assert that use of the term Islamophobia is increasingly more controversial, given that it often serves to contain very diverse phenomena running from xenophobia to the fight against terrorism. Although the term mainly refers to instilled fear and/or hostility towards Islam, it also encompasses the practical consequences of such hostility vis-

à-vis discrimination (both positive and negative), prejudices, discourse and the less favourable treatment of Muslim individuals and communities, and the exclusion of same from political/social mainstreams.

In this article we shall deal with this sort of criticism and/or discrepancies around use of the term Islamophobia, though not without making clear that from our standpoint the term was coined because there is a new reality which needs a name. This reality must be described and defined, for objectively<sup>4</sup> the prejudice against Muslims has grown considerably and so quickly and exponentially that in recent years a new term had to be coined into the vocabulary, able to identify and act against a wide range of acts and attitudes which particularly oppose the Arab and/or Muslim communities residing in Europe and the West.

## 2. ISLAMOPHOBIA VERSUS TERMINOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

Terms/concepts are theoretical constructions derived from a given reality which can capture and synthesize aspects of that reality. They can respond to social constructions resulting from processes of interaction among different individuals (their own identity and practices) or to his-

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<sup>4</sup> An empirical example of this can be seen in different scientific works such as: the report by the European Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) titled “Discrimination Against Muslims in the EU,” published on 28/05/2009 ([http://fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/eu-midis/eumidis\\_muslims\\_en.htm](http://fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/eu-midis/eumidis_muslims_en.htm)); the EUMC report on “Muslims in the European Union: discrimination and Islamophobia,” published on 01/12/2006; the report on “The Fight Against Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: bringing communities together,” published on 01/01/2003; or in the “Reports on Anti-Islamic Reactions Within the European Union after the Acts of Terror Against the USA,” published on 01/05/2002, in which main conclusions are developed regarding “Islamophobia in the EU after September 11.”

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<sup>2</sup> For more details, cf. Martín Muñoz, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Among others, cf. Halliday 1999, Modood 2002, Vertovec 2002 and Werbner 2005.

toric constructions which in an adjustable manner are organized and modified in time and in space. Presumably we should understand the term Islamophobia to be a way to 'read' what is going on, a way to express the (current) reality and account for its practices. In other words, Islamophobia is a term/concept we have constructed to weld together a 'universal container' of social practices and meanings, regardless of the contextual conditions upon which those built until present have been based.

These conditions are diverse in their 'form and content,' such as the different degrees of associationism, technical components, inclusion policies, specific and differentiated mass media treatment, etc. They encompass<sup>5</sup> an infinite number of acts and attitudes which have no need to be highlighted or signified according to the daily logic of 'minorities and majorities,' but which are rather clear acts of exclusion and a broad state of 'uncertainty' centred especially on the more significant 'other' and currently and historically essentialized per the keys of what we take to be Islamophobia. Attacks (verbal, physical, on private property of the 'other,' etc.), negative stereotypes, mimesis and comments in the discourse of various social players, job discrimination, bureaucratic disregard and delay regarding the construction of mosques, prayer rooms and cemeteries, etc., and even the non-recognition of a distinctive identity, both ethnic and religious, are examples of what all too often happens in our societies with respect to a certain population—a minority 'we' identify as foreign (even if Spanish), Arab and/or Muslim.

Although the term in both its 'practical' and theoretical facet seems objectively defined, as to what is or is not an "Islamophobic" act and/or attitude, it is neverthe-

less roundly criticized by some analysts/academics due to its ambiguity and the scant consensus over its definition, and to its application or general acknowledgment. This non-definition gives rise to three main currents of criticism, mostly interrelated: **religious, racial** and **ethno-cultural**. There is also another order of criticism which can involve **etymology, identity, politics, freedom of expression** and **ideological discourse**, etc., which complete and/or complement the distinct discrepant lines around its use.

