



PROFESSIONAL ISLAMOPHOBIA: A RESURGENCE OF MEDIÉVAL ANTI-MUSLIM STEREOTYPES

Saeed Akhtar

*Lecturer Department of Islamic Studies
University of Malakand
Malakand – Pakistan
saeed11akhtar@gmail.com*

Masaud Hassan,

*Lecturer Department of Journalism and Mass Communication
University Of Malakand
Malakand – Pakistan
iiunione@gmail.com*

Dr. Imtiaz Ahmad

*Assistant Professor
Department of Journalism and Mass Communication
University of Malakand
Malakand – Pakistan
dostisw@hotmail.com*

Abstract

Islamophobia is an irrational fear or prejudice towards Islam or Muslims. It can manifest itself in many ways, including but not limited to discrimination against Muslims in employment, the media, education, and everyday life; hate speech and hate crimes against Muslims; and the exclusion of Muslims from the public sphere. Islamophobia is a form of bigotry and racism. It is rooted in ignorance and misinformation about Islam and Muslims. Islamophobes often falsely conflate Islam with terrorism, extremism, and violence. This is despite the fact that the vast majority of terrorist attacks worldwide are carried out by non-Muslims. Islamophobia is a growing problem around the world. In many countries, it is on the rise. This is due in part to the increase in anti-Muslim rhetoric from political leaders and the media. The following research articles conducts a historical analysis of the phenomenon in an effort to establish that the modern day Islamophobes—specifically, Daniel Pipes, Pamela Geller, and Robert Spencer—rely on anti-Muslim stereotypes from the Middle Ages when crafting their Islamophobic narrative.

Keywords: Middle Ages, Saracens, Right-Wing Activists, Bloggers, Christians, Muhammad (peace be upon him), Caricatures, Anti-Muslim Bigotry.



Islamophobia had pro-Christian and anti-Muslimism elements during the crusades and colonial eras. In the contemporary world, secular concepts such as democracy, freedom of thought, gender equality etc., have put religious ideas on the back burner. The word islamophobia became a part of public discourse in the late 1990s when the Runnymede Report was launched by Jack Straw. According to the report, Islamophobia is a fear, abhorrence and antagonism towards Islam and its followers. The report identified several closed views, beliefs and hostile stereotypes which constitute the contemporary anti-Muslim bigotry.

The Runnymede Trust found that Islam is viewed as unchanging and uniform. The idea that Islam lacks variety, diversity of interpretations and sectarian controversies is the first on the list of closed viewpoints. (Green, 2019, p. 13) In other words, all Muslims have a same worldview and set of ideas. This notion is largely responsible for the Islamophobia that exists in the West today. People will simply assume that Islam is an intolerant and violent religion, if media coverage concentrates on acts of violence or terrorism committed by a tiny percentage of Muslims.

Thinking of Islam as a static and monolithic religion creates erroneous generalizations. For instance, many in the West might assume that all Muslim women experience the same restrictions if they have happened to land in a country such as Saudi Arabia; but in reality, Saudi Arabia is the exception rather than the rule. Saudi Arabian women are subject to severe restrictions on their public behavior, such as the ban on driving but women in other Muslim majority countries do not encounter such restrictions. Contrary to the notion that other faiths or belief systems are complex and dynamic and do not lend themselves to simple categorizations, Islam is supposed be uniquely opposite.

Secondly, Islam is considered as separate and 'other'. (Green, 2019, p.13) The belief that Islam is incompatible with fundamental principles found in other religions especially Judaism and Christianity is another key component of Islamophobia. Similarly, Islamic ideals and values are thought to be at variance with Western civilization and its ideals like tolerance, religious pluralism or religious freedom.

Thirdly, Islam is considered inferior. (Green, 2019, p.14) A third closed view is that Islam is not only different from but also inferior to the West. A host of stereotypes are put together to construct the narrative of inferiority: Islam is gender biased; the west is gender equal; Islam is backward; the west is enlightened; Islam is barbarous; the west is tolerant and modern; Islam is irrational and illogical and the west is both logical and rational.

