

ISLAMOPHOBIC LANGUAGE ON THE INTERNET

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Introduction

Islamophobia may be defined as prejudicial practices against Islam and dehumanization of Muslims. This is generally reflected in negative attitudes, discrimination, physical harassment and vilification in the mass media. An independent anti-racist think tank in the United Kingdom, the British Runnymede Trust, in a 1997 report described Islamophobia as the view that Islam has no common values with other cultures; is inferior to the West; its political ideology is based on violence; its criticisms of the West cannot stand and that discriminatory practices aimed at Muslims are not without justification (cited in Quraishi, 2005).

After being elected Pope, Pope Benedict told Muslim leaders that 'they had a duty to help defeat terrorism' (<http://www.sabnews.com/world/other>). It would be interesting to know if the Pope made a similar appeal to people of other faiths or their governments. By asking Muslim leaders to help fight terror, is he implying that it is Muslims who are responsible for all the terror, and absolving a lot of others who are responsible for it? The spiritual leader of the world's Catholics quoted the words of a Byzantine Christian emperor who had described some of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) as 'evil and inhuman'. After worldwide protests he later apologized saying that the quotation came from a medieval text that didn't reflect his personal opinion (Gandolfo 2006). The attempt at damage control was pathetic to say the least.

Pat Robertson, who claims to be a Christian evangelist and is also a TV host on the Christian Broadcasting Network's *The 700 Club*, went to extreme lengths to insult Islam as 'a bloody, brutal type of religion' (<http://mediamatters.org/items>). Nick Griffith, leader of the British National Party, has described Islam as a 'wicked, vicious faith' (*The Sunday Star*, 12 November 2006). We also read about growing Islamophobia elsewhere. A Singaporean senior minister has remarked that 'Islamic fanatics' are fanning 'the fires of hatred' (*The Star*, 14 October 2006).

What is evident from all the above is that there is a sustained verbal onslaught against Islam and Muslims from both sides of the Atlantic, from personalities of non-Islamic faiths and racist organizations. At times, this even extends to physical onslaught against people who have a Muslim appearance.

The popularity of the term 'Islamophobia' and hatred for Muslims in various

guises have become more widespread since the infamous 9/11 attack. The number of Islamophobes has gone up drastically. The September attacks on the World Trade Center on American soil have brought Americans, Canadians, Europeans and Australians (who have common values and lifestyle) much closer to abuse the religion itself, although the 9/11 attackers had clearly strayed from the Prophet Muhammad's *hadith* that a perfect Muslim is someone from whose tongue and hands people do not get hurt. Civilians, passengers, bystanders and shoppers cannot be considered legitimate targets in a hostile situation. Only Muslims who have been driven to desperation target them. The attacks on American soil, and later the London bombings in July 2006, have made Muslims convenient scapegoats in general and provided Islamophobes the ammunition to malign Muslims as a whole in the different countries they reside. To drag the religion into all these is grossly unfair. We should never associate Islam with the personal, cultural, separatist, militant and political motivations of those who profess the religion. Their thoughts and actions are not representative of Islam and the worldwide *ummah* (Muslim community).

Henzell-Thomas (2001) believes that there is another dimension towards the prejudices against Muslims. The most extreme position taken by Muslims in some countries is projected as the totality of Islam by those who are not familiar with the religion.

Methodology

Known Islamophobic terms which appeared in reading materials were typed into the search engines Yahoo, MSN and Google. A plethora of information was gathered about these expressions in terms of their usage in context. A review of literature on Islamophobia was carried out with the invaluable help of the articles obtained from the Internet sources. There were many articles in defense of and against Islamophobia. These formed the basis for the study. We discuss below the anti-Muslim vocabulary to understand things in the proper perspective.

Discussion

In this paper, we are concerned mainly with the linguistic aspects of Islamophobia, that is, lexical expressions which serve to perpetuate prejudices against and misconceptions of Islam and its adherents. We shall deal with some common examples of Islamophobic language in various articles gathered from the Internet.

In Arabic, Islam means peace, not the opposite. Unfortunately certain individuals and groups have come up with many collocations with 'Islam' and 'Islamic' which are wholly incompatible and contradictory to matters related to Islam. 'Islam' is a noun. 'Islamic' is an adjective which is derived from 'Islam.' The term 'Islamic' is used to refer to the behavior of Muslims and those connected to their religion. Thus, 'Islamic' can occur with 'history', 'culture', 'books', 'teachings', 'architecture', 'schools', 'laws', 'countries', 'museum', 'values', 'civilization', 'clothing', 'banking' etc.

