Islamophobic Tropes (Intermediate)

Reading 1: Culturally Incompatible

Directions: With your group members, read the following text[1] and then discuss the connection questions together.

The **trope** alleging that Islam and Muslims are culturally **incompatible** with Western society has been circulating for one thousand years. It is rooted in religious conflict and the divisive language use to encourage Christians to fight against Muslim during **the Crusades** (1096–1291). Pope Urban II's 1095 speech, which is seen as starting the Crusades, referred to Muslims as 'enemies of the Lord', who harmed women and stained altars 'with their uncleanliness'.

This belief of Islam as culturally inferior, violent, oppressive to women and at odds with Christianity continued after the Crusades, and shaped the treatment of Muslims during European **colonialism** (1400s–1900s). When Europeans studied the cultures of the people they colonised, they also 'othered' Muslims and painted the Middle East and Asia (the 'East'/'Orient' as less advanced than the West. European colonial powers used these views to justify their oppressive behaviour. Then, in the twentieth century, the narrative that there is a clash of civilizations between Muslims and the West started being spread.

Today, the idea of Muslims being culturally incompatible can be seen by responses to Islam in Europe. Media outlets emphasise difference and depict Muslims negatively. Many news stories focus on terrorism and the **oppression** of women, making terrorism, violence and **misogyny** seem like a Muslim-only problem. In reality, violence against women and gender inequality are society-wide problems, and exist in other religions (the Quran, which was written in the seventh century, outlines legal rights for women that were not granted in UK law until the twentieth century).[2] The media also portrays Islamic practices, such as halal meat, sharia law and Islamic dress, as dangerous. Such limited and negative portrayals are a form of cultural racism, and influence the way the public sees the relationship between the West and Islam. These stories of cultural incompatibility ignore the crossover between Islam, Christianity and Judaism,[3] and that Muslims have been living in Europe since the eighth century. In the areas now known as Spain and Portugal, Muslims lived alongside Christians for almost 700 years before they were expelled. In the UK, Moors lived in Elizabethan England, and Muslim sailors from Yemen and Somalia started settling in the port cities of Cardiff and Liverpool in the late 1800s (the r descendants still live there today. More recently, in the 1950s and 1960s, people from former British colonies, such as Pakistan, Cyprus and Nigeria, emigrated to Britain, having been invited to fill labour sh rtages after the Second World War. Some worked in construction and coal mines, while others were medics, engineers and scientists. At the time, Muslim immigrants were seen as a blessing to Europe, helping it to recover from the war.

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.
- **Incompatible:** Unable to exist or live with another person, group or thing.
- **Misogyny:** The hatred, dislike or distrust of women.
- **Oppression:** Cruel or unfair treatment that harms a person or group of people over a prolonged period.
- **Trope:** A commonly shared idea, phrase or story.

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[1] Some of this text is based on content from a video on this trope made by Get the Trolls Out!, an organisation that works to counter religious hate speech.

[2] What factors determine the changing roles of women in the Middle East and Islamic Societies?, PBS, 2002, accessed 25 May 2023.

[3] Islam, Christianity and Judaism are all Abrahamic religions: they recognise Abraham (Ibrāhīm in Arabic) as the first prophet, and are centred around the worship of the god of Abraham/Ibrāhīm, who in Islam is called Allah; other prophets they share include Yakub/Jacob, Ayub/Job and Musa/Moses.

During the 1970s, many immigrants, who were already in Europe, brought over family members to settle in their new countries. As European economies worsened in that period, media attitudes towards migrants started to change. While there have been many refugees from Muslim countries in recent years, the majority of Muslims in Europe are not immigrants; they are citizens, who were born and raised here. In the media, however, Muslims are depicted as foreign, 'other', and people to be wary of.

Saying Islamic culture is incompatible implies that Muslims can't live and function in the West, when this has been happening for centuries. Moreover, much of the Western world has actually been historically shaped by Islam and Muslims: Muslims developed new disciplines, like algebra and chemistry, and made major advances in medicine, astronomy, engineering and agriculture.

Connection Questions

Discuss the following questions and prompts together, noting down your group's ideas.

