

Globethics Repository



Scholarly islamophobia

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Jamouchi, Mohammed
DOI	10.58863/20.500.12424/4291178
Publisher	Globethics Publications;Conference of European Churches
Rights	2023 Globethics Publications & CEC;Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International
Download date	2026-09-11 03:38:04
Item License	http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/4291178

SCHOLARLY ISLAMOPHOBIA

*Mohammed Jamouchi**

Introduction

Islamophobia is not specific to the working classes,¹ it is also expressed by elites (political, media, academic, intellectual, researchers and other experts) from which some radical political tendencies² and anti-multiculturalist³ European populist leaders have taken inspiration these last decades. The scholarly form of Islamophobia is aroused by the high class, whose favourite topics are immigration and the misfortunes

* Director of the Istituto di Skriptura; Member of Centre d'Études et de Recherches en Sciences Sociales since 2010. © Globethics Publications, 2023 | DOI : 10.58863/20.500.12424/4291178 | CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International.

¹ On the lived, documented and quantified realities of Islamophobia in Europe see : ECRI (Commission européenne contre le racisme et l'intolérance : Bruxelles); FEMYSO (Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organisations : Bruxelles); CCIB (Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en Belgique : Bruxelles); CCIF (Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en France : Paris); Observatorio de la islamofobia en los medios (Madrid) ; Grupo de estudio sobre islamofobia : Cataluña); FAIR (Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism : UK); Tell MAMA (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks : UK); CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations : USA); Penel, Edwy, *Pour les musulmans*, Paris: La Découverte, 2016.

² No European state is immune to this phenomenon: Front National, Bloc Identitaire, Vlaams Belang, Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, Lega Nord, Unione Democratica di Centro ...

³ Le Pen, Orbán, populists (Flemish, Catalan and the Italian Northern League) among others.

of a population subject to change (communitarianism, integration, assimilation and acculturation). But when did this animosity begin? Why has Islam become the new phobia? And above all, how do these elites feed this apprehension?

The Power of Words

The power of words and the shock value of images: Paris Match is perfectly aware of the power of the verbal and the iconic power of persuasion; as is the prologue of John: "In the beginning was the Word [...]" (John 1:1). But this Parisian weekly's motto applies even better to Charlie Hebdo, which takes it to the extreme. Naming is the act of bringing into existence. The power of words should not be underestimated; it should not be considered a soft power. Words are likely to wreak havoc among endogenous and exogenous, indigenous and non-indigenous⁴ populations: "Is Islam compatible with the West?"; "can Muslims be assimilated to and soluble in French society?". Intellectuals (ideologists, professors, academics...) now support and write casual words that carry heavy consequences when it comes to ethical responsibilities. Their words, coupled with their reputation,⁵ result in fantasies, phobias, and twisted imagination that distort and amplify so as to reach individuals and community and feed the collective unconscious.

⁴ A categorisation of society into just two basic groups, such as 'indigenous' and 'non-indigenous', creates clear dividing lines, very often with a rigid pattern of domination and subordination. These categories are not relevant in politics in identifying citizen participation.

⁵ For centuries, the most eminent thinkers (Thucydides, Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Luther, Calvin, Burke, Bentham, Nietzsche, Freud...) have fed/nurtured the idea of an egoistic and pessimistic perception of humanity in contrast to the actions of revolutionary figures (Jesus, Mohammed, Gandhi, Luther King, Mandela...) who went against the mainstream.

The Discourse on the Other

What worldview can we have of an Islam - misidentified (are we talking about a faith, members, a culture, or a civilisation?), poorly understood, poorly studied, subject to numerous interpretations and multiple fantasies – claimed (as an ethnic, cultural and/or religious affiliation) by one-fifth of the global population?

Studying the relationship between Muslims and Europe's construction requires a deconstruction of our respective imaginations. The possible variations of 'Islam' is troublesome for the researcher; it grants impunity when faced with potential opponents, for how can anyone invalidate a chosen position with so many variations of Islam on offer? From here, there is only one step to making an enemy of them.

