Islamophobia, its Past and Present (Advanced)

Islam was founded in the seventh century and is an Abrahamic religion, like Judaism and Christianity. These three monotheistic religions recognise Abraham (Ibrāhīm in Arabic) as their first prophet, and are centred around the worship of the god of Abraham/Ibrāhīm, who in Islam is called Allah (the Arabic word for God). Despite, and sometimes because of, these shared origins, there has been interfaith conflict[1]. Present-day Islamophobia has its roots in Medieval anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim sentiment propagated by the Christian Church prior to, and during, the Crusades (1096–1291).

After its founding in 610, Islam spread across North Africa and the Middle East, growing its followers and conquering territory that was part of the Christian Roman Empire during the Early Muslim Conquests (622–750 CE).[2] In the areas now known as Spain and Portugal, this sparked the Reconquista movement (720–1492) as Christians sought to reconquer the lost land. Despite this conflict, there is evidence of trade and good relations between Christians and Muslims: in Spain, the ruling Muslims established relationships with senior Christian figures, while in England the eighth-century King Offa minted a coin modelled on a dinar made by Al-Mansur, the Caliph of Baghdad.

However, at the end of the eleventh century, the Christian Church orchestrated a military campaign against Islam and Muslims to reclaim territory, notably Jerusalem, lost to Islamic rule and to strengthen its control over monarchs in the Roman Empire. In 1095, Pope Urban II gave a speech, triggering the start of the Crusades, in which he referred to Muslims as 'the enemies of the Lord', depicting them as a distinct group to Christians.

When the Crusades ended in 1291, Muslims had been demonised for two centuries and were established as the 'other' in the minds of European Christians. This impacted how they were viewed and treated. In 1400s Spain, for example, when Christians ruled once more, Purity of Blood laws excluded converted Christians with suspected or known Muslim or Jewish heritage from public life on account of their supposedly 'impure blood'. These laws became central to the Spanish Inquisition and were used to justify the persecution and expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain.

European colonialism, which began in the fifteenth century and lasted until the twentieth, reinforced this bigoted notion of a primitive 'other' (and of the superiority of white, Christian Europeans), and ultimately led to the creation of the concept of race to justify power inequalities, slavery and the mistreatment of those who had been colonised. That said, Muslims had already been racialised and depicted as biologically and culturally inferior before this concept emerged. The demonisation of Muslims is also evident in how the Moors[3] were viewed in sixteenth-century England: in 1596, Elizabeth I wrote a letter to the Mayor of London stating that there were too many Moors and requesting that they be deported to Spain and Portugal.[4]

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[1] Jerusalem, which is currently claimed by both Israelis and Palestinians as their capital, is a holy site for Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Who rules over the area has been a source of interreligious conflict. The Crusades saw Christians and Muslims fight over this land. In the present day, this land is a source of conflict between Israelis, who are mostly Jews, and Palestinians, who are mostly Muslims.

[2] Conflict and conquest are part of the human story and most places in the world have been controlled by different rulers and empires throughout history.

[3] Moors is the term given to Muslims from North Africa. They ruled parts of Spain and Portugal until the fifteenth century, having claimed the territory during the Early Muslim conquests in the eighth century.

[4] Shakespeare's plays *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* further highlight people's distrustful and disdainful views of Muslims. *Othello*, who is targeted for being a Moor, is insulted, tricked and driven to murder and suicide; while in *The Merchant of Venice*, which is also known for its portrayal of the period's antisemitism, the Prince of Morocco, also a Moor, is depicted as an undesirable wedding match.

During the period of European colonialism, there were large Muslim empires, notably the Ottoman Empire (1299–1922), which sought to expand into Christian Europe. The threat of territorial expansion, combined with long-established prejudice concerning the Islamic 'other', impacted how Muslims were viewed, written about and spoken of.

The Enlightenment (1680–1820) simultaneously saw the emergence of more positive views of Islam, and the cementing of ideas of Islamic inferiority in the world of academia. There was a division between the West, the 'occident', and the East, 'the orient'. From the eighteenth century onwards, it was common for Europeans/Westerners to view Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, including Islamic culture, as simple and backward, despite the existence of prominent Islamic empires and the countless contributions Muslims made to human progress. This practice was later coined as Orientalism by the Palestinian-American professor Edward Said, who argued simplistic views of the Middle East were used to help justify European colonialism.

By the early twentieth century, a large part of the Muslim world was ruled by European colonialist countries.

Tropes that emerged in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period that portrayed Muslims and Islam as antagonistic to Christianity, as violent and barbaric, as oppressors of women, as monolithic and as a threat to Europe continue to circulate to this day, having been adapted to different socio-historical contexts. These tropes shape how Muslims are viewed and treated, both in European countries and elsewhere through the foreign policy of Western/European governments.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, these prejudicial attitudes towards Muslims and Islam have led to discriminatory portrayals of Muslims in the media and the entertainment industry; to public figures, including politicians, espousing Islamophobic views without censure; to government foreign policy that has seen Western/European powers invade Muslim majority countries in the Middle East; to anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies, and attacks on asylum detention centres; to structural inequalities that mean Muslims face discrimination in the workplace and are more likely to experience poverty; and to acts of violence against Muslim individuals and communities.

Islamophobia does not just exist in European/Western contexts. In recent years, there have been attacks against the Rohingya in Myanmar, the Uyghurs in China, and the Muslim population of India, which are rooted in the historical othering of Muslims. The attacks against the Rohingya and the Uyghurs have been called genocides.

It is important to understand that Islamophobia has both anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim strands; it is both a form of racism and a form of religious prejudice that views Muslims as culturally inferior and Islam as a backwards religion that does not align with liberal, democratic values. While these two forms of Islamophobia can appear separately, they are fed by each other. Both, therefore, need to be recognised to challenge Islamophobia.