Research Notes

The Language of Islamophobia in Internet Articles

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Abstract: Islamophobia, the hatred for and fear of Islam and Muslims, manifests itself in physical, political, cultural, linguistic and other forms. From the linguistic perspective, many words have been coined to perpetuate prejudices against Muslims and their religion. Expressions are freely used to associate Islam, which means "peace" in Arabic, with concepts and actions which the religion and practising Muslims do not approve of, much less condone. Expressions such as Islamic terrorism, Islamic fanaticism, Muslim extremists, Islamist and political Islam have been used pejoratively. To strike fear and misgivings in the minds of many Europeans, the British capital has even been mischievously called "Londonistan" by anti-Muslim elements. Known Islamophobic items taken from Internet articles need to be analysed to respond objectively to linguistic Islamophobia.

Key words: Islamophobia, political Islam, Muslims, Internet, language

Islamophobia may be defined as the practice of prejudice against Islam and the demonisation and dehumaniSation of Muslims. This is generally manifested in negative attitudes, discrimination, physical harassment and vilification in the media. The British Runnymede

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Trust, an independent anti-racist think tank in the United Kingdom, in a 1997 report described Islamophobia as the view that Islam has no values in common with other cultures; is inferior to the West; has a violent political ideology; its criticisms of the West lack substance and that discriminatory practices carried out against Muslims are justifiable. Kopanski laments that there are influential academics "who are engaged in promoting the idea of 'Islamic threat' to Western civilization."[1]

After assuming the papacy, Pope Benedict XVI, in his major address to Muslim leaders, said they had a duty to help defeat terrorism. It is not clear if the Pope made a similar appeal to people of other faiths or their leaders, political or religious. By asking Muslim leaders to help defeat terror, he was implying that it is Muslims who are spreading terror, and absolving a lot of others who are involved. The spiritual leader of the world's Catholics cited the words of a Byzantine emperor who had characterised some of the teachings of the Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) as "evil and inhuman." After worldwide protests he apologised saying that the quote "came from a text that didn't reflect his personal opinion."[2]

Pat Robertson, supposedly a Christian evangelist, and a television host on the Christian Broadcasting Network's *The 700 Club* went so far as to insult Islam as "a bloody, brutal type of religion." *The Sunday Star* included a news report which stated that Nick Griffith, leader of the British National Party had called Islam a "wicked, vicious faith." Such people "have been joined by the forces of many secret societies like Freemasons and All Bonesmen, who fear Islam as an organised, institutionalised force."[3]

President George Bush's global "war on terrorism" has given the pretext for many governments to go after Muslims. This includes the enthusiastic attempts of some Balkan countries to exploit the global "war on terrorism" for their own advantage. This has resulted in increased anti-Islamic activities in the Balkans. Muslims in Kosovo and Bosnia are depicted by Serb intellectuals as "Islamic fundamentalists, Islamic terrorists, Islamic radicals...."[4] Islamophobes have even coined the term "Londonistan" to refer to the capital of England and the United Kingdom, following the names of many Muslim countries which end in –stan as in Pakistan. This is likely to sow seeds of hatred among the mainly White English-

speaking population who may come to resent the presence of Muslims in their midst.

What is clear from all the above is that there is a relentless onslaught against Islam and Muslims from both sides of the Atlantic, from personalities of non-Islamic faiths, nationalist and racist groups. Muslims have been very unfairly stereotyped and frequently linked to "ignoble traits of intolerance, threat, terrorism, and an implacable opposition to modernity."[5]

The use of the term "Islamophobia" and hatred for Muslims in various guises have become more rampant since the events of September 11, 2001. The attacks on American soil have brought Americans, Canadians, Europeans and Australians, who have shared values, much closer to attack the religion of Islam itself. If it is indeed true that the 9/11 attackers were Muslims, they had clearly strayed from the Prophet Muḥammad's ḥadīth (saying) that a perfect Muslim is one from whose tongue and hands, people are safe. Civilians, passengers, bystanders and shoppers are not legitimate targets in a hostile situation. Practising Muslims do not target them. Desperate ones do.

The attacks on American soil, and later the London bombings in July 2006, have made Muslims in general to be scapegoats and provided Islamophobes an excuse to malign Muslims as a whole, in the various countries they live in. To drag the religion into such activities is gross injustice. Islam ought not be associated with the personal, cultural, separatist and political motivations of those who profess the religion. Their actions are not representative of Islam and the *ummah* (worldwide Muslim community).

