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"That's how Muslims are required to view the world": Race, culture and belief in non-Muslims' descriptions of Islam and science

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Abstract

Islam's positioning in relation to Western ideals of individuality, freedom, women's rights and democracy has been an abiding theme of sociological analysis and cultural criticism, especially since September 11th 2001. Less attention has been paid, however, to another concept that has been central to the image of Western modernity: science. This article analyzes comments about Islam gathered over the course of 117 interviews and 13 focus groups with non-Muslim members of the public and scientists in the UK and Canada on the theme of the relationship between science and religion. The article shows how participants' accounts of Islam and science contrasted starkly with their accounts of other religious traditions, with a notable minority of predominantly non-religious interviewees describing Islam as uniquely, and uniformly, hostile to science and rational thought. It highlights how such descriptions of Islam were used to justify the cultural othering of Muslims in the West and anxieties about educational segregation, demographic 'colonization' and Islamist extremism. Using these data, the article argues for: 1) wider recognition of how popular understandings of science remain bound up with conceptions of Western cultural superiority; and 2) greater attentiveness to how prejudices concerning Islamic beliefs help make the idea that Muslims pose a threat to the West respectable.

Keywords: Science and Islam, science and religion, Islamophobia, racialization, non-religion

Introduction

In recent years, against the backdrop of the 'War on Terror', various authors (Massad, 2015; Norton, 2013) have shown how North American and European writers, past and present, have positioned concepts such as individualism, freedom, women's rights and democracy in such a way as to externalize Islam and portray the tradition as representing everything the West stands against. Less attention has been paid, however, to another concept that has been central to the image of Western modernity: science. As with the political ideals above, claims about science have been prominent in Western writing on Islam. Nineteenth century orientalists such as Ernest Renan and E.H. Nolan dismissed Islam as guided by 'fixed

principles' that make it inherently hostile to scientific discoveries (Nolan, 1859: iv; Renan, 2000 [1883]). More recently, too, 'New Atheists' and *soi-disant* spokespersons for science such as Sam Harris (2006) and Richard Dawkins (BBC, 2011) have singled out Islam as implacably opposed to scientific inquiry. The question of how science fits into the cultural identity of Western societies, and its role in influencing attitudes to Islam, has been, however, neglected.

In this article, we analyze comments made about Islam over the course of 117 interviews and 13 focus groups with non-Muslim members of the public and professional scientists based in the UK and Canada on the subject of the relationship between religion and science. We show how participants' accounts of Islam and science contrasted starkly with their accounts of other religious traditions, with a notable minority of predominantly non-religious participants describing Islam as uniquely, and uniformly, hostile to science and rational thought. Using these data, we do two related things. First, we highlight the contemporary influence of narratives claiming that Islam's 'dogmatic' nature puts it at odds with science and associated concepts such as 'Enlightenment', 'reason', and 'modernity'. This allows us to show how science, as well as signifying a set of institutions and practices, functions as a label marking out social identities and boundaries. Second, we use our data to make an argument about the study of contemporary Islamophobia. While we draw upon recent scholarship on the racialization of Muslim identity, we criticize and take steps to remedy the lack of consideration given in this body of work to stereotypes about religious interpretation in Islam. We draw attention to the ways in which prejudices about belief and processes of racialization and cultural othering are intertwined. Further, we argue that being attentive to prejudices specifically about religious belief in Islam can shed light on the processes by which Islamophobia is *made respectable*.

We begin by reviewing the emergence of Islamophobia as a concept and debates about it. Here, we contrast analysis of historical anti-Islamic sentiment with literature on contemporary Islamophobia, paying attention to the distinction developed in the latter between Islamophobia and 'Muslimphobia'. We then introduce our research and give an overview of our findings, before providing a detailed account of the themes we encountered in participants' negative accounts of Islam and Muslims. Although we show how our participants' comments involved racialization and the othering of 'Muslim culture', we also highlight how prejudices about interpretation in Islam were central to participants' negative judgements. We analyze the social role of such prejudices, before concluding with an argument about the need to integrate insights about religious interpretation into scholarship on anti-Muslim prejudice.

