Islamophobia and the Limits of Multiculturalism

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In a recent essay, the Canadian philosopher and political scientist Charles Taylor argued that the current debate about multiculturalism in the Western countries has become a debate about the limits of how far multiculturalism will go and what will determine these limits today are Islam and Muslims. Taylor identifies the current crisis of multiculturalism as one that concerns how people perceive themselves vis-à-vis others. Taylor believes that multiculturalism has become suspect and inextricably linked up with Islam because “almost every reason for tolerance’s apparent fall into disrepute concerns Islam”. ¹

Taylor’s remark that the debate about Islam and Muslims in Western societies is turning into a crisis of multiculturalism is alarming to say the least. Why? Because Islam has become part of the public debate to determine how far multiculturalism will go.² This is confirmed by the rising tide of what we now call Islamophobia and a host of other acts of intolerance, discrimination and racism against Muslim individuals and communities. Louise Arbour, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, concurs that bigotry and prejudice against Muslims are increasing in Europe. In this regard, Arbour, who based her remarks on a recent study by Doudou Diene of Senegal, made a call to all governments to take action against racism and discrimination against Muslim communities.

The current attitudes towards Muslim communities in Europe and the United States are part of a complex set of issues. There is no easy way of discussing pluralism, multiculturalism and the future of Western societies without discussing Islam and Muslims. At this point we should ask ourselves the following question:

Is Islamophobia a phenomenon in itself or is it the result of a deeper problem?

In a world in which everything is related to everything else, Islamophobia cannot be seen in isolation from what is happening around us. Islamophobia did not suddenly come into being after the events of 9/11. In many ways, the trauma caused by 9/11 helped surface the problem. The problem goes beyond both 9/11 and the United States.

Whether we like the term or not, Islamophobia has become a fact of our lives especially for those living in Europe and the United States. The word
Islamophobia began to be used in the 1980s. The 1997 Runneymede Report called Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All was launched in November 1997 by the then British Home Secretary Jack Straw. The Report defined Islamophobia as “the dread, hatred and hostility towards Islam and Muslims perpetrated by a series of closed views that imply and attribute negative and derogatory stereotypes and beliefs to Muslims”. The Report also added that Islamophobia is based on “an outlook or world-view involving an unfounded dread and dislike of Muslims, which results in practices of exclusion and discrimination”. Defined in these broad terms, Islamophobia covers a large area from politics and immigration to schools and workplace.

While the term continued to be used in various ways, the first major report after 9/11 was published by the European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC). Entitled Summary Report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001, the report documented the acts of discrimination and racism against Muslims in 15 EU member countries. The Report’s findings show that “Islamic communities and other vulnerable groups have become targets of increased hostility since 11 September. A greater sense of fear among the general population has exacerbated already existing prejudices and fuelled acts of aggression and harassment in many European Member States. At the same time, attempts to allay fears sometimes led to a new interest in Islamic culture and to practical inter-faith initiatives”.

The Runneymede Report was updated in 2004 and documented some encouraging developments. The acts of hatred and discrimination against Islam and Muslims, however, continued to be on the rise. The Danish cartoon crisis and its aftermath are still fresh in our memories. The speech by Pope Benedict at Regensburg University in 2006 continues to be seen as a sinister attack on Islam by the most important Christian figure in the world. The US President Bush uses the word “Islamo-fascism” freely and frequently while it remains a mystery how the words Islam and fascism became a single ideology in Mr. Bush’s political vocabulary. Numerous such events are happening on different scales, all pointing to a dangerous trend.

**Manifestations of Islamophobia**

Islamophobic acts manifest themselves in numerous ways. Some are quite explicit and obvious, some subtle and implicit. They take various forms and display degrees of aggression. Sometimes they come in the form of verbal and physical attacks on Muslim individuals. In some cases, mosques, Islamic centers and Muslim properties are attacked and desecrated. In the workplace, schools and housing, it takes the form of suspicion, staring, hazing, mockery, rejection, stigmatizing and
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outright discrimination. It other public places, it may take the form of indirect discrimination, hate speech or denial of access to goods and services.