Individual and collective identity build political constructs when placed in opposition to the other. The nature of it is binary: a group, a faith, an ideology versus another; the West versus communism; the liberal versus the planned economy, etc. Following the Cold War, the economic market, coupled with human rights, were intended to reconcile us. It was also necessary, in line with the diktat of economic growth⁶, to justify the continuing production of arms, for which an ideological gap had to be filled. The solution: finding the perfect enemy. Just as the Red Peril was substituted by the Green, Islam replaced communism. In the context of a double economic and moral crisis, of capitalism and Marxism, Islam has become visible. This new rising concern has become the ideal and indefensible enemy.

Sociologist Abdellali Hajjar shows how the concept of 'assimilation' is linked to numerous factors related both to political and social context, as well as to the shifts of understanding in its meaning. His innovative

⁶ On spoilation / the plundering of "natural resources", minerals "from Muslim countries made poor" and presented as the "bad guys" see : Ateş-Snijdewind, « Waaron moslims en vluchtelingen als het kwaad worden voorgesteld » in *Nieuw Wij*, Amsterdam, 15 mei, 2021.

approach analyses, for instance, how an administration measures the ‘assimilation’ of candidates⁷. The investigative journalist Edwy Penel also condemns assimilation: ‘the Islamophobes ask for the eradication of Islam’, requiring that Muslims erase themselves in the process. To be accepted, Muslims must first become unseen and unheard. “Assimilation is a terrifying order which was also the one of French colonisation, to accept the other one on the condition that they are no longer themselves, and to distinguish them only in the case they decide to look like us and accept them only if they give up what they were before”.⁸

Contrary to the Method

Against all expectations and against all approaches, when it is not simply steeped in deception, Islamophobia is systematically built on gross error, confusion, pseudo-statistics and other amalgams. Included within this set of approximate realities can be found the unsubstantiated fantasy of colonial sciences, sometimes with a mix of romantic or unsympathetic orientalism⁹ inherited from the 19th century. Revisited and updated at the end of the 20th century, they now emerge in line with the today’s standards. With a disregard for logic, reason and other humanistic values, man is no longer sheltered from a certain tendency - natural or cultural - of belittling and discriminating its ideological ‘opponents’.

⁷ Hajjat, Abdellali, *Les frontières de l'identité nationale. L'injonction à l'assimilation en France métropolitaine et coloniale*, Paris: La Découverte, 2012

⁸ Penel, Edwy, *op. cit.*, 77.

⁹ In North Africa, the colonial sciences (history, ethnology, anthropology, sociology) are invested by a sometimes fantasised orientalism (Delacroix, Dinet, Doutté, Kandinski, Gautier, Hugo, Majorelle, Regnault and others); in sub-Saharan Africa by ethnology conducive / to suitable for all paradigms (Deluz, Griaule, Paulme and others).

Construction of Islamophobia

The academic construction of scholarly Islamophobia, or of an imaginary Islam, appears on various occasions. In contemporary times, one of the stages in the construction of the 'scholarly Islamophobia' object in academic circles can be traced back to the mid-19th and early 20th centuries in the heart of the colonial era, 'in the writings of French administrators-ethnologists', under the Third Republic. This hostile speech towards Islam in France took root and was elaborated within such prestigious institutions as 'le Collège de France, la Sorbonne and l'École libre des Sciences politiques'. The leading lights are Tocqueville¹⁰, Maupassant and in particular Renan¹¹, whose 'hostile theses to Islam will have the ear of Jules Ferry'. The historian and political scientist Olivier Grandmaison describes the theses¹² relating to "the inferiority, harmfulness and dangerousness of Islam" as "renanism"¹³. The political scientist Gilles Keppel has surprisingly, and no less academically, managed to make it seem evident that the word islamophobia is a recent invention.¹⁴ All the while, the historian

¹⁰ That said, the judgements and prejudices of Alexis de Tocqueville's youthful ardour in the context of colonial fever would be much more nuanced in his mature writings such as in *Democracy in America*.