Atkin and Richardson examined, in 2007, a sample of 86 "letters to the editor" about Islam and Muslims in *The Guardian* and *The Observer* (two British newspapers). The letters were printed between January 1 and May 31, 2004. They concluded that "so many of the arguments employed in those letters discussing Islam or Muslims go awry."[6]

Studying Islamophobia

The term "Islamophobia" is formed by combining "Islamo" which refers to Islam, the religion, and things associated with it, and the

Greek suffix "phobia" which means "fear of." It is difficult to understand what there is to fear from Muslims. After all, Muslims are not advanced militarily, educationally, scientifically, industrially and economically. They do not possess weapons of mass destruction, own prestigious universities, have not made groundbreaking research in the fields of medicine and science, to mention a few instances. Nevertheless, Islamophobia persists.

Islamophobic activities did not begin recently. They started as early as the Crusades and later the Inquisition in Spain. The term became popular, among other things, with the publication of *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* by the Runnymede Trust in the United Kingdom in 1997.[7] It attained greater credibility with the participation of the then UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan at a seminar titled "Confronting Islamophobia: Education for Tolerance and Understanding" in December, 2004 in New York.[8] The term, according to Daniel Pipes, has achieved a degree of linguistic and political acceptance. But it has yet to be included, for example, in the *Collins Advanced Learner's Dictionary* published in 2007. The Council of Europe defines Islamophobia as "the fear of or prejudiced viewpoint towards Islam, Muslims and matters pertaining to them."[9] Allport defines prejudice as "an aversive or hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group, and is therefore presumed to have objectionable qualities ascribed to that group."[10]

Robert Spencer, a prolific Islamophobic writer, has gravely offended Muslims by describing the Holy Qur'ān as the jihadists *Mein Kampf*, the book which embodies Hitler's fascist philosophy.[11] Henzell-Thomas of the Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism (FAIR) has stated that the Internet is a rich source of Islamophobic utterances.[12] True enough, Arabs have been variously described as "limb amputators," "women repressors," "towel-heads" and "camel-jockeys." The looting of Iraq is the work of "a load of thieving Arabs." Muslims are "loathsome," "terrorists" and "asylum seekers."[13]

It is apparent that those who have easy access to various forms of public discourse have the power and privilege to express their views with more ease and efficiency. The spread of Islamophobic language is a "linguistic form of domination and manipulation" to

borrow Fairclough's expression.[14] Those who come across prejudiced language need to exercise critical language awareness for the sake of justice and objectivity.

Methodology

Known Islamophobic terms, 16 of them, namely, Islamic terrorism, Islamic fanatics, Islamic fundamentalism, Islamic extremists, Islamic radicals, Islamic fascists, Islamic fundamentalism, Islamists, jihadist, Islamism, militant Islam, radical Islam, political Islam, fanatical Islam, Islamofascists, militant Muslims and Muslim terrorists were typed on the search engines of Yahoo, MSN and Google between September and November 2006. A wealth of information was revealed about these expressions in terms of their usage in context. A literature review on Islamophobia was conducted with the invaluable help of the articles gathered from the Internet sources and scholarly publications. There were many articles in defence of and against Islamophobia. These formed the basis for the present study. The present researchers have discussed the anti-Muslim vocabulary as people familiar with linguistics and as Muslims themselves living in an Islamic country.

Discussion

As stated, this study is concerned with the linguistic aspects of Islamophobia - expressions which serve to perpetuate prejudices against Islam and its adherents. It looks at some common examples of Islamophobic language in various articles gathered from the Internet and responds to them in an objective manner. Islam, in Arabic, means peace. However, certain quarters have come up with many collocations with "Islam" and "Islamic" which are incompatible with and contradictory to things related to Islam. "Islam" is a noun. "Islamic" as an adjective is derived from "Islam." The term "Islamic" is used to refer to the practices of Muslims and those related to their religion. Thus, "Islamic" can co-occur with history, books, teachings, schools, laws, countries, museum, values, civilisation, etc.

