

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Islamophobia: A New Phenomenon or Part of a Continuum

Adam Folorunsho Olowo

ABSTRACT

Following the September 11, 2001, attack in the United States, the negative perception of Islam among Westerners worsened, the wildfire of hateful speech against Muslims—particularly the Arabs and their civilization—became fully fueled, and the ceiling of somewhat acceptable hate speech against them rapidly escalated. It has become a truism to say that Muslims live in an exceptionally unstable time, and as the world continues to become even more unpredictable, it is difficult to imagine a time in history in which Muslim-West discourse is of greater need of attention than now. While Islamophobia is a concept that was coined in the 20th century representing the fear and hatred of Muslims as individuals, a group, or a concept, Muslims or Islam have been held culpable for a number of humanity's shortfalls, and the hatred towards them is as old as the religion itself. This paper, therefore, advances the conversation about Islamophobia, and perhaps most notably, elucidates the discussion of whether or not Islamophobia is a 20th-century creation or part

Received 18 June 2020; accepted: 10 March 2021; published September 2021
© 2021 The Author(s), HBKU College of Islamic Studies.

Cite this article as: Olowo, A. (2021). *Islamophobia: A New Phenomenon or Part of a Continuum?* *Astrolabe: A CIS Student Research Journal*, (3)
<https://www.hbku.edu.qa/sites/default/files/IslamophobiaNeworContinuum.pdf>

of a continuum of anti-Muslim sentiments throughout history. This paper also engages critically with previous studies concerning Islamophobia in the West and provides historical evidence from a religious perspective that justifies the assertion that Islam and Muslims have been victims of hate speech right from the onset. An overlying objective of this paper is also to highlight the continuities and discontinuities of Islamophobia from the medieval period to the modern period, in a bid to identify how the term has developed over time and the different ways by which the ideology can be combated—most especially through dialogue. Ultimately, this paper employs a historical approach and it relies heavily on secondary sources.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Islam, hate speech, West, continuities and discontinuities

I. INTRODUCTION

While there has been a growing concern over the continued expansion and proliferation of discriminatory practices against Muslims over the past few decades, the adverse implications of such practices, particularly on life, property, and human relations, are something that cannot be overemphasized. It has become a truism to say, or think, that we live in an exceptionally unstable time, and as the world continues to get even more unpredictable, it is difficult to imagine a time in history in which Muslim-West discourse is of greater need of attention than now. Whether or not what has become known as Islamophobia today is a creation of 19th-century Western scholars has been heavily contested in academia and attracted divergent views. However, one idea that stands uncontested by scholars and researchers in the field is that the Iranian revolution of 1979 was the first step in a bizarre sequence of events that set in motion what became known as Islamophobia in recent history. Therefore, to say that Islamophobia suddenly came into being in the wake of the 9/11 event would be wide of the mark, for although the trauma caused by the event helped bring the problem to the fore, the history of anti-Muslim sentiments is far older than the 21st century. Ever since, the West¹ has displayed unwavering determination to rid Europe, and perhaps the world, of Muslims' influence which it has considered to be not only dangerous but also incompatible with the modern Western ideal.

From Ayatollah Khomeini's theocracy in Iran to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, and from 9/11 in the United States to 7/7 in the United Kingdom, coupled with other terrorist attacks such as hijackings, suicide bombings, and hostage situations, the vision of Islamic fundamentalism has forced Westerners to see Islam and Muslims in general as an existential threat to Western hegemony and control. The implication of the climate of fear caused by these events is a monolithic understanding of the Muslim world, seeing them not as a diverse community of believers but solely through the lenses of extremism and terrorism. While this may perhaps be justified in the context of ISIS or Boko Haram, it fails to do justice to the complex realities of the Muslim world, which consists of a great

¹ The West as used here describes a people, a place, an ideology, and even a religion (Christianity).

number of pacifists and liberal followers. These stereotypical perceptions of the Islamic world have seriously intensified in the past few decades, manifesting itself in numerous ways, taking on different forms, and seeing Muslims across Europe live in constant fear of persecution.

In this regard, this study is less about the criticism of Islamophobia or anti-Muslim sentiments and more about understanding the phenomenon itself and its historic origin. This paper, therefore, advances the conversation about Islamophobia, perhaps most notably, elucidates the discussion of whether or not Islamophobia is a 20th-century creation or part of a continuum of anti-Muslim sentiments throughout history. This paper also engages critically with previous studies concerning Islamophobia in the West and provides historical evidence from a religious perspective that justifies the assertion that Islam and the Muslims have been victims of hate speech right from the onset. An overlying objective of this paper is also to highlight the continuities and discontinuities of Islamophobia from the medieval period to the modern period, in a bid to identify how the term has developed over time and the different ways by which the ideology can be combated most especially through dialogue. Ultimately, this paper employs a historical approach and it relies heavily on secondary sources.

II. CONTEMPORARY ISLAMOPHOBIA

Before 9/11, the stage was already set for discriminatory attitudes against individuals or groups that orient around the Islamic tradition. By the 18th century in Europe, an emergent meaning and understanding about Islam was already in circulation, fueled by the information and documented experiences that were derived from the travelogues of European aristocracy and privileged elite who toured the land of the Orient.² These travelogues, according to Edward Said, became increasingly popular in European societies, forming a sizable number of reports that helped form the “Orientalist tradition.”³ It, however, did not come as a surprise that this body of literature maintained many of the stories and myths circulated by the Crusaders in the 13th century, where Islam or better still “the Orient,” was not only presented as the direct opposite of the West or “the Occident” but also demonized and criticized for many of its beliefs and practices.

As European countries continued to consolidate their hegemony over large stretches of land outside Europe, dominating major portions of the African continent and the Middle East, such expeditions further endorsed the fact that Islam constitutes the most pervasive and perhaps the most powerful ideological force in the world, which could one day overthrow Europe from its position of power.⁴ The existence of Islam as a universal religion and transnational force covering almost a fifth of the entire world population continues to pose an existential threat to the West, forcing them to commence an academic

2 Christopher Allen, *Islamophobia* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2010), 29.

3 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage, 1979).

