# The Fight against Islamophobia in Catalonia: A Challenge to Coexistence

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Islamophobia is a phenomenon based on assigning people a single identity, their Muslim faith, when faith is only one of the many aspects that can make up our identity. Although it is deeply rooted in history and has a global nature, in recent decades Islamophobia has experienced a rise in Europe as a result of the growing visibility of migration. Thus, discourses have developed that attribute Islam with a series of problems, conflicts and situations involving people of the Muslim faith. In this respect, it is fundamental to address Islamophobia through programmes and initiatives taking a holistic approach, such as the case of the II Jornades Gatzara, held in Barcelona from 17 to 21 May 2022.

On 18 August 2017, a few hours after the terrible massacre on La Rambla in Barcelona and a few hours before the terrorist attack in Cambrils, Carmen Lomana, a regular participant in TV magazines, posted a series of tweets that clashed with the messages of support for the victims and the calls for coexistence. The first tweet said: "I would like to see a demonstration by Muslims against the murderers. They say they are a minority, but where are the others?", while the last one concluded: "I have no time for anyone who tries to justify what is happening. No phobia. The only phobia is theirs against us." Here it is taken for granted that, faced with a terrorist attack committed by people who claim to be of the Islam religion, it is normal for Muslims to go on the street to condemn the terrorist attacks. The key question here is whether they have to do so as Muslims or members of the public; or as members of the public of Muslim faith, assuming they are mutually exclusive. From 18 August, in cities such as Barcelona, Melilla, Madrid and Valencia, dozens of Muslim organisations held rallies to condemn terrorism. Moreover, hundreds of people of Muslim faith joined the many rallies inside and outside Catalonia to condemn terrorism. They did not necessarily do so as Muslims but as members of this society.

In fact, we cannot ignore this reality if we exclusively allude to the faith of a person to identify them: they are assigned a single identity, when faith, like ethnic origin or place of residence, is just one of the many aspects that make up our identity. Be it conscious or latent, Islamophobia usually considers that Islam – understood as a monolithic religion – is the main parameter that defines the identity of a

Muslim, which explains their behaviour and defines their life objectives, be they personal, professional, political and so on. Therefore, as illustrated by the last tweet, insisting on the religious identity of a person enables an us versus them dichotomy to be established without defining who is one of us and who they are. In the words of the political expert Vincent Geisser (2011: 419), Islamophobia is "a mode of culturalist and essentialist thought which assimilates the real or imaginary belonging to Islam to a globalising and totalising entity, and which usefully uses an anti-racist and universalist argument to highlight the 'cultural backwardess' of Islam and Muslims."

As diverse European and national institutions steadily point out, there has been an increase in Islamophic discourses in Europe, but also in discrimination, hate crimes and the use of violence against people labelled as Muslim. How can we understand this phenomenon? And how can we fight against it? This article seeks to define the main features of Islamophobia to characterise the phenomenon and highlight the challenges it poses to coexistence.

## Contemporary Islamophobia: A Recently Characterised Phenomenon

Far from being coined by "Iranian fundamentalists" in the 1980s to condemn any criticism of the Muslim religion, as some argue (Fourest and Verner, 2003), the concept of Islamophobia appeared for the first time in 1910 (Bravo López, 2010). At that time, a group of French Orientalists used it to refer to a form of hostility towards Islam and Muslims in the territories administered by the French colonial empire.

This concept reappeared in Europe in the 1980s. It is not used to allude to the hostility against the colonised Muslim populations but to characterise a phenomenon of rejection and hostility that specifically affects Muslims living in the Old Continent. In 1980s Britain, several sociologists saw the rise in "cultural racism"; that is, a racism that identifies Muslims as fundamentally different and inferior people as they are not European, are not white, and have another culture (Allen, 2010; Modood, 2000; Grosfoguel, 2014).