Former Muslim and well-known opponent of Islam Ayaan Hirsi Ali regularly makes use of these criticisms in her writing and speeches. She compares Islam with the Enlightenment values that are prevalent in the West, such as freedom of research and individual freedom. Islam, according to her writing, "is irreconcilable with the libertarian ideas at the core of the legacy of the Enlightenment." (Ali, 2008, p.35.) She claims that one of the reasons that makes Islam so repugnant is its "obsession with subjugating women." Being convinced of the backwardness of Islam, she



maintains that Islam cannot contribute any valuable thing to the west in terms cultures, ethics and intellect. (Ali, 2008, p.36)

Fourthly, Islam is feared as a threat. Seen from the fear perspective, Islam is looked upon as hostile, belligerent, and aggressive.(Green, 2019, p. 15) Islam is a conquering religion, hence there will unavoidably be a "clash of civilizations" between the two entirely antagonistic worldviews, namely Islam and the West.

Fifthly, Islam is viewed as being manipulative. (Green, 2019, p. 15) The belief that Muslims are suspect because they are perceived as cunning and depending on their faith to offer them a tactical military or political edge is another typical characteristic of Islamophobia.

Sixthly, anti-Muslim racial prejudice is acceptable. The report points out that anti-Muslim sentiment and anti-Asian attitude are frequently linked since racism and Islamophobia are frequently combined in the British context. (Green, 2019, p. 16) Though the westerners usually denounce racial discrimination in any form and shape, it becomes acceptable when it is meted out to Muslims and Arabs in various Western societies.

Seventhly, Muslims' critique of the West is counted as invalid. (Green, 2019, p. 17) The Western critique of Islam is seen as a one-way track as Muslim opinions on and critiques of Western ideals or practices are rarely or never taken into consideration by Western politicians, religious leaders, and media, despite the fact they themselves enjoy the freedom to criticize and satirize Islamic beliefs and practices.

Finally, Anti-Muslim discourse is treated as natural. The research makes the observation that anti-Muslim rhetoric is so ubiquitous that even some prominent individuals who vehemently advocate for tolerance and equal rights for all people show little or no care for the prejudice experienced by Muslims in their community. (Green, 2019, p. 17) Prejudiced remarks or viewpoints concerning Muslims are commonplace rather than hateful.

Muslims frequently find themselves unable to stand up for themselves in front of Western audiences and some think that they are not heard when they do stand up to speak. In other words, they lack the authority to influence how Islam is portrayed in the media. In the context of international political and military initiatives as well as domestic security, powerful politicians influence unfavorable perceptions of Islam. In the wake of significant events like the Danish cartoon issue, we have also seen instances of the media shaping the narrative of Islam.

European Christians deliberately represented Islam as a debauched type of paganism. Alternatively, maybe as a result of this, Christian authors may have projected onto the fears of the Saracens their own troubled relationships with holy objects.



The medieval poets, chroniclers, and hagiographers eloquently depicted denigrating caricatures of Saracens. In the twelfth century, the Saracens were portrayed to be worshipping a pantheon of idols with Mahomet (or Mahon, Mahound, Mahamet) as their chief deity. (Tolan, 2019, p.6) Even Peter, Abbot of Cluny, who ordered the first Qur'anic translation in the 1140s, was unsure whether to label the Saracens as "pagans" or heretics. These Saracens are desert raiders and enemies of civilization, and God gave Ismael and his lineal descendants a permanent genetic disposition to be hostile and savage. Furthermore, these people, who are more appropriately known as Ishmaelites call themselves Saracens to conceal their descent from the slave Hagar and trace their origin to Abraham's real wife, Sarah. (Bachrach, 2017, p. 144) However, the fact of the matter is that none of the Muslims have ever identified as Saracen.

