



Unconscious Islamophobia

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Abstract: Our historical relationship with Islam has accumulated a whole series of negative perceptions dominated by prejudices and stereotypes. We have internalized a reductionist and monolithic image of “us” and of “them” (the two “cultures”). It is as if these were closed universes in which millions of human beings are designated as “Western” or “Muslims” and represent alien and even antagonistic cultures. This concept of “cultures” in relations between the Muslim world and “us” is a product of a Western construct in which “Islam” and therefore all individuals within Islam are fictitiously represented, labelled ideologically as a dominant global force, in a way that portrays the behaviour and culture of that enormous mass of people as a uniform entity. They all are One, and the great variety of this immense geographical area is ignored. This One is perceived as alien, separate and with no values in common with us, inferior and dominated by fanaticism, fundamentalism and irrationality. The combination of hostility and reductionism that feeds this reconstructed vision of a threatening, backward and violent *homo islamicus* turns Muslims into people requiring therapeutic or punitive interventions. Overall, this illustrates that the problem of anti-Muslim behaviour, due to intolerance towards citizens who follow Islam, has grown in importance, and people must be made aware of its existence and the need to take measures and actions to contain and prevent it. However, defining Islamophobia requires its existence to be politically and socially acknowledged, and this is clearly not the case today. This debate is ongoing and rational and empirical criteria must be sought to define this phenomenon in accordance with international standards on racism and intolerance.

“Islamophobia” is a term that is commonly used in Western societies despite the lack of an agreed definition or established legal explanation for the term, or even a consensus on its relevance. This is symp-

tomatic of a new, emerging and increasingly common reality, as well as our society’s lack of awareness of this phenomenon.

The term “Islamophobia” has aroused

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a fair amount of controversy, with some people even questioning its validity or simply rejecting its existence. It is a neologism first coined in the 1990s to refer to global perceptions of Islam in negative and pejorative terms and to discrimination against Muslims for reasons of racial hatred and prejudices. Although its use has intensified and spread since 2001, back in 1997 the Runnymede Trust, a British “think tank” specializing in research into cultural and ethnic diversity, defined this term in its report *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*. This report identified attitudes that fuel Islamophobia: Islam is perceived as a monolithic block, static and unresponsive to change; it is viewed as separate and “other”; it does not have values in common with other cultures, is not affected by them and does not influence them. Islam is seen as inferior to the West; it is considered barbaric, irrational, primitive and sexist; Islam is seen as violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism and engaged in a “clash of civilizations.” Hostility towards Islam is used to justify discriminatory practices against Muslims and the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream society. Anti-Muslim hostility is seen as natural or normal.

Although this definition has been criticised and rejected by academics and intellectuals, as well as by the media and different governmental institutions (mainly international organisations), its use has become widespread, meaning that we must accept the existence of this problem and its potential consequences: social exclusion, lack of protection of fundamental rights and potential disorder. In 2004, the Council of Europe defined Islamophobia as follows: “the fear of or prejudiced viewpoint towards Islam, Muslims and matters pertaining to them. Whether it takes the shape of daily forms of racism and discrimination or more violent forms, Islamophobia is a violation of human rights and a threat to social cohesion.”¹

In fact, international Fundamental Rights organisations have expressed concern about the growing spread of intolerance and discrimination toward Muslims, and have warned about the risk of a new racist phenomenon taking root and unsettling social relations and challenging the defence of human rights. The Council of Europe examined this phenomenon in 2005 in its report entitled *Islamophobia and its Consequences on Young People*. The OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) has become increasingly concerned about this trend. At the conference on “Anti-Semitism and Other Forms of Intolerance,” held in Cordoba in 2005, Islamophobia was addressed for the first time in a plenary session, and later in 2007 the Spanish presidency of the OSCE organized the first monographic conference on “Discrimination and Intolerance against Muslims.”²

