

Islamophobia's Controversial Nature as a Term

Written by Alex Griffiths

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ALEX GRIFFITHS, AUG 19 2011

Islamophobia was first defined by the Runnymede trust in 1997, but the term did not enter popular usage until after the “appearance” of Islam as a decisive force in global affairs on September 11th 2001. The fault lines were perhaps already there, President Bush in his state address that evening referenced Christianity no less than five times in the final minute of a four and a half minute state address to a supposedly secular and diverse nation[1]. One of the many victims of this atrocity was Salman Hamdani a 23 year old Muslim and part time ambulance driver. For six months until his body was found clutching his paramedic bag beneath the rubble his family believe he was suspected of involvement[2], the family of another Muslim victim were barred from flying to her memorial service because the name of their lost one had been added to a no fly list because again, she was suspected of involvement[3]. That Muslims have become increasingly subjects of fear and discrimination is not disputable, it is happening not only in the US but also here in the UK as will later be more widely demonstrated. Where a colourful debate has however erupted, is in how this phenomenon can be best described be it through the term Islamophobia or through other pre-existing or differing forms.

Anti-Muslim sentiment is very real and occurring, it is a phenomenon which cannot be described through pre-existing terms; the “threat of being labelled Islamophobic” stifling freedom of expression and impacting on legitimate critique of Islam is largely unfounded. Islamophobia is, however, a weighted term and should be modified.

Methodology

In order to evaluate the usefulness of the term Islamophobia it must first be decided which factors are most relevant to either highlighting or discounting the need for the term or modifying it in some manner. This paper posits that in order for Islamophobia to stand as useful term it must describe a real and occurring phenomenon and that it must do so accurately. To do this we must first consider if what Islamophobia contends to describe: “an outlook or world-view involving an unfounded dread and dislike of Muslims, which results in practices of exclusion and discrimination”[4] is indeed occurring. Secondly, we must examine some of the most prominent problems raised with the terms use, though the logic behind the selection of counter-arguments may appear rather random, it was impossible to cover all arguments and I have selected as broad an array as the word count allows whilst also selecting those arguments which present the biggest challenge to the term Islamophobia. In this I hope to subject the term to as rigorous and aggressive an evaluation as possible. Thirdly with those arguments both for and against examined and in mind, I hope this paper will find the time to delve into the term Islamophobia itself and suggest if and where modifications to either the definition or the term can be made to accommodate for the problems arising.

A brief comment on the sources used within this essay is also necessary, the scarcity of academic sources makes the study of the issue currently very difficult, one need only attempt to purchase texts on Islamophobia to see that whilst the shortage will shortly be rectified, currently, there is a dearth of broad academic texts. Many of the texts which do exist and most strongly argue for Islamophobia as a term originate from or are closely associated with the Runnymede Trust. Readers must be aware that publications from such bodies as the *Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia* and the *Uniting Britain Trust* have subsequently, possibly an inherent need to substantiate the use of the term. This has all heightened the need to use online sources; I have endeavoured to ensure that the events and facts raised within these are verifiable through simple cross checking. The uncertain

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nature of statistics regarding potentially Islamophobic attacks is also harmful, indeed, as late as 2005 following the killing of Kamal Raza Butt by youths who accused him of being “Taliban” the police referred to the incident as racially aggravated[5] and so it is likely that a vast swathe of what could demonstrably be attacks on Muslims because of their faith rather than race have likely been lost under the title of racially aggravated.

Does Anti-Muslim sentiment exist and is it not better described by pre-existing terms like racism?

The most logical argument for the use of the term Islamophobia is naturally that discrimination against Muslims on the basis of their faith is indeed occurring, several commentators have, however, suggested that either explicitly Anti-Muslim sentiment does not exist, is less than that contended or that such prejudices can already be described under pre-existing terms such as racism.