Similar false stories were propagated during the crusades. Crusade chroniclers narrate the glorious victory and chivalrous deeds of Christian knights. They fought valiantly and broke open the doors of the Templum Domini and discovered the image of Muhammad (peace be upon him), made of silver... so heavy that six men with powerful arms could not lift it," sitting on a high throne. (Bachrach, 2017, p. 144) It was dressed in purple and gold and completely encrusted in stones.

Needless to say, neither at the Dome of the Rock nor anywhere else did the crusaders ever come across idols of "Mahummet. (Tolan, 2019, p.27) A number of crusade chroniclers have concocted fiction that paints a vivid justification of how the crusaders abolished paganism and restored the true religion of Christ. A crucial component of the theological defense of the crusade is the Saracens' pagan beliefs: the pagans crucified Jesus, and the crusaders will take their revenge on them for the crucifixion of their "parent."

For the author of *Chanson d'Antioche*, Mahomes—an idol held up in midair by magnets—serves as the focal point of the pagan ritual. 17 Sansadoines, a defeated Saracen general, hits the idol, causing it to fall to the ground and be destroyed after it failed to give its followers victory. (Tolan, 2008, p. 135) The angry pagan recognizes the futility and helplessness of his idols and smashes them with his own hands.

This name (mahon, mahum, mahun, mahoun, makemet, mahoude, mahowne, etc.) becomes a typical phrase to identify idols in both French and English, including those worshipped by the ancient Greeks and Romans, the gods of the Vikings or other northern heathens, and the supposed gods of the Saracens. (Tolan, 2019, p. 36)

Amurack is instructed by Mahomet to lead his men to Naples and overthrow the kingdom of Aragon. Belinus chirps, "And because we have God Mahound on our side, the triumph must needs to us betide," as they go forward (IV.1.86–87). Amurack acts like a defeated Saracen king would when he finds out that Belinus has been murdered and his army defeated at the close of act IV: he curses and threatens Mahomet.



The medieval stereotypical and polemical depiction of Muhammad (peace be upon him) as an idol or a false prophet who carries the sword in one and 'Alkoran' in the other hand still pervades the contemporary western discourse on Islam and feeds their Islamophobic prejudice. (Tolan, 2019, p. 41)

According to Boccaccio, it was during the era of Byzantine emperor Heraclius (r. 610–41) that the "seducer Mahumeth" assumed the title of prophet and enacted fatal commandments. (Hedeman, 2008, pp.42-46) his biography of the prophet, Laurent de Premierfait referred to him as "the traitorous traitor Machomet," and used negative epithets for description of his personality such as a "false, dishonest prophet and magician," (Hedeman, 2008, p.47)

Medieval Christians described the holy Quran as "vile and undignified Alcoran". They maintain that one day when Muhammad (peace be upon him) was giving a sermon, the bull with the book fastened to its horns appeared out of nowhere. It was acclaimed as a heavenly messenger, and the book was cherished as the written word of God.

In an era when questions of reform and heresy profoundly split the Church and European culture, the writers who crafted these polemical biographies Of Muhammad (peace be upon him) were concerned with the spread of heresy among Christian population. They had disagreement controversies over the beliefs and authority of the Church. Therefore, rather than being inspired by curiosity about Islam or its prophet, their disparaging images of Muhammad (peace be upon him) mirrored their own concerns and anxieties about fake reformers, and heretics. (Tolan, 2019, p.47)

Beginning in the twelfth century, Latin theologians made an effort to disprove what they called the "Saracen" heresy; in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, mendicant friars studied Arabic and the Qur'an in order to better combat the "Saracen heresy" in a largely fruitless attempt to win people over to Christianity. To portray Muhammad as a heretic, they aggressively (mis)read Muslim texts (and relied on older Arab Christian sources).

The predominant view of Muhammad in Europe from the twelfth century all the way up to the sixteenth century is that of a heretic and false prophet.