¹¹ As a professor at the Collège de France, Renan enjoyed a masterly reputation, which gave scientific value to his prejudices and other legitimate opinions. In addition, he is perceived as a great writer because of his election to the Académie française.

¹² These theses have had a lasting effect on the study of continental social sciences in contrast to the emancipation and Anglo-Saxon development of *post-colonial studies*.

¹³ Grandmaison, Olivier, " *Ennemis mortels* " *Représentations de l'islam et politiques musulmanes en France à l'époque coloniale*, Paris: La Découverte, 2019.

¹⁴ From a media point of view, nothing will have been as spectacular, disconcerting, disturbing, unexpected and paradoxical for the sensitivity of French public opinion -under the new regime- as a revolution carried out and

Grandmaison, states that “the scholarly Islamophobia of colonial France presents thematic analogies with contemporary Islamophobia”, that the scholarly Islamophobia of the colonial era is similar to that which is propagated today by high-profile intellectuals. This new face of hatred is part of the long history of colonial xenophobia that does not state its name. Other sociologists rigorously describe how the object of 'Islam' has progressively been seen as a 'problem'.¹⁵

Another significant step is marked by the media impact of a publication - Aristotle at Mont Saint-Michel [AMSM],¹⁶ whose central theme is the denial or minimisation of Arab civilisational, cultural and linguistic participation in the transmission of Greek heritage (*in casus* Aristotelian) to European culture. In other words, Sylvain Gougenheim's ideological and demagogic proposal is a clumsy attempt to show that Europe discovered Greek heritage without any external intervention.

In addition, intellectuals such as Alain Finkielkraut do not miss an opportunity to repeat again and again, much like a litany or mantra, that there is ‘a problem with the Islam of France’¹⁷ when he is invited to

completed in the name of a clergy. This revolution of the mullahs is even more moving, impressive and upsetting than the political Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood. On the media impact, see Delthombe, Thomas, *L'islam imaginaire. La construction médiatique de l'islamophobie en France*, Paris: La Découverte, 2005; Bourdieu, Pierre, *Sur la télévision*, Paris, Liber-Raisons d'Agir, 1996. However, it is not mentioned that this is a Platonic (Iranian) Republic and (Shiite) Imâmology, which dethrones a thousand-year-old monarchy (founded by Cyrus).

¹⁵ Hajjat, Abdellali/ Mohammed, Marwan, *Islamophobie. Comment les élites françaises fabriquent le problème musulman*, Paris: La Découverte, 2013.

¹⁶ Gougenheim, Sylvain, *Aristote au mont Saint-Michel. Les racines grecques de l'Europe chrétienne*, Paris, Seuil, 2008.

¹⁷ Bowen devotes his entire first chapter to him – see Bowen, John R., *L'islam un ennemi idéal*, Paris: Albin Michel, 2014. ; Penel, *op. cit.* draws a parallel between the evolution of the French academician and the malaise of French society, of which the intellectual is the “symptom”.

France Inter and other public radio stations as the only unopposed player.

A Scholarly Controversy

Scholarly Islamophobia became known and was made public when the publication of a controversial and disputed¹⁸ book (AMSM) hit the headlines in the spring of 2008, during a tense French and international geopolitical era (Sarkozy's Dakar speech, Benedict XVI's Regensburg speech) in which European companies and politicians seemed to show their contempt with complete impunity.

AMSM is a purposefully crafted construction of circumstance, which accounts for this scholarly Islamophobia, written at a time when the discourse on the "Greek roots of Europe" had been reactivated;¹⁹ even suggesting "to rectify school textbooks" in order to recall the place of Islam in European heritage, as per a recent (2002) EU report²⁰; and

¹⁸ It is worth noting in passing the low editorial standards of the time, as was the case, for example, when Bernard-Henri Lévy's *Testament de Dieu* was published by *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1979, severely criticised by the historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet at the time.