To this criticism we must add differential and contextual aspects, many of which are wielded against 'universal' use of the term. Yet we must make clear *a priori* that the contextual importance—specifically regarding criticism addressed to use or not of the term Islamophobia—is relative from the moment that the basis for such discrimination, above all due to 9/11, has varied. While initial prejudice was directed against historically stigmatized populations, such as the Maghrebi and especially Moroccan population in the Spanish case, prejudice now encompasses the Muslim population in general, regardless of where the people subject to Islamophobic acts come from. Moreover, one might say that Islamophobia at present is basically addressed to people we have defined as Muslims, independently of whether or not they are, and independently of their own self-description. In the Spanish context we can find an example of this in Sub-Saharan ethnic communities (as in other contexts, the stigmatized ethnic population can be another<sup>6</sup>)—the Senegalese, for instance. In this case, the 'host society' has established no mechanical relationship whereby any 'Black' Senegalese identified as Muslim, yet there is a cause-effect reaction whereby most Moroccans or Maghrebis (formerly colonized and not 'submissive') are Muslims, even if the 'departure point' for both groups is the same (in this case Sunni, etc.)—the same which in the other would apply to Mouride

<sup>5</sup> See for example the recommendations on Islamophobia approved by the Council of Europe. Abduljalil Sajid. Chairman, Muslim Council for Religious and Racial Harmony UK.

Muslims of the Wolof ethnic group, or those pertaining to the Tijaan (Tijaniyyah) confraternity, etc.

This leads to reflection on the processes of identity-building versus the 'other,' via which in most cases the place of origin is not distinguished: one does not know what the invented enemy is, neither culturally nor ethnically, as suspicion is extended to anything that 'sounds' Arab, Muslim or 'Islamic,' beyond 'sure' analyses regarding the construction of otherness. To that end, the 'only good Muslim,' one not subject to the prejudices and judgments of the surrounding society, is the one not identified as such or who simply keeps out of the limelight or hides his/her respective identity. However, this is not entirely valid, given that the 'Muslimness' label, which identifies and at times categorizes or serves to discredit an individual or community, goes beyond its own bounds, given that it depends on other factors and perhaps the biased view we have of the 'us' against the other.

### 3. CRITICAL APPROACHES FROM THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

In the international context we can observe a number of critical approaches which deal with national construction of the concept, framed per the specific nature of each country, while also providing connotations which can be 'generalized' vis-à-

<sup>6</sup>This aspect can be seen, for example, in the most recent FRA report providing data on how Muslims throughout the EU experience processes of discrimination and victimization. The study covers Muslim respondents of various ethnic origins from 14 member States; a view both *emic* and *etic* shows for example that 64 percent of Africans (North Africans and Sub-Saharan) who call themselves Muslims in Malta, or 47 percent of Sub-Saharan in Finland, consider themselves victims of discrimination. For more details, cf. European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey. Data in Focus Report/Muslims. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), (EU-MIDIS) December 2009.

vis the other European and/or Western contexts and experiences.

To that end, we shall first analyze criticism associated to the racial, ethnic and religious facet. Second: the facet that is etymological, identitary, critical of freedom of expression and involving differences arising in the framework of ideological discourse. Third and last, we shall focus on 'criticism' which holds that Islamophobia was born as a concession to politically correct language.

#### 3.1. Racial, Ethnic and Religious Facet

From the 'racial criticism' standpoint, the Islamophobia concept has nothing specific that has not been previously covered at semantic and even legal level by the term 'racism.'<sup>7</sup> Racism in particular, from the psychoanalytical perspective, is seen as the inability of some people to handle the difference, as well as the inability to deal with similarities with the 'other.'<sup>8</sup> With this focus it becomes evident that Islamophobia can (or should) be conceived as a kind of post-modern fear, a fear encompassing the intellectual elites of Western society, given that it runs against contemporary intellectual trends which fight against essentialism and relativism. In this regard, Islamophobia is taken to be another phobia or racism, i.e., an inability to deal what is actually or just apparently different.

Likewise, for others the prejudice around Islam is often perceived as a mere justification, a new way to justify and signify old phenomena well known by everyone, such as discrimination, racism and/or xenophobia (phobia regarding immigrants). It is therefore not correct in this case to speak of Islamophobia but rather of a bilateral 'new racism'<sup>9</sup> which among other elements combines race, nationalism, reli-

<sup>7</sup> For more details cf. Wiewiorka (1992).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Modood, (1997:4) and Balibar, (1991:34-38).

gion, culture and history. Fear and/or discrimination toward Muslims is thus a new stage in the evolution of racism, built up from a perceived cultural, religious and historical differentiation, but also due to other factors such as phenotype, way of dressing and cultural aspects, etc. Likewise, from this viewpoint society will seldom reject from the start the Muslims in a community for the faith they profess, but rather due to their 'racial condition' and/or their condition as immigrants, foreigners or outsiders.