At the societal level, the political loyalty of Muslims is questioned to the effect that the Muslim citizens of Western countries are accused of dual or multiple loyalties. They are presented as less committed to democracy, constitution and human rights than others. Their religious identity is seen as an obstacle to respecting and abiding by their country’s constitution and laws. The general accusation is that Muslims regard themselves as Muslim before they are British, French or Spanish. And this jeopardizes their full citizenship in the countries in which they live. This view thus introduces a deep dichotomy between religious identity and national loyalty. While it is true that Muslims feel attached to the larger Islamic world (dar al-islam), the religious association of a person is not at the same level as preferring a particular country or political order over others. As Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, points out, a Muslim's attachment to the ummah, the global Muslim community, is similar to a Christian's loyalty to the Church. The religious loyalty in question clearly predates the political loyalty required by the nation states in which we live. And it is a major challenge for all communities and nations, Muslim or non-Muslim, majority or minority, to maintain their loyalty to the society in which they live while upholding the universal principles of justice and equality which go beyond national boundaries. Yet to raise the issue of multiple loyalties only in relation to Muslims betrays a racist point of view. Critical Islamic thinking in Europe and the US is seen suspect because it goes beyond the conventional lines of criticism. Unless the conditions of being European citizens are set as being white, Christian and secular or a combination of them, the critical engagement of Muslims with their governments cannot be seen as misplacing one's loyalty.

The media are where the one-sided and irresponsible coverage of things Muslim and Islamic have become a breeding ground for Islamophobic sentiments and acts. Muslim symbols and figures are ridiculed and derided in the print media. Negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims are presented as part of news reporting, TV debates, political speeches and religious sermons. Many of these comments would be unacceptable if they were directed at Jews, Blacks or other communities, but they are used freely for and about Muslims. As an American media expert pointed out more than twenty years ago, "you can hit an Arab free; they are free enemies, free villains – where you couldn't do it to a Jew or you can't do it to a Black anymore." In January 2004, a European journalist was able to write the following: "Arabs are threatening our civilian populations with chemical and biological weapons. They are promising to let suicide bombers loose in Western and American cities. They are trying to terrorise us, disrupt our lives." The irony is that the journalist who wrote these words believed that Iran was an Arab country.
One of the most disturbing manifestations of discrimination is the suppression of Muslim voices that call for moderation while maintaining their critical distance. From the print and visual media to public debates, such voices are either ignored, marginalized or rejected as mere apologies. Before and since 9/11, hundreds of Muslim scholars, intellectuals, politicians and public figures have condemned acts of terrorism and called for peaceful solutions to violent conflicts. But they have hardly been able to compete with Osama Ben Laden's media success. The result is that only the most extreme and marginal voices get enough air time to dominate the discourse about Islam and Muslims.

Considering its current forms, Islamophobia has become a form of racism because it targets a group of people and incites hatred against them on the basis of their religious beliefs, cultural traditions and ethnic backgrounds. With the rise of hatred and discrimination against Muslims, racism has come to combine not only race but also ethnicity, language, culture and religion all at the same time.8 In this sense, Islamophobia is not racially blind. The old racism based on biological inferiority resurfaces as ethnic, cultural and religious racism. In the case of Islam, such words as militant, uncivilized, oppressive, barbaric, authoritarian, promiscuous and violent are used as part of the religious beliefs and cultural practices of Muslims. The “racially inferior” is gradually replaced by the “religiously inferior”.9 In this sense, it is impossible to separate Islamophobia from the ethnic and racial hatred of Arabs, Asians and Blacks.10