¹⁹ The concept of "founding disagreement" was put forward by Olivier Abel during a colloquium organised by the Avicenne Association. The Avicenne think-tank (interconvictional association, composed of Michel Gheude, Mohammed Jamouchi, Marc Lenders, José Reding) working on the construction of Europe organised a public debate on secularism and Article 51 of the future European Constitution on 13 December 2003 in Brussels. See: Michel Gheude, Mohammed Jamouchi, Marc Lenders, José Reding, « Le désaccord fondateur » in: *La Libre Belgique* 17 November 2003; *Le Soir*, 18 November 2003; in: *La Revue Nouvelle*, January 2003; « L'Europe à la recherche de valeurs communes. Le désaccord fondateur » in *Le Courrier international*, 08 January 2004.

²⁰ Gouguenheim, *op. cit.*, 14.

when the burning debate on 'national identity'²¹ in France was being put back into the public arena.

This construction poorly conceals an ideological judgement on Islam that was already present in many debates. It shows that “behind the clothes of scholarly discourse – a clothing threaded of thin arguments - a new form of Islamophobia is hidden and alluded to”²² (Robert, 2010). It was also criticised in a column by Alain Gresh²³ (*Un historien au service de l'islamophobie*) and was challenged from the outset by academics who castigated it in a petition for obvious breaches of academic criteria. Through a meticulous study of the controversy triggered in 2008 by Sylvain Gouguenheim's book, a collective work (GAEN) examines the mechanisms of scholarly Islamophobia and its uses, and political issues linked to memorial mobilisation.

Deconstructing Islamophobia

By deconstructing the pseudo-arguments of Islamophobia, Grandmaison disproves the unfounded and fallacious/insidious statements of certain French elite, according to whom the term 'Islamophobia' is a recent invention of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Iranian mullahs. In his time, Étienne Dinet, orientalist painter, author of the first biography²⁴ of Muhammed, already denounced the violent anti-Muslim speeches alleging "Islamophobic delirium"^{25 26}, the Islamophobia of politicians, scholars and xenophobic

²¹ Hajjat, *op.cit.*

²² Robert, Aurélien (2010), « L'islamophobie déconstruite », in *La vie des idées*, <https://laviedesidees.fr/L-islamophobie-deconstruite.html> (accessed 25 May 2022)

²³ Gresh, Alain, “Un historien au service de l'islamophobie”, in: *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 7 May 2008.

²⁴ In French, *La vie de Mohammed, prophète d'Allah*, Piazza, 1918.

²⁵ Gresh, *op.cit.*

orientalists of the early 20th century. Since then, scientific research has been carried out and has shed some light on undeniable historical facts that can no longer be falsified as easily as they were in the days of colonial science.²⁷ Thus, it makes the deconstruction of the 'Muslim problem' possible.²⁸

Beyond the indignation raised by this book, the first response of academics on scholarly Islamophobia is developed under the direction of Max Lejbowicz, subtitled 'Science and Ideology'²⁹ against AMSM. Another group of researchers devotes an entire book to its methodical refutation. At the beginning of this essay, Irène Rosier-Catach states abruptly, laconically and unambiguously: "Sylvain Gougenheim has written a bad book. The Greeks, the Arabs and Ourselves [GAEN] is also a work of circumstance. Its authors, specialists in the Islamic, Byzantine and Western Middle Ages, react to a highly controversial book (AMSM) which they present as an intellectual deception. The authors of the collective response [GAEN], all from the academic world (EPHE, EHESS, CNRS), use their erudition and formal tools of deconstruction to criticise Gougenheim and what they call 'scholarly Islamophobia'". The writers of GAEN retort that "Gouguenheim is not a specialist on the subject of his book, and that he does not have the necessary knowledge to give scientific credit to his theses". Furthermore, his work is presented as a revisionist enterprise of intellectual history. This is contrary to the humanist ideals of stigmatising a population and essentialising it (reducing an entity to an

²⁶ This vision of an East that mirrors the West should be compared with Edward Said's equally revealing vision: the unconscious East of the West. See Dinet, Étienne, Ben Brahim, Sliman, *L'orient vu de l'occident*, Paris: H. Piazza & P. Geuthner, 1921.