Islamophobia, past and present

Islamophobia is simultaneously a very old and a very new phenomenon. The word itself was introduced into the Anglophone lexicon only in the 1980s (Vakil, 2010: 33), becoming mainstream following the attacks of September 11th 2001. Those who popularized the concept, however, recognized that it described 'centuries old' hostilities (CBMI, 1997). Accordingly, recent collections on the subject (M. Malik, 2010; Meer, 2016; Sayyid and Vakil, 2010) contain fruitful analysis of both historical and contemporary perceptions. Historical work has tended to focus on the ways Muslims and Islam have been depicted in Western literary, philosophical and political writing (Anidjar, 2003; Massad, 2015),[1] while research into contemporary Islamophobia has been concerned with negative public perceptions of Muslims (Bleich, 2009), attacks on them (Allen et al., 2013) and legislative and policy responses to these problems (Meer, 2010). With interest in the concept being spurred by the 'War on Terror', analysis of contemporary trends has, understandably, been dominated by the impact of securitization on Muslims' rights and engagement with Western states (Hussain and Bagguley, 2012; Saeed, 2016).

There are important continuities between these two literatures. The racialization of Islam and the exoticization of Muslim women, for example, are conspicuous themes throughout, showing that, while Islamophobia today operates through novel governance logics and technologies of control (Hussain and Bagguley, 2012), past cultural norms continue to echo in and influence the present. Questions of *belief* tend, however, to be treated differently depending on whether historical or contemporary prejudice is the subject of discussion. When focusing on historical depictions of Islam, scholars have found space to discuss perceptions of religious interpretation. An important analytical theme has been historical writers' accounts of the way Christianity and Islam relate to modernity, Enlightenment and 'the secular' (Asad, 1993; Massad, 2015).[2] Authors such as Derrida (2002) and Anidjar (2003, 2006) have persuasively argued that Enlightenment-era Western writers, historians and philosophers commonly depicted Christianity as, at one and the same time, the opponent of secular, enlightened rationalism *and* as the tradition that contained the seeds of rational inquiry and thus made secularity and Enlightenment possible.[3] They point to how Christianity came to be regarded as, in Kant's (1958 [1793]) terms, a 'reflecting', potentially reasonable intellectual tradition embedded in Western culture, in contrast to Jewish and Islamic 'dogmatisms' that were seen as external and alien to it. Their argument, in short, is that during the process of Christianity in the West becoming secularized the distinction between secular and religious, and in turn between rational and non-rational, became intertwined with the production of Western culture and its others.

This contrast between Christianity and Islam (which we will see repeated in our interviews below) enables stereotypes about Muslims' beliefs to form an important theme of analysis and critique. In scholarship on historical Islamophobia, consideration is given to how depictions of others' religious beliefs *as well as* racial classifications facilitated the characterization of non-European populations as 'uncontrollable' and 'fanatical'. A limited amount of space has even been given to scrutiny of claims by historical Western writers about Islam's influence upon science (Lyons, 2014: 73–111; Massad, 2015: 39–42), with the dismissive portrayals of Renan and others being contrasted with figures, such as John W. Draper (Yalcinkaya, 2011), who spoke positively about scientific advances during Islam's Abbasid-era 'Golden Age' (another trope that emerges in our interviews). In scholarship on contemporary Islamophobia, however, this consideration of stereotypes about belief diminishes. Beyond Said's (1997 [1981]) pioneering analysis of portrayals of 'Islamic fundamentalism' in the 1980s, writing on contemporary Islamophobia has involved remarkably little discussion of prejudices about the nature of Muslims' beliefs. Contemporary public perceptions of religious interpretation in Islam, and by extension of the tradition's relationship with concepts such as 'science', 'modernity', and 'rationality', have therefore been sorely neglected.

Racialization and religion

This neglect is at least in part the consequence of how the debate about Islamophobia has played out since the term was popularized. Journalists on the liberal left as well as the right have repeatedly called Islamophobia's status *as prejudice* into question, describing it as a 'myth' (K. Malik, 2005) and a 'nonsense' (Toynbee, 2005). Such claims have generally been based on the argument that Islam is a system of ideas to which people choose to subscribe and is, therefore, distinct from socially or biologically determined characteristics such as 'race' and gender that deserve legal protection. In stronger versions, this extends to claiming that protection against Islamophobia – through legislation outlawing incitement to religious hatred, for example – presents risks to free speech and amounts to a 'capitulation to Muslim extremism' (for an overview see Meer, 2010: 181–183).

Against such opposition, those seeking to win recognition for Islamophobia have typically, and understandably, emphasized the *socialized* nature of Muslim identity. In some cases, this extends to dispensing with the term 'Islamophobia' entirely and proffering alternatives such as 'Muslimphobia' or 'anti-Muslimism' (for a summary see Cheng, 2015: 564). Halliday (1999: 898), for example, justified such a substitution on the basis that '[t]he attack now is against not *Islam* as a faith but *Muslims* as a people' (original emphasis). Central to this

substitution is the insight that Islam was historically, and remains today, racially coded. In many national contexts, within and indeed beyond the West, being Muslim is associated with ethnic group membership and thus with certain somatic characteristics (Moosavi, 2015: 44). Imagery denigrating Islam, moreover, has often utilized somatic tropes such as the 'bulbous nose and bushy eyebrows' familiar from the history of anti-Semitism in Europe (Levey and Modood, 2009: 439). Such arguments suggest an understanding of Islamophobia as racism that merely *presents itself* as religious criticism. The switch in terminology, then, allows the debate around religious prejudice to be bypassed, with discourse kept in terms familiar to scholars of race and ethnicity.

