The Rise of Islamophobia: Islam, Muslims and Western Values

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Opening Remarks and Protocols

Islamophobia has emerged as the label that refers to acts against Muslims based on fear or hatred. And is has become more visible in recent years. We have in the recent past witnessed in extensive media reports of acts of aggression against Muslims in New Zealand, hate crimes against Muslims in London, mainland Europe and the US, including tearing people's hijabs off, tugging on beards, verbal abuse and obscene and hateful graffiti attacks.

These acts have been qualified differently by a range of analysts:

- It has been classed as **racist** – while we know Muslims are not a race, but a diverse group, the resulting actions against anyone who looks 'Muslim' does paint it as racism in the effects.

- It has been categorized as **xenophobic** – discrimination against anything that seems 'foreign', strange or different.

But are Muslims really different?

From our experience as Muslims growing up in the west, we grow up in the same areas as others; we attend the same schools; work in the same companies for the same jobs; go to the same gyms, or market, or grocery, or beach. Just like everyone else.

Yes, we are a slight shade of different – we live differently. Typically it is common to hear that we have stricter parents (who adhere to more traditional values), so that we are not in school for carnival celebrations, or can't always watch the same tv shows. We dress differently on the beach; and we face restrictions that limit our free intermingling (not with animosity or aloofness, or insecurity). We tend to keep to ourselves. And I hasten to add although in these ways we are different, we are not unique, but rather emulate behaviours similar to other 'traditional' groups in society.

There are fundamental differences at the Core

Values:

When we consider beliefs & foundation Islamic tenets, we believe in God, Allah, and the angels and jinns, and in heaven and hell. We believe in the Quran as the word of Allah. In contemporary society, the typical view of such beliefs are that they are traditional. Outdated. These are considered myths, legends and folklore today, akin to ghosts, ghouls and goblins, which all exist in the domain of fantasy.

Today, the rational and emerging empirical views are built on US President Grant's secularism and separation of church and state (influenced by France in 1901) – a position that holds religious neutrality by the state, and which views religion as a personal matter that should not interfere in normal interactions and pursuits of everyday life. When US President Eisenhower signed into law the National Defence Education Act, although the intent was to bolster STEM competencies, the

result was to further enforce the exclusion of religion and the propagation of atheism in schools. This is different in Islam, in which, as a way of life, we are bound by Islam in all that we do. Islam defines dos and donts of our everyday life, and to be a good Muslim and live in pleasure of Allah is to comply.

Building off of these, the materialism of science, and the accompanying fervor of anti-metaphysics that emerged is a dominant perspective today, and establishes in its own paradigm a viewpoint of religion as traditional, unfounded and backwards - a hindrance to progress. Perhaps this is mired in the European history of science versus the Catholic Church, but it certainly does not hold credence in Islam, where Islamic inquiry was the driver of scientific foundations. For example, the spread of Islam and Muslim territories to far-flung corners of the known world at the time, meant that Muslims in those areas, wanting to pray facing the Kabbah, had to plot their coordinates constantly to maintain the direction of the Kabbah for their 5 daily prayers. These led to developments in Astronomy, Optics and other fields by such Muslim thinkers as ibn Haytham, Abd Al-Jabbar ibn Ahmad, ibn Khaldun and others.

There are other ways in which differences in our core beliefs manifest. That we believe in a Day of Judgement where every person is held accountable tempers our behaviours, excesses and so on. This is diametrically opposed to living a life of reckless abandon until you discover your purpose, and find someone to settle down with. Someone following the Islamic tenets might work less and focus more on work life balance, or family life, at the opportunity cost of growing income and 'living it up' so to speak.

Freedom of Speech

Add to this the emerging post-modernism values of freedom, and the whole issue becomes amplified. In the west we believe rights of freedom of speech, but in the Islamic equivalent we maintain freedom of responsible speech – specifically *"it is not permitted to arouse nationalistic or doctrinal hatred or to do anything that may be an incitement to any form of... discrimination"* or violate sanctities or dignity of Prophets, undermine moral values or harm society…* (OIC's Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, 1990)

Conversely, the Western sentiment skews towards freedom of expression devoid of responsibility, as exemplified in the statement by Lawerence Krauss (Journal of Science, Religion and Culture, 2015):

"No idea should be sacred in the modern world. Instead, in order for us to progress as a species, every claim, every idea should be subject to debate, intelligent discussion, and when necessary ridicule. Satire is perhaps one of the most important gifts we have to inspire us to re-examine our own lives and our own ideologies. If every other area of human endeavour is open to ridicule, then certainly so should religion. The notion that a cartoon, which presents an image of a historical figure, is so blasphemous to provoke violence is repugnant to anyone who believes that free and intelligent discourse is the basis of a civilized world." (Krauss 2015)

Krauss mentioned the need to *"...encourage even ridicule of the sacred Qur'an in the public media. The more frequently and openly this appears, the less threatening it will seem, and the more acceptable it will be for believers to actually intellectually engage rather than emotionally and violently act."*

From an Islamic perspective, people should be held responsible for their speech, and should demonstrate restraint in saying offensive remarks to others without cause or reason. For Muslims, this difference in values is fundamental and there is no middle ground (MajlisTT paper on Insulting Islam and the Muslim Response, 2015), and would continue to be a basis for tension.