But we cannot put aside the 'religious facet' of Islam and the latter's involvement in the religious, social, political and cultural aspects of Muslim individuals and communities. From the moment in which religious connotation enters into play another series of discrepancies of a 'religious' nature arises. In this regard, '**religious criticism**' basically puts forward two postures: on the one hand, that Islamophobia can be used by some Muslims or communities to forbid all criticism of Islam as a religion, i.e., so that the religion they practice is not questioned in any way; on the other stand those who hold that the term may be misleading, as it implicitly presumes the pre-eminence of religious discrimination (phobia against a single, homogenous and unchangeable Islam), when there are other forms of discrimination which can be ethnic, 'racial' or class racism, etc., with much greater relevance or representation. For this reason the religious connotation which can accompany the term Islamophobia is rejected, given that in different countries religion is often seen as an obstacle to integration<sup>10</sup>. Criticism on this point is likewise related to aspects such as laicism or the construction of a secular society, wherein it is held that the representation of religion should mainly be undertaken in a private context.

In this debate on religious connotation,

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<sup>10</sup> This aspect can be seen in different countries where there is a persistent idea that the meaning of integration is akin to 'assimilation'.

we must not forget that religion is still a fundamental dimension in the process of building ethnic identities, and this 'despite' religion's changing nature, far from disappearing due to the logic of instrumental reason<sup>11</sup>, or 'reappearing' or 'returning.' Simply put, religions are there, even though we have not known how to understand and/or analyze this from a reductionist theoretical standpoint. So, far from disappearing, religions are updating, taking on new life and multiplying<sup>12</sup>, and in some cases rediscovering themselves via adjustment processes that give meaning to the identity of 'one' versus the 'other.'

From the analysis of 'religious criticism' arises '**ethnic criticism**,' given that some players consider discrimination towards Muslims to be addressed towards the community form of ethnic identity rather than the facet based on beliefs and/or personal faith. That is, in this case prejudice against Muslims could be likened to ethnic prejudice (therefore linked to a biologizing terminology, such as the concepts of racism and xenophobia, more than to religious prejudice), as they have considered the case of the term Islamophobia.

To explain this viewpoint, we must bear in mind that ethnicity is a product of the identification process, which can be defined as the social organization of cultural difference<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, what really matters when explaining ethnicity is not so much the cultural content of the identity taken in an isolated manner, but rather the interaction mechanisms which per a certain strategic and selective cultural repertoire<sup>14</sup> uphold or question collective boundaries. For this reason the Muslims' processes of

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Beyer (1994).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Durkheim, (1992:397-398).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Bart (1976, 15).

<sup>14</sup> Identities are multiple and selective, and at every moment we use one or another depending on the selection of repertoires. What we select at each moment will indicate what is significant at that moment, whether as reaffirmation of the element or as rejection of same.

contemporary essentialization is like a new process for legitimizing the ethnization of the 'other,' i.e., the alterity<sup>15</sup> of an individual or group with respect to the 'other.' Ethnization is therefore held to be a process whereby certain collectives are defined and perceived as outsiders, i.e., as alien actors in their own territories. Another kind of ethnization occurs when a collective of immigrants who previously adopted their resident country as a 'homeland' is confronted by a collective of citizens who radically deny that the former can take part in the country's political and economic life. In this case, it is not enough for the Muslim immigrant collectives to want to become full members, but rather their desire must be respected at legal level and by the citizens of that country. It is at that moment that the ethnic status of a collective begins to form part of the nation state in which it resides<sup>16</sup>.

We must nevertheless note that we are currently facing a more diverse and heterogeneous situation, given that regardless of their ethnic origin, many European Muslims suffer discrimination in employment, education and housing, etc.<sup>17</sup>

### *3.2. The Ethnological, Identitary, Freedom of Expression and Ideological Discourse Facet*

As mentioned above, there is another order of criticism or discrepancy toward the term Islamophobia, which though fully linked to ethnic, religious and cultural aspects, is in itself used as individual criticism over the use of this terminology.