²⁷ See footnote 9.

²⁸ Hajjat, Abdellali/ Mohammed, Marwan, *op.cit.*

²⁹ Lejbowicz, Max (ed.), *L'islam médiéval en terres chrétiennes. Science et idéologie*, Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires Septentrion, 2009.

identity). Was it not the intention of the legislator in 1905 (law on secularism) to achieve social pacification? However, there has been a shift from the neutrality of the state to the neutrality of society.³⁰ More than a reconfiguration of secularism, François Daroin mobilises a "new secularism", sometimes referred to as a "substantialist turn",³¹ by stating that "this new secularism must now target Muslim visibility...". He ends his report by pointing out that "this secularism is incompatible with human rights".³² There is a surreptitious shift from the neutrality of the State to the neutralisation of Muslims by people who use State services.

Impact of Knowledge

The persecution of a group because of its cultural, religious, ethnic, or other affiliation is not a recent phenomenon but dates back to the dawn of humanity. The creation and feeding of an anxiety-inducing atmosphere does not incite people to live together peacefully.

One of the favourite themes of Islamophobia is immigration, in particular (leading to a clash of civilisations) its consequences (multiculturalism, communitarianism that is more passive than active, depending on the different public policies adopted by each state), its presumed solution (integration, assimilation) and its presumed danger (the great replacement), which have been blamed for a certain radicalisation on both sides. Hence the political denunciation of multiculturalism as an obstacle to integration into life in wider society.

³⁰ On the notion of state neutrality in Belgium, see: Wouters, Inès, « « Neutralité inclusive » et « neutralité exclusive », ou comment le dévoiement de notions juridiques protectrices sert à justifier des pratiques discriminatoires », in: *D3Mag – Magazine mensuel détroit*, September 2021.

³¹ Portier, Philippe, « Le tournant substantialiste de la laïcité française », in : *Horizontes Antropológicos*, (52), 2018, 21-40.

³² Report submitted to Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin by Deputy François Daroin, *Pour une nouvelle laïcité*, mai 2003.

Gouguenheim's publication made headlines in 2008 after provoking significant controversy. The spirit of the Enlightenment is increasingly illuminated by a succession of polemics, the latest one called 'Islamogauchism'. This scholarly aggressivity has been coupled with a no less aggressive dissemination of a negative vision of Islam to the general public, presented as hostile to the free exercise of reason and the progress of science.

This reactivation of 'Renanism' is significant. Are these occasional works indicatives of the type of society being promoted? Are we trying to build an exclusive or inclusive society? To avoid the reality of specific economic and social issues, they have symbolically been transposed into issues arising from the problem of immigration. The debate, thus perverted and displaced, has cost immigrants dearly and has slowed down the process of integration".³³ Very often, the strategy of diversion does not fail to succeed.

The observations of the anthropologist John Bowen and the investigations of Penel remind us that ideas have social consequences that sometimes lead to tragic events (hate crimes and premeditated homicides). The works of Bowen and Penel - of different but complementary construction - point out that, once normalised, these ideas become dangerous.³⁴ Thus, intellectuals with media coverage and

³³ Weil, Patrick, *La France et ses étrangers. L'aventure d'une politique d'intégration de 1938 à nos jours*, Paris : Gallimard, 1995, 487.

³⁴ "You end up creating a danger by shouting every morning that it exists. By dint of showing the people a scarecrow, we create the real monster." (Zola). Both the Bible and the Qur'an forbid the use of bad words, bad language towards people because this kind of behaviour can literally kill a person, since the word acts deeply on the other. Bad words act on the mind and the body (through the secretion of harmful substances), to the point of making the person depressed, unhappy, ill, traumatised or even annihilated. Moreover, the same gesture, the same word does not necessarily have the same meaning, the same impact: the violence of one is not the violence of the other.

high visibility – with which any amount of intellectual honesty would hardly allow – raise the spectre of an Islam threatening France and its republican values³⁵ on radio and television platforms. Consequently, the reduction of the Muslim faith to a political and security problem³⁶ by politicians does not augur well.