Manners

The issue of manners is a generally sensitive one across cultures. In the western, largely ex-british colony and heavily Victorian influenced, world,

manners and etiquette are clearly defined, codified and stratified across levels in society.

From dress code (e.g. the necktie) to acceptable behaviours (bowing to new acquaintances) to interaction (affectation), the vestiges of these codes predominate western society.

Islam is not different, in that it has its own *adab* or etiquette defined, based on verses of the Quran and traditions of the Holy Prophet (pboh) among other source references.

Where these etiquettes differ, the effects can be divisive. Take for example the etiquette of having meals:

"The source of all good manners is a nice perception of, and kind consideration for, not only the rights, but the feelings of others. The customs of society are adopted and observed to enable us to be more agreeable. And nowhere is the distinction between gentleman and the boor more marked than at the table.

"*Cut with the knife, but never put it in the mouth; the fork must always convey the food. Let the food be taken to the mouth, and not the mouth to the food…. At the conclusion of a course, where they have been used, a knife and fork should be laid side by side across the middle of the plate - never crossed - with handles to the right."* (The Pocketbook of Etiquette, Margery Wilson, 1940).

In Islam, predominantly from Arab (Bedouin) culture, we understand food is served in dish, and multiple people eat from the same dish. We are told in Shariah to:

- Eat with the right hand.
- Eat from what is directly in front of one.
- Eat from the edges and not from the middle
- Eat with 3 fingers
- If food falls on the floor, remove the dirt from it and eat it, and not leave it for Shaytaan.
- Clean the plate & lick the fingers "for you do not know where in the food the blessing is"

These practices are different. And some would say it is rude, wild, uncultured. It doesn't help that the lamb is roasted and served whole on the dish, and one tears off pieces with one's hand and offers it to the 'honoured' guest. Thus it is common to hear the labels of 'barbaric' and 'uncivilised' or even 'primitive'.

Now juxtapose these cultural differences on the 'civilised west' – especially in the context of migration from Muslim countries, and the friction increases. It's a good excuse for politicians to mobilise native citizenry to make a stand against these foreign invaders.

Geo-Political Reality

Islamic activism and violence have by far dominated the media as it relates to Islam and Muslims in recent times.

Firstly, today, we are dominated by conflicts in Muslim countries or with Muslim minorities within countries –

India (Kashmir), China (Uighurs), Burma (Rohingas), New Zealand, Australia, Paris, London, America, Germany, Russia / Chechnya, Algeria, Israel/Palestine, Sudan, Nigeria, Syria… Middle Eastern conflicts have dominated instability in the region, and therefore it appears to be a 'Muslim' problem, embedded in the ideology. This of course is the perfect narrative for countries like Israel that can attract sympathy and investments as the bastion of civilization in the Middle East outpost. Even here in T&T the 1 coup attempt conducted by the Jamaat al Muslimeen, the nationals who went to fight alongside ISIS against Syrian Government, and more recently the waring gang 'Unruly Isis'. But largely the issue has not been religious, but political, and more specifically control of land and resources. Religion is used to mobilise support from the grassroots, but at the core it mostly is an issue of control of resources. It does lead to **statistical numbness**, and create an **empathy gap,** so that many believe it is an inherent 'Islamic' problem and castigate its followers thusly.

Related to this, the perpetuation of international influence in the respective regions means some governments – democratic or monarchies – are propped up as puppet entities, not acting in the will of the people but in some instances against it. In other cases, fringe opposition movements are given support in order to topple the government and achieve control. It is in this context we saw the rise of persons **fighting for or against international interests** - as Abu Nidal, Yasir Arafat, Yahya Ayash, Ramzi Yousef, Amir Khattab, Osama Bin Laden, al-Bhagdadi, and at the start of this year, Ayatollah Khomeni.

- Media loves it – it sells news.
- Politicians love it – here is an external threat that can unite us all
- Big Business love it – military hardware and strategy advice sold upfront gets replaced with development infrastructure needs, loan agreements with infrastructural financing entities and the accompanying imposition of macroeconomic and democratic policies.

Some Muslim responses castigate violence, others are apologetic ("These are the actions of a fringe few"), and others are in support ("When one part of the Ummah feels pain we are all affected"). But rarely do we hear this is not a matter of religion, which is the message that sits at the core.

What does all of this mean?

From the western perspective, the silent conservative Muslim majority is asked to apologise or to show their progressiveness by discouraging these acts. Accompanying this, the general sentiment seems to be that the Muslim identity needs to be erased – for example the banning of the hijab in France, the objections to ritual sacrifices at the time of Eid-ul-Adha, and perhaps soon circumcision would follow (this being the imposition of religious tradition on children too young to reject its influence). These would ideally be replaced by rational, empirical and secular identities that the west can understand and therefore control.

The reactions of others have spanned a range of positions from solidarity to sympathy, indifference, suspicion and fear, active discrimination and regrettably even aggression.

As Muslims, we need to understand these dynamics in both the symptoms and causes, and not succumb to the overly simplistic 'Jewish conspiracy / Illuminati' discourse. This we will only know through ongoing research and monitoring of the situation, and then constant engagement with the various publics.

And if we believe Islam is a way of life, then surely there must be something there that guides us in this situation. To this we turn to The Qur'an, the Sunnah and our leaders who are given authority above us.

And for this, I am sure we will be suitably and comprehensively informed by our other panelists.

Ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters, thank you for your attention. Assalamu alaikum.