

Causes of Islamophobia

Speech delivered at the annual gathering of
Ahmadiyya Anjuman Lahore, on 24 December 2021

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(Note: This is the translation of the written text of my Urdu speech for the annual gathering of Ahmadiyya Anjuman Lahore, 24 December 2021, which has been further edited for publication in this version. Here I have added footnotes containing quotations from, and references to, sources.)

يُرِيدُونَ لِيُطْفِئُوا نُورَ اللَّهِ بِأَفْوَاهِهِمْ وَاللَّهُ مُتِمُّ نُورِهِ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ الْكَافِرُونَ ﴿٦١﴾ هُوَ الَّذِي أَرْسَلَ
رَسُولَهُ بِالْهُدَىٰ وَدِينِ الْحَقِّ لِيُظْهِرَهُ عَلَى الدِّينِ كُلِّهِ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ الْمُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

“They desire to put out the light of Allah with their mouths, but Allah will perfect His light, though the disbelievers may be averse. He it is Who has sent His Messenger with the guidance and the Religion of Truth that He may make it prevail over all religions, though those who set up partners (with Allah) are averse.” (The Holy Quran, 61:8–9)

After I was requested to deliver a talk on the subject of the causes of Islamophobia for the annual Lahore Ahmadiyya gathering of December 2021, two days later, on 15 October, I was giving a Friday *khutba* in the UK in the month of *Rabi-ul-awwal* on the topic that the Holy Prophet Muhammad was “a mercy to the nations”. I did not know then that, only a few minutes earlier, a Muslim in England had stabbed a member of the UK Parliament, Mr David Amess, several times with a knife. The member of Parliament died two hours later. The killer remained on the scene and it was soon proved that this was an act of terrorism by a Muslim. This atrocity, and similar incidents, are among the causes of Islamophobia (fear of Islam or hatred of Islam) in the West. But Islamophobia did not begin because of such events. These events just continue and re-inforce Islamophobia and keep it going.

The term ‘Islamophobia’ was only coined in the last twenty years, but this phenomenon has existed for many centuries. At the very beginning of Islam, Muslims conquered countries populated largely by Christians, such as Syria, Palestine, the

present-day Israel, Egypt etc. The rulers of those countries were Christian but they cruelly oppressed and maltreated their own Christian populations because Christians were divided into many sects which were each other's bitter enemies. When Muslims conquered those countries, they established justice there, in accordance with the teachings of Islam. They treated the Christians so well that those Christians started to prefer living under Muslim rule than the rule by their own co-religionists.¹

However, the Christians in Europe, in countries such as England, France, Italy etc., which were ruled and largely populated by Christians, were most unhappy to see that in the Middle East, where their sacred places were located, Christians had been defeated and were living under Muslim rule. This was the beginning of Islamophobia in the West. They knew little about Islam, and they constructed an image of Islam based on their hatred, ignorance and prejudice towards Islam. In our time, around the year 1960, an English historian Norman Daniel published a book entitled *Islam and the West, The Making of an Image*. In it, he has shown after much research and analysis that the false picture of Islam which was presented in Western writings of 700 or 800 years ago, still has some reflection in modern Western literature on Islam.² Another Western scholar of Islam of our times, Francis Robinson, compiled a book entitled *Atlas of the Islamic World since 1500*, published around the year 1980. He expresses surprise that although Christianity has lost its hold in the West, and Western countries have become non-religious or secular, but still the same objections against Islam, which used to be spread by bigoted Christian writers of the past, have been adopted by the non-religious, secular Western writers and are today put forward in new ways.³

¹ In *The Preaching of Islam*, Sir T.W. Arnold writes: "When the Muslim army reached the valley of the Jordan and Abu Ubaidah pitched his camp at Fihl, the Christian inhabitants wrote to the Arabs saying: 'O Muslims, we prefer you to the Byzantines, though they are of our own faith, because you keep better faith with us and are more merciful to us and refrain from doing us injustice and your rule over us is better than theirs, for they have robbed us of our goods and our homes.'" (p. 55, 1913 edition).

² Daniel in his Foreword mentions the "prejudices which still, after so many centuries, affect European attitudes; and which do so, despite the great contemporary improvement in understanding..." (p. v). He begins his Introduction as follows: "... the European West has long had its own characteristic view [of Islam], which was formed in the two centuries or so after 1100, and which has been modified only slowly since. ... and even when, in relatively modern times, some authors have self-consciously tried to emancipate themselves from Christian attitudes, they have not generally been as successful as they thought themselves." (p. 1)

At the close of his book he gives the following advice to Christians about Islam: "what the mediaevals studied we may study again, making use of what they did; but we may do it for its own sake, and without thought of propaganda, and without hatred" (p. 307, 1966 edition).