Such is firstly the case of '**etymological/terminological criticism.**' From this view-

point, the terms 'anti-Muslim racism,' 'anti-Arab' or even 'intolerance against Muslims'<sup>18</sup> are clearer than the term Islamophobia for various reasons. On the one hand, use of the word 'phobia' in the concept is not considered appropriate, as it would imply the existence of a sort of mental illness (phobia: obsessive aversion to someone or something and/or compulsive irrational fear); on the other, the term Islamophobia is not considered 'ideal,' for there is no specific rejection of Islam as a religion, but rather a rejection of Muslim individuals or collectives or those defined as such. This kind of criticism even makes an analogy between the word Islamophobia and the word 'anti-Semitism,' arguing that from a grammatical standpoint anti-Semitism should signify a prejudice against Semitic peoples in general, even though it is exclusively used to refer to hostility against the Jews. In this regard, the grammatically incorrect Islamophobia would require the 150 years which the term 'anti-Semitism' needed to become grammatically acceptable, except that Jews recognize themselves and are recognized as being a single ethnic group, contrary to the case of Muslims.

Parallel to this, inclusion of the word 'Islam' in the word Islamophobia raises another kind of discrepancy: based on an undeniable question, the religious, racial, cultural and ethnic diversity of the groups 'supposedly' the object of Islamophobia, the term Islamophobia homogenizes everything associated to Islam and therefore to Muslims. In this homogenization process the diversity of communities and individuals is essentialized, and distinct and differentiated processes are eventually included in a same concept. It is held in turn that widespread use of the term Islamophobia by distinct communities may also essentialize internal plurality at local, regional,

<sup>15</sup> Understood as the process via which societies and cultures exclude a group of people, particularly due to their otherness.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Oommen (1997:91ff).

<sup>17</sup> As stated in the EUMC report on "Muslims in the European Union: Discrimination and Islamophobia," published on 01/12/2006.

<sup>18</sup> Authors such as Fekete (2004), Arun Kundnani (2007) or Salaita (2006), among others, opt for this kind of terms.

national and international level.

Other terms which semantically attempt to approach the national particularities or 'realities' (besides the more extended 'anti-Arab anti-Muslim racism') are becoming alternative though critical lines vis-à-vis usage of the term Islamophobia. For example '*Islamfeindlichkeit*' in the German context literally means hostility to Islam, or its rejection, but not phobia in the sense of fear, or '*maurofobia/morofobia*' in the Spanish case.

Second, we should look at '**criticism**' linked to the '**identity-building process**' which initially does not reject use of the term, but does question the generalization and value of same, as well as its ability to describe the social reality in a non-essentialized manner. This criticism is meant to show both the use and abuse of a terminology—Islamophobia—which we ourselves have constructed. This identity-building presumes that the term Islamophobia is not put up in a 'one-way' manner addressed to Muslim communities and/or individuals, but rather that the prejudice we are dealing with is very likely two-way. According to this thesis, the term Islamophobia is not complete, given that to understand it we should delve into the contemporary public discussion regarding 'Islam' and 'West,' and also delimit the confusing 'inter-relational' debate being generated.

From this point of view both sides have a tendency to essentialize from the 'Muslim' and 'Western' standpoint both the Muslim population and the rest of the non-Muslim population. On the one hand there is widespread social 'alarmism' based on the 'threat' of how Islam presents the Western world<sup>19</sup>, and on the other, how from the West<sup>20</sup> it is presented to Muslims. The 'simplification' from the West's viewpoint involves a number of prejudices regarding many aspects associated to the world around Islam: to think that all (or most)

Muslims are terrorists; to consider widespread the 'degree of aggressiveness' disseminated by news media with respect to Arab countries; to think that the universal denial of human rights encompasses the whole Arab world; and to think that the billion Muslims, their social and ethnic groups, are all the same. Likewise and bilaterally there is a process of essentialization by Muslims vis-à-vis the West—the *a priori* Muslim 'simplification' of a comprehensive and uniform 'West,' along with the stereotyped idea of a single unitary and universal Muslim identity extended to all Muslims, their holy texts and their culture<sup>21</sup>.