4 John L Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4, <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0602/99028443-d.html>.

enquiry into the Orient with the intention of gaining an understanding of Islam and probably transform it.⁵ This group of Western academicians, which Edward Said described as “Orientalists,” oversaw the dissemination of information that presents Islam and the Muslim world as an inferior civilization—a backward group of individuals that are irrational, violent, and barbaric with no regard for human life nor peaceful co-existence.⁶ This pessimistic representation of the Muslim world informs today’s dichotomous relationship of Islam and the West, and by the end of World War II, conditions were already ripe for discriminatory behaviors towards Muslims in and outside of Europe and America.

While Orientalism and its discourses remain incredibly important to Muslim-West relations, the categories of understanding Islam and the manner of approaching Muslims had significantly changed by the second half of the 20th century. What used to be an academically driven area became largely politicized, requiring military action from both ends of the spectrum. The Iranian revolution of 1979 under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini was a significant point in the chain of events that created a backlash in the United States against Islam, seeing a large-scale opposition to what Lester Kurtz termed as the “Westoxification of Islam.”⁷ Stereotypical attitudes towards Muslims were further reinforced in the United Kingdom and perhaps all over Europe after the devastating event of the Rushdie Affair in the late 1980s. In what was interpreted to be an act of blasphemy against the last prophet of Islam, Muhammad, Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* attracted heavy criticism from the Muslim world to a point where a *fatwa* (nonbinding legal opinion) was issued for the author’s death.⁸ These events and few others further reified the existing fear and mistrust of the Muslim community, the culmination of which led to the neologism “Islamophobia.”

The origin of the term as a neologism and a concept has been a subject of debate over the past few decades. While many traced its origin back to the United Kingdom, others would argue for America or even France. Notwithstanding, the term Islamophobia became widely publicized in the Runnymede Report of 1997, providing its first definition and awarding it its sociopolitical discursive resonance.⁹ In this report titled *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, *Islamophobia* is defined as “the dread, hatred, and hostility towards Islam and Muslims perpetuated by a series of closed views that imply and attribute negative and derogatory stereotypes and beliefs to Muslims.”¹⁰ Since then, Islamophobia has been regularly adopted by the media, NGOs, political analysts, and the people to label

5 Allen, *Islamophobia*, 30.

6 Allen, 31.

7 See Lester R Kurtz, *Gods in the Global Village the World's Religions in Sociological Perspective* (California: SAGE Publications, 2016).

8 Allen, *Islamophobia*, 41.

9 Christopher Allen, “Contemporary Islamophobia Before 9/11: A Brief History,” *Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Hatred: Causes and Remedies*, 7th ed., vol. 4 (London: Westgate House, 2010), 15.

10 John L Esposito and Ibrahim Kalin, *Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century* (Oxford; New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8.

a reality that contextualizes Islam and Muslims as objects of aversion, irrationality, and barbarism in a contemporary liberal world.¹¹ The somewhat acceptable negative stereotypical attitudes towards Muslims intensified in the wake of the 9/11 attack in the United States, and was bolstered by the 7/7 event in the United Kingdom, the Danish cartoon controversy of 2005, the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, and the more recent murder of Samuel Paty in France. The culmination of these events fed the wildfire of Islamophobic attitudes in the West, and retrospectively, “Westernophobia” in the Muslim world.

Over the years, Muslims in Europe have been placed under immense scrutiny, having to deal with explicit and implicit acts of Islamophobic nature that mark them as either terrorists or extremists. Islamophobic discourse became common and legitimate in the media, in politics, and even in education. A perfect example of this is the British National Party (BNP) political campaign organized shortly after 9/11 in Britain themed *Islam Out of Britain*, geared at exposing the threat that Islam and Muslims constitute to the British society in a pamphlet titled *I.S.L.A.M*, meaning; intolerance, slaughter, looting, arson, and molestation of women.¹² In 2002, a report published by the European Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) highlighted the pattern of discriminatory practices against Muslims in the EU after 9/11.¹³ This report justified the obvious fact that anti-Muslim sentiments have become more extreme, with Muslims becoming indiscriminate victims of both verbal and physical attacks across Europe and the West in general.¹⁴

The retaliatory measures adopted by both the European governments and the people saw numerous mosques desecrated, Islamic schools destroyed, a dramatic increase in intelligence surveillance, banning of Islamic organizations, discriminatory immigration policies, and above all loss of life. Women as the most visually identifiable adherents have been reported to be the greatest victims of Islamophobic attacks, without forgetting Muslim men with whom even Sikh men, due to their visible turbans and beards, had to share in their predicament. With the media, far-right political leaders, and even Western intellectuals taking the front seat in this unpleasant reality, the question that arises here is whether or not this has always been the case for Muslims throughout history.

III. A NEW PHENOMENON OR PART OF A CONTINUUM

Despite Islamophobia being a concept coined in the 20th century representing hatred of Muslims as individuals, a group, or tradition, it is believed that the actual history of anti-Muslim sentiments goes far deeper than that. The sudden rise in modern-contemporary prejudicial treatment of the Muslim community makes it appear distinctive and disconnected from the influence of history, a stance that many scholars have already taken. While it is, on the one hand, true that over the years Islamophobic acts have taken on

11 Erik Bleich, “Defining and Researching Islamophobia,” *Review of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 2 (2012): 181.

12 Allen, Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Hatred, 88.

13 See *The Summary Report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001*

14 Allen, *Islamophobia*, 103.

different forms that are mostly shaped by the time and place in which they occur, it is on the other hand important to note that throughout history, there are also salient elements that always repeat themselves. Understanding that the history of Islam and the West goes as far back as the medieval period in the Byzantine Empire, it is, therefore, argued that a retrospective review of the history of their relations would help contextualize the current “hot spots” of Muslim-West relations. Are the negative attitudes and actions against Islam and Muslims a new phenomenon, or are they part of a continuum of Islamophobia throughout history?