A popular response to the phenomena Islamophobia developed to describe when it first began to gain currency in the 1990s was to deny that a problem existed. Indeed in 1997 Polly Toynbee, a columnist with the Guardian wrote a piece entitled *In defence of Islamophobia; religion and the state* within which she decries Islam as unworthy of respect for its position on gender, argues that Shari ‘a law is uncivilised and unjust on the single basis of Saudi Arabia and equates religion in general with “New Agers, astrologists, Moonies or any other sect, or cult with a sufficient number of followers ... A religion is just a cult with more followers”[6]. She also notes “there is no hard evidence that poor, black, non-English speakers of other faiths are treated any better than Muslims. Racism is the problem, not religion.”[7] Toynbee was writing a full seven years after the Bush (snr) administration had signed the Hate Crimes Statistics Act into law because of a heightening awareness of violence motivated by religion[8] and a year after analysis of the National Survey of Ethnic minorities identified that of the South Asian immigrant population in Britain 88% of Hindu’s were in full time employment alongside 71% of Sikhs and 74% of other faiths (excluding Muslims) and non-identifying. This can be compared with only 57% of Muslims in full time employment[9]. Though it is unreasonable to posit that faith is the sole causal factor behind these statistics, it is certainly curious that at a time when members of the mass media believed that race was the real issue rather than religion, the only community from the South Asia region not to have a full time employment rate above 60% was the Muslim population. The BBC in 2005 found that a Muslim had changed his name by deed poll to a name of Anglo Saxon origin and received more job offers than he had with his original name[10], in 2006 Muslim school girls were verbally abused after praying[11] in what the government at the time termed “Prejudice related bullying”. Some persisted in denying the existence and extent of Anti-Muslim sentiment into the mid 2000s, Kenan Malik commented: “Exaggerating anti-Muslim prejudice is useful for mainstream politicians”[12]. However, Maliks commentary on Islamophobia fails to stand up to an objective examination of his evidence. He delves into the statistics and away from real case studies, characterising most attacks on Muslims as of a minor nature. This despite an attack on a Muslim who had ignored the advice of friends not to wear traditional dress to prayers had left the victim nearly blind, partially paralysed and partially brain dead at 22 years of age, the police whilst investigating the crime suggested the victim had links with extremists[13]. In the same year three Lebanese students were verbally abused and beaten with one left hospitalised, a student in Knightsbridge beaten and doused in alcohol and a young woman was struck in the face with a toolbox by a white man who also attempted to remove her hijab[14]. The article identifying these attacks terms them “Anti-Arab racism” but two of the three events show how an attack on the victim’s faith formed at least a small part of the attacks where the students were doused in alcohol and the attempt to tear off the young woman’s hijab. The failure to engage with real life examples aside, it is unclear if Maliks use of statistics is fair. Disputing that Anti-Muslim sentiment is behind how 15% of those stopped and searched under anti terror laws are Asian whilst they only constitute 5% of the overall population. Malik explains this disproportion as “the result of majority of anti-terror sweeps taking place in areas – near Heathrow Airport, for instance – where there happen to be higher numbers of Asians. Almost two thirds of terrorism stop and search operations took place in London, where Asians form 11 per cent of the population.” Malik does not explain why by his own words, the majority of anti terror sweeps “happen to be” in Asian population centres.

What this essay terms roughly as the “domestic politics of externalisation” whereby ills and problems confronting society are blamed on immigrants, incomers and people of discernable difference to the majority, is in transition. Where prior to and during the 1980s political parties such as [elements of] the conservatives, the BNP and the National Front fostered perceptions that ethnic minorities received preferential treatment over white natives[15] based on the race of these ethnic minorities[16], a process began in the late 1980s and rapidly grew where this

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perception was fostered on the basis of more differences, including religion. This culminated in 2008 with the BNP recognising the increasing marginalisation of race as a mobilising factor and subsequently deploying singularly Anti-Muslim conjecture[17]. The current popularity of the EDL, a single issue far right group: "EDL's raison d'être is to take a stand against the rise of radical Islam on Britain's streets. When you ask the rank and file though they will tell you they are just anti-Muslim"[18] would certainly imply along with the evidence put forward above that increasingly, discrimination based on primarily on religion is gaining currency.