1. What does the Islamophobic trope of cultural incompatibility suggest? How does it present Muslims and their relationship with the West?

2. What emotional response does this trope seek to provoke? How does it seek to influence attitudes towards Muslims?

3. What are the similarities and differences between how the Islamophobic trope of cultural incompatibility has been used throughout history and up to the present day? What does the evolution of this trope teach us about discrimination/Islamophobia?

4. What does the content of this article make you think and feel? Explain your answer.

5. In your own words, write a two- to three-sentence summary of this article in your notebooks. You will be sharing your summary with a new group in the next part of the activity.

Handout

Islamophobic Tropes (Intermediate)

Reading 2: Oppression of Women

Directions: With your group members, read the following text[1] and then discuss the connection questions together.

Glossary

- **Oppress:** To harm a person or group of people over a prolonged period by treating them in a cruel and/or unjust way.
- **Patriarchal:** Related to a society or government controlled by, and that privileges, men.
- **Submissive:** A person or thing that allows itself to be controlled by others.
- **Trope:** A commonly shared idea, phrase or story.

This **trope** asserts that Islam **oppresses** women and that women need to be protected from Muslim men. Tied into this trope is also the belief that Muslim women are **submissive**. These ideas are not new: they have been in circulation since the founding of Islam in the seventh century, and have been spread by historical Christian figures. This is despite the fact that across many re igions (including in Christianity, individuals and groups have interpreted their holy texts to justify treating women as inferior. When people choose to single out and stereotype Islam as a religion that oppresses women, they may be more invested in 'othering' Muslims than in fighting for w men's rights.

Moreover, women in Islam have had their rights considered and have played active roles in a society throughout history. The Quran, which was written in the seventh century, outlines Muslim women's marriage, property and inheritance rights (in the UK, women did not gain these rights in law until the twentieth century).[2] Women have also been heads of state in Islamic countries.

In the present day, a part of the narrative about the oppression of women in Islam is about what women wear. Face veils, such as the niqab or the burqa, and head coverings, such as the hijab are seen as evidence that women are oppressed and/or submissive and, to some people, are symbols that Islam is a **patriarchal** and backward religion. The practice of women wearing headscarves, however, is not unique to Islam: many female Christians and Jews still wear headscarves to this day.

While some interpretations of Islam, such as those guiding the rulers of Iran, Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, deny women basic freedoms and/or choice over whether or not to wear a headscarf, many Muslim women, particularly those living in Western European countries, choose to wear one. Fighting against Muslim women wearing head coverings (and in some cases, as in France and the Netherlands, banning face coverings can deny women the right to choose for themselves. Moreover, debates about head coverings are often one-sided and exclude the voices of Muslim women who wear them.

The narrative of Islam oppressing women is further reinforced by media coverage. Often, stories about Muslims or Islam are accompanied by images of women wearing a full-face veil, even if they are not relevant to the story. Images of Muslim women in religious clothing are also used for negative news stories. The overuse of such images reinforces the trope that Islam oppresses women in the minds of non-Muslims and singles out Muslims as different and a group to be feared. Such selective coverage is also misleading: only 0.003 per cent of women in Europe wear the burqa or niqab.

Moreover, by focusing on negative stories, the media misses out on the opportunity to create a more realistic image of Muslim women, and celebrate their achievements and successes. This imbalance adds further fuel to this trope.

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[1] Some of this text is based on content from a video on this trope made by Get the Trolls Out!, an organisation that works to counter religious hate speech.

[2] What factors determine the changing roles of women in the Middle East and Islamic Societies?, PBS, 2002, accessed 25 May 2023.

Connection Questions

Discuss the following questions and prompts together, noting down your group's ideas.

1. What does the Islamophobic trope concerning the oppression of women allege?

2. What emotional response does this trope seek to provoke? How does it seek to influence attitudes towards Muslims?

3. What are the similarities and differences between how the Islamophobic trope concerning the oppression of women has been used throughout history and up to the present day? What does the evolution of this trope teach us about discrimination/Islamophobia?