In later decades, the British think tank Runnymede Trust published two reports that marked the recognition of this concept by non-Muslim actors. The second report lists a series of eight views that enable an Islamophobic discourse to be identified (Runnymede Trust, 1997). Among others, there is the idea that Islam is a monolithic and static bloc and an inferior (not different) religion and that any discourse against Muslims is legitimate. Although this definition is not free of criticism, it marked a first stage in the road to the political recognition of Islamophobia.

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These first advances were crucial in the context that followed the 11 September 2001 attacks. In Europe, several initiatives emerged to monitor the rising Islamophobia after 11-S (for example, the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, including Islamophobia as a phenomenon to be monitored). Meanwhile, the issue of the fight against Islamophobia gained ground in the political agenda of the European Union and several European countries (Casa Árabe, 2007). In this context, in 2004 the Council of Europe provided a first definition in which it considers that Islamophobia is "a form of racism and Islamophobia manifested through hostility, exclusion, rejection and hatred against Muslims, especially when the Muslim

population is a minority, which occurs with a greater impact in Western countries." This approach focuses on the fears and prejudices against Islam and Muslims and highlights that Islamophobia, along with being a threat to coexistence, can legitimise discriminatory attitudes and violations of human rights (Ramberg, 2004).

Although the concept of Islamophobia is relatively recent, its emergence responds to the need to characterise a series of phenomena such as hostility, stereotyping and attitudes of rejection and discrimination against Islam and/or Muslims. However, both the complexity of the phenomena that this concept embraces and the diversity of contexts in which it is applied have raised many debates on its definition and applicability.

## Islamophobia, Anti-Muslim Racism, Moorphobia? The Same Concept for Various Realities

Although there was a relative consensus about the fact that Islamophobia was an increasingly visible phenomenon in Europe, this recognition has also gradually raised various scientific, legal and political debates on the relevance of this concept. This is mainly due to the large number of processes that can feed this phenomenon, such as racism, sexism and xenophobia (Rosón Lorente, 2012).

A first debate is related to the role of religious identity in the rejection and discrimination mechanisms. As we have seen above, several sociologists consider that Islamophobia is mainly the proof of a form of "cultural racism" (Allen, 2010; Meer and Modood, 2009; Werbner, 2005). Their main argument is that it is difficult to determine which aspect of identity (ethnic and religious) is the object of a form of rejection or hostility. Thus, these authors argue that Islamophobia is a form of cultural racism, because "this identity is now defined on the basis of the individual's ethnic origin rather than exclusively on the basis of his beliefs" (Bravo López, 2010: 3). In the same vein, Fred Halliday (1999) argues that it is more appropriate to speak of "anti-Muslimism" given that, in his view, Islamophobia is not exercised against Islam as a religion but against the followers of this religion.

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If such is the case, how can we determine that a supposed case of Islamophobia does not conceal, in reality, anti-Arab, anti-Magrebian or anti-Muslim racism? These perspectives show that Islamophia is *also* a form of racism: it attaches certain religious and cultural characteristics to Muslim people "to vilify, marginalise, discriminate or demand assimilation and thereby treat them as second class citizens" (Modood, 2018).

A second category of debates focuses on the religious dimension of this phenomenon. By highlighting the religious intolerance envisaged by Islamophia, authors such as Geisser (2003) and Werbner (2005) argue that Islamophobia not only embraces a form of intolerance but also unleashes discourses and, *in fine*, measures that validate the rejection of this religion in the public sphere in its widest sense. Therefore, Islamophobia not only refers to "fear of" (*phobia*) but also involves restrictive or prohibitive attitudes against certain religious practices. From this perspective, Islamophobia is *also* a form of institutionalised religious intolerance that may involve certain exclusion processes: the laws to prohibit the veil in certain spaces, the rejected licences to build mosques or the refusal of some school

canteens to provide halal or vegetarian food are some examples.

In short, the concept of Islamophobia is relatively recent in the academic and political world. The complexity of the phenomena it embraces (racism, religious intolerance, and so on) has brought about a large number of debates on its definition. Beyond these debates, we have identified the main characteristics of Islamophobia:

- It is distinguished by hate, hostility, prejudices or rejection against individuals and institutions characterised as Muslim.
- It leads to consequences such as acts of discrimination, the use or legitimisation of the use of violence or certain processes of exclusion.
- It can be exercised by people, movements, organisations and institutions.
- It can include – or be combined with – other processes of radicalisation or othering, such as racism, Moorphobia, sexism and aporophobia.

