

# Islamophobia: Meaning and Origins

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Islamophobia can be defined as the excessive and empirically unjustifiable fear, hatred of, or bias against Islam, Muslims and Islamic civilization, which are translated into policies, attitudes, language, literature, and into condoned individual as well as collective behavioural patterns.

Islamophobia is a new term for a centuries-old idea and phenomenon. Its evolution was steep and dynamic. Differences from one era and its context to another were in nuances and methods, rather than magnitudes and goals. While at first and for a long time Islamophobia was in the spirit of “us versus them”, in recent times it came to be, principally, in terms of “them among us”.

The seeds of Islamophobia were planted as soon as Muslims started to assert themselves as equal protagonists on the global cultural and civilizational stage, threatening global order. As the followers of the final Prophet and the emissaries of the final heavenly message to mankind - plus as a moderate nation (*ummah wasat*), in the sense of being thrust into the epicenter of the dynamic religious, historical and civilization-making processes of the world - Muslims were destined to be looked down upon in the “elite club” and to be dealt with suspiciously.

However, due to the profoundly unique nature of worldly and otherworldly relationships between Muslims and Christians – both actual and aspiring – it is no wonder that the whole Christendom was quickly transformed into the home and incubator of the latest sentiments. At first, the reaction to the Islam and Muslim spectacles was one of awe and amazement, subsequently morphing – and understandably so – into panic and dread.

Edward Said wrote: “Yet where Islam was concerned, European fear, if not always respect, was in order.” After Prophet Muhammad’s death in 632, the military and later the cultural and religious hegemony of Islam grew exponentially, bringing Persia, Middle East, Turkey, North Africa and substantial parts of Europe (Sicily, Spain and parts of France) to its fold.

“By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Islam ruled as far east as India, Indonesia, and China. And to this extraordinary assault Europe could respond with very little except fear and a kind of awe. Christian authors witnessing the Islamic conquests had scant interest in the learning, high culture, and frequent magnificence of the Muslims... Not for nothing did Islam come to symbolize terror, devastation, the demonic hordes of hated barbarians. For Europe, Islam was a lasting trauma” (Edward Said).

It is on this account that Islamophobia is identifiable even with certain thought patterns from the 11<sup>th</sup> through to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, for it was during the Crusades (1095-1291) that trepidation, hate and prejudices against Islam and Muslims (embryonic forms of Islamophobia) peaked and never dwindled afterwards. Today’s Islamophobia is but an upshot, as well as extension, of the legacies of medieval interreligious relations and their extremist together with aggressive polemical thought. It is an effect that issues from age-old causes.

The scope of the evolution of Islamophobia incorporated Christian radical and virtually fanatical polemics and apologetics, linking Islam and its rise with the Apocalypse, and providing erroneous descriptive accounts of Islam, the Muslim world and its societies along with cultures.

### **Islamophobia and polemics**

Some people are happy to confine medieval and early modern Muslim-Christian intellectual, interreligious and missionary relations – and tensions - to the realm of polemics. Yet some, in order to allude to the character of the relations, especially insofar as Muslims are concerned, preface the word “polemics” with “anti-Islamic”.

However, that is not enough and does not paint a true picture of the situation. Polemics revolves around the subjects of contentious rhetoric, aggressive criticism, heated debates, disputes and disagreements, all intended to nullify and mercilessly destroy what an opponent holds to be true – in turn proving staunchly the authenticity and correctness of one’s own position (this segment is called apologetics).

At any rate, the process of polemics is still expected to be infused with rationality, fairness and balance, and to be supported by sufficient evidence, in that finding and enforcing the truth – or at least what is closest to it - while at the same time tearing down the edifice of its antitheses, is the goal of the whole exercise. If the goal of polemics is not the vast orb of the truth, that then defeats the purpose of both polemics and the truth. No sooner does that happen, than polemics as a constructive energy turns into a juggernaut. The less genuinely polemical polemics is, the more repellent to the truth it becomes. Indeed, two wrongs do not make a right.

Christians are supposed to be acquainted and very comfortable with the idea, perhaps more than anybody else. It is stated in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 as follows: “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

Obviously, the strongholds, arguments and pretensions of falsehood and ignorance are to be countered and disposed of with the weapons of sheer faith, piety, wisdom, guidance and knowledge of God. Doing otherwise is un-Christian. It is ungodly and wrong.

It follows that there is no place in polemics for bigotry, lies, excessive hate, insults, fabrications, deceits, cheatings, unsubstantiated hyperboles, preconceptions, ignorance and distortions. If the truth is defended by truthful means, it is bound to prevail, sooner rather than later, causing the falsehood realm to be exposed and to perish. Just as the truth fears nothing, so do its people: followers, leaders and preachers alike. The truth and falsehood are irreconcilable.

### **The role of freedom**

As a matter of fact, the truth needs neither defence nor enforcement. It only needs freedom as regards its portrayal, presence and function. As such, not only is it able to defend itself, but it also easily conquers minds and hearts of its own accord.

