A Confusion of Minds? An Objection

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This article is a contradiction to the article by Maximilian Gottschlich:A Confusion of Minds. Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia

I was shocked to have seen the unfortunate article by Maximilian Gottschlich that appeared on JCRelations.net February edition. Mr. Gottschlich's essay not only conveys strange and reductive reasoning, its tone is arrogant, dismissive, and is anything but the kind of role model that an organization promoting true dialogue should emulate and endorse. The most egregious part of the article is that it dismisses and denies one of the most difficult and problematic aspects of Western culture that has been manifest for well over a millennium, a problem that is closely related to the Western problem of Anti-Semitism. That is the reality of Western Islamophobia.

Contrary to Mr. Gottschlich's claim, Islamophobia was not invented in the 1970s. The term was actually coined as *islamophobie* by a Frenchman, Alphonse-Étienne Dinet, an Orientalist painter, in his 1918 biography of Muhammad. It refers to the ancient disorder of irrational aversion to everything Islamic and to the Muslim as the natural and irreconcilable enemy of the Christian and the European. It sees Islam as the negation of civilization, barbaric and cruel. The term was invented only in the early twentieth century, but the phenomenon is ancient. The problem has been treated by dozens of scholarly works written by Europeans – not Muslims, as Mr. Gottschlich claims. The authors are academics and scholars who are experts in their fields. I am talking about people such as Professors John Tolan at the Université de Nantes, Gil Anidjar of Columbia University, Michael Frassetto of Georgia State University, David Blanks at the American University in Cairo, Suzanne Conklin Akbari at the University of Toronto, the late Kenneth Setton at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, and the well-known British intellectual and writer Norman Daniel.

Why are Mr. Gottschlich and so many other intelligent and educated people ignorant of the problem of Islamophobia? The reason is actually quite simple. Fear and hatred of Muslims, like fear and hatred of Jews, is so deeply embedded in Western culture that it is hardly noticed. Islamophobia is learned and absorbed with one's mother's milk. It is unconscious. It seems "natural." But why is such deep antipathy to Islam such a common Western trait? The story behind Western dread of Islam actually begins even before the birth of Islam.

For the first three centuries of Christian history, Christians and Jews competed against one another for the status of being the "true" chosen of God. The Jews of Late Antiquity did not consider Jesus to have been the expected Jewish messiah, and the new Christian believers considered their religion to have fulfilled or superseded the old and outmoded expression of monotheism epitomized by the "Old Testament." The competition between these two communities continued until the fourth century, when the Roman Empire Christianized. In a single generation Christianity moved from a despised and persecuted faith under Emperor Diocletian to a privileged faith under Emperor Constantine, and only a few decades later it became the official religion of the newly Christianized Byzantine Empire. The miraculous change in such a short time was considered by many to have been divinely ordained. And why not? It was such an extraordinary turn of events! It seemed to any rational individual that history proved theology – that the Christianization of the Empire proved the truth of Christ. This perspective was articulated in many writings and treatises

by Christian theologians, historians, and other intellectuals, and their views seemed to be proven by the extraordinary flowering of Christian civilization.

But less than three centuries later, that perspective was turned on its head by the astonishing success of Islam. And to make the blow even more painful, Muslims naturally considered that history had proved *their* theology. God had certainly ordained the astounding success of Islam and the extraordinary flowering of its own brilliant civilization.

What was the Christian reaction? Some Christians looked inward when the Byzantine Empire was nearly swallowed up by the Muslims and their previous nemesis, the Persian Empire collapsed entirely under the pressure of Muslim expansion. They contemplated why their faith might have failed to meet with divine favor. Most Christians, however, sought another reason. Many concluded that the Devil was behind the success of Islam. They could not conceive of the possibility, after their triumph over Judaism and Roman paganism, that Islam could be a reasonable and legitimate expression of monotheism. Some wrote that Muhammad could not be a prophet of God, but must have been the prophet of Satan. Others claimed that he was an epileptic or a trickster who deceived his dim-witted followers into working and sacrificing for him, and that he was nothing more than what we would call today a deceitful cult leader, a charlatan and a fraud.

These images were repeated so often in Christian writings that they penetrated into other conveyors of culture in the Christian world: folklore, the plastic arts, literature, music, children's stories. Like Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia became embedded in Christian culture. While it began as an ecclesiastical reaction to a profoundly painful political blow, it transformed into a much larger cultural phobia, a fear of the "Saracen," the "Moor," the "Arab" or "Ishmaelite," and the image of the cruel, swarthy pirate who would steal one's children and assault one's women became secularized in European civilization. It was even assumed that Jews were natural allies of the Muslims, a potential "fifth column" for Muslim attacks against Europe. Contrary to Mr. Gottschlich's claims, this fear and hatred of Islam was not invented by some Muslim imams in the 1970s. One can see its expression in the high art found in European museums and churches for centuries, in popular culture, and in many genres of European literature. That culture was brought by Europeans to distant lands such as North America, Australia, Africa and other places so that Islamophobia has thoroughly penetrated western civilization in General.

The reality of Islamophobia does not excuse Muslims for the huge rise in virulent, hateful Anti-Semitism that has become so pronounced in much if not most of the Muslim world today. This reality must also be addressed. But the fact is that Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism exist side-by-side in many parts of the world. It is the task and responsibility of institutions such as JCRelations.net and the ICCJ to educate and advocate in order to end this disease of scapegoating and irrational hate. Dismissing or even excusing one strain of the disease is not a solution. It is a provocation. No organization whose purpose is to advance interfaith understanding should promote such prejudiced and arrogant writings by including them in their publications. It does its best work when it provides positive and helpful forums and resources for education and activism against all forms of hate and prejudice.

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For Dr. Firestone's writings on the topic, see:
- "Islamophobia and Antisemitism"
- "Contextualizing Anti-Semitism in Islam"
- "Islamaphobia and anti-Semitism in the Media"
- "Jewish-Muslim Relations"

- “Muslim-Jewish Dialogue”
- Who are the Real Chosen People
- An Introduction to Islam for Jews
- Children of Abraham: And Introduction to Judaism for Muslims

See also:
- Books

- Arabic Translation
- Turkish Translation