4. What does the content of this article make you think and feel? Explain your answer.

5. In your own words, write a two- to three-sentence summary of this article in your notebook. You will be sharing your summary with a new group in the next part of the activity.

[3] Faisal Hanif, _British Media's Coverage of Muslims and Islam (2018-2020)_, Centre For Media Monitoring, November 2021, pp. 144–56, accessed 14 December 2022.

Handout

Islamophobic Tropes (Intermediate)

Reading 3: Terrorism and Violence

Directions: With your group members, read the following text[1] and then discuss the connection questions together.

At the root of this **trope** is the belief that Muslims and Islam are a threat to the security of Western society. Its origins can be traced back almost one thousand years to **the Crusades**, when Muslims were depicted as the violent enemy of Christianity. In Pope Urban II's 1095 speech, which is seen as triggering the Crusades, he refers to the Muslims as torturing and murdering Christians in a brutal fashion. This bloody portrayal of Muslims had a lasting impact, influencing how Islamic empires were viewed. While Islamic empires did conquer new territory and fight against others, the perception of Islam as uniquely violent ignores the history of all major religions and empires.

Glossary

- **Colonialism:** The practice of one country invading, occupying, and controlling another 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.
- **Extremist:** A person who holds radical political or religious views and who may support violence.
- **Perpetrator:** A person carrying out a harmful, illegal, or immoral act
- **Surveillance:** The monitoring and spying of someone or something (it often happens to criminals).
- **Trope:** A commonly shared idea, phrase or story.

The association of Muslims with terrorism happened more recently. After 9/11, a direct link between Islam and terrorism was established in the minds of people in the West. The 'War on Terror', started in response to September 11th, led to the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and led to Muslims being suspected as terrorists: they were put under **surveillance**, watched in schools and stopped at airports.

The threat of extremist terrorism is real, but Muslim extremists, who misinterpret the Quran, are not the only perpetrators; far-right extremists have also been engaging in acts of terrorism, many misinterpreting the Bible to justify their actions (far-right terrorism is now regarded as the greatest threat in the UK). There is, however, a difference in how the media reports on terrorist attacks: Muslims are readily associated with terrorism and media outlets refer to Islamic practices or phrases such as 'Allahu Akbar' (which means God is most great) when reporting on cases, incorrectly suggesting that terrorism is part of Islam.

Moreover, when it comes to far-right acts of terrorism, media stories are hesitant to call the perpetrator a terrorist. Media stories often focus on humanising the perpetrator by depicting them as mentally unwell and/or they label them a 'lone wolf', suggesting that they are a one-off problem. The attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand, and in Norway, as well as the international far-right network that radicalises people online, highlight that this is not the case.

When an act of terror is perpetrated by a Muslim extremist, the entire Muslim community is expected to apologise for the actions of the extremist. There is also a sharp rise in anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic sentiment after terrorist attacks as Muslims are treated as guilty by association. The broad and diverse Muslim community is discriminated against for the actions of a small extremist minority.

There are anti-Western feelings in some Muslim-majority countries and among some Muslim

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[1] Some of this text is based on content from a video on this trope made by Get the Trolls Out!, an organisation that works to counter religious hate speech.

communities, and this can motivate some extremist individuals to engage in acts of terror. One of the more uncomfortable things to consider is what the roots of these feelings are, and how colonialism and Western-led wars in the Middle East have shaped current political and economic struggles in the Muslim world. This does not in any way, shape or form excuse acts of terrorism; it suggests that the issue is not about Islam, but about politics and oppression.

Connection Questions

Discuss the following questions and prompts together, noting down your group's ideas.

1. What does the Islamophobic trope concerning terrorism allege?

2. What emotional response does this trope seek to provoke? How does it seek to influence attitudes towards Muslims?

3. What are the similarities and differences between how Islam has been depicted as violent throughout history and up to the present day? What does the evolution of this trope teach us about discrimination/ Islamophobia?

4. What does the content of this article make you think and feel? Explain your answer.

5. In your own words, write a two- to three-sentence summary of this article in your notebook. You will be sharing your summary with a new group in the next part of the activity.