The definition of racism given by the Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) confirms that Muslims are discriminated against on account of all the elements of racism combined. According to ECRI's General Policy Recommendation No. 7 of December 2002, racism means “the belief that a ground such as ‘race’, colour, language, religion, nationality or national or ethnic origin justifies contempt for a person or group of persons, or the notion of superiority of a person or a group of persons”. The same document defines ‘direct racial discrimination’ as ‘any differential treatment based on a ground such as race, colour, language, religion, nationality or national or ethnic origin, which has no objective and reasonable justification’.11

The reason why Islamophobia is bad for everyone is not only because it is a form of racism but also because it is created and sustained by a view of the self and the other that sees clash and confrontation as the primary if not the only way of relating different cultures and communities. Whether through religious or secular arguments, the Islamophobic sentiment is derived from a set of values that need to be put into question.

Today, we're going through the pains of establishing a just world order. The transition from the bi-polar world of the Cold War to the uni-polar world of American dominance was not easy. In fact, it was never completed because the
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American dominance was challenged by a process of globalization which even the most powerful nations can no longer control. The first Gulf War did not bring any order. Nor did the invasion of Iraq in 2003 make things any better. All attempts to establish a new world order within a uni-polar framework have failed. The American policymakers have failed to understand that they cannot remain a hegemonic power in a world with emerging centers and new regional and semi-global powers. The only way any nation can keep its power in today's world is through power-sharing. It is not enough to be powerful. One needs to be justified as well.

At the cultural and intellectual level, Euro-centrism continues to be a problem that hurts not only non-Western societies but also Westerners themselves for a uni-polar world only leads to the economic, political, intellectual or artistic marginalization of the vast majority of world populations. It strips people of a sense of meaning and purpose. Much of the current sentiment of dispossession and frustration we see in non-Western societies is a result of this.

A uni-polar and Euro-centric model of cultural and civilizational order can no longer provide a sense of security and participation for all citizens of the world. A multi-polar and multi-centered world has to arise to undo the misdeeds of both cultural isolationism and Euro-centrism. A world order that is no more than an excuse for the "White Man's Burden" cannot foster a culture of peace and civilized diversity. The future of the relationship between Islamic and Western societies will largely depend on the extent to which we go beyond the "us versus them" language. It will also shape the ways in which the large number of Muslims living in Europe and the United States will be allowed to be part of Western societies as equal citizens.

Multiple Identities, Multiple Worlds

A multi-polar and pluralist world is not a world without standards or values. It is a world in which all cultures and societies are seen as equals but are urged to vie for the common good. This is not a wishy-washy multiculturalism that runs the risk of eroding common grounds between cultures and creating parallel communities. Rather, it is an act of enriching oneself by recognizing others. Today, Muslims living in the West and Westerners interacting with Muslims have a chance to enrich themselves by recovering the middle path of preserving their identity while recognizing those of others. It is through such acts that we can foster an ethics and culture of coexistence that will not tolerate racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia and hate crimes against Muslims as well as the demonization of Jews, Christians and Westerners.

Part of the problem lies in creating a conflict between an absolute self and an absolute other. Much of the language of clash today is based on such an oppo-
sition in which Islam is set against such values as justice, equality, human rights and human dignity. Many non-Westerners and Muslims among them make the same mistake in reverse in the name of indigenous oppositions, belated nationalisms or communal uniqueness. Speaking of the self and the other as a binary opposition, however, does not necessarily lead to an essential conflict. The distance between the self and the other can be construed as a healthy tension in expanding one’s self-understanding and reaching out to the world around us.