In this regard, before the distinct processes of Western social and religious intolerance, processes whose tangible result is seen in conflicts which reject the 'other' and are in turn the root of Islamophobia, an endless number of responses to social exclusion have been generated, such as signs of power loss and de-structuring of the bases of identity thought, beyond the 'hardening' of Western ideological postures and the root of the very concept of Islamophobia.

Thirdly, we encounter criticism or discrepancies which consider use of the term Islamophobia to be unmerited, along with its respective symbolic burden, as it 'hinders' the **freedom of expression** of certain sectors and/or social players. This debate initially emerged as criticism of the Runnymede Trust report. Those who currently hold up the lack of freedom of expression to justify the insistence or imprecision of the term Islamophobia make biased use of the

<sup>20</sup> On this point we must bear in mind the thesis by Sayyid (1997) whereby a critical conceptual narrative is presented regarding how the Western world has come to identify the 'Islamic threat.' For Sayyid, Islamism has signified a process of reinterpretation and reinvention of the Western identity and in turn its place in the world through 'Euro-centrism.' Sayyid defines Euro-centrism as being the West's response to the possible challenge of domination of the Muslim world.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Halliday (1999:893).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Halliday (1999:892).

reaction from various public opinion sectors, Muslim or not: for example, the Mohammed caricatures controversy (2005), the film *Fitna* (by Dutch far-right MP Geert Wilders) or the theatre play *The Satanic Verses* using the book of the same title by Salman Rushdie, which opened in Germany on 30 March 2008, etc. These and other social players hold that the charge of Islamophobia hampers their freedom of expression. They ironically point to the 'freedom of expression' enjoyed by people who want to condemn or denounce discourses and acts, such as the 'Islamophobia Award' granted by the Islamic Human Rights Commission, a British organization.

On this point, we must note that freedom of expression, albeit vital for democratic life, should not be deemed an absolute universal value. It should be wielded within established legal frameworks and under the appropriate ethical and legal responsibility of the different social players involved. This means that Islamophobic speeches cannot be justified through recourse to the protection of fundamental rights.<sup>22</sup>

In fourth and last place we should take into account differences regarding the term Islamophobia in the framework of '**ideological discourse**.' This criticism is grounded in the eagerness of researchers and/or academics to demonstrate that Islamophobia exists in the society they are studying; they go so far as to generalize and make universal considerations with no criteria whatsoever regarding both the phenomenon and the distinct readings associated to same. This generalization causes the term Islamophobia to lose its original meaning, distorting the observed reality. From this point of view criticism is addressed to our inability to differentiate between discourse and practice—at the level of discourse not everything can or should be called Islamophobia.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Martín Muñoz (2008:26-27).

This implies veiled criticism of how the term Islamophobia has grouped such a variety of forms of discourse and acts, aiming to show that any act marked as Islamophobic proceeds from a same ideological core<sup>23</sup>, which has distorted and/or lost its original meaning. This 'criticism' aims to show that indiscriminate use of this terminology is not positive and that 'not all Islamophobic acts or incidents are Islamophobia.' To avoid this 'generalization,' it holds that all the observable and related nuances of acts marked as Islamophobic must be studied in depth, as it would be wrong to have to choose between Islamophobia or 'nothing.' To that end, it proposes distinguishing, per national specificity, between academic discussions about Islam and modernity; public debates about whether Islam recognizes the principle of separation of church and state; the public clamour which essentializes Islam; and the forms of inciting hatred, such as discourse associated to the death of Theo van Gogh, etc.

### 3.3. '*Criticism*' of the '*Politically Correct*'

Ultimately, it must be stressed that since the term Islamophobia was coined in the Runnymede Trust report, some researchers and essayists have considered that it was generated as part of politically correct discourse. From this viewpoint Islamophobia is an 'invention,' a rhetorical term meant to be distant from any sort of euphemism and/or criticism addressed to both Muslims and the religion they profess.<sup>24</sup>

At present, criticism of the 'politically correct' has shifted to a categorical pronouncement via which all aseptic discourse 'in favour' of the integration and understanding of a culture, way of life and respect for traditions, etc., of Arab and/or

<sup>23</sup> For more details, cf. Maussen (2006).