This approach sits alongside a second, and we argue more helpful, response that seeks not to bypass the religious aspects of Islamophobia but incorporate these within theories of cultural racism and racialization (Massoumi et al., 2017; Meer, 2016; Modood, 1997). Here, too, Muslim identity is understood not just as a matter of agreeing with certain ideas but as a 'quasi-ethnic sociological formation' (Meer, 2008: 66). In this case, however, religion and race are treated similarly: just as 'race' is conceived of as a social construction within which 'certain ethnic heritage or cultural practices attach to social advantage and disadvantage' (Massoumi et al., 2017: 5), so Islamophobia is seen as advantage and disadvantage rooted in perceived attachment to religious beliefs or communities. The racialized nature of Islamophobia is acknowledged, but in this literature greater emphasis is placed on the argument that racism does not always involve claims about biology. Stereotypes about British South Asians, for example, have rarely referred to biological inferiority but instead have usually involved claims about their being culturally alien (Modood, 1997). Such stereotypes are rightly regarded in Britain as racist, if for no other reason than they have been used to justify physical attacks ('Paki-bashing'). Similar non-biological stereotypes have been applied to Muslims ('terrorists', 'sexual predators'), along with associated abuse. Indeed, one of the strongest arguments for this manner of understanding Islamophobia is that there is a clear relationship between street-level abuse of Muslims and wearing visible signs of belief (Meer, 2013: 503; Meer and Modood, 2009: 74). This helps account for the fact that abuse of Muslims, unusually for racialized harassment, disproportionately affects women rather than men, particularly women who wear a *hijab* or *niqab* (Allen et al., 2013).

What is striking, however, is that even scholars who take this second approach have said little about misrecognition of Muslims' beliefs. Massoumi *et al* (2017) analyse how the social movements that popularize Islamophobia act in the pursuit of specific material interests, and explicitly distinguish their work from 'ideas-based approaches'. Meer and Modood's work does stress that Islamophobia has religious components, but their main focus is the

projection of racial and cultural themes *onto* religion. Indeed, their work points away from questions of belief at times, arguing that religious discrimination 'does not usually proceed on the basis of belief but on the perceived membership of an ethno-religious group' (Meer and Modood, 2010: 83). These authors' conceptualization of Islamophobia requires, we argue, no re-working to be able to incorporate belief-based prejudices: within this framework, Islamophobia could involve, *inter alia*, the projection of beliefs, traditions and forms of interpretation onto people who are, or are perceived to be, Muslim. Neither group of authors disagrees in principle, too, with analyzing claims about Muslims' beliefs (indeed, both have hinted such work is potentially important: Massoumi et al., 2017: 6; Meer and Modood, 2009: 353). Nevertheless, there is a tendency in this body of scholarship – exemplified by Runnymede's recent efforts to cement an agreed definition of Islamophobia (Elahi and Khan, 2017) – to neglect belief. We want to propose that, while this may facilitate public recognition of more extreme manifestations of Islamophobia, it comes at the cost of neglecting subtler, socially acceptable prejudices. Further, it hinders the potentially forceful argument that, whatever one's views concerning freedom to criticize religious ideas, stereotypes about the beliefs people hold do exist and can be damaging.

The present study, then, proposes to build on the work of these authors to bring scholarship on racialization into contact with data dealing explicitly with religious interpretation. In what follows, we connect historical and sociological literatures on Islamophobia by examining how discourses about Islam's 'irrational' and 'anti-science' nature appear in the interview narratives of non-Muslim scientists and publics in the West. Science, we show, has force as an identity marker and is mobilized in anti-Muslim narratives that touch on themes of race, immigration and social cohesion. The philosophical theme of our interviews also means that our data shed light on how prejudices about belief and processes of racialization are intertwined. In the sections below, we will show not only that stereotypes of belief and racialization work together, but that that the former follow distinctive social dynamics that deserve closer attention.