Islamophobic Tropes (Intermediate)

Reading 4: Monolithic

Directions: With your group members, read the following text[1] and then discuss the connection questions together.

There are almost 2 billion Muslims living in over 232 countries in the world today. Given this large and widespread population, it is not hard to understand that different cultures, values, perspectives and religious practices exist within this broad community – such diversity exists in every social group, religious or otherwise. In the UK, in addition to British Muslims, there are Muslims from countries such as Algeria, Bangladesh, Cyprus, Egypt, India, Iran, Kenya, Kosovo, Nigeria and Turkey, to name a few,[2] all with their own customs and interpretations of Islam. However, despite this diversity, Muslims are often stereotyped and regarded as the same. This fuels discrimination: if the actions, beliefs and experiences of one Muslim are seen as representative of the whole community, then one person's act of violence or **oppression** marks everyone. This rarely happens with people from other religious groups.

This simplified view of Muslims is linked to their representation as a cultural 'other', a process which began during **the Crusades** to justify religious confli t and which continued in the centuries after. In literature and religious texts from the Middle Ages, Muslims are referred to as one cultural or religious mass, and often as a savage enemy. This simplistic narrative was reinforced through European **colonialism**, which spread ideas of European superiority to justify inequalities and oppression.

In the present day, this idea of Muslims as a **monolith** lives on. It is spread in the media through generalised portrayals of Muslims, which do not highlight their rich diversity and group them together in a way that is not done to followers of other religions.

In the West, it is not widely known that there are two main sects of Islam, Sunnis and Shias, both of which contain subgroups with different interpretations, practices and approaches to Islam. Or that Muslims around the world do not hold the same views when it comes to practices such as wearing headscarves. In Europe, 88 per cent of Muslims surveyed believe a woman should have the right to choose if she wears a veil, while in Sub-Saharan Africa, 40 per cent of those polled agreed. Or that in Muslim-majority countries, there are differences in customs: in Saudi Arabia, the sale of alcohol is strictly forbidden, unless you are non-Muslim, in which case, you can drink in your own home. Whereas in Tunisia, the country has a large wine-making industry and alcohol can be purchased in many places.

Muslims are as diverse and complex as every group in society. Understanding this is vital in combating Islamophobia.

Glossary

- **Colonialism:** The practice of one country invading, occupying, and controlling another 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.
- **Monolith:** When used to refer to a group of people, it suggests they are viewed as all being the same.
- **Perpetrator:** A person carrying out a harmful, illegal, or immoral act
- **Opression:** Cruel or unfair treatment that harms a person or group of people over a prolonged period.
- **Trope:** A commonly shared idea, phrase or story.

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[1] Some of this text is based on content from a video on this trope made by Get the Trolls Out!, an organisation that works to counter religious hate speech.

[2] Jawad Iqbal, 'The diverse origins of Britain's Muslims', *BBC News*, 18 January 2016, accessed 27 September 2022, and *Summary Report: Understanding Muslim Ethnic Communities*, Communities and Local Government, April 2009, accessed 27 September 2022.

Connection Questions

Discuss the following questions and prompts together, noting down your group's ideas.

1. What does the Islamophobic trope concerning the monolithic nature of Muslims allege?

2. What emotional response does this trope seek to provoke? How does it seek to influence attitudes towards Muslims?

3. What are the similarities and differences between how the Islamophobic trope that depicts Muslims as a monolith has existed throughout history and up to the present day? What does the evolution of this trope teach us about discrimination/Islamophobia?

4. What does the content of this article make you think and feel? Explain your answer.

5. In your own words, write a two- to three-sentence summary of this article in your notebook. You will be sharing your summary with a new group in the next part of the activity.

Islamophobic Tropes (Intermediate)

Reading 5: Islamisation

Directions: With your group members, read the following text[1] and then discuss the connection questions together.

In recent years, there has been a rise in people fearing the **Islamisation** of Western countries. This fear has its roots in a **conspiracy** theory called the 'Great Replacement' theory,[2] which alleges that the white populations of Western countries are being replaced by immigrants and will eventually be wiped out. In Europe, immigrants of African and Middle Eastern descent, particularly Muslims, are depicted as a threat.[3] Among some far-right groups, especially in America, there is also a religious aspect to this conspiracy: Christianity is seen to be in danger.