<sup>24</sup> For more details, cf. Moreras (2000).



Muslim communities and individuals on a basis of equality is a first person attack directed at the 'counterpart' which apparently seeks to self-ascribe or self-define itself as Islamophobic, so as to legitimize any kind of criticism or socio-political response to those seeking to further a solid knowledge which transcends the essentialist and manipulative discourse seemingly imposed on Islam and Muslims who live in European societies and the West in general.

In this regard, the report (1997) made clear that not all criticism is based, or has to be based, on a stereotypical construction of the Arab and Muslim world, and that therefore as it does not depend on prejudices there are certain questions that can or should be criticized.

#### 4. CRITICISM FROM THE NATIONAL CONTEXT: RETHINKING HISTORIC 'MOOROPHOBIA'

A number of critiques we have seen are repeated to greater or lesser extent in different European and/or Western countries and contexts. The Spanish case is no different here, as 'racial, ethnic and/or religious' criticism and discrepancies are articulated, along with criticism over 'terminology' and associated to identity-building processes, which circumscribe the reality of our national context.

Yet it cannot be said that there is a specific critical line, scientifically speaking, toward the concept of Islamophobia, which began to be used around 2000<sup>25</sup>, when Islamic communities were becoming increasingly visible and in turn began to be more organized; scant consensus is nevertheless observed regarding its use. Acts such as those which occurred in Ceuta (Calamocarro 1995), El Ejido (Febrero 2000), Ca N'Anglada (Tarrasa) and Premià de Mar (2001-2002), etc., were labelled as racist,

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126-132.

xenophobic anti-immigrant acts marked by anti-Moor prejudices and are exceptionally analyzed nowadays as Islamophobic acts.

Indeed, until very recently most acts against Muslims or Arabs were solely and exclusively linked to aspects such as xenophobia or anti-immigrant racism in both the political<sup>26</sup> and social ambit by the very communities<sup>27</sup> targeted by those acts. An in-depth look at this aspect distinguishes four different postures: those holding that Islamophobia does not exist as such; those who deny Islamophobia, but hold that a historic Mauro(Mooro)phobia does exist<sup>28</sup>; those who opine that the Islamophobia seen in Spain is fundamentally the historic Moorophobia<sup>29</sup>; and those who analyze and study Islamophobia and publicize such acts and/or attitudes.

On this point we must make it clear that for an in-depth study of discrepancies and/or criticism regarding the term Islamophobia, it is not necessary to work out the historic evolution of the concept itself or

<sup>26</sup> We can only highlight the initiatives undertaken in the political sphere at a time when the term Islamophobia has become an active part of the political agenda: on the one hand, the OSCE-organized conference held in the city of Cordoba in 2005 and titled "Anti-Semitism and Other Forms of Intolerance"—it focused, for the first time in plenary session, on the subject of Islamophobia; on the other hand, the Conference on "Intolerance and Discrimination towards Muslims," held in 2007, also in Cordoba, during the Spanish OSCE presidency, where Islamophobia was understood to be a "reality that threatens the coexistence of our societies."

<sup>27</sup> An example of how Muslim communities have recently begun to use this terminology can be seen on the WEBISLAM website. The 'Islamophobic' problems collected on these pages show a broad range of social, national and international conflicts which from its viewpoint impact on the way of life of the communities based in Spain. For more details, see <http://www.webislam.com/>, consulted on 10 August 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Zapata-Barrero argues that what exists in Spain is not exactly Islamophobia or cultural religious racism, but rather historic Maurophobia (phobia against the Moors). Cf. Zapata-Barrero (2006:145).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Laura Mijares and Ángeles Ramírez (2008).

the alternative concepts (such as 'Maurophobia' and 'Moorophobia') linked to same in the Spanish context, given that such descriptions are usually based on the assumption that the concepts are static and that if not taken as such the strictly diachronic perspective used to study them treats them as such in most cases.