It is clear therefore that discrimination based on religion is becoming commonplace and that many of the discriminatory issues confronting Muslims today are not down to race. Subsequently, a term is required to describe this. The question of if Anti-Muslim sentiment can be described under the label Islamophobia or if it can be described by pre-existing terms is problematic. As the OIC remarks: "ongoing trend of Islamophobia that formed a contemporary manifestation of racial discrimination, prejudice and xenophobia"[19]; and so it is the belief of many that Anti-Muslim sentiment is a development of pre-existing prejudices and largely confounds the definitions used to describe these. Indeed racism as defined as: "The belief that race accounts for differences in human character or ability and that a particular race is superior to others or discrimination or prejudice based on race." [20] has no room for faith and indeed, as notable above, many of those who have argued for Anti-Muslim prejudices to be described as racism highlight racial factors involved in Anti-Muslim incidents or conflates racism to be a blanket term to refer to discrimination based on difference. There is potential for the description of Anti-Muslim sentiment as Anti-Semitism, Arabs are indeed a member of the Semitic family. However, given the term is highly associated with Anti-Jewish sentiments it is likely such a description will be resisted; the term also suggests that Muslims are universally of Arabic ethnicity which is erroneous. This leaves xenophobia: "A person unduly fearful or contemptuous of that which is foreign, especially of strangers or foreign peoples"[21], depicting Anti-Muslim sentiment as xenophobic would thus not be completely inaccurate although not ideal. Many for instance would reject that British Muslims are "foreign peoples", the definition is also unhelpfully broad, an individual with irrational fear of his unknown neighbour could feasibly be described as xenophobic. Atop this, a question must be posed, why when exclusive terms have been determined necessary to describe Racial and Jewish discrimination is Anti-Muslim sentiment considered by some to be unworthy of its own term? It is a question with an unclear answer.

Fear of being labelled Islamophobic hinders legitimate criticism of Islam, freedom of expression and scholarship

Following the widespread controversy which occurred after the publication of Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses and more recently the Jyllands-Posten cartoons the "threat" which certain forms of Islam pose to "Western liberal values" has become a subject of increasing discussion. Its proponents argue that the term Islamophobia is often utilised to inhibit legitimate criticism and scholarship of Islam.

The argument then is on the basis of what constitutes legitimate criticism. There is no one accepted definition of what legitimate criticism construes and so a working definition is called for. Holding legitimacy to be "undisputed credibility"[22], this paper argues that for one to gain credibility then ones authority to critique must be accepted, indeed a synonym of credibility is trustworthiness. Thus legitimate criticism must be on the basis of an honest evaluation of *all* the world before us. Where criticisms are raised by writers who are demonstrably willing to be dishonest in their use/non-use or portrayal of evidence and if unsubstantiated conclusions or generalisations are reached, it is illegitimate and unjustified. This writing then will regard legitimate criticism as critique derived from a neutral analysis.

In 2005 an editor at Jyllands-Posten noticed "hesitancy"[23] amongst Europeans in depicting Islam. He commissioned a number of artists to draw the Prophet Muhammad. One of the artists drew a blackboard and upon it wrote in Arabic "The editorial team of Jyllands-Posten is a bunch of reactionary provocateurs"[24] and three years before the same editor had chosen not to publish cartoons satirizing the resurrection of Jesus because it "would provoke an outcry".[25] It is ultimately for the reader to decide if his intentions were innocent enough but the act itself was not neutral. It is clear that at the time the act was considered inflammatory by some and that the Editor had previously self censored in regards to another religion makes his neutrality deeply questionable. Was it an act of legitimate criticism to defile the Prophet Muhammad and to continue an ongoing media process by which Islam was

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depicted as medieval in life style and mentality? [26]Gottschalk presents an interesting argument as to the editor's motivations, positing that the editor could have considered Islam a greater threat to free expression than Christianity. [27]The intricacies and uncertainties of the act itself aside it did give rise to the notions expanded upon in a paper signed by many notable critics of Islam which was circulated. Within, were the words: "We refuse to renounce our critical spirit out of fear of being accused of "Islamophobia", a wretched concept that confuses criticism of Islam as a religion and stigmatisation of those who believe in it." [28]