The following expressions are extremely offensive to Muslims when they are used together with "Islamic," for example: Islamic terrorists/terrorism, fanatics, radicals, fascists, extremists/extremism,

militants, threat, violence, etc. Many offensive terms also co-occur before "Islam" for example: fascist, fanatical, radical, hardline, militant Islam, etc. The term "Muslim" is used after "militant" and before "terrorists" as in militant Muslims and Muslim terrorists. Moten comments that Muslims are portrayed as "extremists and threatening" if they are involved in "efforts to pursue policies contrary to the West or to redress the unfavourable balance of global power."[15] Bin Laden is used as a reference point to personify the so-called "Islamic terrorism." Even scholars who are supposed to be objective are unashamedly Islamophobic. Serbian scholars have used the words "terrorists" and "Muslims" synonymously.[16]

Is it necessary to describe those who carry out violent acts as Buddhist, Catholic, Christian, Hindu, Muslim or Protestant? There are militants and terrorists of all hues all over the world. Those in the Basque region of Spain who want to break away from the country do sometimes commit violent acts which result in many deaths, but they are often referred to as Basque separatists, not terrorists. The Irish Republican Army carried out many acts of terror, but they were never referred to by their religious affiliation. But in the case of violent acts committed by Muslims, they are invariably linked to their religion.

Islam does not inspire, nor does it aspire that its followers resort to terrorism, radicalism, and militancy. As such it is grossly unfair to use the epithet "Islamic" before the above words. The European Union's Commissioner for Justice, Freedom and Security has rightly condemned the use of the phrase "Islamic terrorism" to refer to people who commit suicide attacks or criminal activities on behalf of Islam.[17] These people are not doing Islam any favour. In fact, they have unintentionally succeeded in getting many non-Muslims to misunderstand Islam.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, a Christian voice of reason and moderation in the United Kingdom, has pointed out the injustice in coining the phrase Islamic terrorism. Whoever carries out terrorist and criminal acts in whatever guise abuse their religion, whether they are Buddhist, Christian, Hindu or Muslim. Young Muslim leaders who met in Copenhagen, Denmark in July 2006, have in fact urged "young Muslims to reject and marginalise extremism."[18]

The word "fundamentalist" is disapprovingly used as in "Islamic/ Muslim fundamentalists." A religious fundamentalist is one who follows his or her religion faithfully. As such there are Christian, Jewish as well as Hindu fundamentalists too. Is it harmful for Muslims to observe the basic tenets or fundamentals of their religion with devotion? Muslims may not be ashamed of being called "fundamentalists" for observing the fundamentals of Islam: their testimony of faith, daily prayers, fasting in the month of Ramadan, sharing their wealth with the less fortunate and performing their pilgrimage to Makkah. This includes defending their faith and upholding religious principles. Muslims have no problem in living peacefully with Jews, Christians and people of other religious affiliations "as long as all are sincere and honest in sticking to God-dictated fundamentals enshrined in their respective scriptures."[19]

Islamic fascism, Islamic fascists and Islamofascism are new kids on the block of linguistic Islamophobia.[20] Islam and Muslims are assigned dangerous labels to scare non-Muslims and to incite the latter to attack the former on the street, in the bus, the plane, in their places of worship and their homes. As is well known, the term fascism is a European invention. It has been defined as a "system of government marked by centralisation of authority under a dictator, stringent socioeconomic controls, suppression of the opposition through terror and censorship, and typically a policy of belligerent nationalism and racism."[21] The term became well known due to the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's fascist dictatorship under his Fascist regime.

A similar concept, Nazism, was practised by the German Chancellor, Adolf Hitler. Inciting hatred of Islam and Muslims in this way is most unfortunate. Islam is opposed to dictatorship or dynastic rule. For example, after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad (SAW), the caliphs or political leaders of Muslims were chosen by a system of consensus known as *shūrā*. In fact, the Prophet (SAW)'s succession was done democratically. Decisions were taken after due consultation, and the leaders felt they were immediately accountable to the people and to their Creator in the Hereafter. So, to use the above terms to describe Muslims makes no sense.

Jose Maria Aznar, the Prime Minister of Spain who lost in his bid to be re-elected due to Spain's involvement in the invasion and

occupation of Iraq, has vented his anger by saying that "Islamic fascism" is dangerous to the rest of the world while Castroism is a dangerous threat to Latin America.[22] George Bush, the President of the "hyper-power" state, has announced that his "nation is at war with Islamic fascists."[23] Thousands of innocent Iraqis have been killed, mutilated and displaced as a result of this war. It is now common knowledge that it was waged without locating the elusive "weapons of mass destruction." The invasion of Iraq along with its horrifying consequences may be conveniently labelled as the mother of all terror activities. The number of innocent Afghan civilians involved is also large. The term Islamic fascism is, therefore, meaningless. One cannot but agree with Khan who states emphatically that it is the born-again neo-conservative Christian and Zionist fanatics who are "the real new fascist-Bolsheviks, who are out there to suppress democratic dissent and take away democratic freedom of Muslims in the name of cracking down" on what has come to be terribly and conveniently popularised as terrorism.[24]