The medieval Muslim-West encounters were majorly carried out under the banner of religion but within a political climate. This section is less about giving a comprehensive historical analysis of Muslim-West relations and more about singling out key historical moments that may have had significant influence, and therefore, elucidates the provenance of contemporary misconceptions of Islam and Muslims in general. Therefore, a major aspect of this section will cover Muslim-Christian relations in the Middle Ages, the period in which both traditions not only stood as the world superpowers but also geographically separated. A lot of what will be discussed here may seem externally theological, but internally they shed light on the expansionist project of the Eastern Arab Muslims and Western Christendom.

The Muslims already posed a big threat to Western Christendom long before they even realized it. The first and foremost reaction of Western Christendom to the emerging of Islam was to interpret it through the lenses of their scriptural traditions, seeing the Islamic invasion as a fulfillment of prophecy.¹⁵ This was the stance taken by the Monophysite Armenian Bishop Sebeos, who in 661 gave a description of the Prophet and Islam. He suggested that God intended to fulfill in the Arabs the promise made to Abraham and his son, in which the Arabs were destined to establish control over the territory that God had granted Abraham.¹⁶ As it became clear that the Muslim Arabs demanded much more than territorial control, conforming to a supersessionist or proselytic theology that seeks not only to correct but also to replace Christianity as an Abrahamic religion, different interpretations—albeit stereotypical—about Islam and Muslims began to develop. This moment marked what may be described as the beginning of “medieval Islamophobia.”

In a letter drafted by Maximus the Confessor (d. 662) to Peter the Illustrious in the mid-7th century, bemoaning the tribulations inflicted by the barbarian invaders (the Arabs), while warning Peter to remain constant in his prayers, he said: “What could be more dire than the present evils now encompassing the civilized world? To see a barbarous nation of the desert overrunning another land as if it were their own, to see our civilization laid waste by wild and untamed beasts who have merely the shape of human form.”¹⁷ He

15 See The Book of Genesis

16 John Victor Tolan, *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam: A Book of Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 13; John Moorhead, “The Earliest Christian Theological Response to Islam,” *Religion* 11, no. 3 (July 1, 1981): 226.

17 John Victor Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 43.

went on to describe Arabs as followers of the anti-Christ who take great pleasure in human blood, a description that found resonance with John of Damascus's view of Islam.¹⁸ The 9th century in Western Christendom was a significant period in the history of Muslim-Christian relations, one that saw an increased interaction between the Muslim and Christian communities and a significant rise in the circulation of confrontational and stereotypical tracts. One such tract is the *Apology of al-Kindi* that, although with questionable authenticity, provides context to the unpleasant ambience of the Muslim-Christian encounter. In this document, al-Kindi launches several harsh attacks on different aspects of Islam, questioning the status of Muhammad as a prophet, his treatment of women, and above all his war-like personality.¹⁹ These attacks may seem theological at first, but considering the inestimable position that religion occupies in the entire setting of Western Christendom (Roman Empire), there is no doubt that these tracts had significant implications on how Muslims and their religion were perceived.

The climate of fear created by the spread of Islam forced Christians to project a negative evaluation of Islam in a bid to halt the growing tide of conversion that threatened the growth of Roman Christendom. This fear and disdain manifested itself in numerous ways, a constant feature of which was the vilification of the personage of the last prophet of Islam, Muhammad. Examples of this are widespread in numerous 9th- and 10th-century chronicles and polemical literature. In the chronicles of Theophanes the Confessor, he condemned Muhammad's revelation as emanating from epileptic fits, and criticized him for spreading violence and barbarism across the land.²⁰ The stereotypical project of Theophanes was carried even further by Nicetas of Byzantium, who in his texts titled *Refutation of the Book Fabricated by the Arab Muhammad* qualified Muhammad as an impudent impostor and subjected him to a kind of psychoanalysis in a way that questions his mental state.²¹ It is, however, important to note that the majority of what was documented about Muhammad and Islam during this period was learned in absentia, reflecting lack of knowledge and, according to John Esposito "luxuriated in ignorance of triumphant imagination."²² One would assume that the long years of the Crusaders in the Middle East would enlighten the discourse positively; unfortunately, all of what they did strengthened the misconceptions and reinforced the negative stereotypes that were already in circulation about Muslims and Islam years before the Crusades.

In the post-Reformation period, where secular principles were beginning to gain traction in the West, the study of Islam and the Muslim world began to transcend the

18 Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Chicago, Ill: New Amsterdam Books, 2000), 38.

19 Goddard, 53.

20 Robert G. Hoyland, "The Earliest Christian Writings on Muhammad: An Appraisal," in *The Biography of Muhammad: The Issue of the Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 276.

21 Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, 57.

22 Esposito, *The Islamic Threat*, 45.

theological dimension to include the civilizational and cultural aspects.²³ With great reverence for rationality, Enlightenment scholars such as Voltaire were forced to re-interpret and re-contextualize Islam from a more secularized perspective in order to champion their Enlightenment principles. Posing Enlightenment rationalism against the presumed irrational Orient, important writers of the Enlightenment were forced to maintain many of the earlier stereotypical accounts about Islam and Muhammad.²⁴ In *Fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophète*, Voltaire portrayed Muhammad as the opposite of all that is good: a theocratic tyrant, a model of fanaticism the like of which the world has never seen.²⁵ The preoccupation with the Islamic civilization in the Enlightenment period informs the rise in academic enquiry into Islam and the Muslim world. Enlightenment literature provides later Orientalists with good standing in the process of designating Islam as Europe's inevitable other. In one of his lectures, the French Orientalist Ernest Renan defended the power of science (reason) by dismissing Islam as irrational and Muslims as static and backward, incapable of learning or opening themselves to innovative ideas.²⁶ These negative stereotypes of a backward, inferior, violent, irrational, and anti-Western religious tradition, on the one hand, provide justification for Western imperialism in the Muslim land, and on the other hand, serve as references for emerging modern-contemporary scholars.