On the contrary, to understand the alternative use of concepts and the degree of consensus that has come to exist around the term Islamophobia, we shall focus our attention on three different processes which in short mark the dividing line between use of one or another term around our 'national specificity.' These processes are visibility of the 'other,' identity building and substantiation of the difference.

#### 4.1. *Visibility of the Other*

The process of making visible the immigrant presence is generated via the Muslim communities' territorial occupation of spaces previously delimited by the destination society. The inflexion point for this process was in 1986, when Spain joined the then European Economic Community, given that since 1609 there had been no overly visible presence of Muslim or Arab communities in Spain. Spain began to take in a large and growing number of foreigners, of whom Muslim Maghrebis are a significant percentage. This notwithstanding, the visibility of the 'Muslim immigrant population' is not the only factor accounting for the appearance of ethno-religious communities, i.e., the stigmatized 'other,' for other factors of a different nature play a role, such as the appearance of Spanish neo-Muslims, converts and social actors akin to same.

For this reason the search for identity seen in this process is closely linked to the social construction of a shared common space, forging identity 'signs and features' which internally join related groups and in turn mark the difference vis-à-vis the exterior. Along with these phenomena,

'anti-Islamic and anti-Arab' attitudes still prevail in some sectors of Spanish society, a combination of different degrees of ethnic, religious and nationalist discrimination.<sup>30</sup> Attitudes very deeply rooted in historic stigmatizations of the 'other,' an aspect which since the early Spanish nation-state project was founded in 1492 blended 'Arabophobia' and Islamophobia, were legitimized by continually overlapping 'pureblood laws' that merged a supposedly biological, ethnic and religious terminology, giving way to 'Moorophobia.'<sup>31</sup>

Mooro(Mauro)phobia is therefore spoken of as an alternative terminology for Islamophobia, assuming from the start that the concept of 'Islam' as a religion is not understood by a broad majority of local social players, in neither their discourse nor their practice. In this case, the rejection (phobia) is not so much about the monotheistic religion, but rather the local visibility of the people who practice it. In other words, the Islamic 'whole' associated to the Islamic religion as a way of life amply manifested by any practicing Muslim is not understood in the prejudiced, misinformed and 'Westernized' view of those social players who formulate the 'phobia' based on different identity-building processes, in most cases diametrically opposed to the 'other.'

From this standpoint, the pre-existing historic racism throughout Spain's history as a nation-state and prior to the 9/11 attacks continues to exist, albeit polarized after these attacks. The feeling against Muslim communities based in Spain is held to be based not so much on religious grounds but rather on ethnic differentiation which refers to the 'Arabness of individuals' and more tangibly their condition as 'Moors'<sup>32</sup> to 'justify' the phobia or rejection. This presumes a systematic confusion, very often predetermined, between 'Arabness,' 'Mus-

<sup>30</sup> Cf. ASEP (1998).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Stallaert (1998).

limness' and 'Islamism,' which justifies 'Islamophobia' based on a blend of ethnocentrism and cultural essentialism.

#### 4.2. Identity-Building Processes

Parallel to visibility of the other is a process of identity-building, for the identity of a given group only emerges in situations of 'contact and interaction' with other groups, via a number of features which differentiate one group from another, and never as a feature of the group itself. In this identity-building process the historic memory is especially important, along with the 'invention of tradition.'<sup>33</sup>

For this reason 'Islam' and its 'adjacent prejudiced categories'—Moor, Muslim, Islamist, Mohammedan, etc.—are continually compared in processes of building the identity of 'us' versus the 'other.' In this regard, use of the historic term 'Moorophobia' has been extended to most Muslim communities established in cities and regions, wherein the power structures essentialize majority and minority relations. On this point, Moorophobia is built on a basis of ignorance and in many cases 'panic'—an invasion, the historic past, etc.—regarding certain cultural and religious elements which the 'host society' holds to be unchangeable elements of its identity conscience, and are very often conceptualized as being a threat to Western

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<sup>32</sup> In this case the word 'Moor' is used in a derogatory manner vis-à-vis the immigrant origin population from the Maghreb, without any sort of ethnic distinction, and particularly for the immigrant population arriving in *patera* boats, although etymologically it should refer to the inhabitants of Mauritania.