There is a further danger in dissolving all boundaries between the self and the other: it creates a sense of insecurity and homelessness, which we see everywhere today from the streets of Cairo to Spain. Globalization has deepened this sense of insecurity. It is felt deeply especially in Muslim countries where the eroding effects of modernization have created a profound sense of mistrust and resentment towards the modern world in general and the West in particular. In short, a radical liberal view of the self leads only to a non-self, which, in turn, further exacerbates our sense of insecurity. This is the biggest challenge of the kind of pluralism with which we live today.12

Muslims living in the West face similar tensions. In the name of integration, they are asked to embrace assimilation and thus lose their identities. They are expected to become French, German or Danish, as if there are such neat identities that can be applied to all Europeans. Combined with the deep-rooted culture of mistrust and suspicion, this demand results in the further alienation of European Muslims and forces them to become a sub-culture within Europe.13

While the general attitude towards Islam and Muslims in the United States is not coloured by long historical memories and deep cultural claims as it is the case in most of Europe, the current trend is worrying. The hate campaigns launched in the name of fighting groups like al-Qaeda are laying the ground for policies of fear and intimidation. Such words as Islamic terrorism, extremism and now Islamofascism are finding their ways into the political vocabulary of presidents, top government officials, reporters, commentators, secular ideologues and religious pundits.

Islamophobia is a result of a set of deeper problems in our modern world. Whether Eastern or Western, all societies feel the pressure of coping with the new realities around us. The changes brought about by globalization create a sense of insecurity rather than presenting opportunities for collaboration across religious and national boundaries. Ordinary people feel dislocated and marginalized. We all feel we lost the center and we can no longer control our lives and the events around us. This creates a deep sense of alienation. As a result of deep-seated fears and uncertainties, people lose faith in culture, society and politics. They no longer believe in such universal values as justice and equality because they feel these concepts have lost their meaning in a world where powerful nations can afford to spend billions of dollars on weapons but cannot secure a humane order.
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Yet no culture and civilization can afford to close itself up to others. There is more fluidity of cultures and a steady mixture of ideas today than ever before. A Muslim teacher in Cairo can no longer ignore the headlines in Western newspapers just as a French businessman cannot ignore what is happening in the Middle East. Unlike the previous centuries, it is impossible to stop the flow of ideas and perceptions moving from one end of the world to the other.

The steady flow of ideas and the constant interaction of cultures and societies at different levels present both opportunities and challenges. Yet in our world of global communications, perception defines reality. How people perceive something is more important than the facts on the ground. In fact, whoever controls perception controls reality. More than any other religion, Islam has suffered the most from the impact of false perceptions and stereotyping. It is therefore extremely significant to understand how perceptions and images concerning Islam and Muslims are created, formulated, shaped, transmitted, publicized and sustained.

When Perception Defines Reality

A good example of how perceptions shape reality is the coverage of conflicts in Muslim countries. Even though there are many violent conflicts around the world, the ones that get the most media attention are the ones in the Muslim world. This is partly because most of them are tied to Western interests. While millions have been brutally and tragically killed in Africa, Latin America and Asia, the general impression is that the bloodiest conflicts always happen in Muslim lands. One can make the same argument about the status of women in Islamic countries. While Muslim countries’ record on women’s rights is troubling to say the least, it is not the only awful record which Western powers should be concerned about. Even a cursory study of the status of women in different parts of the world reveals that the mistreatment and suffering of women also take place in places other than Afghanistan and Pakistan. While the Muslim countries get the most coverage on this score again, one finds no such campaign concerning the status of women in other countries.

The second layer of the problem is that it leads to reductionist and essentialist claims about Muslim culture and religion. While other conflicts are covered and analyzed as political conflicts, the ones in Muslim lands are usually analyzed in connection with the Muslim tradition, beliefs and practices. Suddenly, the analysts become interested in going deeper to understand the root causes of violent conflicts. Even in the case of the Protestant-Catholic conflict in Northern Ireland where the conflict is as much political as it is religious, religion is not brought up as an element of political analysis. It is mentioned as a fact among others, and no further meaning is attached to it. In the case of conflicts in the Muslim world,
however, the whole argument takes a new turn. All kinds of religious, cultural, historical and even eschatological explanations are put forward to explain how and why Muslim culture is violent, irrational, backward, suicidal, and so on.