With the scientific breakthrough of the 20th and 21st centuries, it is difficult to imagine a better time in history where stereotypical attitudes and anti-Muslim sentiments can have more profoundly damaging effects than now. As the medieval perceptions of Islam and Muslims continue to recur in contemporary evaluations of Islam, the previously nonexistent social media has made the Islamophobic industry a lucrative one. Presently, social media has become the fastest and the most profitable propaganda machine in history, disseminating stereotypical images and misunderstandings about Muslims and Islam, the majority of which stands in continuity with medieval Christian polemical literature. The horrors of 9/11, 7/7, the Danish cartoon controversy, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and many other Islamist terrorist attacks provide justification for contemporary anti-Muslim sentiments, resulting in a backlash of Islamophobia across the European landscape in which all Muslims, regardless of their conceptual or geographical origins, are viewed through the lenses of terrorism and extremism.²⁷ The same applies to political spaces in France, Germany, as well as the United Kingdom, the United States, Spain, the Netherlands, and other European countries having to revisit their security and social policies including immigration, religious freedom, and intelligence in fear of the Muslim populace. In the midst of it all are intellectuals in various Western communities—the Spanish Antonio Elorza, the Italian Oriana Fallaci, the Dutch Herman Philipse, the French Caroline Fourest, the American Robert Spencer, and many more—all of whom

23 Allen, *Islamophobia*, 29.

24 Allen, 29.

25 Allen, 29.

26 Esposito, *The Islamic Threat*, 46.

27 See Elizabeth Poole, *Reporting Islam: Media Representations and British Muslims*. (I.B. Tauris, 2009).

present a shared position of the warlike feature of Islam, and therefore, its incompatibility with modern-Western ideals.²⁸

It has become abundantly clear, from the above, that the fear and hatred of Islam is as old as the religion itself. Despite being coined in the 20th century, history has shown that Islamophobia is not an entirely new phenomenon. Understanding that different cultures, time, and places have shaped Islamophobia over the years, nevertheless, some elements remain fundamental to Islamophobia throughout history and they continue to repeat themselves. If so, what separates contemporary Islamophobia from historical narratives? What have contemporary Islamophobes added or changed? What are the continuities and discontinuities of Islamophobia in the medieval and contemporary period?

IV. CONTINUITIES AND DISCONTINUITIES

In view of the fact that anti-Muslim rhetoric and discrimination have always existed in the history of Muslim-West relations, the plausibility of a consistent pattern in the content and themes of classical and modern literature would not be an impossible idea. In this section, this study seeks to explore how classical texts continue to inform modern scholarship of Islamophobia. More precisely, it seeks to establish a pattern of continuity of anti-Muslim discourse in classical and modern literature and to examine how the discursive content of these themes continue to evolve and change over time. This, on the one hand, is done in an attempt to establish a thematic connection between classical and modern interpretations of the Islamic tradition, and on the other hand, to deduce newly emerging questions and concerns which were previously non-existent in the classical period. To do this, three particular themes have been selected for analysis: violence, otherness, and the status of Muhammad. The focus on these themes will make it possible to broaden our knowledge of Islamophobia as a phenomenon, to widen the scope or lenses by which the subject is conceived, and to create a pattern of understanding that transcends the usual reductionist approach, which attempts to treat contemporary Islamophobia in isolation from its actual historic origin.

a. Thematic Analysis: Violence, Otherness, and the Status of Muhammad

The subject of violence features predominantly in the history of Islam and the West in the same way that it constitutes one of the perennial themes that have a high profile in both classical and modern-contemporary discourses on Islam. In the wake of the initial encounter of Islam and Christianity in the Byzantium, the first news of Islam that circulated Western Christendom has to do with its militaristic composition and its barbaric nature. The contention that Islam spread by the sword (force), according to Kate Zebiri, was an important subject for early generations of European scholars because it contradicts sharply with the Christian ideal model of Christ (the Prince of Peace), and it justifies the

²⁸ Jocelyne Cesari, “Islamophobia in the West: A Comparison between Europe and the United States,” in *Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 2011), 35.

motive to dismiss the new religion on the ground of heresy.²⁹ The “violent narrative” of Islam is a foundational theme, something that was heavily discussed in the chronicles of the Byzantine historian Theophanes the Confessor (d. 817) and Nicetas of Byzantium in the 9th century. Similar narratives and expressions were carried even further in the Crusaders’ accounts of Islam (10th–13th centuries), the Reformation,³⁰ and post-Reformation period³¹ (16th–18th centuries), and in the modern-contemporary period.³² Despite an established continuity of the narrative from the historical survey of violence as a theme, it is important to bear in mind that the expression has undergone significant changes over the years as well. Violence as expressed in earlier texts has more to do with the spread of Islam and the adopted method of subjugating weak territories. In sharp contrast to the classical view of violence as being backed by a powerful empire, the contemporary conception of violence is usually associated with the structure of the Islamic law and policy that appears to be incompatible with modern-Western values. Although the latter is not completely absent from Western consciousness, the alleged violence of Islam mostly corresponds to the rise of political Islam, radical jihadist activism, and what appears to be “Islamic extremism.”