Guibert believes that the cow revelation is sufficient, especially in light of the fact that the rule it exposes caters to the perverted libido of these Oriental people. Theophanes had criticized Mouamed for assuring his adherents of a heaven filled with sensuous pleasures. (Nogent, 1996, p. 32) Guibert takes it a step further by speculating that the new law's core component and the reason it appeals to a sensual population is sexual license.

Muhammad, he says, had been an idolater in the past and had become wealthy via commerce and his marriage to Khadja. He chose to pose as a prophet in order to rule over his tribe, and his companions—naive nomads who were ignorant of the signs of prophecy—believed him. He and his men made



money via plundering and going to battle. According to the Christian author, these deeds suffice to disprove Muhammad's status as a prophet; his military fiascos, particularly the defeat at the battle of Uhud, where he suffered injuries, are even more compelling evidence. A true prophet would have anticipated (and prevented) defeat. (Tolan, 2019, p 56) The Christian author frequently contrasts Muhammad with Jesus (either expressly or inferentially) in this passage: Muhammad passionately sought after both worldly power and sex, whereas Christ eschewed both. Muhammad also failed to predict his military setbacks, while Christ performed miracles. This disparity is continued in his account of Muhammad's demise. He claims that Muhammad gave the command to his friends not to bury him after his passing because angels would transport his body to paradise in three days. When he passed away, his followers carried out his instructions: "after they had waited for three days, his odor changed and their expectations of his being carried up to paradise evaporated. They buried him after being let down by his false promises and understanding his deception. (Tolan, 2019, p. 57) He didn't work any miracles, as the Qur'an itself acknowledges. He lived an evil life, "rejoicing in thievery and rapacity, and so consumed with the fire of passion that he did not blush to pollute another man's bed in adultery, exactly as if the Lord were commanding it." (Petrus & Alfonsi, 2006, 146) One cannot tell how much of the Alcoran represents Machomet's teachings because it was written not by him but by his students after his passing. (Tolan, 2019, p. 59) Peter identifies Arius, Muhammad, and the Antichrist as the three main foes the devil employs to mislead Christians. (Tolan, 2019, p. 61) The author of the Summa haeresis Saracenorum paints Muhammad (peace be upon him) a base-born man and a clever manipulator of gullible Arabs.

Muhammad (peace be upon him) is criticized by Peter for his incorrect beliefs regarding the Trinity, Christ (especially his rejection of the incarnation), and heaven as a place of sensual pleasures. (Tolan, 2019, p.61) This argumentative essay contends that Islam is the anthology of all the faults that the Christian world has previously been aware of.

Riccoldo presents a dissertation on the Qur'an that is more thorough and organised than anything that was before written in Latin. The denial of the key Christian teachings of the Trinity, Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection are listed by him as its "main faults." He laboriously contrasts the doctrine of the Qur'an with earlier Christian heresies including Nestorianism, Jacobitism, and Arianism. (Monterde, 2011) He criticizes the Qur'an for being violent, disorganized, contradictory, and confusing—in other words, illogical.

Unlike other Christian polemicists, Riccoldo is less concerned in recounting the life of Mahomet; instead, he attacks the Qur'an and briefly describes Mahomet's history in order to criticize the Qur'an's revelation and compilation. (Monterde, 2011)

The following discussion examines the justifications, motives, and influence of well-known people and groups that purposefully silence the variety of Muslim voices and willfully create and capitalize on anti-Islamic fear in a way that is unheard of in mainstream political and media circles. This activity is termed as "professional Islamophobia." A group of conservative politicians, right-wing activists,



bloggers, and even disillusioned Muslims or ex-Muslims who specialize in condemning Muslims make up the professional Islamophobia movement.