The following terms are beyond any doubt extremely offensive to Muslims when they are used together with 'Islamic': *terror/terrorists/terrorism, fanatics, radicals, fascists, extremists/extremism, militants*, etc. Many other offensive terms also occur before 'Islam', for example: *hardline, fanatical, fascist, militant, radical*,

etc. The term 'Muslim' is used after 'militant' and before 'terrorists' as in 'militant Muslims' and 'Muslim terrorists' to present a sinister portrayal of Muslims.

It is really unnecessary to describe those who carry out violent acts as Buddhist, Catholic, Christian, Hindu, Muslim or Protestant. There are militants and terrorists of all creeds – cultural, fanatical, nationalist, political and racist. Basque militants in Spain who want to secede from the country also sometimes carry out violent terror activities which result in the deaths of many people, but they are often described as Basque separatists, not terrorists. The Irish Republican Army too conducts many acts of terror, but they are rarely referred to by their religious affiliation. The parties involved in the conflict in Northern Ireland are seldom maligned as Catholic or Protestant extremists. But in the case of violent acts committed by people who happen to be Muslims, these are invariably linked to their religion.

Islam does not encourage its followers to resort to terrorism, radicalism, fanaticism, extremism, fascism or militancy. As such it is grossly unjust to use the epithet 'Islamic' before the above terms. The European Union's Commissioner for Justice, Freedom and Security has correctly condemned the use of the hurtful expression 'Islamic terrorism' to refer to people who conduct suicide attacks or criminal activities supposedly on behalf of Islam. These people are not doing Islam any favors. In fact, all they have succeeded in is getting many non-Muslims to misinterpret Islam and reinforcing prejudices against the religion. The Archbishop of Canterbury, a voice of reason and moderation in the United Kingdom, has pointed out the injustice in coining and using the phrase 'Islamic terrorism.' Whoever commits terrorist and criminal acts in whatever guise abuses their religion, whether they are Buddhist, Christian, Hindu or Muslim.

The word 'fundamentalist' is often disapprovingly used as in 'Islamic/Muslim fundamentalists.' A religious fundamentalist is a person who follows his or her religion faithfully. As such we have Christian and Hindu fundamentalists too. Is it wrong for people who profess a certain faith to observe the basic principles or fundamentals of their religion with devotion? Muslims may not be ashamed of being called "fundamentalists" for performing their daily prayers, fasting in the month of Ramadan, sharing their wealth with the needy, performing their pilgrimage to Mecca and other religious obligations required of them. The fundamental beliefs of Muslims do not infringe upon the rights of others. Muslims may be branded as fundamentalist by those who abuse the freedom of speech, have scant respect for the religious rights of others and wage war on them under various pretexts.

'Islamic fascism', 'Islamic fascists' and 'Islamofascism' are new kids on the block of linguistic Islamophobia. Islam and Muslims are assigned dangerous labels to scare non-Muslims. As we all know from our history lessons in school, 'fascism' is an European invention. The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* describes fascism as a 'system of government marked by centralization of authority under a dictator, stringent socio-economic controls, suppression of the opposition through terror and censorship, and typically a policy of belligerent nationalism and racism' (1996: 663). The term became widespread and notorious due to the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's fascist dictatorship under his Fascisti regime. A similar concept, Nazism, was practiced by Adolf Hitler. Thus, Nazism, too, originated from Europe. Inciting hatred of Islam and its followers in this way is most

unfortunate and without justification. Islam is opposed to dictatorship or dynastic rule. In fact, Islam has shown democracy at work. For example, after the demise of the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), the caliphs or political leaders of Islam were chosen by a system of *shura* (consensus). Decisions were taken after due consultation and the leaders felt they were immediately accountable to the people and to their Creator in the *akhirah* (hereafter). So to use terms such as 'facist' to describe Muslims is incorrect.

Jose Maria Aznar, a former prime minister of Spain who lost in his country's elections due to Spain's involvement in the unpopular Iraq invasion and occupation has vented his anger in the following words: "Islamic fascism is dangerous to the rest of the world while Castroism is a dangerous threat to Latin America" (<http://rawstory.com/news/2006/Aznar-warns-Chavez-s-Castroism=thre-10052006.html>). The world's most powerful political leader has declared that his 'nation is at war with Islamic fascists' (*The Sunday Times Review*, 1 October 2006). Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have been killed and maimed as a result of this war. It is now common knowledge that it has been waged on false pretexts. The so-called weapons of mass destruction seem to be a figment of the imagination. The number of innocent Afghan civilians who have lost their lives or have been mutilated also runs into thousands. One begins to wonder what the term 'Islamic fascism' means. Tariq Ramadan (cited in Burleigh 2007), has asserted that it is fascism which kills innocent people in Iraq. A US senator, Russel Feingold, a democrat from Virginia, has urged President Bush to cease using the phrase 'Islamic fascism' as it does not make any sense (Carol 2006).