These conspiracies are rooted in the divisive language used by the Christian Church to start the Muslim–Christian wars known as **the Crusades**: Muslims were depicted as savage, enemies of Christianity and as a risk to Christian Europe. In his 1095 speech, Pope Urban II referenced how Muslims had 'invaded' Christian lands, accusing them of having stained altars 'with their uncleanliness' and of forcibly circumcising Christian men. This suggests a fear of Muslims enforcing their practices on Christians. The success of many Muslim empires throughout the second millennium CE kept this fear of a Muslim invasion alive in the minds of Europeans.

The 'Great Replacement' theory, which emerged in the early twentieth century, got its name from a 2011 French book called Le Grand Remplacement. The book, which argues that white European populations are being replaced by immigrants, is popular with white supremacists. The 'Great Replacement' theory is also **antisemitic** in nature: **white supremacists**, referring to the antisemitic **trope** that alleges Jews control the world, blame Jews for the rise in non-white immigration to Western/European countries. This theory contributes to violence: the far-right white supremacist terrorist behind the 2019 Christchurch terror attack in New Zealand referred to it in his manifesto, and depicted Muslims and Islam as a threat to Christian Europeans.

This fear of Islamisation is connected to immigration and is racist and anti-Islamic/ anti-Muslim in nature. When talking about immigration, public figures and the media sometimes use exaggerated or militaristic language, referring to a 'Muslim invasion', or claiming 'Christianity is under attack'. At other times, references to Islamisation are less obvious: newspapers might, for example, highlight the increase in Muslim-sounding names. Fears of Islamisation are also evident in the creation of names that merge Middle Eastern place names with European ones, such as Eurabia and Londonistan.

Glossary

- **Antisemitic:** Hatred of, and hostility towards, Jews. It is also a form of racism.
- **Conspiracy:** A secret plan to do something illegal or harmful.
- **The Crusades:** A series of wars between Christians and Muslims started by the Christian Church to reclaim areas that were important to both religions.
- **Globalisation:** The growing connection between the world's countries, cultures, businesses and people.
- **Islamisation:** Bringing people and places under Islamic rule.
- **Trope:** A commonly shared idea, phrase or story.
- **White Supremacist:** Someone who believes the white race is superior to others.

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[1] Some of this text is based on content from a video on this trope made by Get the Trolls Out!, an organisation that works to counter religious hate speech.

[2] This conspiracy theory is also known as the 'White Genocide' theory.

[3] Which immigrants are perceived as a threat is connected to immigration patterns and can vary between regions. In the US, for example, people of colour and Latinx immigrants are targeted.

While migration and the movement of people has always been part of the human experience, in the last century, migration to Western nations has increased due to **globalisation** and the connections formed by colonialism. This immigration has faced resistance from some quarters: some are concerned immigrants take jobs, while others fear that accepting people from other cultures is damaging to their own/their nation's identity. However, these fears are more likely to be held by people who have little direct experience of immigration: in the 2016 EU referendum vote, the areas in the UK with a high proportion of leave voters had low levels of immigration[4] – suggesting that living alongside immigrants helps dispel these concerns and that the media plays a role in shaping people's views of groups they don't know or have contact with.

Connection Questions

Discuss the following questions and prompts together, noting down your group's ideas.

1. What does the Islamophobic trope concerning Islamisation allege?

2. What emotional response does this trope seek to provoke? How does it seek to influence attitudes towards Muslims?

3. What are the similarities and differences between how the Islamophobic trope of Islamisation has existed throughout history and up to the present day? What does the evolution of this trope teach us about discrimination/Islamophobia?

4. What does the content of this article make you think and feel? Explain your answer.

5. In your own words, write a two- to three-sentence summary of this article in your notebook. You will be sharing your summary with a new group in the next part of the activity.

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[4] Chris Lawton and Robert Ackrill, 'Hard Evidence: how areas with low immigration voted mainly for Brexit', *The Conversation*, 8 July 2016, accessed 15 May 2023.