This group is referred to as the "Islamophobia Industry" by Nathan Lean and the "Islamophobia Network" by the Center for American Progress. ¹ Whatever we name it, the fact that people who engage in and benefit from professional Islamophobia have access to influential political, media, and publishing platforms that feed into and amplify Western fears about the Muslim "Other" is what counts. (Green, 2019, p. 205)

Numerous far-right academics, activists, and bloggers have arisen in the US discussions regarding Islam in the wake of 9/11. Professional Islamophobes utilize internet, media and their political circles to disseminate negative views about Islam. In this connection, a large number of audiences and readers have been influenced by three people in particular: Daniel Pipes, Pamela Geller, and Robert Spencer.

Daniel Pipes is the most well-known of the three and the one who was already well-known in far-right circles before 9/11. ² In 1978, Pipes earned a doctorate in mediaeval Islamic history from Princeton University. He began working for the government in the early 1980s, joining the US State Department's policy planning team. He also attempted to teach at the college level, but in 1986 he permanently left academia and moved into the realm of political think tanks. He directed the Foreign Policy Research Institute from 1986 to 1993 before becoming the helm of the Middle East Forum in 1994. Pipes founded the Middle East Forum to promote a conservative reaction to alleged Middle Eastern challenges to US interests.

Before 9/11, Pipes published a number of books and essays. The National Review published his most well-known essay, "The Muslims Are Coming! The Muslims Are Coming!" in 1990. He asserted that "West European civilizations are unprepared for the enormous immigration of brown skinned peoples preparing unusual meals and not quite preserving Germanic norms of hygiene".

After 9/11, his political and cultural impact substantially increased. He made 450 radio and 110 television appearances in the year after the attacks in addition to penning op-ed pieces for prestigious publications. ⁴ With the publication of his book *Militant Islam Reaches America* in 2002, he established his standing as a public "expert" on Islamic terrorism. In the book, he makes the case that Muslim Americans pose a severe threat to the US because they share al Qaeda's objectives. ⁵ Despite several protests from politicians and groups who felt Pipes was more devoted to fighting than to peace with Muslims and nations with a majority of Muslims, President Bush appointed Pipes to the US Institute of Peace in 2003.

In 2002, Pipes founded the Campus Watch website using his post-9/11 situation as inspiration. ⁶ The website's goal was to maintain tabs on so-called activist academics who were teaching on US college campuses and whose opinions on the Middle East differed from those of neoconservatives. He



intended to exclude academics who opposed Israeli occupation of Palestine and US foreign policy in the Middle East, especially the justification for war in Iraq. Pipes even urged students to file online reports of "problematic" instructors. The websites published the files of eight "suspect" researchers in September 2002. (Daniel, 2002.) Over a hundred academics contacted the Middle East Forum after hearing about this blacklist to express their sympathy and request to be added to the Campus Watch list.

Though Pipes exhibits almost all major characteristics of professional Islamophobia, he disagrees with the term itself. What exactly is an "undue fear of Islam" when followers of Islam today are the leading perpetrators of aggression committed in the name of Islam, he wonders? Besides urging Muslims to avoid blaming "the potential victim for fearing his would-be executioner," he also urges them to do away with the phrase. ⁷ In other words, Pipes maintains that the fear of Muslims in the West is entirely justifiable since Muslims across the world constitute an existential threat to everyone else. (Daniel, 2002) His website focuses on drawing attention to the dangers of Islam.

Others who practice professional Islamophobia owe their careers primarily to 9/11 and its aftermath, in contrast to Pipes, whose reputation as a sharp critic of Muslims predated 9/11. Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer are two prime examples. Geller, a native of New York City, began her career as a financial analyst before moving on to become a publisher and writer for local newspapers. After 9/11, she started working in the field of professional Islamophobia and in 2005 she started the website Atlas Shrugs. The website concentrated on highlighting the risks associated with Islam.