## A Contemporary Phenomenon with Deep Historical Roots

Although Islamophobia is a global and contemporary phenomenon, its manifestations are local and its roots are also historical. In this section, we will highlight two aspects of the phenomenon: its historical dimension and its contemporary dimension.

The historical roots of Islamophobia in Europe are found in the numerous conflicts and power dynamics that set the Muslim religion against the Catholic religion. This includes episodes such as the Muslim presence in the Iberian Peninsula (al-Andalus) and the geopolitical rivalry between the Ottoman Empire and diverse European empires. Gema Martín Muñoz argues that both the expulsion of Muslims and Jews from al-Andalus and the discovery of America led Europeans to promote a European identity that rejects the contribution of Islamic thought to the development of European thought and identity, which fed "the idea of two isolated universes without a common heritage" (Martín Muñoz, 2014: 38).

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Moreover, the colonisation of mostly Muslim countries in the 19th and 20th centuries contributed to the Islamophobic collective imaginary. Justified in the name of a "civilising mission", colonisation enabled the dichotomy between civilisation and barbarism to be (re) activated, concepts such as "inferior races" to be popularised and the idea that (colonised) Muslims are a kind of "fifth column" capable of subverting the public order because of their religious practices and ideas to be spread (Triaud, 2006). In the Spanish context, the historian Eloy Martín Corrales (2004) shows how the prejudices already used eight centuries ago (the fanatic, lazy, decapitating Moor) are reactivated in favour of the political agenda of the time, for instance, during the Spanish Civil War (Dieste, 1997).

Although it is historical, this us versus them dichotomy continues to be fed by determined political, academic and media discourses that make Islam the main explanatory variable to understand the past and future of Muslim societies (Grosfoguel, 2014). Moreover, this dichotomy is increasingly used to differentiate members of the same society, as happens in several European countries. As Nasr Hamid (2014: 14) recalls, the Orientalist vision of the Arab Muslim-Arab world has polluted public opinion to the extent that "there is no difference between whether they are practising Muslims or not, although Muslims, whether in Europe

or the United States, are not a homogenous group." This creates identity problems, hinders the feeling of belonging to a society in which the so-called "second and third generation" youths were born and grew up, and feeds social exclusion dynamics, not to mention the feeling of humiliation or scorn experienced by many.

In the contemporary context, one of the first factors that explains the rise in Islamophobia in Europe is related to the growing visibility of migration. With the arrival of migrants in the Old Continent, mainly after the Second World War, discourses have been promoted that insist on the invasive character of such migration and the dangers that it poses for European societies (Liogier, 2012).

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The settlement of these populations in Europe resulted in a growing visibility of their religious practices and customs (religious garb, halal food, construction of mosques, and so on),[1] which has gradually resulted in Islam being attributed with a series of problems, conflicts and situations involving people of Muslim faith. This culturalisation of certain social, economic and political problems enables us to interpret any of these situations as the reflection of an apparent incompatibility of values between some "Western values" – poorly or never defined – and some "Islamic values" which, for instance, go *against* gender equality (veil), *against* coexistence (halal menus), *against* freedom of expression (the case of the caricatures) or *against* secularism (religious signs, construction of minarets, and so on) (Bourekba, 2018). In this context, Islamophobic discourses and institutional decisions that may derive from them justify the rejection of the demands formulated by Muslim people in the name of the need to safeguard the values of equality, freedom and coexistence. Whether passive – not responding to a demand from the Muslim community – or active – rejecting the demand for halal menus in schools –, this institutional Islamophobia focuses on the religious character of a demand and uses arguments based on values to justify itself (Stop Als Fenòmens Islamòfobs, 2021: 16).