Research methods

The research this article is based on was carried out between 2014 and 2017 as part of the multi-disciplinary project 'Science and Religion: Exploring the Spectrum'. This project's goal was to investigate how debates about, and perceptions of, science and religion are socially situated. Drawing on an emerging, predominantly USA-based body of sociological scholarship on science and religion (see, inter alia, Ecklund, 2010; Hill, 2014; Noy and O'Brien, 2016), the research investigates variations in how science and religion are

understood in different national contexts and (non-)religious groups. A central theme in the research is, then, analyzing how philosophical and scriptural interpretations intersect with, and are influenced by, social processes and conflicts. The qualitative social scientific strand of this project included 123 interviews and 16 focus groups with members of the public and scientists working in the life, biological and medical sciences (see Table 1).[4] We selected approximately the same number of religious as non-religious participants[5] and, beyond this, chose participants purposively to ensure variation in terms of belief, age, class, gender and ethnicity (see Emmel, 2013). In the case of interviews and focus groups with the public, recruitment was facilitated by a pre-screening survey that enabled targeted selection.

	Scientists	Public
UK interviews	20	41 (4)
Canada interviews	22	40 (2)
UK focus groups	3	5 (2)
Canada focus groups	3	5 (1)

Table 1: Interviews and focus groups (brackets indicate Muslim/ex-Muslim cases excluded from this analysis)

Interviews covered participants' (non-)religious formation, interest in science, views about science and religion, attitudes toward evolution, and perceptions of public coverage of science and religion. We did *not* ask participants their views of Islam directly, but questions were designed to elicit opinions of 'religion in general' and of outgroups (for example: 'Can you recall an occasion where you learned about how people with beliefs different from your own understand evolutionary science?'). In this article we focus upon non-Muslims' comments about Islam, so we have excluded three focus groups and six interviews including Muslims or ex-Muslims.

Interviews and focus groups were semi-structured, following a schedule common to the UK and Canada that enabled participants the leeway to elaborate their views. This flexible structure was designed to give participants scope to draw associations between themes (Wengraf, 2009). In the USA, people's views on science and religion are associated with positions on a range of moral issues, from gender and sexuality to families, schools and human life (Noy and O'Brien, 2016). Acknowledging this, we sought to explore how people's beliefs about religion and evolution – and science and religion more generally – mapped onto other issues. As we shall see, interviewees moved rapidly from subjects like science,

rationalism and religious interpretation to socio-political themes including education, demographic change, and religion's place in public life.

Overview of findings

All the interviews and focus groups were transcribed and analyzed using the qualitative data analysis package QSR NVivo. Across all transcripts, including those we excluded, there were 904 references to Islam and Muslims across 106 interviews and focus groups. These were coded, once Muslim/ex-Muslim participants and interviewers' comments had been removed, into 256 extended passages across 91 interviews and focus groups. All interviewees and focus groups were classified on a seven point scale ranging from negative to positive about Islam and Muslims in order to facilitate systematic comparisons (using matrix data queries) across religious, national and professional lines.

Given our purposive sampling strategy and indirect questioning, we cannot make generalizable claims regarding the prevalence of negative attitudes toward Islam and/or Muslims amongst British or Canadian populations. Nevertheless, a clear qualitative distinction emerged from our data between how participants discussed Islam and how they discussed other religious traditions. It was extremely rare for participants to single out traditions other than Islam and Christianity as being incompatible with 'scientific inquiry'. In the case of other minority religions, participants were generally willing to acknowledge their lack of knowledge, while Islam's nature was considered by many to be *well-known*. Moreover, as we shall illustrate below, in the case of Christianity our participants were generally willing to accept that there is variation within the tradition and that the Bible offers flexibility of interpretation in a way they were not for Islam and the Qur'an. Participants who were negatively disposed to 'religion' as a category did associate Christianity with suspension of critical reasoning, but it was extremely rare for participants to claim that being Christian *necessarily* and *uniformly* involved such suspension, or to claim that Christianity is *dangerous* as well as irrational.

Across the 91 interviews and focus groups, the number coded negative (1-3) and positive (5-7) was similar (26 and 25, respectively).[6] This equivalence, however, needs to be treated carefully. Among those coded as positive towards Islam and Muslims, comments were generally limited to acknowledging that Muslims suffer racism or that there is diversity within the Islamic tradition. Positive comments about the *content* of the tradition – for example, the claim that Islam forms part of the 'Western canon' or that the Qur'an 'contains beauty' – were extremely rare. We go into detail about the character of the negative accounts below, but suffice to note here that these overwhelmingly involved claims about

the nature of Islamic belief. Most negative accounts of Islam were offered by members of the general public rather than scientists (see Table 2). Our study thus found little evidence to suggest that knowledge of science encourages anti-Islamic views. Consistent with findings from USA-based scholarship on science and religion (Evans, 2011; Hill, 2014), taking a position on science and Islam appeared to have more to do with identity and moral positioning than familiarity with scientific concepts. There were also limited differences observed between the two country contexts, reflecting the fact that, while the present Canadian government has a comparatively open stance concerning immigration, Islam-related moral panics have occurred in both nation-states.