An Islamist is a Muslim who would like the state, which is predominantly Muslim, to be administered according to Islamic law. Modern day Islamists have turned to the ballot box to get the people's approval for this. But the word "Islamist" is used in the sense of one who wants to uphold Islam and is intolerant, therefore. It is also used in the sense of an armed Muslim, militant, radical, extremist and uncommitted to Western values. "Islamism" is used synonymously with militant Islam, radical Islam, political Islam and a terrorist version of Islam.[25] Taken as a political term, an Islamist is one who believes in the political ideology that Islam espouses. The term "Islamism" has been coined and is being used pejoratively to portray Islam as just another *ism* like communism, fascism, Nazism or socialism.[26] Islam is a way of life. It includes many things and politics is just one of these. These two terms - Islamist and Islamism- are used in the news media as if Muslims detest democracy, engage in violence and hate non-Muslims. In Islam, the political leader is also the spiritual leader. It may not be so in other countries which profess other ideologies. If Muslims prefer, through democratic choice, an Islamic state to other forms of government in countries where they are a vast majority, how does it affect those who do not live there? Do others have to dictate how Muslims have to conduct their political life?

Political Islam is described as undesirable by Islamophobes. In Islam there is no separation between the state and religion. As Moten rightly points out: "Islam is comprehensive in scope in which religion is integral to politics" unlike the modern secular norm.[27] Leaders who have been given the trust to govern must do so with the guidance of religion. Governing a country is a great privilege, the leaders are answerable to God for their actions, they cannot, therefore, abuse their positions. Political Islam is portrayed as dangerous, violent, dictatorial and undemocratic. On the contrary, political Islam is none of these. If certain Muslim leaders fit these descriptions, it is not the fault of the religion. Even when Islamic political parties are democratically elected through the ballot box, they are still not good enough. They are vilified as extremists who are not fit to govern a country. So, conditions are created and attempts made to deprive them of their chance to govern.

Islamic parties have been compared to communists, Nazis and fascists. Muslims are ridiculed for demanding their democratic right to be governed by the precepts of their religion. Misgivings about the association between Islam and politics are unfounded. One just has to look at the governing elite in Malaysia, for instance. The country is governed by a ruling coalition comprising various political parties representing the different races and faiths in the country. The dominant party is the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) which, among others, champions Islam. The party president who is also the Prime Minister, in his address to the party's general assembly in 2006, assured fellow Malaysians that the Malay Muslim party will be just and fair to all the communities. Other race-based parties have given UMNO the trust to lead the country because of their conviction that the party will treat them fairly. Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi emphasised that tolerance and power sharing were essential for maintaining peace and stability in the country.[28] It can certainly be seen that Islam exerts a positive influence in the politics of even a multi-ethnic country.

The coinage jihadist is among the most recent Islamophobic terms. It derives from *jihād* which in fact has two meanings as rightly included in the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. A *jihād* refers to 1) a holy war against non-Muslims who wage war against them and 2) a struggle/war against something

negative or undesirable, for instance, corruption, poverty, illiteracy, prostitution, etc.[29] The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* has only the first meaning which most non-Muslims are familiar with, i.e. "a holy war fought by Muslims."[30] However, the *Macmillan English Dictionary* and the *Oxford Reference Dictionary* give a more satisfactory definition and explanation. According to *Macmillan,* it is "a holy war or fight that Muslims take part in to defend Islam," meaning it is a defensive and not an offensive one.[31] 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 vigour of the Islamic community and also against resistance to the rule of divine law within oneself."[32] However, in the opinion of Fareed Ahmad and many others, "No matter how much Muslims may protest, the term *jihād* is consistently used in the lexicon of unbelief to mean a violent-armed struggle against the West" waged by so-called rogue states, suicide bombers, holy warriors and radical Islamist hijackers.[33] The word jihadist in the modern context of Islamophobia has come to narrowly mean a Muslim who fights a holy war against mainly, Western interests and nations.