In passing, that is exactly what Islam wanted from the very beginning. But since the members of the “elite club” persisted in placing insurmountable obstacles in the path of Islam’s freedom, the obstacles had to be removed forcibly. Conquests for conquests’ sake were never the goal in Islamic civilization - with some unfortunate exceptions of course. Neither imperialism nor colonization furthermore was an Islamic way. Muslims merely aspired to generate environments where people could freely see Islam in its proper light and could freely accept or reject it as the final revelation to mankind.

The Qur’an is unequivocal that there is no compulsion in religion (al-Baqarah, 256). It also proclaims: “And say: ‘The truth is from your Lord, so whoever wills - let him believe; and whoever wills - let him disbelieve’” (al-Kahf, 29).

Defending the “truth” by untruthful means denotes that there is something seriously wrong both with the alleged “truth” and its defenders. To intentionally have recourse to inappropriate methods and measures signifies a serious vulnerability and lack of faith. Such “defenders” need to examine their fidelity, wisdom and, above all, self-worth.

No amount of fake pretexts, such as freedom of thought, conscience and speech, can disguise the actual reality. Parenthetically, freedom is supposed to breed more freedom and afford more opportunities, in lieu of impeding the former and diminishing the latter. It is supposed to inspire, press forward and unite.

Freedom is likewise meant to pave the way for and lead to the sphere of the truth. The truth and freedom are twins, needing one another, apart from a mere continued existence, for self-actualization too. A rupture in this relationship undermines the integrity of ways in which equally the truth and freedom are approached and handled.

In the case of Islam and its relations with others, the components of outright lies, insults, abuses, falsifications, prejudices, animosities and injustices on the latter’s part disqualify an action to be either polemics or apologetics. Rather, they render it a form of Islamophobia regardless of the circumstances within which the same may be effected and by whom. Without a doubt, the spirit of Islamophobia is always one and abides; what changes are forms, linguistic expressions, intensities and some other minor temporal variants.

### **Medieval Europe gripped by fear of Islam and Muslims**

The unprecedented supremacy of Islam struck fear into the countries of Christendom, in particular those European countries as stood next or close to the seemingly unstoppable Muslim (firstly Arab then Ottoman Turkish) advances. Islam was perceived as the biggest problem of Europe. It was a scourge and also a curse. Its culture and civilization were seen as alien and vicious, despite the overwhelming empirical evidence to the contrary.

Some people even thought that soon there will be no Christianity and Christians left in the world. All of them will be conquered and then converted by force to Islam. Before long, there will be only Islam (Muhammadanism) and Muslims (Saracens or Muhammadans).

Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (d. 1320), a Christian apologist and missionary, complained to God in one of his letters addressed directly to Him following the fall of the city of Acre in 1291, which spelled the end of the Levant Crusades: “And it is to such a beast (Prophet Muhammad and Muslims) that you have given so much power against the Christians for almost 700 years! Truly I believe that the worst days are approaching, those which you who are truth

itself prophesied. But you promised that these worst days would be brief (Mark 13. 19–20). Why then has such a cruel beast raged against and dominated Christians for so long?” (Riccoldo’s Letter One, translated by Rita George-Tvrtkovic).

Riccoldo also said, still complaining to God: “And you, O Lord, irreproachable in wisdom and admirable in justice, you have given strength to a sinful man, a criminal. To Mahomet (Muhammad), the greatest criminal, you have given an earthly kingdom - nay, you have given him and his people (Muslims) rule over the whole world!”

“The image of Islam throughout most of Western Europe prior to and during the crusading period was severely distorted if not completely fictitious, the product of a vivid imagination of the religious other” (Adam S. Francisco). Muslims were deemed morally-depraved pagan idolaters and Satan-inspired barbarians. They followed their prophet, who was the worst. He was evil, immoral and the false prophet of Antichrist. Islam and its place in history were explained away in relation to the Apocalypse (the total destruction and end of the world) and the eschatological prophecies of the Book of Revelation as the last book in the Bible.

The doctrines, practices and institutions of Islam were targeted most by Europe’s essentially theological response. In charge of doing so was the religious leadership of the Roman Catholic Church, which was headed by popes and the hierarchy of their clergy. As a result of the doctrine of papal supremacy, popes enjoyed immediate, full and supreme power over the Church and the temporal state (Papal States). Their authority was absolute and unquestionable.

However, that honor was a double-edged sword. Popes and their ordained priests were often accused of abusing their powers and offices. Many were corrupt and fraudulent, practicing nepotism, cronyism and double standards. They were also greedy and immoral. Religious and political infightings were common. Hence, the concept of “bad popes” was created. In his book “The Bad Popes” (1969), E.R. Chamberlin documented the lives of eight of the worst and most scandalous popes.

That was the background of the proliferation of Islamophobia. Islam and Muslims were frequently used as a decoy and distraction from the real religious and political state of affairs. The whole thing was manipulated for the sake of advancing hidden agendas and protecting ulterior motives. Within the spectrum of raging Islamophobia, and within the internal affairs of the Church and its Papal States, certainly, the last thing that was desirable was the truth and its transparency. Islamophobia was coming home and was becoming part of Europe’s ethos.