The word 'Islamist' is used by Islamophobes to mean a Muslim who wants to uphold Islam and who therefore must be intolerant. It is also used in the sense of an armed Muslim, militant, radical, extremist who is opposed to Western values. In the recent conflict in Somalia where different factions, mostly clan-based, are involved in gaining power, the Islamist faction is described as terrorists, while non-Somali Ethiopian forces who have invaded the country are portrayed as saviors who are out to get rid of the terrorists. Being an Islamist is not acceptable. Such hypocrisy is practiced by certain countries. 'Islamism' is used synonymously with 'militant Islam', 'radical Islam', 'political Islam' and a terroristic version of Islam (Fuller, G. and Pipes, D., 2003). But taken as a political term, an Islamist is one who believes in the political ideology that Islam encourages. The term 'Islamism' is not acceptable because it trivializes the religion. It cannot be equated with other "isms" like capitalism, communism, consumerism, socialism, Marxism and Castroism. To its believers, Islam is a revealed religion. These two terms – Islamist and Islamism – are often used in the news media to suggest that Muslims are against democracy, engage in violence and hate non-Muslims. In Islam, the political leader is also expected to be the spiritual leader, unlike in other countries which profess other political ideologies.

'Political Islam' is described as dangerous because, according to Islamophobes, it is aggressive and totalitarian (Goldhagen 2006). But according to whom and what criteria? In Islam there is no separation between the state and religion. Leaders who have been given the *amanah* (trust) to govern must do so with the guidance of religious precepts. Governing a country is a great privilege and the leaders are answerable to God for their actions, therefore they cannot abuse their

positions of power. 'Political Islam' is portrayed as dangerous, violent, dictatorial and undemocratic. On the contrary, political Islam is none of these. If certain Muslim leaders fit those epithets, it is not the fault of the religion. Even when Islamist political parties are democratically elected through the ballot box, they are vilified as extremists and militants who are unfit to govern a country. Difficult conditions are created and attempts made to deprive them of their chance to rule. Islamist parties have been compared to communists, Nazis and fascists. Is it wrong if Muslims choose to be governed by the precepts of their religion? Any doubt about the supposedly undesirable association between Islam and politics is baseless and misguided. One has only to look at the situation in Malaysia where the country is governed by a coalition of political parties representing the different ethnic groups in the country. The dominant partner in the ruling coalition is the United Malays National Organization which presents itself as an Islamic party. The leader of the party, who is also the Prime Minister, has time and again assured all Malaysians that the party will be just and fair to all the communities (*The Star*, 18 November 2006). Does this not indicate that Islam and politics can work together in an atmosphere of trust and goodwill?

The coinage 'jihadist' and 'jihadi' are recent Islamophobic terms which are being used widely. Both are derivatives from 'jihad' which in fact has two meanings as correctly included in the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (1996: 968). A jihad refers to 1) a holy war against non-Muslims who wage war against them and 2) a struggle/war against something negative or undesirable within yourself and against external factors such as corruption, poverty, illiteracy, prostitution, etc. The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* has only the first restricted meaning which most non-Muslims are familiar with, i.e. 'a holy war fought by Muslims' (2003: 869). However, the *Macmillan English Dictionary* and the *Oxford Reference Dictionary* give a more satisfactory definition and explanation. It is 'a holy war or fight that Muslims take part in to defend Islam' (Macmillan, 2002: 769), highlighting that the war is a defensive and not offensive one. According to the *Oxford Reference Dictionary*, 'One of the basic duties of a Muslim, prescribed as a religious duty by the Koran and by tradition, is to struggle against threats to the vigor of the Islamic community and also against resistance to the rule of divine law within oneself.' (1986: 442). The word 'jihadi' is used as a noun and has been coined to refer to a person who is involved in jihad which is considered evil. Whatever acts are not covered by jihad are not the activities of a jihadi. Those who carry out unIslamic activities are not jihadis, if we understand the true meaning of jihad. We should not confuse ourselves and fail to distinguish between legitimate defenders of the faith and those who act desperately by resorting to extremist measures. So, in a sense it is synonymous with 'jihadist'. However, the words 'jihadist' and 'jihadi' in the modern context of Islamophobia have come to be narrowly used to refer to a Muslim who fights a holy war against (mainly) Western interests and nations. True jihadists and jihadis, clearly and truly, fight in self-defense of the *ummah* (Muslim community) in the way a jihad ought to be conducted. They will resist invasion, occupation, domination and humiliation by outsiders. No one will agree to one group or country invading, occupying and causing immense harm to another. A jihadist does not commit activities which are proscribed in Islam. It would be seriously erroneous to equate a jihadist or jihadi with a terrorist. So, linguistically, a jihadist or jihadi may be characterized as a patriot, resistance, independence or freedom fighter, one who is