This is particularly interesting, because there is evidence that some scholarship and commentary is being unduly influenced. Karen Armstrong in her biography of the Prophet Muhammad begins with a comment on the layers of misunderstanding that exist between people of the West and people of the Islamic world. [29]She tells us of the tale of the Martyrs of Cordoba beginning with the monk Perfectus. Armstrong presumptively focused on the matter because the tale is oft raised as an example of Muslim intolerance, departing from this approach Armstrong instead depicts the Martyrs of Cordoba as an oddity, a "curious incident uncharacteristic of life in Muslim Spain" [30]. Whilst this is certainly true, after all Mozarabs as Christian subjects who had assimilated extensively with their Muslim rulers became known, had even sided with the Muslims against the emperor Charlemagne's attempt to take Zaragoza in 777; the tone of her work is unquestionably biased. Armstrong is unabashedly apologetic, the Muslim authorities were "loath to put Perfectus and Ishaq to death but they could not allow this breach of the law" [31], she depicts the Martyrs as fanatics and the Muslims as humane and reasonable who were even willing to forgive the crimes and spare the life of Eulogio were he to make a token submission to Islam in which it was openly permitted to be insincere [32]. Armstrong shies away noticeably from commenting on the events which led to the beginning of this bloody legend, Perfectus had been asked by Muslims who was the greater Prophet, Jesus or Muhammad. To disparage the Prophet Muhammad at the time was a capital offence and the question was a clear slight against Perfectus and his faith, a reminder of the dominance of Islam in Spain which had come to the cost of Christian rulers. It was a cruel provocation against a weak minority but Armstrong only describes it as a "trick question" [33].

This "Islamophillia" or "Islamophobia-phobia" as it has been coined has become a popular subject for those who believe Islamophobia inhibits legitimate criticism [34]. This "attempt to offset some of the grossly critical biographies of the prophet that have appeared in the West ... [by] expressly try[ing] to make Muhammad praiseworthy to Western eyes" [35] has typified some of the so inclined scholarship seeking to readdress perceptions of a "clash of civilisations" or to fight perceived ignorance. Subsequently, controversial events are covered with a friendly eye, critical and potentially damaging conclusions, avoided. Pointedly however, this would appear to be largely a response to Anti-Muslim sentiment and an attempt to rectify the problem rather than through fear of being called Islamophobic. Criticism of this scholarship and viewpoint would also appear to be very much limited to those with an agenda, Julie Burchill in the Guardian in 2001 raised the issue of Islamophillia during which she wrote "we have a reason to be suspicious of Islam and treat it differently from the other major religions ... while the history of the other religions is one of moving forward out of oppressive darkness and into tolerance, Islam is doing the other way around" [36]. Burchill would appear to ignore the acts of some Hindus who in 2008 attacked a Christian orphanage [37] or how the Vatican is attacking safe sex and assisting the spread of HIV in Africa [38]. Islamophillia as a term then, it would seem, requires much more extensive and most importantly, much more neutral scholarship to be of use. This, however, does not negate from the fact that some scholarship is, if not being influenced by a fear of being called Islamophobic is at least being influenced by a desire to confront Anti-Muslim prejudices.

It is necessary to look at work which can be considered to be intrinsically Anti-Muslim, where evidence has been ignored and neutrality disabused to allow the propagation of the author's views. There are numerous examples of this, Spencer in his text *The truth about Muhammad* writes briefly on the views expressed by Jerry Vines in 2002 that "Islam was founded by Muhammad, a demon-possessed paedophile". Here, he does not dispute the characterisation of the Prophet Muhammad as a paedophile and goes on to attribute the marriage to Aisha as the sole cause of the continuing practice of pre-teenage marriages within some parts of the Middle East and Muslim world [39]. Spencer does not explain to us why given that the practice which by his own admission existed prior to the marriage of Aisha [40], should be solely attributable to the Prophet Muhammad. In 2004 Benny Morris from commented in a Haaretz interview ""There is a deep problem in Islam. It's a world whose values are different. A world in which human life doesn't have the same value as it does in the West." [41] A view so distant from the truth, it is hardly worth pointing out that Islam is a religion in which the sanctity of life is held high: "nor kill yourselves; for verily Allah hath