However, the most vivid accounts of the spread of these anti-Muslim attitudes and behaviour are in the reports published by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUCM)—now the European Fundamental Rights Agency—to monitor the development of Islamophobia since 2001. The Agency's last report published in 2007, entitled *Muslims in the European Union. Discrimination and Islamophobia*, confirms that Islamophobia, in the form of discrimination and other expressions of intolerance, is a reality and is spreading according to previous reports. Furthermore, the second qualitative report accompanying the previous report entitled *Perceptions on Discrimination and Islamophobia. Voices from Members of Muslim Communities in the European Union*, confirmed that Muslims living in EU countries believe that

¹ “*Islamophobia and Its Consequences on Young People*,” Seminar Report, Council of Europe, 2004, p. 6

² See the website http://www.osce.org/conferences/tnd_muslim_2007.html [accessed 21-07-2010].

this is a reality. Although both reports also state that there is insufficient information available to confirm the real situation in each European country, it does confirm the existence of this phenomenon, which is probably more widespread if databases were to include the specific characteristics of Islamophobic incidents, which is normally not the case. Again, the problem stems from society's lack of awareness of a problem that must be tackled before it is too late to react. If people are unaware of the existence of racist and intolerant acts, then one can make no efforts to identify and report these incidents and consequently no measures will be taken to prevent them. For this reason, the report continually emphasizes the need for databases (police, judicial, etc.) to include information on manifestly anti-Muslim incidents and acts and classify them as such. This work must be carried out in cooperation with Muslim communities in the respective Western countries themselves.

What is disconcerting is that anti-Muslim tendencies described in the abovementioned report are reflected through discrimination in key areas for integration such as employment, education and housing. If this is accompanied by the sense of denigration and humiliation felt by many Muslim citizens, especially young people, due to the relentless insistence on presenting their faith, culture and identity as inherent sources of decadence, fundamentalism and terrorism, the result will be considered more in terms of social conflict than peaceful inclusion. We must also remember that discrimination, ghettos and contempt for the culture and identity of a people are the perfect breeding ground for hatred and radicalisation.

Overall, this illustrates that the problem of anti-Muslim behaviour, due to intolerance towards citizens who follow Islam, has grown in importance, and people must be made aware of its existence and the need to take measures and actions to contain and

prevent it. However, defining Islamophobia requires its existence to be politically and socially acknowledged, and this is clearly not the case today. This debate is ongoing and rational and empirical criteria must be sought to define this phenomenon in accordance with international standards on racism and intolerance.

THE HISTORICAL LEGACY

Undoubtedly, geographical and historical proximity always implies complex and competitive relations among neighbouring geopolitical groups. This has certainly proven to be true in the European and Muslim world since the Middle Ages and has resulted in the transmission of a conflictive historical memory. The rivalry between Islam and Christianity, Al-Andalus and the Christian kingdoms, and the European and Ottoman Empires caused conflicts of interests and ideologies that stigmatized the Other. Amin Maalouf's book *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* or the film *Saladin* by the Egyptian filmmaker Yusuf Shahin, are clear examples of how Arab authors interpret events completely differently from the way they are portrayed in Christian and European imagery. However, the problems caused by this situation did not prevent an unquestionable social reality: the Byzantine Empire maintained close ties with the Umayyad and Abbasid Orient (even closer than with European Christian kingdoms), there were continuous economic and cultural exchanges between Al-Andalus and the Christian kingdoms, and the Islamisation of the medieval West was an undeniable historical fact (in Sicily, the Iberian Peninsula and the Balkans). Unfortunately, most historical texts ignore these exchanges and communications and only mention confrontations. This has all been part of the gradual development of an ideology.

The expulsion of the Muslims and Jews from Al-Andalus and the discovery of

America fuelled a belief that Europe was a closed identity that declared itself as the sole guardian of the attributes of humanity and treated other peoples as inferior. The development of the ideology underpinning this European concept began during the Renaissance and has continued until today, selectively interpreting History, in which the Orient disappeared from European thought, and consolidating the myth that this originated from a single original Greek-Roman source. In other words, the founding myth of European thought authoritatively excluded any contributions from the Orient and ignored the important role of Islamic thought, in not only the recovery and re-reading of Hellenistic thought but also through the rich contribution of a rational philosophy. This “expulsion” fuelled the concept of two isolated universes with no common heritage.

