

Islamophobia, its Past and Present (Intermediate)

Islam was founded in the seventh century and is an Abrahamic religion, like Judaism and Christianity. These three **monotheistic** religions recognise Abraham (Ibrāhīm in Arabic) as their first prophet, and are centred around the worship of the god of Abraham/Ibrāhīm, who in Islam is called Allah (the Arabic word for God). Despite, and sometimes because of, these shared origins, there has been interfaith conflict.¹ Present-day Islamophobia has its early roots in Medieval anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim sentiment spread by the Christian Church prior to, and during, **the Crusades** (1096–1291).

After its founding in 610, Islam spread across North Africa and the Middle East during the next two centuries, growing its followers and conquering territory that was part of the Christian Roman Empire.²

Despite this, there is evidence of trade and good relations between Christians and Muslims during this time. However, at the end of the eleventh century, the Christian Church started a military campaign against Islam and Muslims to reclaim lost territory. In 1095,

Pope Urban II gave a speech, which triggered the start of the Crusades, in which he referred to Muslims as 'enemies of the lord', depicting them as a distinct group to Christians.

When the Crusades ended in 1291, Muslims were established as the 'other' in the minds of European Christians. This idea of inescapable difference impacted how Muslims were viewed and treated in Europe.

European **colonialism**, which began in the fifteenth century and lasted until the twentieth, reinforced this idea of an inferior 'other' (and of the superiority of white, Christian Europeans), and led to the creation of the concept of race to justify power inequalities, slavery and the mistreatment of those who had been colonised. During the period of European colonialism, there were large Muslim empires, notably the Ottoman Empire (1299–1922), which sought to expand into Christian Europe. The threat of the Islamic 'other' thus remained in the minds of Christian Europeans and impacted how Muslims were viewed, written about and spoken of in the following centuries.

By the early twentieth century, a large part of the Muslim world was ruled by European colonialist countries.

Tropes that emerged almost one thousand years ago and that portray Muslims and Islam as a threat to Christianity, as violent, as **oppressors** of women, as **monolithic** and as a danger to Europe continue

Glossary

- **Colonialism:** The practice of a powerful country controlling a less powerful country or area and profiting from its resources.
- **The Crusades:** A series of wars between Christians and Muslims started by the Christian Church to reclaim areas that were important to both religions.
- **Genocide:** When the whole, or part, of a religious, racial, ethnic or national group is intentionally destroyed.
- **Monolith:** When used to refer to a group of people, it suggests they are viewed as all being the same.
- **Monotheism:** The belief that there is only one God.
- **Oppressor:** Someone who treats a person or a group in a cruel or unfair way.
- **Trope:** A commonly shared idea, phrase or story.

¹ Jerusalem, which is currently claimed by both Israelis and Palestinians as their capital, is a holy site for Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Who rules over the area has been a source of interreligious conflict. The Crusades saw Christians and Muslims fight over this land. In the present day, this land is a source of conflict between Israelis, who are mostly Jews, and Palestinians, who are mostly Muslims.

² Conflict and conquest are part of the human story and most places in the world have been controlled by different rulers and empires throughout history.

to circulate to this day. These tropes shape how Muslims are viewed and treated, both in European countries and elsewhere through the foreign policy of Western/European governments.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, these prejudicial attitudes towards Muslims and Islam have led to discriminatory portrayals of Muslims in the media; to public figures, including politicians, spreading Islamophobic views; to government foreign policy that has seen Western/European powers invade Muslim majority countries in the Middle East; to anti-immigrant policies and attacks on asylum detention centres; to structural inequalities that mean Muslims face discrimination in the workplace and are more likely to experience poverty; and to acts of violence against Muslim individuals and communities.

Islamophobia does not just exist in European/Western contexts. In recent years, there have been attacks against the Rohingya in Myanmar, the Uyghurs in China, and the Muslim population of India, which are rooted in the historical othering of Muslims. The attacks against the Rohingya and the Uyghurs have been called **genocides**.

It is important to understand that Islamophobia has both anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim strands; it is both a form of racism and a form of religious prejudice that views Muslims as culturally inferior and Islam as a backwards religion that does not align with democratic values. While these two forms of Islamophobia can appear separately, they are fed by each other. Both, therefore, need to be recognised to challenge Islamophobia.