³ Robinson writes that "traditional sources of hostility to Islam derived from the medieval Christian

Turning back to the historical development, some 800 to 1000 years ago Christian European countries were aroused by the passion that they must go to conquer the lands in the Middle East where their sacred places were located and where their fellow Christians were living under Muslim rule. For this purpose they launched the crusades. They raised armies in England, France, Italy and other European countries and went to present-day Syria, Palestine, and Israel and repeatedly tried to conquer them. In order to incite their own people to join these military expeditions they presented before them a most hideous and distorted picture of Islam, the Holy Prophet Muhammad and the Muslims.

Despite believing in this ugly picture of Islam, when the crusaders returned to their countries after failing in their crusades, they came back very impressed with Salah-ud-Din Ayyubi, his character, wisdom, justice and kindness.⁴ This shows that if Muslims present a good example of moral behaviour, they can win the hearts of their most staunch enemies. It should also be remembered that this was a time when Muslim civilization was at its height and Western nations were much behind Muslims in worldly development and knowledge. Therefore, although the Christians of Europe were deeply biased against Islam, they still used to take advantage of the knowledge developed by Muslims and were impressed and over-awed by them.

However, after about the year 1500 this situation started to change and to become the other way round. In Western countries, progress started being made in scientific knowledge and this led to all kinds of technological inventions being made. Along with that, European nations began to explore the world and establish trading centres in Asia and Africa, as in our own Indo-Pak subcontinent. At exactly the same time, the decline of Muslims started. The development of knowledge in their countries came to a stop and they lost the qualities and skills of statecraft and government. By the 19th century (the 1800s) Muslim countries were either directly under the rule of one European power or another, or they were so weak that they could not maintain their own independent rule and relied on the support of some European power or other.

polemic still flourish in secular form”, an example of which is that “the old objection which focused on the enjoyment of sex and sensuality has become a new objection to the position of women”. He adds: “Indeed, a disapproval of Islam, which sometimes amounts to outright hostility, seems ingrained in the secular culture of the West” (Francis Robinson, *Atlas of the Islamic World since 1500*, 1982, Introduction, p. 20, col. 2).

⁴ Robinson describes Salah-ud-Din Ayyubi, or “Saladin”, as: “the great hero of medieval chivalry” (p. 16, col. 2).

When Christians saw their dominance in every field of life, they considered it to be a proof of the truth of their religion and the validity of their values and civilisation. They declared Islam to be the cause of the failure and the decline of the Muslims. Their opinion about Islam now was that this religion may have been of some good many centuries ago, but in the new age of knowledge and enlightenment Islam was an obstacle in the path of human progress and human civilization.⁵

Along with the spread of European rule in the world, Christian missionaries also went all over the world and attempted to convert Muslims to Christianity. Now the West was addressing the Muslims themselves. At the time of the crusades the purpose of spreading hate against Islam was only in order to incite their fellow Christians to take part in the wars against Muslim rule in the Middle East. So the Christian public could be told anything against Islam, no matter how baseless; for example, that Muslims worship Muhammad, or Muslims worship the sun, or Islam teaches that women do not have souls.⁶ But now the Muslims were the audience. Therefore, what was required was a criticism of Islam which at least had some basis, so that it might have an effect upon the Muslims, and not be rejected as complete nonsense.

So in this period, Christians published literature such as English translations of the Quran and biographies of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, in which they tried to prove their own distorted views about Islam. Islam was presented by them as a religion of ignorance, savagery and violence, whose founder was following his own worldly and material desires. Regrettably, these critics found much material in the books of the Muslims themselves, and in certain wrong notions held by Muslims, which they could use against Islam.

However, in the same age, due to the progress of scientific knowledge in the West itself, the educated sections in the West began to raise doubts about and objections

⁵ Francis Robinson refers to the opinion of Ernest Renan (d. 1892), the French orientalist and language scholar, that he considered Islam was “opposed to the scientific spirit, and a barrier to progress”. He adds: “Indeed, confidence in the superiority of Western civilization, and of Western ways of looking at things over the Islamic, has been instinct in much Western scholarship” (p. 20, cols. 1–2).

⁶ Robinson includes the following in the misrepresentations of Islam by European Christians: “the Quran had been borne to the people on the horns of a white bull; the Prophet was a sorcerer ... who, according to Christian legend, lied and wallowed in debauch...” (p. 16, col. 1). Norman Daniel’s book deals in detail with these non-sensical misrepresentations; for example, “stories that told of a dove whom Muhammad, or a wicked teacher of Muhammad, trained to eat a grain of corn from the Prophet’s ear, to simulate the Holy Ghost” (p. 32), “Muhammad was also often supposed quite wrongly to be ignobly born ... and an idolator among idolators” (p. 83), and the opposite allegation that he had been a Christian cleric “frustrated in his ambition, who perverted his own converts to spite the Roman church” (p. 83).

against religion itself, the existence of God and the spiritual matters that are the basis of all religions. Although these objections applied also to the Christian religion, but they were directed at Islam as well. And as I have said earlier, modern non-Christian Western writers inherited from their Christian forefathers a distorted picture of Islam, and in addition their modern branches of knowledge created new forms of objections against Islam as a religion.