### **The case of Martin Luther**

Martin Luther (d. 1546), a seminal personality in the Reformation, perfectly encapsulated the European (Christian) phobia about Islam and Muslims when he said that Muslims (the Turks) were such a mighty lord that no kingdom or land was strong enough to resist them alone, “unless God will do a miracle”. He then went on to say that the Muslim menace, in fact, was invited by people’s waywardness. Muslims were the rod of God’s wrath, “a divine visitation upon the sins of rulers and people”.

Thus, to fight against Muslims, in their capacity as an instrument of divine retribution, would be tantamount to resisting God and His will. “None but a poor Christian would fail to recognize in these the lash and rod of God”, Luther concluded.

“The Turks were for Europe what the Babylonians were for Israel - a ‘schoolmaster’ to discipline and to teach fear of God and prayer. The real culprits were not then the Turks, but the ‘papists and false Christians’” (Sarah Henrich & James L. Boyce).

To Luther, therefore, the matter was not solely about fighting Muslims, but as well about fighting Islam. The theatre of war had to be upgraded. It had to be twofold: military and doctrinal. Luther therefore proposed that “we must first smite the Turk’s Allah, that is, his god, the devil, and strike down his power and godhead; otherwise, I fear, the sword will accomplish little...I believe that the Turks’ Allah does more in war than they themselves.”

Luther further elaborated in his book titled “On the war against the Turks”: “The Turk’s Koran, or creed, teaches him to destroy not only the Christian faith, but also the whole temporal government. His Mohammed commands that ruling is to be done by the sword, and in his Koran the sword is the commonest and noblest work.”

Luther next lamented that Christendom was prepared for neither mode of defence. The lack of readiness and skills to fight a theological war against Muslims troubled him most. He felt that he, too, was a victim of that pervasive – albeit deliberately well-maintained - culture of ignorance pertaining to Islam. He said that although he eagerly desired for some time to learn about the religion and customs of the Muhammadans, nothing was available to him except some prejudiced works. “I have tried in vain to read the Qur’an itself”, he said.

### **The papists as the manipulators**

Luther nonetheless laid all the blame at the doors of the Church (popes) and its clergy. It was them, the papists, who had distorted the picture of Islam and had manipulated the situation. They concealed the case of Islam and Muslims from the masses, revealing only “base things” about them, so as to paper over the many deficiencies and wrongdoings of theirs and so, try to save their own skin.

Luther, for instance, blamed the authors - and benefactors - of certain tainted literary works on Islam, exclaiming that they wished thus “to frighten sincere Christians away from (learning about) Muhammadanism and hold them (falsely) secure in their faith in Christ.”

Moreover, the papists were charged with eagerly taking pains to excerpt from the Qur’an all the “improper and absurd things” solely with the aim of provoking hatred and moving people to ill-will. In so doing, they “either pass over without rebuttal or cover over the good things it (the Qur’an) contains. The result is that they have achieved too little credibility or authority, as it were cheapening their work either because of hatred of the Turks or because of their own lack of powers of refutation” (from Luther’s preface to “The tract on the religion and customs of the Turks”).

Luther additionally explained the doctrinal abuses of Church leaders and the reasons behind them: “For now I understand the reason why the Turkish religion is so concealed by the papists...It is because they sense what in fact is true, that, if it should come to the point of arguing about religion, the whole papistry with all its trappings would fall. Nor would they be able to defend their own faith and at the same time refute the faith of Muhammad, since then they would have to refute those things that they themselves most approve and for which they most strive, and defend those things that the followers of Muhammad most approve and for which they most strive.”

Finally, in 1542, about four years before his death, Luther laid his hands on a copy of the Qur'an in Latin translation. Luther then worked on securing support for its publication. The task was fulfilled one year later in 1543 by Theodore Bibliander (d. 1564), a Swiss reformer, Christian missionary, apologist and Islamophobe. For this first printed edition of the Qur'an in Latin, Luther wrote his famous preface.

In the preface he wrote that now with the published Qur'an the evil beliefs of Muhammad could be more easily refuted. "Let us now prepare ourselves against Muhammad", he called out, adding "I do not doubt that the more other pious and learned persons read these writings, the more the errors and the name of Muhammad will be refuted." And so, Luther's famous polemics methodology was born.

However, it ought to be mentioned that the said Qur'an, which was translated from Arabic by Robert of Ketton (d. 1187), was deemed by many critics imprecise, distorted, untrustworthy and misleading. Yet it remained the "standard version" for European readers and refuters of Islam up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century when Latin was still the lingua franca of international communication, scholarship (equally secular and religious) and science. Latin (Ecclesiastical or Church Latin) is still the official language of the Vatican city-state and is widely used in theological works, liturgical rites and dogmatic proclamations. The above translation was produced for a purpose, to be a tool "for aiding the conversion of Muslims to Christianity".

In any case, this only shows that since its fruition during the era of the Crusades, the outlook and trajectory of Islamophobia fundamentally neither changed nor veered off. It stayed the course, while infinitely enriching its stock with newly-acquired proficiencies and experiences. Modern Islamophobia is nothing but the latest phase in the centuries-old evolution. Unfortunately, we are yet to see and hear the last of it.