Issues surrounding the status of Muhammad are a recurrent theme in the early period of Muslim-Christian/Western encounters, and it remains a matter of serious concern in the modern-contemporary discourse on Islam and the West. As the Islamic model of an ideal being and “the Seal of the Prophets,” there was an immediate need for early Christians to vilify the personage of Muhammad for two particular reasons: to preserve the legacy of Jesus Christ as the son of God and Christianity as the dominant religion. The earliest Christian reference to the Arab Prophet Muhammad appeared first in the chronicles of Thomas the Presbyter, which was supposedly composed around 640.³³ In it, Muhammad was presented as a military leader who withstood the Persians and gained control of their land, an expression that found resonance in later texts of Christian historians and philosophers such as Bishop Sebeos, Theophilus of Edessa (d. 785), and the Nestorian Christian of Arab descent al-Kindi.³⁴ By the 11th century in Western Christendom, distorted portraits or caricatures of Muhammad were already widespread in a way that portrayed him as violent, barbaric, promiscuous, licentious, and above all mentally derailed. Such rhetoric comes through very clearly in the Crusaders’ account of Islam and

29 Kate Zebiri, “Orientalist Themes in Contemporary British Islamophobia,” in *Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 2011), 175.

30 Martin Luther described Islam as “a movement of violence in the service of the anti-Christ; it cannot be converted because it is closed to reason; it can only be resisted by the sword, and even then with difficulty”. See Albert Hourani, *Europe and the Middle East* (London; Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1990).

31 See Voltaire “Fanatism”

32 See Robert Spencer, *The Truth about Muhammad: Founder of the World’s Most Intolerant Religion* (Washington, DC: Regnery Pub., 2007); Ergun Mehmet Caner and Emir Fethi Caner, *Unveiling Islam: An Insider’s Look at Muslim Life and Beliefs* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 2009).

33 Hoyland, “The Earliest Christian Writings on Muhammad: An Appraisal,” 277.

34 Hoyland, 278; Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, 53.



Muslims, examples of which have been further spelled out in post-Reformation literature up until the present time. The French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire wrote a great deal about this subject in his book *Fanaticism or Mahomet the Prophet*, the description of which remains evident in the academic and political spheres of the contemporary landscape.³⁵

As Islam continues to spread across and beyond the Arabian Peninsula, conquering major portions of Roman and Persian empires and encountering different religions along the line, the “otherness” of Islam as a tradition, a culture, and a way of life was one that posed a great challenge to Western Christendom. Originating from an uncivilized, crude, and barbaric tribe of the Middle East and defying the usual order of revealed prophets—all of whom are Banī Isrāīl (Children of Israel)—the thought of accepting Islam as a continuation of Christianity was an inconceivable reality for early Christians. The theme of “otherness” as constructed in the early centuries of Muslim-Christian/Western encounters was viewed from a religious lens leading to a conception of Islam as either heretical or a harbinger of the apocalypse.³⁶ Such narratives have undergone significant changes over the course of the century, especially since the Reformation period that foresaw the separation of the Church and the State. The theme of otherness has taken on a different narrative in the modern-contemporary discourse on Islam, one that is discontinued from its typical religious or theological context to an understanding that considers otherness in terms of national identity, social cohesion, and immigration.

Trying to map out the continuities and discontinuities of Islamophobic rhetoric from the early medieval period to the modern-contemporary period by looking at only three themes can hardly do justice to the broad area of the specialization. However, it is believed that an analysis of these themes—violence, the status of Muhammad, and otherness—would help broaden our understanding of Islamophobia as a phenomenon and open new areas of discussions that are yet to be explored.

b. New Images of Islamophobia

In a contemporary world where discrimination and racism are seriously abhorred, Islamophobic discourse has become common and legitimate in almost every segment of the Western landscape. The discourse surrounding Islamophobia today has taken on new forms that were previously non-existent in the history of Muslim-Christian/Western encounters. The fear of Islam became the driving force behind many modern Western anti-Muslim policies that are majorly expressed in security legislation, immigration, prosecution, and oppression. Bearing in mind that Islamophobia today is a constellation of new ideas and old ideas, new trends have developed over the years that shape the contemporary Islamophobic discourse. These trends can be observed under two different categories: multiculturalism and the media.

35 Refer to the Danish Cartoon controversy of 2005, Samuel Paty's Murder in France, and Spencer, *The Truth about Muhammad*; Caner and Caner, *Unveiling Islam*.

36 Zebiri, “Orientalist Themes in Contemporary British Islamophobia,” 176.

Multiculturalism

The flexibility of Islam as a religion and its compatibility with modern-Western values has become something of particular interest in the current debate about multiculturalism. In view of the challenge posed by Islam and Muslims to the secular-liberal ideal of Western modernity, there has been a growing concern over the presence of Muslims in the West and particularly their ability to blend or integrate into Western society. The majority of what Islam and Muslims represent appears to be antithetical to all that the West stand for, and as multiculturalism treads even deeper into Western societies, it has initiated new ways of thinking about society and identity, one that is designed to stereotype Muslims as the “incompatible other.”³⁷ The implications of this are widespread and written over all the newly adopted anti-terror and security legislation policies that are often conflated with immigration, gender and hijab (veil), and human rights issues.

In the wake of 9/11 in the United States, policies concerning immigration changed significantly to target Muslim communities from gaining easy access into Western countries. This move was motivated by the rising tide of Islamophobia across the Western landscape, in which the fear and anxiety make Muslims appear in Western consciousness as either a terrorist or a potential one in the making. Such anti-Muslim immigration policies are observable in countries like France, Germany, the United States, and the Netherlands.³⁸ Furthermore, gender and hijab also have a high profile in the contemporary discourse on Islam and multiculturalism, and receives proportionate attention from the media. An area that provides motive and justification for Islamophobic acts revolves around the patriarchal design of the Islamic law that, according to Western Islamophobes, supposedly awards little to no significance to the female gender. Issues such as child marriage and polygamy are oft-cited as evidence of Islam’s backwardness and to challenge its readiness for a multicultural world. The discussion about female emancipation also takes into consideration the notion of the hijab as a religious symbol which Islamophobes believe to be restrictive and at times pose a security threat.³⁹ Entrenched in the discourse of Islam and multiculturalism is the issue of freedom of expression, which many would agree is one of the most complex, problematic, and ever-recurring issues in recent times. The question of whether or not people are free to express hate and prejudice about other cultures is still an ongoing debate; however, the issue continues to be a major source of controversy in the modern-contemporary Islamophobic discourse. The Rushdie Affair of 1989, the Danish cartoon of 2005, and the recent decapitation of Samuel Paty in France are representational of the local and international outbursts that issues of free expression can precipitate.