Like Pipes, Spencer has some scholarly background in religion. He earned his MA in religious studies from the University of North Carolina in 1986. However, his specialization was early Christian history rather than Islam. Before adopting the role of public intellectual in the wake of 9/11, he taught for a while at a Catholic high school in the Bronx. Spencer spreads fear and hate against Islam and warns his audience and readers of the menace Islam presented to the United States. In his seminal book *Islam Unveiled* he cautions western societies against what he calls intrinsic brutality, backwardness, and sexism of Islam. (Robert Spencer, 2003, p. 9)

He has continued to write and collaborate on books with controversial names, such as *The Complete Infidel's Guide to the Koran* and *The Truth about Muhammad: Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion*, both of which were published in 2007. He has been on several US and European news programs and written for well-known Western publications. His website, *Jihad Watch*, has allowed his opinions to reach a broader audience as well.

Before the issue over a proposed Islamic center near Ground Zero in 2010 broke out, Geller and Spencer were already rising stars in the professional Islamophobia network. However, this dispute made them rock stars within conservative anti-Islam forces in the United States. In fact, Geller is a major factor in why the facility, also known as the Park51 Islamic Center, attracted so much attention. Geller's blog post for Atlas Shrugs in May 2010 was the catalyst for the center's widespread criticism.



(Lean, 2017) The article's headline, "Monster Mosque Pushes Ahead in Shadow of World Trade Center Islamic Death and Destruction," made Geller's concerns quite clear.

She uses the guilt-by-association theory, which is the cornerstone of Islamophobia, to link the center's construction plans to Islamic terrorism: "Those structures were demolished by Islamic jihad when it invaded, wiped out, and killed three thousand individuals in an act of conquest and Islamic supremacism. What better way to demarcate your region than to build a massive mosque on the World Trade Center site, which is still undeveloped? Any decent American, whether Muslim or not, would never consider using such a slur. Geller links the activists behind the proposed center to the 9/11 attacks without hesitation, despite the fact that they had no connections to al-Qaeda or radical strains of Islam.

Around the time of the start of this controversy, Geller and Spencer partnered. In April 2010, they were elected to co-lead Stop Islamization of America (SIOA), the American affiliate of a European anti-Islamic group. SIOA jumped into the battle and assisted in setting up a June 6 event to "Stop the 911 Mosque." The date was chosen by Geller and other SIOA members because it fell on the same day as D-Day and the attack of Normandy during the second World War. She saw a connection between the current struggle against Islamic supremacism, which was exemplified by resistance to the Park51 Center, and the American struggle against Nazism. (Kumar, 2012, pp. 185–86.)

Plans for the center were not stopped by the demonstration or the campaign as a whole by Geller, Spencer, and SIOA, but their efforts did succeed in several important ways. It made the project and the Muslims who backed it highly unpopular in many political and media circles. Based on this momentum, SIOA rapidly started working on additional anti-Islamic projects, such as ads denigrating Islam that were displayed in New York City subways and buses. The Southern Poverty Law Center and the Anti-Defamation League have designated SIOA as a hate group as a result of the organization's efforts, which have continued to garner attention and reputation.

In America after 9/11, Pipes, Geller, and Spencer are only the tip of the iceberg in terms of anti-Muslim bloggers and activists. More could be said about other well-known proponents of professional Islamophobia, like Brigitte Gabriel, a Lebanese-born Christian and founder of ACT for America, who views all Muslims as practicing radicals, and Frank Gaffney and David Yerushalmi, who both lead organizations that disseminate false information about Islam and work to pass anti-Muslim legislation, like the infamous anti-Sharia legislation that started sweeping through the country.

In Conclusion, the modern day Islamophobes just regurgitate the anti-Muslims stereotypes that were constructed by their medieval ancestors. They consider Islam as being incompatible with modern western ideals in the same way as their predecessors saw the Saracens as desert raiders and enemies of civilization possessed of innate genetic propensity for savagery and desert raiding. Likewise, the medieval poets, chroniclers, and hagiographers eloquently depicted denigrating caricatures of Saracens and presented the prophet of Islam as a false prophet who carries the sword in one hand and



‘Alkoran’ in the other hand. The same unfavorable stereotypes continue to permeate modern western discourse about Islam, which reinforces their anti-Islamic prejudice and creates hatred against Muslims.



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