The growing visibility of Islam in Europe also unleashed conspiracy theories that reactivate the myth of the "fifth column", whose objective is to alter European values, socio-demographic composition, and cultures. For instance, the theory of Islamisation argues that the settlement of Muslim populations in Europe forms part of a project of Islamisation of the continent and that the demands of this population, such as the construction of mosques or the right to dress as you like, are evidence of this desire (Liogier, 2012; Sanders, 2013). Moreover, the theory of the great replacement, conceived by the French writer Renaud Camus, argues that the populations who emigrated to Europe will eventually replace the "native" peoples through higher fertility levels.

These theories also contribute to conscious Islamophobia and unconscious (or latent) Islamophobia "because it is not about discrimination but rather protection and self-defence faced with the danger embodied by Muslims" (Martín Muñoz, 2014: 43). These theories legitimise the need to protect against the apparent Islamisation of society and can finally

1. According to the *Estudio Demográfico de la Población Musulmana*, produced by the Unión de Comunidades Islámicas de España (UCIDE) and by the Observatorio Andalusí, Catalonia is the Spanish autonomous region with most Muslims (564,055 out of a total of 2,091,656).

justify the use of violence as a response to the danger posed by Muslims. From this perspective, Geisser argues that Islamophobia is an "anti-Muslim neo-racism" that results from a "heterophobic imaginary that believes it is more or less legitimate to give an answer to a 'primary violence', that of Muslim individuals or groups, whose secret project would be to subvert our system of values" (Geisser, 2011).

Jihadist terrorism has given a real boost to certain Islamophobic discourses, attitudes and measures. In fact, it is not possible to understand the rise in Islamophobia in the 21st century in Europe without taking into account the impact of terrorism. The Jihadist attacks enable discourses to be promoted according to which European Muslims – as members of a monolithic community – practise a religion that is deeply violent and fundamentally opposed to coexistence. In the vein of the great replacement, these attacks would be the proof that European Muslims are actually the Trojan horses of a plan to Islamise Europe. Hence the rise in Islamophic attacks seen in many European cities after a Jihadist attack.

Moreover, the terrorist threat has justified the implementation of discriminatory measures designed to watch over Muslims and the spaces where they interact: mosques, Imams, staff or even students in schools are under suspicion. As a consequence, the integration and inclusion agenda has been eclipsed by the antiterrorist agenda, which prioritises security. In this respect, many studies highlighted the multiple relationships between the antiterrorist fight and the implementation of discriminatory measures that are implicitly or explicitly Islamophobic (Abbas and Awan, 2015; Kundnani, 2009).

Finally, the media and social networks play a clear role when enabling the circulation and dissemination of discourses that are hostile to Islam and Muslims. Both types of platforms can serve as a sounding board for Islamophobic discourses and, therefore, form part of dynamics of dissemination of prejudices leading to the criminalisation of Muslim groups or to the justification of discriminatory measures against them (Awan, 2016). For instance, the Observatory of Islamophobia in the Media considers that the Spanish media outlets participate in the promotion of a climate of Islamophobia as they treat Islam and/or Muslims as if they were a homogenous entity; they link them to terrorism and use Islam as a factor that explains cultural practices. The social networks pose even further challenges: platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok have a set of characteristics – outreach capacity, decentralised use, anonymity, visibility – that modify the scenario of creation and distribution of information and enable certain users to employ them as tools for hate discourse.

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In short, Islamophobia is a phenomenon whose existence is the result of a set and combination of historical factors and contemporary phenomena. Although there are theoretical debates about the relevance of the concept, in reality this results in stereotypes, exclusion and rejection dynamics, discrimination and even violence against people according to their real or supposed belonging to Islam. Faced with this scenario, there are increasingly more voices that call for the implementation of programmes, initiatives and strategies aimed at addressing Islamophia in a holistic way.

Given this situation, spaces should be created where we can meet. This is an unavoidable social and political challenge. Neighbourhood and city projects are needed, where diverse people, associations and communities can meet and generate shared experiences with a positive outlook. In this respect, examples

such as the II Jornades Gatzara[2] provide a key opportunity.

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