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been to you most merciful!"[42], "take not life, which Allah hath made sacred, except by way of justice and law!"[43]

Finally, a remark must be made about the continuing existence of neutral scholarship which avoids biasing itself towards either viewpoint. Hugh Kennedy in remarking about the ease of movement within the Abbasid Caliphate for Muslims with the means also comments "Whilst Coptic Christians bound to their native Egyptian soil were obliged to wear lead seals around their necks and carry written passports if they wished to move from one town to another, Bukayr was a Muslim, a member, if only a humble one, of the new Muslim ruling class"[44], Kennedy makes no value judgement of this inequality aside from to state that it occurred. This willing neutrality is shown in another text *The Prophet and the age of the Caliphates* in which he remarks on the peace between the Christian Nubians in South Egypt and the Muslims[45]. This would certainly appear to be an ideal example by which to suggest an ability to peacefully co-exist now based on that of then, even more so for that they did has "proved something of a puzzle to Muslim jurists since Nubia was clearly part of the dar al-Harb and yet the Muslims had signed a permanent and lasting peace treaty with its people."[46] Kennedy however, again refrains. Asma Afsaruddin in her text *The first Muslims*, in her work on Saints and Awliya notes the key doctrinal differences between the two but also their (very) fleeting similarity[47]. Evidence then, that neutral scholarship on Islam concerned for objectivity does exist and has not been adversely affected. Similarly, meaningful academics who have come to controversial conclusions such as those proposed within Patricia Crone's *Meccan Trade* and the work of Gerald Hawting and John Wansborough have not been stifled out of fear of being labelled Islamophobic. Crone, in her work to question the traditional narrative of Islamic history makes offensive conclusions but she is not widely thought to be or accused of being an Islamophobe for many accept her authority since her methodology is relatively honest and her work generally evidenced.

Though the desire to attack perceptions of Islamophobia has influenced some scholarship and commentary, it is apparent from the above that "fear of being labelled Islamophobic" has had a negligible effect on the free expression of even wholly illegitimate views about Muslims and Islam such as those of Morris and Spencer, on the practice of neutral scholarship as evidenced by Kennedy or on legitimate historical criticism by academics such as Crone.

A discussion of the term Islamophobia

A phobia is an inherently irrational feeling on the part of the sufferer, indeed it is defined as "a persistent, irrational fear of a specific object, activity, or situation that leads to a compelling desire to avoid it."[48] As such, terming Anti-Muslim sentiments as Islamophobia or Xenophobia represents an unhelpful and automatic value judgement of the accuser upon the individual expanding on such views. It is clear from the many outlooks expressed by commentators that they regard a fear, disdain or dislike of Islam as a perfectly rational fear. John Keegan in the Telegraph wrote "This war ... belongs to a much wider conflict between the settled, creative, productive Westerners and predatory, destructive Orientals."[49] Melanie Phillips in the Sunday Times wrote "An army within, are waiting for an opportunity to destroy the society that sustains them."[50] These writers regard their views as perfectly rational responses to a perceived threat and regardless of views otherwise, engaging with a debate as to if these views are rational or irrational detracts from what is surely the purpose of Islamophobia –to describe Anti-Muslim sentiment.

Halliday is said to have suggested that a more accurate term would be "Anti-Muslimism" since hostility is directed against the acts of Muslims rather than at Islam itself. As examples above would demonstrate however, this is not the case. Often the acts of violent or extreme Muslims are used to substantiate discrimination against all Muslims and against Islam itself. Halliday accepts within his text *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation* that the acts of violent Muslims are often conflated into a view of all Muslims[51], why he believes that such a conflation cannot occur between the acts of violent or extreme Muslims and Islam itself is unclear.