Professional status	General public	Scientist
	20 (24.4%)	6 (12.5%)
Nationality	UK	Canada
	15 (23.8%)	11 (16.4%)
Belief	Religious	Non-religious
	8 (11.4%)	18 (29.5%)

Table 2: Frequency of cases including negative accounts of Islam (percentage of all non-Muslim cases in brackets)

Most striking were the differences between religious and non-religious participants. Studies of what factors predict hostility toward Muslims in Europe are not conclusive on the question of whether (non-)religion predicts anti-Muslim views. Strabac and Listhaug's (2008) analysis of European Values Study data found little connection between religious practice and attitudes toward Muslims. Using a multilevel model based on data on belief, values and identity from the same survey, however, Ribberink *et al*. (2017) found a consistent relationship between non-religiosity and anti-Muslim sentiment, as well as increased solidarity with Muslims among Protestants. Our indicative findings resonate with this latter study. Negative accounts of Islam were almost three times as likely to be found in interviews and focus groups with non-religious participants as religious non-Muslim participants. Similarly, positive accounts of Islam and Muslims were more than twice as likely to be found in interviews and focus groups with religious non-Muslim participants as non-religious participants. There were exceptions: in our sample the most positive comments about the Qur'an's beauty were made by the leader of a humanist network. In general, however, the view that Islam is inimical to science was predominantly non-religious, while many Christian participants emphasized the commonality between religions. Research in the field of non-religion studies has observed that science is central to the moral identities of some non-religious individuals (Catto and Eckles, 2013; Lee, 2015). In our research with non-religious

people, science emerged not just as central to identity but as a concept through which difference was expressed and boundaries maintained.

Negative orientations toward Islam

We turn now to look at the negative accounts of Islam in our interviews and focus groups. We begin by looking at how racialization and cultural othering featured in our interviews. We then move on to examine the process of *exceptionalization* in our interview and focus group data. By this, we mean narratives used to mark Islam out as uniquely irrational or threatening. As we shall see, there numerous ways in which Islam was exceptionalized by participants, but underlying almost all these were claims or assumptions about Islam's supposed interpretive inflexibility. The idea that Islam leaves no room for individual reasoning was a common thread in the negative accounts of Islam in our data, and we suggest that the way this thread was tied into racialized claims (or not) holds lessons for understanding Islamophobia.

Racialization and cultural othering

Above, we referred to three related forms of prejudice: 1) biological racism involving claims about somatic characteristics; 2) cultural racism involving non-biological claims about cultural inferiority; and 3) religious prejudice involving claims about the beliefs people hold. All of these types of claim were made at some point in our study. A minority (5) of participants expressed themes familiar from far-Right discourses: prophecies of a violent confrontation with Islam or predictions about the 'demographic colonization' of Europe by Muslims. For example, Cliff (all pseudonyms), a White British non-religious member of the public, saw conflict with Islam as inexorable:

> [Islam is] the enemy of everything. It's the enemy. And we're just blindly wandering into it. We're not hanging on to the insights of Enlightenment, which to me is the primacy of reason over dogma. We're turning our backs on that, and it's absolutely terrifying. I'm not sure what's going to happen.

In interviews where biological or cultural claims were prominent, interviewees sometimes distinguished explicitly between 'cultural' and 'religious' threats. Natascha, for example, a White Canadian non-religious member of the public, described 'Muslim culture' in highly racialized terms and as separate from 'religion':

> [S]ome societies, and it's particularly Muslim populations, some of them are in Pakistan, some of them are in India […] the inbreeding […] first cousins are marrying

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each other, and it's causing […] birth defects and so on, but these people are actually worshipping these, I don't even know if you can call them humans at that point, as a sign of God […]. In some areas of the world, and particularly in Islamic countries, it's not just religion; it's culture.

A similar distinction was made by Abigail, another White Canadian non-religious member of the public. In her case, a gendered narrative of violent Muslim/Western confrontation was described as cultural conflict and *not* scriptural:

Why cover your face? We're not a country who walks around in masks. And also don't tell me you're doing it because of your faith because the Muslim faith there's nothing about covering their face. And, as I said, and always makes me wonder, well, if you're that strict of a Muslim that you're going even over and above what your own doctrine tells you to do then I guess you want to kill all of us infidels too, and that's pretty frightening to me.