And the reverse never happens. None of the so-called Middle East experts or Islam analysts mentions the positive qualities of Muslim culture to explain the things that go right instead of wrong. A good example is the coverage of Iranian-born Anousheh Ansari's travel into space as the first Muslim woman. I haven't seen or read any analysis of her culture, religion or ethnicity that may have propelled her to take this extraordinary trip and make the headlines worldwide. Nor did we see anything different when the Bangladeshi banker Muhammad Yunis was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his ambitious and extremely successful project of giving small loans to help the poor. Like Ansari and countless other Muslim figures who have had their stories of success, Mr. Yunis is from the Muslim world and must have some connection with the cultural and religious history of the society in which he grew up. Is it assumed that when it comes to Muslims everything bad happens for a religious reason and everything good happens for a secular reason?

In short, how we perceive a conflict or a situation becomes more important than what the hard realities on the ground suggest. Therefore an effective study of the relationship between Islamic and Western societies will have to pay close attention to the construction and transmission of images and perceptions. In this regard, it is important to emphasize that people in the West are bombarded on a daily basis with the worst depictions of the Muslim world and thus cannot differentiate between what is normative and mainstream Islam and what is a distorted version of it. The western public can make a distinction between abortion clinics in the United States, Timothy McVeigh and David Koresh on the one hand, and what many Christians would consider to be mainstream Christianity. There is little need to explain the difference between violence committed in the name of Judaism and Christianity and the essential teachings of these religions. People do not link terrorism to Western religions because they know enough about them. But this is not the case with Islam.

A troubling result of this attitude is the treatment of Islamophobia as a non-issue by Western media. Insulting, intimidating and threatening Muslim individuals and communities and in some cases committing violence against them is presented as a reaction to what is described as Islamic extremism and terrorism. This leads many people to conclude that the violent reactions against Muslims have a reason and thus can be excused. Islamophobia is used to construct, justify and sustain racist and exclusivist political discourses to the extent that the motto "Islamophobic and proud of it" becomes an ideological mark. Islam is presented as an enemy and as an 'other' to construct purist and exclusivist national identities as well as to justify religious exclusivism.
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The insidious results of Islamophobia are numerous, and I shall refer only to two of them here. First of all, Islamophobic acts prevent Muslims from fully participating in the political, social, cultural and economic life of the societies in which they live. Islamophobia creates a constant sense of victimization and marginalization among second and third generation Muslims. It makes them feel foreign, distant and unwelcome. It creates parallel societies whereby the integration of different ethnic and religious communities into the society becomes impossible.

Secondly, the constant presence and pressure of Islamophobia bars Muslims themselves from open self-criticism. Confronted with frontal attacks of racist and Islamophobic attitudes, Muslims tend to shy away from criticizing fellow Muslims openly and end up defending some of the most extreme ideas and actions. They feel that they will be betraying their Muslim brothers and sisters in the midst of a war launched against them because of their ethnic and religious identities. Confronted with guilt by association and communal stigmatization, many Muslim individuals take refuge in the kind of group solidarity that makes self-criticism look like a self-defeating strategy.

What is to be done?

Islamophobia is only the surfacing of these deeper problems. To confront the issue, I would suggest a three-level strategy. The first is the discourse analysis of what we now call Islamophobia. We have to be clear about the terms we use when we discuss the phenomenon of discrimination against Muslims. What constitutes Islamophobia, what is honest criticism without racism, how we identify and report Islamophobia are all questions that need to be answered for a proper understanding and analysis of the numerous facets of discrimination against Islam and Muslims. Both Muslims and non-Muslims need to be educated about these issues so that we have a broad consensus on the terms we use. Particularly, the Muslim communities must take responsibility in educating their members about the larger questions of intolerance and racism so that they can fight against all forms of discrimination including Islamophobia.