<sup>33</sup> For more details cf. Hobsbawm (2002). In this regard note that in this identity-building process Huntington's forecasted 'clash of civilizations' has not occurred, but rather the formation of antagonistic groups aiming to strengthen their control over history and memory via different strategies involving the invention and reinvention of time and space, i.e., to strengthen their own identity before an essentialized and stigmatized 'other'.

civilization and therefore incompatible, 'inferior and rejectable'<sup>34</sup> in the ideal of 'European' life.

#### 4.3. Substantiation of the Difference

Due to the other's visibility and the identity-building processes, a new process of substantiating the difference, essentialization and prejudices around the Arab and Muslim world arises. This requires a biologizing reinterpretation of social relations to confer solidity on the nation-state project, an aspect frequently based on an 'ethnic election myth' (Smith, 1996). That is, there is a 'selection of who is in and who is out' of the project. In this case, an approach is reflected, derived from relations based on biological racism via an ethnicity which constantly looks to the past to build the future of the group and community.

This reinterpretation of social relationships, based on the selective differentiation of cultural alterity, will eventually be dealt with in the processes of temporalization and 'selective historic memory,' causing continual 'conflicts' around belonging or not to the space previously marked out as territory by the resident communities and individuals.

The substantiation of identity therefore differentiates the distinct groups based on whether or not they have the potential to be assimilated, if not integrated, by the destination society. This differentiation begins with the idea that there are ethnic groups that are more or less easy to assimilate, due to cultural or linguistic closeness, etc., as opposed to others, such as the Arabs and Maghrebis, etc., who from the neo-racist standpoint are hard to assimilate. Moorophobia therefore holds that the other cannot be assimilated and is a threat to local, regional and nationalist bases of thought or identities.

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<sup>34</sup> See Said (1978).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

As mentioned above, criticism voiced around the term Islamophobia is diverse in form and content, although closely linked both internationally and in the Spanish national context. Such criticism over 'acceptance' or not of the term in turn makes use of alternative concepts based on three major critical currents: religious, racial and ethno-cultural. To this are added etymological, identity and political aspects, and those regarding freedom of expression or even ideological discourses.

The fact of 'criticizing' or disagreeing with a term is neither new nor negative, given that traditionally terms such as racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia and homophobia, etc., have been roundly criticized and/or contested, resulting in countless ranges of acceptance which place in doubt the solidity or precision of same. Yet they have nevertheless been able to 'combatively' consolidate, both politically and socially.

Usually such criticism emerges as a reaction to some (pertinent or not) accusation, whether direct or indirect, implicit or explicit, or which simply affects our own identity and our different way of seeing the reality we face, with which we do not agree. This implies that different social players try in one way or another to discredit the correctness or use of a term and, in short, the social players who use them. However, there is also constructive criticism which aims to be a means for reflection, improvement or understanding, criticism which definitively concerns the elimination of all forms of social and political discrimination and stigmatization—in this case of religious minorities—regardless of whether one or another term is used.

In this regard, when observing the discrepancies around any 'controversial' concept such as Islamophobia, the only thing which remains clear is that no matter what we call it, there are acts and attitudes

against the Islamic and Muslim communities that reside in our close surroundings, and which are specifically addressed to the Muslim population or what we consider as such. This new reality needs to be named, described and defined, as the only way to act vis-à-vis those who consciously or unconsciously position themselves against the Arab and/or Muslim communities in a prejudiced manner.

In the Spanish case, as in the aforementioned criticism in the international context, the contexts and their past and present are specific. This presumes the existence of countless cases whereby the realities associated to construction of the terms change and/or evolve, either positively or negatively. For example, contemporary racism, above all in Western societies, has been labelled or defined in the context of neo-racism. Likewise, the term Moorophobia, which in its time was loaded with a great deal of historical symbolism, now no longer bears the nuances which for many social players made it an implicit part of the national reality or Spanish context. This non-conformity is also presented—a sort of *déjà vu*—in the case of Islamophobia.

We must nevertheless be aware that the problem we are facing is 'something' more than a witty play on words, in so far as we are speaking of acts and attitudes which essentialize and discriminate human beings, located far from the field of equality whereon social relations, should be governed. There is no doubt that this aspect should not or cannot have any place in the current system of democratic values in which we live.

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