Despite these examples, however, our data did not support the premise that Islamophobia is predominantly a matter of ethno-cultural or racialized difference with questions of belief being of little significance. The much more common tendency in our data was for narratives about *cultural* difference to be tightly interwoven with, indeed based upon, narratives about *philosophical* difference. Claims about philosophical differences between religious and secular traditions were used as explanations of social trends or as justifications for fears emerging within spaces of encounter (especially, as we shall see, schools). The following exchange, for example, took place in a focus group with ten non-religious members of the public in London. All participants were White British, as were the facilitators (one facilitator was Muslim, although this was not disclosed to participants).[7] The conversation began by focusing on the theme of scientific progress, with one participant's optimistic comment on the subject being challenged by three others:

Participant 1: [I'm optimistic about the future because] I like to see it [history] as leaving ignorance and prejudice and bigotry behind us.

Participant 2: But it [ignorance] may not continue to depreciate…

Participant 3: No, I agree.

Participant 2: Because as demographics change I believe the birth rate amongst religious families is higher. But there is a sense that…

Participant 1: Except that the experience of this country is that they start to conform to the kind of patterns that the rest of us conform to…

Participant 2: I don't…

Participant 4: I'm not sure that's true.

Participant 3: It's true about the number of religious groups, but I think there may be something about Islamic groups which is different.

The conversation continued, with Participant 4 eventually concluding with the following:

Just sitting in King's Cross Station […], all the headscarves suddenly appear. I think, am I imagining this? But that says to me that something very, very dangerous is happening in this society. The danger is coming from Islam.

Clearly, this passage involves the construction of cultural others ('the headscarves suddenly appear') while biological themes are alluded to more subtly ('the birth rate amongst religious families is higher'). Here as elsewhere in our data, however, 'Islam' is not just invoked as a group label but is positioned as an ideology whose influence explains certain phenomena. It is this process of linking culture, 'race' and ideology that we wish to examine now, with reference to Islamic exceptionalism.

The exceptionality of Islam

The exceptionalization of Islam was a central theme not just in the conversation above but across the negative accounts. Participants bracketed Islam off from other religions, from general social trends, and from ostensibly universal moral principles or standards for evaluating evidence. Such comments were often curt and stated as a simple, uncontested matter of fact, as the following quotations illustrate:

I think most of the religions of the world, as I understand them – you know, apart from Islam, that's different – but apart from that, you know, we've got to treat people kindly and gently and lovingly.

Lyle, White British Christian, public

I think when science has such a, kind of, a set in stone explanation for something, it's certainly hard to ignore, so I think for any religion, I can see them being fairly open-minded in taking [evolution] into account – maybe certain religions [don't], for example, Islam […].

In some instances, this exceptionalizing of Islam did not entail dividing the tradition from other religions, but rather seeing it as the *exemplary case* of 'religion'. This was a frequent theme particularly in the narratives of non-religious people, some of whom saw Islam as religion in its 'purest', undiluted form:

> I think they're all pretty much the same. They're all, and Muslim is a little bit worse than most, I think, it's proving at the minute. But, I think [all religions], they've all basically got the ingredients, they've got the ingredients for good but unfortunately most of, a lot of the time it's used for evil, isn't it?

Norman, White British non-religious, public

Islam, Christianity and 'Western culture'

This exceptionalization of Islam also implied the *externalization* of Islam. Various narratives situated Islam and Muslim communities outside of 'Western' (or a particular national) culture while placing other religious traditions within it. For example, although, as we have seen, Judaism has also historically figured in European narratives of religious dogmatism, in our study most interviewees who mentioned the tradition portrayed it as having 'rationalized'.[8] Similarly, Christianity was understood by participants to be, today, typically accommodating of empirical evidence, modern social mores and liberal political norms. Christian opposition to evolution was discussed regularly, but was generally depicted by religious and non-religious participants as a limited, predominantly USA-based phenomenon. Christianity was described as part of – and sometimes an ultimately positive influence on – the West. As one non-religious Canadian focus group participant put it: 'I cannot believe that you can divorce the whole influence of Christianity and Western culture [on human rights], for example, for women. You just can't'.