Conclusion

It is unfortunately not possible to cover all of the arguments for and against the term Islamophobia within this short essay but hopefully, upon those issues which this writing has visited, some light has been shed. Muslims are facing discrimination on the sole basis of their faith. Whilst racial, cultural, political, social and economic factors undoubtedly play a role in many of the examples raised within this work, it is undeniable that religion is equal a factor. British politics is in transition, increasingly the far right in particular is utilising an explicitly anti-Muslim discourse to mobilise

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its support base whereas previously it had focused on ethnic minorities and race politics in general. With the advent of the EDL and an increasingly intolerant vein of thought within British society it important that all discrimination and all intolerance can be accurately described.

Pre-existing terms cannot adequately describe Anti-Muslim sentiment and so Islamophobia or an alternative term is called for. The supposition that pre-existing terms are adequate is based either on an unworkable expansion of their definitions or a denial of Anti-Muslim sentiment. Importantly however, there is no term to describe multi-faceted intolerance which has presented itself over the course of this writing. Following the bombing of the Murrah Federal building in 1995 Muslims were subjected to a misdirected backlash which transcended the boundaries between Anti-Muslim sentiment and Racism. Muslims faced abuse such as “Sand Nigger” and “Camel Jockey”, “Why don't you Iranians go home” [52]. In the same sense that racism does not adequately describe discrimination directed against Muslims for their faith, Islamophobia does not adequately describe this multi-faceted intolerance. Islamophobia cannot be permitted to become a blanket term for all forms of discrimination faced by Muslims. Interestingly, Anti-Semitism as a term encompasses religious and ethnic intolerance directed against Jews. The somewhat unique fusion of ethnicity and religion is not something which can be said to exist within the Muslim community and so we remain with a very real problem –How can we adequately describe abuse directed against Muslims for being Muslims but can also be racist in content?

The viewpoint that Islamophobia as a term is being used to hinder the free expression of legitimate criticisms of Islam has been largely inflated, inflated by those who have faced criticism following the airing of their views. Whilst it is true that some scholarship is being influenced by the phenomenon known as Islamophobia, it is apparent at least from the example studied here that this is less a matter of “fear of being labelled Islamophobic” and more a matter of wishing to address the problem of Anti-Muslim sentiment itself. This fear is failing to hinder the expression of illegitimate views regarding Islam; the supposition that legitimate views are likely to be hindered is thus weakened. Neutral scholarship which also raises controversial or offensive viewpoints of Islam has not been stifled by the creation of Islamophobia which largely discredits the “threat” the term Islamophobia is supposed to pose. At no point throughout the reading of this work has an example been found of writers adjusting views they regard as legitimate out of fear of being accused of Islamophobia, indeed many relish in challenging the term and what it seeks to describe.

Islamophobia is an imperfect term, the value judgement it automatically intones, the suggestion of a homogeneity which simply isn't there and the insinuation that a problem taken with Muslims automatically equates to a problem with Islam is unaccommodating. Though undoubtedly possessing its own problems, the label which this essay initially chose out of deference to neutrality, “Anti-Muslim sentiment” appears popular with some commentators who take issue with the term but accept what it is seeking to address, it avoids many of the pitfalls which have befallen Islamophobia; it is notably similar to Anti-Semitism which has gained widespread acceptance. A viewpoint which this writing has not addressed but certainly warrants study is the related term “Islam anxiety” as expounded by Juan Cole in his text *Engaging the Muslim world*.

A note on the nature of the debate, its personalisation and politicisation is particularly detrimental to the much needed development of a term to describe intolerance directed towards Muslims; the meaning of Islamophobia has been clouded by the ongoing conflict between British liberals, British secularists, integrationists, pro and anti-multiculturalists. Whilst academics are shortly to release several hopefully more neutral viewpoints, at the time of writing Islamophobia has been turned into a football between several notable commentators on either side of the divide; Martin Sullivan, founder of Islamophobia Watch and Johann Hari have conducted a lengthy personal campaign against each other[53] which has only hindered the emergence of a commonly accepted term, lost beneath the waves of personal slights, conjecture and bias.

Islamophobia as a term then has its problems and therefore requires modification, it is however well intentioned and describes a very real phenomenon. The criticisms raised explicitly against it, at least the ones addressed here do not give adequate cause to suggest its use should in the meantime be discontinued.

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