Islamophobia: a Western tradition

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Right-wing politicians and commentators in the Netherlands who are accused of anti-Muslim prejudice usually defend themselves by saying that they are 'only criticizing a religion'. This knee-jerk response ignores a long and bloody tradition of bigotry.

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In 2002, Dutch far-right politician Geert Wilders still distinguished between 'good Muslims', whose religion should be respected, and a minority of fanatical fundamentalists. These days, by contrast, he claims that Islam is an inherently totalitarian ideology and that the Qur'an is 'fascist'. Even so he argues that there is nothing racist about saying this, because Muslims are not a 'race'.

This argument ignores the way racism has historically evolved. Race is a biological term, which is of little use in taking about different groups of people. During the 19th century, Europe witnessed the rise of so-called 'scientific racism', which tried to classify human beings on the basis of their appearance as members of certain 'races'. The idea that it is possible to distinguish several races is older than the 19th century, however. Earlier forms of discrimination, against Blacks for instance, was not justified using scientific criteria but through religion and the Bible. As science increasingly replaced religion as the interpretative framework people used to understand the world, the old religious arguments for prejudice made way for new, 'scientific' arguments. What remained the same was the relative position of different 'races' in the hierarchy.

The idea of biological human races is not very popular anymore. The Nazis' crimes are one major reason why something that was once a commonly held notion in Western societies is now relegated to the margins. Just as prejudice did not disappear when religious arguments lost their appeal, however, something similar can be seen now. While arguments about race have been discredited, they are increasingly being replaced with arguments about 'culture' and clashing civilizations. Writing in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Gary Younge has described this process as a shift of focus from arguments based on 'religion' and 'bloodline' to one on founded on 'ethnicity' and 'culture'. A racist is not always someone who believes in a biological hierarchy of different human races; to use the term this literally empties it of meaning – as when the claim is made that Arabs can't be anti-Semitic because they too are 'Semites'.

The new scapegoats of racism in Europe are often Muslims. Instead of races, we hear about an irreconcilable conflict between European or Western culture – assumed to equal democracy and human rights – and Muslim culture, treated as one monolithic entity. The term 'Islamophobia' is increasingly used to describe this new hostility towards Muslims. The term evokes strong reactions. According to a persistent myth, Iranian mullahs coined the word to describe women who refuse to wear headscarves. In reality it is much older than the Iranian revolution. The French painter Etienne Dinet, best known for his romantic paintings of life in the Arab world, used it in his 1922 essay 'L'Orient vu de l'Occident'.

Just like 'racism', the term 'Islamophobia' can be defined so narrowly as to rob it of meaning. Neoconservative Middle East commentator Daniel Pipes, for instance, rejects it because, he alleges, it conflates hostility towards Islam and with criticism of the ways Islam is used politically. Just as racism should not reserved for the relatively few people who still believe in biological races, we should not drop the word Islamophobia because its literal meaning may not always be entirely accurate.

Islamophobia or old-fashioned racism?

In current usage, the term Islamophobia was introduced in 1997 by the Runnymede Trust, a British anti-racist think-tank, when it published a booklet called *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*. This publication dealt explicitly with the distinction between an anti-racist use of the term and its instrumentalization by fundamentalist Muslims who seek to silence all criticism of their religion and the use they make of it.

By the Runnymede Trust's definition, one may speak of Islamophobia when the Islamic religion is presented as a single, homogeneous whole. This means a representation of the history of the Islamic world and of all Muslims as unchangeable, with one indivisible worldview shared by everyone. A second criterion is the representation of Islamic societies as radically alien to other cultures, as if there were an unbridgeable chasm between 'the world of Islam' and the rest of the world. A third criterion is the depiction of Islam as inferior to Western society and as barbarous, violent and sexist. A fourth criterion is giving Muslims sole responsibility for violence and aggression.

Taken together, these criteria nicely describe the discourse of a politician like Geert Wilders. But the idea that 'Western civilization' and 'Islam' are two completely separate phenomena is much more widespread. It can be observed for example in the routine juxtaposition of 'Judeo-Christian civilization' on the one hand and 'Islam' on the other.

To be sure, much of what can heard nowadays in Western countries is nothing more than old-fashioned, vulgar xenophobia. When reporters from the Dutch magazine *Vrij Nederland* interviewed Geert Wilders' supporters outside rallies of his party (the press is not allowed inside), they were repeatedly told that all the problems in the Netherlands are caused by 'the blacks'. Wilders himself, of course, cannot be so crude in public.

Just as human races were an invention of 19th-century racists, the religion Islamophobes claim to criticize is their own creation. Facts and quotes are selected and labelled 'Islamic'. Being born somewhere can be enough to be labelled 'Muslim', whether the persons in question consider themselves believers in Islam or not. The self-appointed critics of religion not only decide who is part of this religion, they also decide what this religion is. A man may be a liberal Alawite, pray together with women, and be a heretic in the eyes of a fundamentalist like Osama bin Laden; for the Islamophobes they are both part of the same Islam.

'I decide who's a Muslim'

This mechanism should come as no surprise in the light of European traditions of discrimination and racism. The 19th-century mayor of Vienna Karl Lüger was a devout Catholic but had little time for talk of a 'Judeo-Christian civilization'; he was one of the founders of modern anti-Semitism. When confronted with examples of his inconsistencies, he famously stated, 'I decide who's a Jew!' Racism is an unequal power relation; one of the ways this manifests itself is that the people it targets are

denied the possibility of defining their own identity. Anti-Semites label people Jewish, regardless of whether they considers themselves Jewish or not. After all, it is part of the stock in trade of anti-Semitism that Jews are unreliable and hide their true identities. That Muslims are not to be trusted because their religion supposedly condones lying to unbelievers is a common refrain of Islamophobes.

These examples are not taken random. Without equating the two in terms of their effects or content, it is possible to note parallels between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Both are ideologies that use conspiracy theories as a framework to explain world events. Anti-Semites have the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion,* a Russian forgery that purports to be a report of meeting in which Jewish leaders discuss their plans for world domination; according to the *Protocols*, wars and all kinds of social conflicts are creation of the Jews and meant to weaken the west. Islamophobes talk about 'Eurabia', a secret Muslim plan to take over Europe. In 2005 Gisèle Littman (under the pseudonym Bat Ye'or) wrote a book called *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis*. The book is an account of a purported decades-long conspiracy by Muslims to manipulate European leaders in pursuit their own anti-Israeli, anti-American ends. Wilders too has picked up the theme of 'Eurabia', warning of 'Islamic colonization' of Europe, a conspiracy involving millions of Muslim immigrants and their children. Conspiracy theories of this kind serve a common end: providing an interpretative framework and emphasizing the evil of the other.

Writing in the German left-wing magazine *Arranca!,* Georg Klauda has used Adorno and Horkheimer's term 'pathic projection' to show how parallel the reasoning of Islamophobes and anti-Semites is. One phenomenon – Klauda uses rape but in the Dutch context it could also be street crime – is highlighted and a single group of people is persistently blamed for it. (In the Netherlands, petty crime and vandalism are often blamed on 'Moroccan street terrorists'.) Using carefully chosen quotations from the Qu'ran and ascribing a single, shared 'Islamic psyche' to the other, the whole phenomenon is then presented as part of a vast conspiracy to weaken the West and as a symptom of a monolithic, antagonistic culture.

The kind of everyday Islamophobia we are now seeing in Europe is a relatively new phenomenon, but when we look at it a bit more in depth, it proves to be founded on older European traditions.

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P.S.