



The Perniciousness of Islamophobia: An American Perspective

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Most thoughtful people recognize that the world is a complicated place. And most also understand that serious and stubborn problems are complex and not easy to solve. One of the most frightening and stubborn problems we face today is the terrible violence and suffering that we observe in the Middle East and North Africa, and which is being exported increasingly to many other parts of the world.

Why is it, then, that so many thoughtful people conclude that the root cause of this suffering is simply and entirely the religion of Islam? The horrific behaviors of some Muslims we observe today are hardly different from those of some Christians in other times. Think of the Crusades and the Inquisition, for starters. But most people do not assume that Christianity is inherently a violent and bloody religion.

There is a reason for our hyperbolic reflex. Violence perpetrated by Muslims triggers deep-seated anxiety about Islam borne of many centuries of cultural baggage. We are all Islamophobes. We come by it naturally.

Islamophobia has been deeply embedded in Western culture from nearly as far back as the birth of Islam in the seventh century. Here is why that happened (in a moment I'll explain *how* it happened).

Monotheism engenders a religious perspective that assumes, logically, that because there is one God, there can be only one *real* Truth. Why would an all-knowing and all-loving God give different and contradictory revelations to different peoples? If different revelations appear to be inconsistent or contradictory, it seems impossible that they could have come from the same divine source. And they certainly can't all be true. The logical religious response to this unimaginable situation is to conclude that only one can be correct. But then how does one determine which is the correct one?

That problem has never proven very difficult to solve. For most people, the answer is simple: *ours* is correct. All others are false.

1700 years ago and long before Islam came on the scene, Jews and Christians disagreed fiercely over this problem of conflicting revelations. Which of their communities was in possession of the *real* Truth? The argument remain unresolved for centuries; meanwhile both were persecuted severely by the pagan Roman Empire, which didn't appreciate that believers in these religions refused to make offerings to the gods on behalf of the emperor.

Christianity finally won the competition when it became the state church of the Roman Empire in the year 380 with the Edict of Thessalonica. The change was drastic and very swift, and Christians at the time could still remember family members being torn by beasts at the "spectacles" in the Roman arenas simply for being Christian. The change from being a despised religion to becoming a beloved religion seemed miraculous. How could it be that within a generation, Christianity transitioned from a reviled religion to the official religion of the most powerful entity on earth?

Theologians and Church leaders at the time drew their own eminently logical conclusion: *sic deus vult*– “so God wills.” To the Church, history proved theology. The fact of Christian ascendancy and domination proved that the Christian understanding of truth was the *real* Truth.

That perspective was a wonderfully satisfying way to see the world, and it was a successful worldview for some centuries.

But then, seemingly out of nowhere, another group of monotheists emerged onto the scene. They came from the parched desert sands of Arabia in the seventh century and quickly became not only a successful competing religion, but also creators of a brilliant and expansive civilization. This new historical reality seemed to disprove the earlier Christian theology of supremacy. How could it be possible, Christians asked, that such an uncivilized people could become so powerful, so successful?

The Muslims, meanwhile, like monotheist believers before them, naturally assumed that their vision of truth was the *real* Truth. And given their amazing successes, they quickly came to the same conclusion that Christians had assumed for their triumph centuries earlier. The victory of Islam is the will of God. History proves theology.

The extraordinary success of Islam was a crushing blow to Christianity and the Church needed to find an explanation.

Various rationalizations were soon put forward to account for the extraordinary success of Islam. One of the earliest was penned by St. Theophanes, an eighth century Byzantine monk and chronicler who wrote that Muhammad was a clever and ruthless epileptic. In order to protect himself from ridicule when he fell into seizures, Muhammad invented the story that he went into trances in order to receive messages from a divine being.

Since Theophanes in the eighth century theologians and historians have come up with many scenarios to explain away the success of Islam, including the myth that the revelations Muhammad had received were not from God but from Satan. These and many other hurtful allegations have been circulating for centuries in traditional media ranging from Church histories to theological tracts, legends and folklore, art and music. The constant reinforcement of such falsehoods embeds them within the cultural assumptions of a civilization. When they persist for long enough they seem conventional, natural “facts” of life.

And this explains *how* fear and anxiety about Islam became a part of Western culture. When stories are told and retold countless times, they become part of the fabric of a civilization. They become, in effect an accepted fact.

The *Chanson de Rolande* is a classic example. It is a song and poem depicting the treacherous Muslim massacre of Charlemagne’s army when it had let down its guard after having accepted an offer for peace. The Song of Roland is the oldest work of French literature and became a template for the development of European literature in general. As it turns out, however, it wasn’t Muslims who caused the massacre, but a band of rebellious Basques. But no matter. Through countless stories, songs, turns of phrases and other means, the message of Muslim treachery became a basic part of European cultural assumption for centuries.

We Americans absorbed the bias through our cultural identity as an extension of European civilization. We come by it naturally, of course, but we have added to it as well. Our most obvious

contribution has been through the movies.

Nobody in Hollywood sat down in the 1920s or 30s and planned to make Arabs or Muslims into villains. Their presumed villainy is simply an extension of cultural stereotypes. The first portrayal of an Arab hijacker in film, for example, was not about Entebbe in the 1970s, but a 1936 movie called *The Black Coin* in which an Arab threatens to blow up an airliner. And the 1920s Rudolph Valentino movies *The Sheik* (1921) and *The Son of the Sheik* (1929) already depict Arab Muslims as thieves and murderers.

So don't be surprised at your Islamophobia. I have it too. It is passed on to us, as it were, with our mothers' milk. But now that we recognize it, we need to think about how it affects our thinking about important issues.

As thoughtful people, most of us feel badly for those suffering in portions of the Muslim world, and we rightly fear the violence emanating from it as well. If we want to put an end to it we need to act effectively, and acting effectively requires smart analysis and good decision making. Attributing the problems simplistically to Islam is natural because of our cultural baggage, and it may be personally reassuring because it absolves us of all (even indirect) responsibility.

But that approach is doomed to failure because it does not explain what is driving the rage that fuels the violence. And it results in the demonization of an entire community. Succumbing to Islamophobia will not solve problems. It will only exacerbate them.

Reuven Firestone is Regenstein Professor of Judaism and Islam at Hebrew Union College, and author of *Who Are the Real Chosen People?*.