The Role of the Media

None of the different tools employed by the West in promoting stereotypical and anti-Muslim rhetoric is as fast and effective as social media. Given its broad coverage and wide

37 Esposito and Kalin, *Islamophobia*, 5.

38 See Joselyn Cesari

39 Kate Zebiri, “The Redeployment of Orientalist Themes in Contemporary Islamophobia,” *Studies in Contemporary Islam* 10, no. 1–2 (2008): 24.



reach, social media has earned its place as the most virulent and profitable propaganda machine in history. Most mainstream media would strenuously deny promoting negative stereotypes of any kind; however, the one-sided and often discriminatory media coverage of events pertaining to Islam and the Muslim community has become a dynamic breeding ground for Islamophobic narratives.⁴⁰ This trend is evident in most Western media outlets, in places like France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States where negative stereotypical images of Islam and Muslims are reported as part of news coverage in live debates, TV programs, political speeches, and even religious sermons.⁴¹ Poole, in her study on British Muslims and global Muslims, linked the stereotypical tendency of the media to what she termed “associative negative behavior.” According to her, “the associative negative behavior of global Muslims is seen to evolve out of something inherent in the religion, and therefore, transposed upon every Muslim (British or not) rendering them a potential terrorist.”⁴² A similar climate exists in France where, according to Geisler, the media prefers to spread populist public attitudes and prejudices over informative and balanced knowledge of Islam. This is also the case in Spain and Italy, where the vast majority of the country’s media outlets operate on the myth of Islamic martyrdom, rendering all Muslim nationals as “internal enemies” in need of an extensive criminal system.⁴³

V. COMBATING ISLAMOPHOBIA THROUGH INTEGRATIVE DIALOGICAL FRAMEWORK

In a globally connected world where religious and political differences can have an increasingly damaging effect on global welfare, several peacebuilding initiatives and techniques have been developed over the years geared towards promoting peaceful co-existence and harmony among conflicting parties. One such initiative is the “pyramid of action” developed by John Paul Lederach in his book *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (1997). Lederach advances an integrated peacebuilding model that incorporates a system of dialogue at a structural and progression level. At the structural level, the model takes the form of a pyramid scheme that enables the implementation of dialogical initiatives in three hierarchical levels of the society, encompassing all groups and incorporating all actors. It is believed that this model, if applied to an Islamophobic setting, will prove effective in identifying and linking actors at the top, middle, and grassroots level of the community, therefore enabling an all-inclusive dialogical process to promote understanding and tolerance in a multicultural and multireligious setting. This pyramid of action will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

40 Esposito and Kalin, *Islamophobia*, 12.

41 Esposito and Kalin, 12.

42 Poole, *Reporting Islam*.

43 Allen, *Islamophobia*, 116–17.

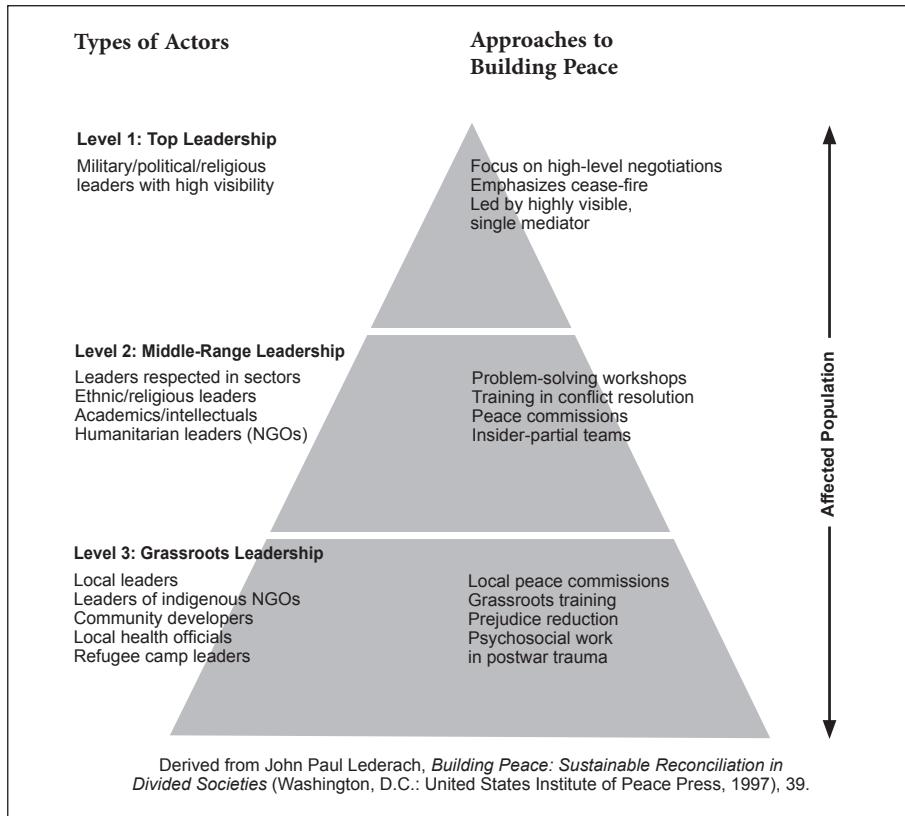


Figure 1: Approaches to Peacebuilding derived from John Paul Lederach's *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*.