The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed an intensive historical process that strengthened this ethnocentric thought process. It was a time when Europe had to reconcile the ideas of the Enlightenment with expansive mercantilism that sought to colonize the outside world. European colonial thought felt that it had to provide moral and ethical justification for the political domination and economic exploitation it exerted beyond its borders. This gave rise to a duality between “civilisation” and “barbarism,” the concept of race and the principle of European cultural superiority over “other cultures,”—appropriating the universal representation of modernity and civilization. Colonialism became a moral obligation and a historical mission that sought to civilise “wild” or backward peoples. Thereafter, cultural arguments were used to justify what were in fact political actions. As a result, in order to use culture for political ends, a line of thought developed that treated other cultures as inferior and, more significantly, denied them any capacity to evolve and progress. These values were attributed exclusively to the Euro-

pean model.

Thereafter, European culture was considered superior to the cultures of other peoples. Its ethnocentric perception of other cultures viewed these from an essentialist perspective (as if they were closed, immutable and monolithic entities incapable of progressing and evolving, characteristics that influenced their entire historical development). Consequently, there was a tendency to consider that the concepts of progress, dynamism and modernisation were values inherent in European culture that had to be universally imitated.

For example, when the European powers partitioned the African continent, the minutes of the 1885 Conference of Berlin stated that European powers had to “*instruct the natives and bring home to them the blessings of civilization.*” The British colonial minister between 1895 and 1903, Joseph Chamberlain, affirmed the superiority of the white race and its civilization, claiming that “*our rule does, and has, brought security and peace and comparative prosperity to countries that never knew these blessings. In carrying out this work of civilization we are fulfilling what I believe to be our national mission, and we are finding scope for the exercise of those faculties and qualities which have made us a great governing race.*” The Frenchman Jules Ferry proclaimed in parliament on July 28, 1885, the duty “*of superior races to civilize inferior races.*”³

In Islamic parts of the world where great civilizations once prospered, a discourse developed that highlighted the decay of Islam and its inability to escape from the obscurantism experienced before the civilizational advance of Europe. This led to a process of denigrating Islam’s cultural and historical legacy, which was portrayed as incapable of progressing and modernising. In other words, all cultural

³ Quoted by Sophie Bessis in her magnificent book *L’Occident et les Autres. Histoire d’une suprématie*. Paris, La Découverte, 2002.

elements of Islam, including the Arabic language, were classified as regressionist and an obstacle to modern evolution. As a result, European perceptions of Islam were full of prejudices towards anything Islamic, and Islam's intellectual and cultural legacy was once again excluded from the modernized world.

Later, European anti-colonial thought rejected the methods of political domination and economic exploitation employed during the colonial period, but did not question the West's insistence on claiming to be the universal cultural model. Progress and development could only be achieved by mimetically copying the West.

THE CULTURAL EXPLANATION OF POLITICAL EVENTS

Another significant historical event that has strengthened the West's sense of superiority over Islam and fuelled the anti-Islamic perception prevailing in Western societies, occurred at the beginning of the 1990s with the legitimisation of monopolar order accompanied by globalisation. This new situation has prompted the West to use cultural differences to explain the origin of these conflicts. As a result, the essentialist vision of the culture of "others," and of course of "Islamic" culture, has strengthened. Islam is therefore often portrayed as a global source of history and the evolution of Arabs and Muslims, thus assuming that Islam is determinist and omnipresent. These analyses treat Muslim societies as a complete, immutable entity, transforming their identity, concepts, culture and institutions according to new circumstances and situations. In fact, essentialist visions are used to convert situations that actually occur in many other parts of the world, due to political, social and economic factors, into "Islamic exceptions." Therefore, it has not been difficult to sway public opinion in Western countries to believe that every-

thing that happens in the Muslim world is due to an irrational wave of anti-Western cultural and religious fanaticism, thus concealing the true origin of political resistances.