Now the time came when Allah appointed Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad as *Mujaddid* and his mission was to refute all these objections against Islam. In one of his early writings, *Izala Auham*, he wrote: “It is undoubtedly true that Europe and America have a large collection of objections against Islam, inculcated through those engaged in Christian Mission work, and that their philosophy and natural sciences give rise to another sort of criticism” (p. 772). He not only wrote books in response to these objections but he also made the prophecy that “the Western world which has been involved of old in the darkness of unbelief and error shall be made to shine with the sun of Truth, and those people shall have their share of Islam” (p. 515).

In my speech there is no scope to go into details of the work which Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad and his followers did in this respect, but I draw your attention to one incident. When Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din went to England in 1912, in continuation of Hazrat Mirza sahib’s mission of the propagation of Islam, it was there that he realized the full extent of Islamophobia in Europe. In the following year, 1913, he sent a written message to the meeting of the All-India Muslim League taking place in Lucknow, India, on 22–23 March 1913. In it he described in detail what is today called ‘Islamophobia’. He writes that after coming to England he discovered how badly Islam and Muslims are looked upon. First it was only the political rulers and the Christian religious leaders of the West who considered the existence of Muslims to be undesirable, because “we have been an obstacle and hindrance”, standing in the way of their objectives, but now it is also “on humanitarian grounds that the peoples of the West desire to see us finished as soon as possible.”

What is the reason? He explains: “If the concept of Islam and the Muslim, prevalent in Europe, were correct and based upon valid data, I should see no reason why every fair-minded person having the least interest in humanity should not come forward to help Europe in her task of effacing Islam from the face of the earth.” He adds: “Our sole remedy lies in dispelling the cloud of ignorance which enshrouds

Europe and prevents her from appreciating Islam at its true value.” He also says as regards the false and ugly picture of Islam that is widespread in the West: “In the beginning, no doubt, it was the work of some evil schemers against Islam, but now it is the honest belief of millions in Europe.” He notes that the decline of the Turkish Ottoman empire and its defects and weaknesses are said to be because of Islam. It should be remembered that when Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din was writing this message the Ottoman sultanate had reached close to its end.

He appeals to the Muslims to: “Do your best to correct the false picture of Islam in Europe, and millions of people here will support your noble cause.”

Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din published this message in 1913.⁷ After that, during the 20th century, accurate and sound knowledge about Islam began to spread in the West. In this work the Lahore Ahmadiyya *Jama'at* played a prominent role. Its first Head, Maulana Muhammad Ali, addressing the Western world in English, and keeping in his mind the atmosphere and society in the West, wrote numerous fundamental books on Islam and urged that this literature should be distributed in the West. Non-Muslim Western authors also wrote books on Islam in which, instead of adopting a biased attitude, they showed more impartiality and inclination to the truth and facts.

A time now also came when Muslims no longer remained a distant people from the West. Through the development of modern means of travel and communications, news and information about Muslim countries became common knowledge in the West. The other change was that, for the first time in history, Muslims migrated to Western countries in large numbers and settled there. The people of the West could see Muslims close at hand and establish relations with them.

The positive result of these new conditions has been that it became difficult to fabricate false and baseless allegations against Islam. But there has also been an adverse result. Due to certain views, customs and practices of the Muslims, which are either contrary to Islam or are not supported by Islam, a bad image of Islam has been projected in some ways and this provides fuel to Islamophobia. In this context, among the misconceptions which spread about Islam, the worst is that Islam had spread by force, it can only continue in existence by using coercion, and that it preaches violence

⁷ See *Muslim India & Islamic Review*, March 1913, pp. 65–70. It was also published in *The Review of Religions*, Qadian, May 1913 issue, pp. 210–219, with an introduction by Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din.

and extremism. In the last thirty years, various events have taken place, reported internationally, by which Muslims themselves can be seen providing support for the allegations against Islam made by its Western detractors. One such event was the recent murder in England of an innocent member of the British Parliament, Mr David Amess, by a Muslim, as I mentioned at the beginning.

Under these circumstances, it is vitally important that the picture of Islam presented for the whole world by Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, which was then explained in full detail by Maulana Muhammad Ali in his English and Urdu books, should be widely disseminated in new forms and new ways.

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