a. Top Level

At the apex of the pyramid are key political, religious, and traditional leaders. In any medium- or large-scale conflict, this group of people stands at the top of the chain serving as spokesmen or leading representatives of their respective sides. What characterizes this group of top-level officials are their visibility in terms of statement releases and news coverage, their significant power or influence on their followers, and their responsibility to maintain a position of strength vis-à-vis their rivals.⁴⁴ As discussed in the previous sections, many actors are at play in the proliferation of stereotypical sentiments and anti-Muslim rhetoric across the world. These actors which includes political and party representatives, religious leaders, and media directors have in one way or the other, set up

⁴⁴ John Paul Lederach, "Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies," Washington, DC: USIP, 1997, 38.

a chain of events that have either instigated hate crimes or caused more misunderstanding between the conflicting parties. In the political sector, the BNP in the United Kingdom, Le Pen and the National Front in France, the Lega Nord in Italy, DVO in Germany, and the Republican Party in the United States are representations of right-wing political parties that push and exploit anti-Muslim rhetoric for political gain.⁴⁵ The same stereotypical pattern is observable in some religious sermons and in the media. Otherwise known as a trickle-down approach, this framework is based on the premise that achieving peace lies with identifying key representative leaders from the political and religious sphere, and getting them to arrive at a peaceful and friendly conclusion. It is believed that the greatest responsibility and potential of resolving misunderstandings of any kind, in this case Islamophobia, resides with representative leaders from both sides of the divide.

b. Middle-Range Level

At the pyramid's midpoint are individuals who occupy leadership positions within a setting where intermittent eruption of verbal or physical abuse is rife. The positions held by these individuals are not necessarily connected or linked to any public office or opposition movements; however, they have a reputable standing and their words hold serious meaning in the society. This group of individuals can be identified along several different lines, the first of which are leaders in sectors such as education, commercial, health, or agriculture. Another approach is to identify outspoken representatives from among the camps in conflict who enjoy the respect of the people and have the capacity to influence their behavior. In settings where there are primary networks of groups and institutions that represent, for instance, the voice of marginalized minorities, such a network could serve as a breeding ground of respectable community leaders who are connected to many influential people in the country and have a comprehensive understanding of what is required for peace to reign.⁴⁶ The motive here is to engage mid-level leaders in an open debate about the concept of Islamophobia in a bid to reflect on controversial issues surrounding the term and try to reach a friendly conclusion. The mid-level approach requires consistency to work, and the more these leaders engage the higher the chance of progress.

c. Grassroots or Bottom-Up Level

The bottom-up level consists of people at the base of the society, i.e. the masses.⁴⁷ These people can be divided into two separate categories: the oppressor and the oppressed. The oppressors herein are the Islamophobes, the weaponized group of people who carry out hateful and premeditated attacks on Muslims and their properties. The oppressed, on the other hand, are the direct opposite. They are the most vulnerable members of the community—in this case, the Muslims—who witness, on a daily basis, abuses of different

⁴⁵ Cesari, "Islamophobia in the West," 32.

⁴⁶ Lederach, "Sustainable Reconciliation," 41.

⁴⁷ Lederach, 42.

kinds and are in constant fear of persecution. These people are the most knowledgeable of the impact of Islamophobic acts, with high awareness of the fear and suffering that much of the population must overcome every single day. Dialogue at the top- and middle-range levels is meaningless without the cooperation of people at the grassroots level. Some of the grassroots approaches outlined by Lederach are organizing local peace conferences, local workshops, capacity building, and some other programmatic peace efforts.⁴⁸ By bringing together local community leaders at the grassroots level, immediate religious and inter-personal issues that have evolved locally are not only identified but also create the opportunity to enlighten and educate the people about tolerance and peacebuilding.

In addition to focusing on the actors and representatives at the different levels of a conflict-ridden society, Lederach adopts an alternative approach, “the nested model of conflict,”⁴⁹ that provides structure for reconciliation, with a direct focus on repairing broken relationships and to orient the views of people in dialogue towards a broader conflict resolution and peacebuilding technique. Despite taking into consideration both the immediate or “micro concern” in a conflict situation and the broader or “more systemic” implication, this model offers creative methods by which parties in dialogue can coordinate themselves towards achieving short- and long-term objectives. The nested model is designed to address the problem of approach i.e., how the way we approach a conflict situation can have a significant impact on our conclusion. This model is made up of two particular levels: the issue level and the system level (see Figure 2). At the issue level, the main concern is about addressing the issue at hand and repairing broken relationships, while at the system level, the deeper and long-term solution is what is discussed.

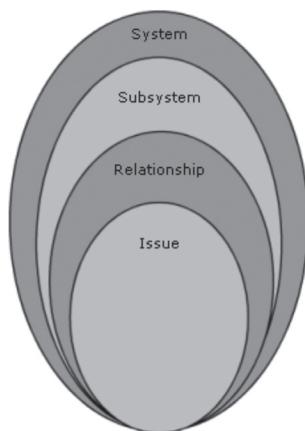


Figure 2. The Nested Paradigm derived from John Paul Lederach’s *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*.

48 Lederach, 53.

49 Developed by the peace researcher and theorist Maire Dugan in her article “A Nested Theory of Conflict,” *Women in Leadership* 1, no. 1 (1996): 9–20.



Taking the Charlie Hebdo case⁵⁰ of 2015 as a practical example, the first step of action—using the nested model approach—would be to defuse the immediate face-to-face tension between the conflicting parties. In this case, the essential thrust of the issue level would be embedded within a relationship that needs to be reconciled. Here, the course of action may be to introduce an alternative explanation or ensure the withdrawal of the alleged blasphemous cartoon as a necessary step to reduce the immediate threat of a seemingly escalating situation. Given that the issue level is about immediacy and relationship, this level is where dialogue is most effective: to engage different actors and encourage a peaceful and harmonious settlement.

The system level, on the other hand, is about the long-term solution placed within a broader context. The first systemic step for conflict resolution practitioners or interfaith organizations in this regard is to engage the state government and mid-level leaders in the state. At the subsystem stage, the goal would be to develop a policy or establish a body that prevents or counters hate speech that has the potential to incite violence, discrimination, and hostile relationships. The subsystem level is therefore, “a middle-range locus of activities that connects the other levels in the system.” At the fourth stage, “the system” is where the systemic change is most felt. In this case, the Charlie Hebdo case would mean re-evaluating the question of freedom of speech—especially one that has serious consequences on religiosity—and mandating civil education at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.

It is believed that in the nested model of conflict, had it been adopted and implemented as a reconciliatory and dialogical tool, many such attacks of similar nature to the Charlie Hebdo incident would have been avoided. One such example is the recent Samuel Paty incident in France: an event whose pattern of evolution mirrors that of the Charlie Hebdo attack of 2005. Through the adoption of the nested paradigm by interfaith and peacebuilding organizations as a dialogical tool, it would ensure sustainability by consistently looking at the broader context of any racial or religious discrimination, thereby preventing the recurrence of such a conflict at any level of the population.

VI. CONCLUSION

This article dwelt at length on some of the key phenomena or themes that have dictated the landscape of Muslim-West relations from the medieval period to the modern-contemporary period. Bearing in mind that each of the identified phenomena is complex and sufficiently significant for more comprehensive and detailed analyses, in actual fact a number of them have already been deeply explored, resulting in substantial research and publications. The intricate and tortuous nature of the history of Islam and the West, especially concerning Islamophobia (as it is called today), implies that further research is necessary to evaluate not only the changes it has gone through but the current trends in perception as well. As

⁵⁰ The Charlie Hebdo case occurred in France over a controversial cartoon that was deemed blasphemous by the Muslim community, the implication of which led to the tragic death of 12 Charlie Hebdo's workers in the hands of two radicalized French Muslim brothers.

argued above, the historical development of Islamophobia can be very complicated, given that religion is not the only motivating factor for conflict and that questions of ideological, ethnic, socio-political, and hegemonic rivalry continue to contribute to the wildfire of a rather hostile relationship between Islam and Christianity/the West.

Islamophobia today, as argued in this paper, is a constellation of new and old ideas, and a critical analysis of the historical evolution of anti-Muslim sentiment must consider the dynamic character of conflicts and development, which consist mostly of cultural, ethnic, social, political, religious, and even inter-religious components. Therefore, an integrative peacebuilding and dialogical framework that encompasses all groups and levels of the community is strongly recommended. Instances where only top-level religious leaders, academicians, and non-governmental organizations partake in peacebuilding and dialogical processes are grossly insufficient. Apart from engaging people at the grassroots, which in itself is extremely important, the complex nature of contemporary Islamophobia requires the contribution of relevant constituencies from different sectors of the community, including political analysts, historians, lawyers, sociologists, economists, artists, and academicians outside the field of religion. The possibility of success is high only when no member of the community is left behind, as the reality of stereotypical and anti-Muslim rhetoric requires much more than religious or theological explanations.

AUTHOR

Adam Folorunsho Olowo

Adam Olowo completed his Master's program in Islamic Studies with a concentration in Comparative Religion from the College of Islamic Studies, Hamad Bin Khalifa University (Class of 2021). He obtained his Bachelor's degree from the International Islamic University Malaysia. His thesis "A Discourse on Religious Tension in Nigeria" examines the multiple dimensions of how people who identify with different religions interact with each other, alongside the implications of such interactions on civil societies and global politics, and a sustainable framework for peaceful co-existence. His research interests revolve around Muslim-Christian relations, interfaith mediation strategies, religious tolerance and peacebuilding, inter-religious co-existence, interfaith dialogue, world religions, and peace.

4lorunshaw@gmail.com

REFERENCES

- Allen, Christopher. "Contemporary Islamophobia Before 9/11: A Brief History." *Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Hatred: Causes and Remedies*, 7th ed., 4:1–12. London: Westgate House, 2010.
- _____. *Islamophobia*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2010.
- Bleich, Erik. "Defining and Researching Islamophobia." *Review of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 2 (2012): 180–89.
- Caner, Ergun Mehmet, and Emir Fethi Caner. *Unveiling Islam: An Insider's Look at Muslim Life and Beliefs*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2009.
- Cesari, Jocelyne. "Islamophobia in the West: A Comparison between Europe and the United States." *Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century*. London: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Dugan, Maire. "A Nested Theory of Conflict." *Women in Leadership* 1, no. 1 (1996): 9–20.
- Esposito, John L. *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0602/99028443-d.html>.
- Esposito, John L., and Ibrahim Kalin. *Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century*. Oxford; New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Goddard, Hugh. *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*. Chicago, IL: New Amsterdam Books, 2000.
- Hourani, Albert. *Europe and the Middle East*. London; Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1990.
- Hoyle, Robert G. "The Earliest Christian Writings on Muhammad: An Appraisal." *The Biography of Muhammad: The Issue of the Sources*. Leiden: Brill, 2000.
- Kurtz, Lester R. *Gods in the Global Village the World's Religions in Sociological Perspective*. California: SAGE Publications, 2016.
- Lederach, John Paul. *Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Washington, DC: USIP, 1997.
- Moorhead, John. "The Earliest Christian Theological Response to Islam." *Religion* 11, no. 3 (July 1, 1981): 265–74. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0048-721X\(81\)80030-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0048-721X(81)80030-9).
- Poole, Elizabeth. *Reporting Islam: Media Representations and British Muslims*. I.B. Tauris, 2009.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Vintage, 1979.
- Spencer, Robert. *The Truth about Muhammad: Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion*. Washington, DC: Regnery Pub., 2007.
- Tolan, John Victor. *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam: A Book of Essays*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- _____. *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Zebiri, Kate. "Orientalist Themes in Contemporary British Islamophobia." *Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century*. London: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- _____. "The Redeployment of Orientalist Themes in Contemporary Islamophobia." *Studies in Contemporary Islam* 10, no. 1–2 (2008): 4–44.