A jihadist is truly one who fights in self-defence of the *ummah* or Muslim community and resists invasion, occupation, domination and humiliation by outsiders. No one will agree to one group or country invading, occupying and causing immense harm and untold suffering to another, for example, torture, rape, killing and desecration. So, objectively, a jihadist may be characterised as a patriot, resistance, independence, freedom fighter and so on. To the invaders and occupiers, jihadists may be insurgents, militants, extremists and terrorists. To those struggling to liberate their countries from colonial and neo-colonial domination, jihadists are regarded as heroes and defenders of the faith. Thus, jihadism, another derivative from *jihād* is a Muslim's struggle in self-defence of his/her people and country. Muslims rightly see nothing wrong in this enterprise. Muslims who stray from the struggle to defend their co-religionists and Islam are not jihadists. Jihadism does not involve the killing of innocent people such as passengers and shoppers. Jihadi is used as an adjective and may be used together with motives, activities and intentions, for instance. But these jihadi motives or activities are all related to defending their religion and co-religionists

in whatever way is permissible. Their actions are not in anyway associated with revenge attacks which involve people who are not directly responsible for attacking them. It must be emphasised that a *jihād* is not limited to an armed struggle. It also comprises an intellectual struggle which includes dispelling the myths and misconceptions others have about them and their religion. This is what the modern Muslim intelligentsia is doing. The words, *jihād*, jihadist, jihadism and jihadi, therefore, ought to be correctly understood and not misinterpreted.

Maldives, an island republic inhabited by Muslims, and with a population with almost 100 percent literacy rate, near South India and Sri Lanka, has been accused of "fast acquiring a radical Islamic colour for the following reasons:"[34]

1) The women, who once "wore bright-colour body-fitting dresses," are not wearing such dresses anymore.
2) Children are being sent to mosques to learn about Islam.
3) "Men have begun growing beards and grand new mosques are springing up."
4) The women whose husbands work away from home have been asked to be virtuous by the Islamic teachers.
5) Muslims are prohibited from drinking alcohol.

It is rather amusing to see a Muslim country being described as acquiring "radical Islamic colour" for returning to their Islamic roots. The irony is that the Islamophobes attempt to distort the truth by labelling 93% of the Maldivians as illiterate whereas the literacy rate in Maldives, according to a 2003 census, stood at 97.2 percent or a little higher.[35]

While the term radical Islam, which is offensive to Muslims, is freely bandied about, the coinage of the term radical Christianity is condemned in no uncertain terms by many Christians. During a discussion about the war on terror on ABC's daytime talk show "The View," Rosie O'Donnel, the co-host, expressed her personal outrage about the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan and the subsequent bombing and killing of thousands of people in the two countries. She attributed these deeds to radical Christians. She was asked to immediately apologise and retract her statement.[36] It is objectionable to use a term which is offensive to Christians. Likewise,

it is offensive to use similar expressions against Muslims. O'Donnel
is not the only person who is horrified by the massive amount of
suffering being experienced by the Iraqis. In a letter to the editor of
The Observer, a British newspaper, a reader, Kaz Knowlden,
expressed his anguish in the following words:

> Wantonly bombing Faluja and killing hundreds of its
> civilians as a result, and then describing these deaths as an
> accident, shows either great naivety or great stupidity. Such
> an approach merely confirms Western indifference to Iraqi
> suffering and Western double standards.[37]

Conclusion

Islam and Muslims are increasingly being attacked in the name of
freedom of speech, creative freedom, artistic expression and
democracy. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, negative
expressions which were once reserved for communism have now
been replaced by those vilifying Islam and its followers. Communism
used to be the "other" for bashing by the West. Islam is the new
"other" now. Essed, as cited in Atkin and Richardson pleads thus:
"Unreasonable argumentation about Islam and Muslims can, at best,
hamper our judgment and impede understanding; or at worst,
actualise and reinforce underlying racial or ethnicist inequalities."[38]

We have not exhausted the examples of linguistic Islamophobia
in this paper. The English language is continually being 'enriched'
with many new expressions attacking Islam, Muslims and Arabs
worldwide. Demonising Islam and dehumanising Muslims must stop
in the name of justice and fair play. We have to build bridges of
mutual tolerance, not barriers to global harmony.

One wonders if the Islamophobia unleashed at Muslims has
anything to do with the fact that Islam is "the fastest growing religion
in the world and even in the US." Feisal, a respected US *imām*,
however, exhorts fellow Muslims to do some intra-Islamic in-house
cleaning to positively shape non-Muslim opinion about Muslims
and Islam.[39] It is imperative that Muslim scholars engage
Islamophobes in intellectual discourse for a more informed
understanding of Islam.

Notes

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