These authors denounce the instrumentalisation of fears³⁷ through this new face of hatred. Despite Gougenheim having produced a “bad book”, his fallacious discourse quickly spread on the Web and revived anti-religious sentiment.

Conclusion: Cultivating a Plural Memory and Integrating an Open Society

Creating and surfing on the fear of the other is not only the prerogative of right-wing populists, uneducated or hateful, it is also the construction of a concept that is elaborated in high places and at a high level, at the top of the enlightened but misinformed or politically dependent, intellectual elite. Ideas and words can have a far-reaching impact on societies.

Cultures and memories are rooted in specific historical contingencies. Cultivating a plural memory, while integrating a society open to differences, means recognising and ratifying divergences and points of rupture (“us” and “them”);³⁸ it means recognising and

³⁵ No scientific study establishes a causal link between immigration and increased violence.

³⁶ “Too often the sorcerers’ apprentices who govern us give birth to monsters” see: Penel, *op. cit.*, 78.

³⁷ For Delthombe, *op. cit.*, French journalist and essayist, there are ‘three key elements of the fear of Islam: the trauma of the Algerian war, the visibility of the Muslim religion and the fear of the Islamisation of lifestyles’.

³⁸ See Mk 9:40; Mt 12:30 ; Lk 11:23; see also, in a xenophobic sense, Cesari, Jocelyne, *Être musulman en France*, Paris: Karthala, 1994: Chapter X. “Them and Us”: Postcolonial Racism, 167-171. An antithesis is needed between

fertilising convergences and points of encounter (“neither Jew nor Greek”).³⁹

Knowledge of one another is a strong basis for the improvement of living together.⁴⁰

The French outlook on and its judgment of Islam, in the light of the Franco-Algerian dispute, raises serious concerns about a potential return of the Islamophobic discourse in the great French national story, particularly by the reappropriation of the father figure of Charles Martel and the historical figure of Joan of Arc. Opposing the other is motivated by colonial xenophobia that does not state its name, as well as a more subtle form of xenophobia. This academic Islamophobia, which dates back more than a century, is not an isolated phenomenon but a structural one. Since the beginning of the 20th century, but especially since the beginning of the third millennium, there has been both increasing attention and increasing tension between the two sides.

Talking of Islam in France is to summon up a painful history: as of the days of De Gaulle and Algeria, it summons up the nostalgia and grief over a French department lost offshore in the Mediterranean.

What ideological lantern is therefore lighting in the country of the Enlightenment nowadays, of the great Revolution and of human rights, which is also distinguishable in its specific secularism and its

“them” and “us” (in the ethnic sense), between being inside/at the centre of the group or outside/at the periphery, those who are “in” and those who are “out” (in the sociological sense), evidence of the deep and dangerous divisions/rifts that separate many religious groups.

³⁹ On the principle of equality or fairness, see Gal 3:27-28, 1 Cor 1:31; Hadith: “...No superiority of the Arab over the non-Arab, nor of the non-Arab over the Arab, nor of the White over the Black or of the Black over the White. ...]” (Ahmed and at-Tirmidhi).

⁴⁰ The Qur'an explicitly encourages the encounter with otherness, as intended by Him: “[...] We have made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another...” (Qur'an 49, 13) This verse, which affirms the idea of monogenism, is one of the best known and most quoted.

problematic colonial and post-colonial relations (such as the Algerian syndrome), and which is also at the forefront⁴¹ of scholarly Islamophobia? Today even, Diogenes the Cynic would be fully mimicking his former role of illuminating the path of those who no longer distinguish what is evident in all its clarity.

⁴¹ France clearly appears as a laboratory of Islamophobic ideas that are spreading to the French society; and exporting to England, the United States and Australia. One can be outraged to see that beyond the Hexagon, France (country of humanism) is cited as a model of Islamophobia.