It is important to remember that the Gulf War was the first expression of that new order. Not only did it demonstrate US supremacy in the world, it also consolidated the self-legitimation of the West's supremacy over "Others" (mainly Arabs and Muslims). What was theoretically a struggle to dethrone a tyrant in a given Arab country became an exploited global cultural crusade to gain the support of virtually all Westerners. The outcome was to establish, with the consent of society overall, the main lines of Western politics in the area: protection of Israeli interests, protection of energy sources in the Gulf, support to Arab dictatorships allied with the West and the construction of a new world order based on legitimate states and "rogue states" in order to identify allegedly random threats to justify huge military expenditure in the area.

The promotion of democracy and human rights was relegated (simply read the reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch) while the West produced a completely *ad hoc* literature to actually evade any real political analysis and justify Western policy in the area, focusing society's attention on the "cultural issues" of which Western society is so enamored: in 1993 the North American Samuel Huntington published his theory on "the clash of civilizations."

The theory of the clash of civilizations became the ideological basis underpinning the solemnization of Western supremacy and cultural stigmatization of actors in other parts of the world where Western political, economic and military hegemony has important interests and who refuse to accept this hegemony and superiority. The discourse on the civilizational clash between Islam and the West is the main

instrument used to legitimize the effects of Western policy on Muslims to Western societies. The formula is as follows: if the explanation of events is based on anti-Western cultural and religious determinism, the responsibilities for Western political and military action are eluded. Huntington's expression "*Islam's borders are bloody*" disclosed a culturalist explanation that released the West of all responsibility for that "blood bath."

Huntington's main contribution was actually to provide a theoretical explanation for something that had already existed for a long time: the West's sense of cultural superiority and its anti-Islamic perceptions. Thus Huntington's thesis arrived at a time when the attention of the international community largely focused on the Middle East.

This international focus on the Middle East conflict and the strong impact of terrorism has meant that the "Islamic" issue has also inevitably received great media coverage. However, the Western media's treatment of the Muslim world tends to reinforce stereotypes. In particular, it constructs a media discourse at a distance: for example, it almost never portrays individuals, only masses, and usually in relation to violence or fanaticism, implicitly casting doubt on the state of civilization of these peoples. It also presents Islam as the abstract key to explain the absolute evolution of these peoples, portraying an evolving world—"our" world—in contrast to another "Islamic" world condemned to a repetitive cycle of hopeless misery and violence. Finally, because its citizens were merely passive transmitters of the inevitable fate of their people, the most exceptional and extremist aspects were sought and chosen to represent the majority; "Islamic fundamentalism" was used to represent Muslims worldwide.

IF ALL ARE ONE ...

Our historical relationship with Islam has therefore accumulated a whole series of negative perceptions dominated by prejudices and stereotypes. We have internalized a reductionist and monolithic image of "us" and of "them" (the two "cultures"). It is as if these were closed universes in which millions of human beings are designated as "Western" or "Muslims" and represent alien and even antagonistic cultures. This concept of "cultures" in relations between the Muslim world and "us" is a product of a Western construct in which "Islam" and therefore all individuals within Islam are fictitiously represented, labelled ideologically as a dominant global force, in a way that portrays the behaviour and culture of that enormous mass of people as a uniform entity. They all are One, and the great variety of this immense geographical area is ignored. This One is perceived as alien, separate and with no values in common with us, inferior and dominated by fanaticism, fundamentalism and irrationality. The combination of hostility and reductionism that feeds this reconstructed vision of a threatening, backward and violent *homo islamicus* turns Muslims into people requiring therapeutic or punitive interventions.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, followed by those in Madrid and London a few years later, have created a perverse alchemy in which these stereotypes have been translated into suspicion and fear. The stereotypic portrayal of Muslims as a monolithic and static block has been extended to the phenomenon of terrorism, prompting a strong tendency to view Muslims as the potential "secret weapon of Bin Laden," thus reminding them of their unwanted presence in Western countries and forcing them to justify their loyalty and trustworthiness. The anti-terrorist laws that have been introduced are preventive regulations in which national and religious origin gov-

erns control and security criteria, reinforcing the social stigmatization of Muslim communities in Western countries. The impact of terrorism has cast suspicion over all spaces and individuals linked to Islam (mosques and Imams). Control and security priorities are socially imposed on aspects relating to integration; and integration policies focus more on preventing terrorism than on promoting equality and fundamental rights.