willing to pay the ultimate price for fellow Muslims living under occupation and suffering untold indignities and the like. It really depends on which side you are. To the invaders, colonizers and occupiers, they may be regarded as insurgents, militants, extremists and terrorists. But to those the jihadists or jihadis are fighting for, they are regarded as heroes. As such ‘jihadi terrorists’ and ‘jihadi terrorism’ are not politically correct and are unacceptable collocations. Likewise, ‘jihadism’, another derivative from ‘jihad’, is a Muslim’s just struggle in self-defense of their people, faith and country. Can anything be even remotely wrong with this? Anything else is not jihadism. Muslims who deviate from the *Sunnah* (the deeds and sayings of Prophet Muhammad) and the holy Qur’an to defend their co-religionists and Islam are not jihadis or jihadists. Jihadism does not involve the killing of innocent people such as passengers, bystanders and shoppers or kidnapping certain individuals who are not a party to the conflict. Therefore these four words – jihad, jihadi, jihadist and jihadism – ought to be correctly understood and not misinterpreted, either through ignorance or malice.

Islamophobes have maliciously coined the term ‘Londonistan’ to refer to the British capital, following the names of many Muslim countries which end in –stan (O’Donnel 2006). These people probably believe that there are too many Muslims living in London. This is likely to sow seeds of hatred and discord among the mainly white, English-speaking population who may come to resent the presence of Muslims in their midst. Let us not forget that the many Muslims seen there may, in fact, be students, tourists, embassy staff and others whose presence is not permanent.

Maldives, an island republic located near South India and Sri Lanka with a 100% Muslim population and a near-perfect literacy rate, has been accused of embracing ‘radical Islam’ for the following reasons in an article entitled ‘Maldives fast acquiring a radical Islamic colour’:

- Their women who once ‘wore bright-colour body-fitting dresses’ are not wearing such dresses anymore.
 - Children are being sent to mosques to learn about Islam.
 - Men have begun growing beards and grand new mosques are springing up.
 - The women whose husbands work away from home have been asked to be virtuous by the Islamic teachers.
 - Muslims are prohibited from drinking alcohol.
- (<http://www.newkerala.com/news4.php?action=31785>)

It is rather amusing that an avowedly Islamic country can be described as acquiring radical Islam for returning to their Islamic roots. In addition, Islamophobes are also not being truthful here. The literacy rate of Maldivians is 97.2% according to a 2003 census (<http://education.yahoo.com/refernce/factbook/my/popula.html>). Yet the article has distorted the truth and stated that 93% of the people are illiterate. This is yet another attempt to discredit Muslims.

While the term ‘radical Islam’ is often freely used without its user being aware that it is hurtful to Muslims, there are others, Christians included, who find the term ‘radical Christianity’ strongly objectionable. During a discussion about the war on terror in ABC’s (a television program) daytime talk show ‘The View’, the co-host Rosie O’Donnel expressed her personal views and strongly criticized the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq which had led to the bombing and killing of thousands of people

in the two countries. She blamed radical Christians for this. She was asked to apologize and withdraw her statement immediately (<http://www.christiannewswire.com/news/35336970.html>). Muslims too categorically disapprove of the term which is offensive to Christians just as they disapprove of the offending expression towards Muslims.

Conclusion

We have so far discussed some common examples of linguistic Islamophobia in this paper. It is by no means exhaustive. It seems that the English language is now continually being 'enriched' with many new expressions that attack Islam, Muslims and Arabs worldwide. Demonizing Islam, Muslims and Arabs has got to stop in the name of justice and fair play. We have to build bridges of mutual tolerance, friendship and goodwill, not barriers to global harmony, cooperation and peace. Islam and Muslims are also increasingly being attacked under the guise of freedom of speech, creative freedom, artistic expression and democracy. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, negative expressions which were once exclusively reserved for communism have now been replaced by those vilifying Islam and Muslims. Communism and the countries which practiced it used to be the Other for criticism by the West. Islam seems to have become the new Other now in the absence of another superpower or perceived enemy. While anti-Semitism is against the law, spreading and inciting hatred against Muslims and their religion does not appear to be so yet. As Atkin and Richardson (2007: 22) rightly point out, biased arguments about Islam and Muslims can 'encourage the social stratification of religious communities, and perpetuate discrimination against Muslims.'

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