In contrast, Islamic opposition to science was typically viewed as comprehensive. The notable exception to this in our negative accounts were occasional narratives that talked of – in the words of Stuart, a White British non-religious member of the public – the 'flowering of Arabic science under the Caliphate'. For some (religious) participants these 'Golden Age' narratives formed part of an argument against the idea of a general conflict between science and religion. For others, however, they fed into a view of the Islamic tradition as having driven out Greek rationalist influences following the Abbasid era and subsequently declined. Stuart, for example, spoke elsewhere of Muslims as people who want to 'bring back' punishments 'we got rid of […] a long time ago'. Such narratives of irrationalism, in

turn, led to Muslims being positioned as threatening. The following comments, for instance, draw a distinction between Christians' and Muslims' orientations toward science education. These quotes illustrate not just how the two traditions were contrasted in our research, but also how comments about Islam and science segued into discussions of social conflict:

> You know, the Tory government think that Christianity is the default religion in this country and that, therefore, if you open up schooling to interest groups, lo and behold, you will get lots and lots of nice Christian schools with lots of nice Christian values and family values, and whatever they mean by that. Of course, you're going to get radical Muslim schools.

> Kaye, White British non-religious, public

> Leaving aside the Catholic school system which seemed to be doing a better job at teaching evolution, the public school system is under pressure from Muslim parents and parents who really don't want their religious ideas undermined by schoolteachers.

> Non-religious focus group participant, Canada

Scriptural determinism

Narratives of cultural othering, then, pervaded our negative accounts of Islam. In almost all cases, however, these were rationalized via claims about the absence of interpretive variation in Islam. Such claims often explicitly referred to the Qur'an and were offered as the basis for claims about Muslims' alleged rejection of evolution, radicalism, educational segregation and demographic 'colonization'. The following quotes – the first returning to the case of Cliff, then two further cases – illustrate:

> I mean, what seems to be happening is, that people are deciding that Allah means exactly what he says. He's not being symbolic. When he says, chop their heads off, he means chop their heads off […]. [Some people say] that needs a good interpretation […] [But] who are they to presume to interpret, that when Allah says this, he doesn't mean it?

> Cliff, White British non-religious, public

> I think my understanding is the Qur'an was literally handed down and there's not, I mean, that is Allah's words. And there's just no messing with interpretation. So theological discussion is very limited. It can be in that situation, that's my

understanding, and the Christian tradition and Judaeo-Christian tradition, I mean, there's a lot of latitude for discussion.

Ronald, White Canadian Christian, scientist

It starts with, okay, the truth is in the Bible so we need to go and follow the Bible; it can't be challenged in some people's mind. And I know that's a very simplistic view of Christianity but as far as Islam goes that's how Muslims are required to view the world, the way […] it was written down 1,300, 1,400 years ago […].

Bryan, White British non-religious, public

More than just offering a 'monolithic' account of Islam (CBMI, 1997), these narratives provide examples of what Appiah (2016) calls 'scriptural determinism': the assumption that a religious scripture determines its followers' worldviews uniformly and can be used as an explanation for specific actions and (real or perceived) social changes. On this view, stereotypes about Muslims are valid because they are enclosed by a rigid philosophical framework.

'Dinner table' prejudice

Two questions follow from these observations. First, to what extent can these statements be counted as prejudiced? The analogy between religion and race, utilized in scholarship on the racialization of Islam, seems to break down insofar as, while all judgements on the basis of 'race' can be described as prejudiced, the same cannot necessarily be said for claims about knowledge traditions. The Qur'an is conventionally considered by Muslims as the revealed word of God, and has a form quite different from the Bible. In the case of Muslims' beliefs about evolution, referred to earlier, there is scant empirical research but religiously justified evolution rejection does occur among Muslim populations, even if levels vary greatly (Clément, 2015). Yet, if this rules out the idea that *all* negative evaluations of these phenomena are prejudiced, we do still see the specific claims above in this way – and not just because they may be embedded in narratives of race and culture. Rather, these claims' ignorance of the array of centuries old interpretive and contextualizing techniques in Qur'anic exegesis, as well as their unhesitating and unreflexive form, makes them prejudiced *about the Islamic tradition itself*.

Second, what is the status of these claims about religious interpretation? Should we regard them as religious prejudice, or as masks for prejudices rooted in constructions of racial otherness, as advocates of terms such as 'Muslimphobia' seem to imply? To argue one way or the other here seems, to us, not just captious but to risk undermining the idea that *both*

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categories are socially constructed (Massoumi et al., 2017). More productive is to examine when, and by whom, different claims are made. As we have already noted, claims about biology and far-right themes were rare in our interviews. Assumptions about literalism in Islam, however, permeated our data more deeply. Furthermore, such assumptions cut across differences in class, education and, in particular, political positioning. Hostile comments about Muslims as a group tended to be made by people who had radical libertarian (Cliff) or anti-élite (Lyle) political views. Generalizations about interpretation in Islam, in contrast, could be encountered across political positions, including positions committed to equality. Indeed, some participants expressed concern about the hostility to which Muslims are presently subjected while *at the same time* affirming a scriptural determinist reading of Islam. The clearest case of this was Bryan, quoted above. Bryan combined highly stereotyped views on what Muslims are 'required to believe' with the following, in response to a question about prejudice toward communities of belief:

> Muslims are categorised as having a broadly similar view of the world which is just nonsense as well, and I think that definitely is a problem in this country.