Consequently, public opinion and social sentiment have focused on the need to adopt “preventive measures” to defend themselves against the Muslim presence on *our* soil. Since 2002, all national and international sociological studies have reported a growing sense of rejection towards Muslims and a close link between terrorism and Muslim immigration. Since these sentiments are expressions of patriotism and self-defence, the ensuing Islamophobic sentiments are legitimised and forgiven by society. Hence, the term “unconscious Islamophobia” would be correct if that is understood to mean protection and self-defence instead of discrimination. For this reason, many are reluctant to call it by its name.

A very significant factor is the fact that extreme right-wing parties that are consolidating their positions in different European countries have generally evolved from xenophobic positions to promote an explicitly anti-Muslim discourse. They use this discourse to fuel Islamophobic sentiment and at the same time, and in contrast to xenophobia in general, present this discourse with greater social legitimisation, taking advantage of unconscious Islamophobia.

In terms of the limits between Islamophobia and freedom of expression, the latter cannot be an absolute value that, devoid of any sense of responsibility, constitutes a violation of that right. Racist and xenophobic language cannot be justified to the detriment of the protection of fundamental

rights. The crisis triggered by the cartoons of the prophet Mohammed demands reflection that, in my opinion, cannot be reduced exclusively as a case of the issue of freedom of expression versus the acceptance of cultural satire and caricature. Given this duality, the answers may not necessarily be so complex. Nor do I believe that the key lies in the holy or sacrosanct nature of religious facts (although there are double standards since the Danish newspaper refused to perform the same “experiment” with Jesus Christ) because non-believers also have the right to not be constrained by beliefs they do not share. However, what converted the publication of the cartoons in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* into a powder-keg situation was the Islamophobic nature and incitement of hatred deriving from the portrayal of the founder of Islam as a terrorist. The nature of the message was clear: if the founder of Islam was a terrorist then all its members are terrorists.

This transmitted a dangerous message that stigmatized and humiliated a large part of humankind. Thereafter, the question is not religious but political because it concerns something as detestable as racism and xenophobia. In this respect, freedom of expression cannot be an absolute value that, devoid of any sense of responsibility, is used to abuse this privilege. In this respect, it is of little importance that there are despotic regimes in the Muslim world that do not respect the rights of their own or other citizens: examples include the Iranian president who continually makes aberrant statements or the fact that there are terrorist groups that only represent a minority. The existence of these realities cannot serve as arguments to justify any type of racism or intolerance. This is especially true because when such argument are aimed at law-abiding citizens, individuals, human beings who, in addition to having to endure these situations of oppression and injustice, suffer insults and offences and are treated as inferiors. Since the car-

toon crisis, there has been a clear failure to defend freedom of expression and outrightly reject the Islamophobic message transmitted in these cartoons, since there can be no room for the incitement of hatred and xenophobia in any European democratic system. A different response would have enabled an ethical reconciliation with all Muslims who were offended by these cartoons and could have helped temper the situation.

It is also impossible to reconstruct an apparently "ideal" situation since some sectors of society expect the Muslim identity of these citizens to dissipate and even gradually disappear during their process of European integration. According to some, the best Muslim is one that visibly ceases to be one, hence the tendency to distinguish between "good Muslims" and "bad Muslims." The former would be Westernized Muslims who declare themselves to be secular and often, without having scientific qualifications, confirm our demonized stereotypes of Islam and its alleged "diseases." Westernized Muslims are often heralded as the only possible ambassadors of their society and culture (although they are often merely smokescreens that prevent us from obtaining accurate knowledge of the diverse reality of the Muslim world). If the rest do not prove that they are "good" Muslims, they are considered "bad" Muslims.

That is not the situation that must be addressed in Western countries, but rather the situation regarding the integration and civil normalization of many people who are Muslims and who do not want to stop being Muslims. To achieve this, we must accept the physical, human and territorial visibility of a people who are already part of Europe's identity. Of course, this does not mean that Muslims are not required to abide by the laws applicable to all citizens, regardless of their race, sex and religion. The former must never exclude the latter. However, the best way to achieve the latter is to not exclude the former.

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