The second level is mapping out the manifestations of Islamophobia. A monitoring and reporting program is essential to understand the extent and nature of discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities in Western countries. Annual country reports need to be prepared to measure the impact of Islamophobia. One cannot rely only on newspaper reports or anecdotal evidence to identify and record hate crimes and acts of discrimination. Proper and effective measures of monitoring, identifying and reporting such acts must be in place to raise awareness on the one hand, and train individuals and communities to seek their rights on the other.
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The third level is designing a comprehensive strategy to curb and eliminate Islamophobia. Developing good practices is key for an effective and positive campaign against acts of discrimination against Muslims in Europe and the United States. A number of good practices are already in place to fight xenophobia, racism and anti-Semitism, and one should consult them to develop effective measures. One should also seek to form alliances with those institutions that deal with the issues of racism and discrimination in general.

Endnotes

2 A good example of how an Islam-related issue in Europe opens up much larger debates is the French government’s decision in 2004 to ban headscarves in public schools. At the time, the media campaign in support of the ban went way beyond girls covering their heads in public schools. The debate covered almost everything from the true spirit of France and Europe to violence against women, integration, assimilation and pluralism. For a good analysis of this debate, see John Bowen, Why the French Don’t Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Service (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006).
4 The question of multiple loyalties has been addressed by a number of Muslim scholars and intellectuals. For an engaging discussion, see Tariq Ramadan, Western Muslims and the Future of Islam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For a discussion of British Muslims, see British Muslims: Loyalty and Belonging, ed. Mohammad Siddique Seddon, Dilwar Hussain and Nadeem Malik (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 2003).
5 A good example of how racial and religious considerations get mixed up is Merryl Wyn Davies, a Muslim convert in Wales, UK. Every time she is interviewed by a journalist, she is asked the following question: “How does a nice, sensible Welsh girl like you end up joining a religion of militant fundamentalists who suppress women?” Quoted in Islamophobia: Issues, Challenges and Action, A Report by the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia (Stoke on Tren, UK: Trentham Books, 2004), p. 65.
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7 Quoted in *Islamophobia: Issues, Challenges and Action*, p. 8.

8 As Tahir Abbas points out, "the British discourse on racialized minorities has been transformed from "color" in the 1950s and 1960s to "race" in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s; to "ethnicity" in the 1990s and to "religion" in the present climate." Tahir Abbas, "After 9/11: British South Asian Muslims, Islamophobia, Multiculturalism, and the State", *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Vol. 21 (Summer 2004) No. 3, pp. 26-38. In a retrospective and troubling way, Islamophobic acts against have come to embrace all of the stages of modern racism.


12 Rowan Williams argues against the "all is the same" kind of religious pluralism in the case of Islam and Christianity because it not only ignores the obvious theological differences between them but also underestimates "their strong sense of the historical particularity of the origins of their faith and of the universal missionary imperative which their practice embodies". For his penetrating analysis, see his *Islam, Christianity and Pluralism*, The Zaki Badawi Memorial Lecture Series.


14 The British National Party (BNP) is a good example of how the fear of Islam is used to launch a racist political campaign. BNP started its "Islam out of Britain" campaign in 2001 and widely distributed a leaflet entitled "The truth about I.S.L.A.M". In the leaflet, "I.S.L.A.M" was used as an acronym for "Intolerance, Slaughter, Looting, Arson, and Molestation of Women". For an analysis of BNP's campaign and the state of Islamophobia in the 9/11 Britain, see Christopher Allen, "Justifying Islamophobia: A Post-9/11 Consideration of the European
Of all the anti-Islamic Christian polemics in recent years, one of the most fascinating episodes was Orlando’s “Holy Land Experience” theme park. Founded by a Protestant ministry which seeks to convert Jews into Christianity, the Holy Land Experience Park introduced a number of extremely anti-Islamic themes after 9/11 and espoused an open confrontation and war between American (Protestant) Christians, Jews and Muslims. For an analysis, see Nancy Stockdale, “Citizens of Heaven” versus “The Islamic Peril: the Anti-Islamic Rhetoric of Orlando’s Holy Land Experience since 9/11/01”, American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences, Vol. 21 (Summer 2004) No. 3, pp. 89-109.