This was an obvious case but can be taken to represent many of the 'soft' negative accounts of Islam we encountered in which an outward commitment to tolerance of Muslims as people coexisted with the view that Islam can only be followed uniformly and literalistically. Many of those who did not come close to using racialized language nevertheless, in their deterministic reading of interpretation in Islam, affirmed the underlying basis for the argument that Muslims pose a threat. This finding calls to mind the Conservative British politician Baroness Sayeeda Warsi's (2011) claim that Islamophobia has 'passed the dinner table test' – or now extends beyond political extremes into contexts of middle class domestic respectability. This is, indeed, what our research suggested, but in an importantly qualified way: outright hostility toward Muslims *as people* was more restricted, while scriptural determinist narratives about Islam, which are not subject to the same public criticism, were widespread and offered unselfconsciously. With religion not being subject to the same censure as explicit remarks about 'race', narratives about Islam *as faith* emerged as a form of 'acceptable' anxiety about Muslims.

Conclusion

We propose, then, that examining popular constructions of 'science' and 'rationality' raises questions not only about how certain cultural narratives sustain Islamophobia, but also about the *structuring* of Islamophobic sentiment. These questions, moreover, have political implications as well as implications for the sociological discipline, and we want to consider

these in conclusion. One of the things that the research presented here highlights is that popular understandings of science remain influenced by longstanding narratives about Western cultural superiority, and that these narratives are, today, often articulated in specifically anti-Islamic terms. Unfortunately, however, within sociology scarcely has this insight been discussed even in directly relevant fields. Within the public understanding of science, for example, empirical analysis has tended to analyze religion simply as a potential driver of rejection of science (Elsdon-Baker, 2015). The contemporary role of 'science' in identity construction and boundary maintenance has been left to the nascent, rather isolated field of non-religion studies. Such work, we suggest, needs to be expanded in order to develop a fuller picture of the uses of science in society.

As well as this, our research strongly suggests that claims about interpretation in Islam can act as a *respectable* way of articulating unease about Muslims. In much the same way that Western media may promote a racialized understanding of European history and identity while at the same time condemning racism, our participants made vast generalizations about interpretation in Islam that implied Muslims are a social threat while also denouncing anti-Muslim discrimination. The uncovering of such subtle and normalized means of racialization and cultural othering has been one of the central functions of racial and ethnic studies, yet the absence of consideration given to religious interpretation in this field means that the dynamic we have explored here has been largely ignored. This suggests, then, a need for sociologies of race and religion to work more collaboratively. At the methodological level, this might mean incorporating lines of questioning about belief within research instruments designed to track prejudice, or analysis of claims about religious belief in made in justification of racialized political norms. At the political level, it also means engaging more directly with the argument that Islamophobia should be opposed not just because Muslim identity is rarely wholly voluntary, but also because even voluntarily chosen beliefs can be misrepresented in prejudiced, potentially harmful ways.

Notes

[1] This includes the shifting terminology used to construct Muslim populations, of course (for example, 'Turks', 'Moors', 'Mohammedans', etc.).

[2] This work follows in the vein of Said's *Orientalism* (1979) but, importantly, maintains that Said failed to recognize how the religious/secular distinction has facilitated the denigration of non-European peoples (see Anidjar, 2006; Vakil, 2010: 26–7).

[3] This is not just an historical narrative but the thesis of contemporary authors such as Taylor (2007) and Lilla (2007), with some, such as popular historian Holland (2009), developing the theme to argue that Islam stands at odds with liberal principles.

[4] UK interviews and focus groups were concentrated in the North West and West Midlands of England. Canadian interviews were mainly limited to the Greater Toronto Area.

[5] Of course, this division is crude and masks significant differences in our sample in terms of levels of practice, strength of belief and manner of identification. Full details of our classification method are available on request.

[6] The remaining 40 involved innocuous comments about Islam and were coded as neutral (4).

[7] Interviewers/facilitators did not disclose their beliefs to interviewees unless asked. With this one exception, all interviewers and facilitators were Christian or agnostic and White British/German.

[8] In observing this we do not wish to imply that anti-Semitism is a lesser problem today than Islamophobia, merely that it is not expressed in terms of religion and science. For comparisons of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia see Meer (2013) and Meer and Noorani (2008).

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