

Deciphering the 'othering' of Muslims



Islamophobia in Britain is associated with anti-Black, anti-Arab and anti-South Asian racism.

By **ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR DR AZEEM FAZWAN AHMAD FAROUK** - November 27, 2016 @ 5:44pm

THE predominant Western view on Islam is very much informed by the orientalist discourse. In order to understand the "othering" of Muslims, we have to go back several centuries and situate the present state of affairs within the Western global/colonial designs.

The relegation of Muslims as inferior in relation to the West began when Spain's Christian monarchy, as one of Christian Europe's frontiers with the Muslim world, fought a battle to conquer the Islamic side of Spain, better known as Al-Andalus. In 1492, when the Spanish Christian monarchy finally defeated the forces of Al-Andalus, they expelled Jews and Arabs not without its pogroms and massacres.

From 1492 onwards, anti-Arab and anti-Muslim were defined on the basis of religious discrimination (praying to the wrong God). The Christian versus Islam struggle articulated the imperial difference, and historically, the expulsion of Arabs and Jews from Christian Spain in the name of "purity of blood" was a proto-racist process. With the onset of the colonial enterprise, however, a full racist perspective was put in motion, and the imperial powers started to characterise Muslims as "uncivilised" and "violent".

Fast forward to the 21st century, it should come as no surprise that the imperial grand design is still very much alive, but it is carried out in subtle ways. For starters, the dominant global discourse on democracy and human rights is designed to privilege European liberalism — primarily understood as being compatible with democracy over "oriental despotism", which the West projected onto Islam and the Orient more generally. By undermining their value system, and in this case the Islamic faith, the West was able to justify the ongoing Western campaign to produce and support a "moderate" Islam.

This is a continuation of the West's effort to "reform" Islam for various strategic ends. But, this is hardly a new Western strategy. It goes back to the primal scene of the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt.

Napoleon's inaugural appeal to Islamic theological legitimacy for his colonial campaign would be picked up by the British later in the 19th century for their own.

While both Napoleon and the British were initially very much interested in using Islam to buttress their standing as an occupier, in 1882, the British began pushing for a new Islamic theological understanding of governance, not to mention sociality in Egypt. This can be seen as a shift from biological racism to cultural racism.

The Western elites of the world system did not give up on their racism. They changed the meanings and discourses of "race" as a response to the challenges from the struggles of colonised people. Cultural racism is a form of racism where the word "race" is not even mentioned. It is focused on the cultural inferiority of a group of people. Usually, it is framed in terms of the inferior habits, beliefs, behaviour, or values of a group of people. It is close to biological racism in the sense that cultural racism naturalises the culture of the racialised people. The latter is represented as fixed in a timeless space. In new cultural racist discourses, religion has a dominant role. The contemporary tropes about "uncivilised", "barbarian", "savage", "primitive", "underdeveloped", "authoritarian" and "terrorist" inferior people are today concentrated in the "other's" religious practices and beliefs.

By focusing on the "other's" religion, the Europeans, Euro-Americans and Euro-Israelis managed to escape being accused of racism.

However, when we examine carefully the hegemonic rhetoric in place, the tropes are a repetition of old biological racist discourse and the people who are the target of Islamophobic discourses are the traditional colonial subjects of the Western empires, that is the "usual suspects".

Only within the outlined *durée* historical continuities, together with the recent hegemony of cultural racism, can we understand the relationship between Islamophobia and racism today. It is absolutely impossible to delink the hate or fear against Muslims from racism against non-European people.

Islamophobia and cultural racism are entangled and overlapping discourses. The association of Muslims with the colonial subject of Western empires in the minds of white populations is simply a given in a core of the modern/colonial world system. This links Islamophobia to an old colonial racism that is still alive in the world today.

In the United Kingdom, Muslims are associated with Egyptians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis (colonial subjects from old British colonies). Islamophobia in Britain is associated with anti-Black, anti-Arab and anti-South Asian racism. In France, Muslims are mostly North Africans (from old colonies such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Senegal). In the Netherlands, Muslims are associated with racism against guest workers and colonial migrants coming from Turkey, Morocco, Indonesia and Suriname. So, Islamophobia as a fear or hate of Muslims is associated with anti-Arab, anti-Asian and anti-Black racism.

At the global level, Islamophobia has been the dominant discourse used in the post-civil rights and post-independence era of dominant cultural racist discourse against Arabs. The events of 9/11 escalated anti-Arab racism through Islamophobic hysteria all over the world, specifically among the dominant elites in the United States and Israel. The latter is not surprising, given the US and Israeli representation of Palestinians, Arabs and Islamic people in general as terrorists decades before 9/11.

It is important to keep in mind that Orientalist views are characterised by racist exotic and inferior essentialist representations of Islam as frozen in time. These Orientalist representations of Islam after the 18th century were preceded by 300 years of Occidentalism (the superiority of the West over the rest) from the late 15th century until the emergence of Orientalism in the 18th century. The historical and political condition for Orientalism to emerge is Occidentalism.

Associate Professor Dr Azeem Fazwan Ahmad Farouk is the director of the Centre for Policy Research and International Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia.