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## **Is Islamophobia (always) racism?**

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### **Introduction**

Hostility towards Muslims and Islam increasingly receives attention, both in public and academic debates. Recent scholarship on what is usually referred to as ‘Islamophobia’ tends to understand it as a particular form of racism (e.g. Goldberg 2006; Malik 2009; Sayyid and Vakil 2010; Klug 2012; Meer 2013a) or at least akin to racism (e.g. Brown 2000; Allen 2010). This focus on the possibility of cultural or religion-based racism is an important and necessary development in our understanding of Islamophobia. It provides us with important tools to condemn hostile attitudes and behavior towards Islam and Muslims. Much of this research, however, is characterized by a lack of conceptual clarity. Particularly, it does not differentiate between religion-based racism and religious or cultural bigotry.<sup>1</sup> This article argues for a clear conceptualization of these ideal types as two different, but equally problematic forms of Islamophobia. Such conceptual tools help to clarify discussions on Islamophobia in for example policy, institutional arrangements, civil society initiatives or various forms of discourse. This article uses the conceptual distinction between anti-Muslim racism and anti-Islam bigotry to assess contemporary political discourse, which influences public opinion as well as policymaking.<sup>2</sup> I argue that Islamophobic political discourse is dominated by anti-Muslim racism, which disguises itself as anti-Islam bigotry.

The first section of this article explains what is generally meant by the term ‘Islamophobia’. I explore its various appearances and how we can differentiate between them in the sections that follow. In the second section, I define racism in a way that does justice to the European experience, past and present. Racism is present when a group of people experiences exclusion because they are believed to share certain allegedly ‘innate’ and ‘unchangeable’ characteristics. Group membership is attributed based on markers such as skin color, language and religious attire. In the third section, I argue that anti-Muslim racism falls within the range of such a definition and explain how it manifests itself in Europe today. In the fourth section, I contrast anti-Muslim racism to anti-Islam religious and cultural bigotry. Religious and cultural bigotry are conceptually distinct from racism, because they do not involve the assumption that group membership is ‘natural’ and ‘innate’. Anti-Islam bigotry, unlike anti-Muslim racism, assumes that individuals can choose to change their allegedly problematic culture and/or religion. The last section of this article illustrates this conceptual distinction by assessing the practical reality of Islamophobic discourse in contemporary European political parties. I argue that although there seem to be individual instances of anti-Islam bigotry, there is a pervasive tendency to use anti-Islam bigotry as a cloak for anti-Muslim racism.

The focus in this article is primarily on the European context. Islamophobia, like all dynamics of exclusion, is strongly context-dependent. Although differences exist within Europe, I take the European debate and discourses of anti-Islam bigotry and anti-Muslim racism as a meaningful context limitation. Only in the first section, where I define the mechanisms of racism in general, will I attempt to offer a general definition which is not limited to the European context.

## **1. What is Islamophobia?**

Recent research shows that a significant part of the European population holds unfavourable views of Muslims, ranging from 28% in the United Kingdom to a staggering 69% in Italy and 72% in Hungary (Wike, Stokes and Simmons 2016; see also the European Islamophobia Report 2017). Over the last two decades, attention for this phenomenon has increased, often under the name ‘Islamophobia’. Despite criticism on the inaccuracy of the term<sup>3</sup>, ‘Islamophobia’ is widely used both in academic and public debates, and by government institutions as well as Muslim organizations (Vakil 2010, 274). It seems that Islamophobia is the best candidate for a meaningful discussion about anti-Muslim and anti-Islam hostility. So what exactly does ‘Islamophobia’ refer to? There is a broad consensus in the literature on two key characteristics of Islamophobia. First, scholars generally agree that Islamophobia should always be condemned, and, as such, should be separated from critique of Islam. Unlike religious criticism, Islamophobia consists of prejudicial and wholesale rejections and denigrations of Islam and Muslims, rather than argumentative criticisms of particular aspects of Islam or Muslim practices. Separating Islamophobia from critique of Islam is important, because eradicating space for criticism on Islam and Muslims would harm democratic debate. A second point on which we can find a relative consensus is the idea that Islamophobia consists of both hostility against Muslims *and* against Islam. Muslims and Islam cannot be meaningfully separated. This is recognized in most contemporary scholarship, which generally categorizes both hostility against Islam and against Muslims under the name ‘Islamophobia’ (e.g. Allen 2010; Meer and Modood 2010; Shryock 2010; Bleich 2011).

As Klug (2012) points out, recent scholarship increasingly views Islamophobia “through a lens of racialization.” The assumption is often made that Islamophobia should be seen as a particular form of racism (e.g. Malik 2009; Sayyid and Vakil 2010; Meer 2013a), or at least a phenomenon akin to racism (e.g. Brown 2000; Allen 2010). In the next two sections of this article, I give an elaborate definition of racism and anti-Muslim racism, after which I

distinguish these from the conceptually different phenomenon of religious and cultural bigotry. I argue that the two Islamophobic ideologies of anti-Muslim racism and anti-Islam bigotry entail different logics of exclusion. Finally, I apply this conceptual distinction of two ideal types to contemporary Islamophobic political discourse. I argue that Islamophobic discourse in Europe today is primarily racist in nature, but that it hides behind a cloak of anti-Islam bigotry.

## 2. Defining racism

If we want to answer the question of whether and when Islamophobia is a form of racism, we first need to define what we mean by ‘racism’. It is vital to look for a definition that takes everyday ‘folk understandings’ into account by connecting to the intuitions that exist in our societies today. At the same time, it is the philosopher’s responsibility to identify a concept that has analytic and explanatory power. In line with Miles and Brown (2003), I define racism primarily as an ideology. It is a system of thoughts and beliefs, which shapes attitudes and prejudices, and gives rise to social, economic or political practices. Such ideologies do not operate at the level of the individual. They are social constructions with real material consequences, dependent on geographical and historical contexts. As such, there is not one racism, but different context-specific *racisms* (Goldberg 2006). In this section, I define certain fundamental characteristics that are shared by different forms of racism. Such a definition allows us to differentiate racist ideologies from other types of exclusive ideologies, such as religious-cultural bigotry. The ideal type of racist ideology can manifest itself (implicitly or explicitly) in individual attitudes and actions, but also in policy initiatives or institutional arrangements (e.g. education system, criminal system, urban development etc.). This latter form is usually called ‘structural’, or institutional racism (e.g. Bonilla-Silva 1997; Mills 1997; Omi and Winant 2015; Sheth 2009). The primary focus in this paper is on the conceptual level of what an ideology of racism entails, and how it differs from other ideologies, rather than on investigating how racism manifests itself in actual policies and institutional arrangements in our contemporary societies. However, the conceptual distinction outlined in this paper can later be used to assess racism in practice, both on individual and structural levels, as I briefly illustrate in the final section of this article.

### *Race as a social construct*

One might intuitively think that racism should be defined as discrimination on the basis of

race. However, this attempt to define racism immediately runs into serious problems. We know today that the races that were categorized as part of scientific endeavours in the 19<sup>th</sup> century do not correspond to intergroup differences in a meaningful way. Although some racial markers such as skin colour are genetically transmitted, genetic variability is greater within those populations seen as ‘races’ than between them. This article assumes that ‘races’ are social constructions, rather than natural kinds. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the fact that certain groups were at some point categorized as a ‘race’, and at other times as a different type of community. When the Irish first came to the United States, for example, they were seen as a “Catholic race” that was inherently “simian, bestial, lazy and riotous” (Patterson 1997, 75). Today, however, the Irish identity is seen as a form of nationality or ethnicity, rather than a race. Similarly, the category of Hispanics originally referred to a language community, but today is increasingly understood as a ‘race’ (Martín Alcoff 2000). Which groups count as ‘races’ shifts over time, depending on socio-political circumstances.

This observation has led to a wide-ranging discussion regarding whether it is useful or desirable to use the term ‘race’ today. Although this is an important question, I will bracket it for the course of this article. It is not necessary to answer the question of ‘race’ to address the question of racism. For the purpose of this article it suffices to acknowledge that racism rests upon the problematic assumption that certain groups inherently share certain negative characteristics. In this context, I will speak of ‘racialized groups’ as the objects of racism.<sup>4</sup> Racialization provides the basis for racism, an ideology which attributes meaning to certain perceptible markers in constructing naturalized community-like groups, which leads to negative social consequences. This definition differs from most other definitions, as it does not require a racialized group to see itself as either a ‘race’ or even a group: racism depends primarily on how racists perceive and treat a certain group. If a group existed prior to their

racialization, their meaning is altered by the racializing project. The rest of this section elaborates on this definition.

### *Racialized groups: markers*

Racism is directed at a racialized group. Membership of such a racialized group is attributed based on the possession of certain *markers*. Such markers, Hall (1997) argues, are read as “signs” or “signifiers” that a person belongs to a certain group. They operate metonymically: the possession of a certain marker places one into a group that is seen as a type of community. The most notable among these markers is pigmentation, often in combination with hair or bone structure, which leads to the assumption that someone belongs to the racialized group of ‘blacks’. Other somatic markers are for example the shape of one’s eyelids, central to the identification of ‘Asians’. Somatic differences are often used as markers in racialization, because they are easily identified and difficult to change. Markers, however, are not necessarily tied to the body. In the United States, for example, Latinos or Hispanics are often seen as a racialized group, but their key characteristic is a certain native language. Another example is that of Bosnian Muslims who were the victim of ethnic cleansing in the 1990s. This group shared the same physical appearance as its perpetrators but was identified based on its religion and cultural ancestry. Although a racialized group is usually identified by one *main* marker, there are often several markers that interact, both somatic and non-somatic.

### *Reduction and naturalization*

In racism, racialized group membership is believed to explain someone’s social, cultural and mental characteristics and dispositions. As Hall (1997) observes: “[o]nce you know where the person fits in the classification . . . , you can infer from that what they’re likely to think, what they’re likely to feel, what they’re likely to produce, the aesthetic quality of their productions,

and so on.” The stereotypical characteristics attributed to members of a racialized group are generally negative and seen in opposition to the group to which the racist belongs.

Racism not only reduces a person to the stereotype associated with their (attributed) group membership, it also *naturalizes* this reduction. The membership and characteristics of a racialized group are connected to human bodies: they are believed to be inherent to a person and unchangeable. Because of this naturalization, racist claims about the innate character of racialized group members are often explained in terms of ancestry and inheritability, such as the “one drop rule” in the United States. Assumptions of inheritability are often also implicit in forms of racism that draw upon cultural, rather than biological markers. As Balibar (1991 22, emphasis in original) has argued, “*culture can also function like a nature*, and it can in particular function as a way of locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin.” We can speak here of ‘pseudo-inheritism’ or ‘pseudo-biology’. Although it is logically nonsensical that cultures are biologically or genetically passed onto new generations, the belief of pseudo-inheritism exists in many forms of racisms, often implicitly (Blum 2002, 216). It is characteristic of racism that one cannot choose to leave a racialized group.

### *Justification for social consequence*

So far, we have seen that racism naturalizes the attributed membership of a racialized group and attaches certain characteristics to this group membership. Such racism has social consequences, because the attributed characteristics are negatively evaluated and seen as different from the group to which the racist (explicitly or implicitly) believes to belong. Historically, instances of group exclusion have been justified by two main, and related, logics. First of all, a racialized group is often seen as inferior to the racist’s group. *Inferiority* arguments can be identified in the justifications for slavery and colonialism, where oppressed

groups were seen as inferior human beings. Since the end of the Second World War, however, racist arguments have generally taken a different form. ‘Cultural’ or ‘differentialist’ forms of racism argue that a racialized group is *incompatible* with the racist’s community, without (explicitly) making claims of inferiority (e.g. Barker 1981; Balibar 1991; Taguieff 2001). ‘Old’ inferiorizing racism can, however, not be neatly separated by ‘new’ differentialist racism. In practice, the two forms have often been combined (see for example Bayoumi (2006) and Heschel (2008)).

Racist ideology justifies a social process of exclusion, which can take on various forms, including verbal rejection, discrimination, segregation, violence or even extermination. Such exclusion can be realized on the level of personal attitudes and behavior, of sociocultural attitudes and stereotyping, or of institutionalization, including in schools, the labor market or the criminal justice system. It should be noted that contemporary forms of such institutional, or structural racism, are hardly ever justified in terms of explicitly racist ideology. Practices such as so-called ‘red lining’ policy or ethnic profiling, for example, are never justified with reference to the idea that populations of color are essentially and inherently different or inferior. Rather, such policies are justified in terms of for example justice, efficiency or neutrality. However, a racist ideology looms in the background, and can be discerned in implicit assumptions that certain individuals are worth less than others (e.g. Butler 2006).

With this last explanation, I can now formulate the definition of racism that will be used in the rest of this article. I take racism to consist in:

- 1) An ideology which attaches negatively evaluated characteristics to a socially constructed group, membership of which is attributed based on the possession of certain markers and seen as unchangeable
- 2) And assumes these characteristics to be innate to all group members

- 3) While using these characteristics as a justification for social hierarchies, exclusion, hostility, or violence.

### **3. Anti-Muslim racism**

In the previous section, I defined racism as the naturalization of stereotyped characteristics attached to a marker-based group, which justifies social exclusion. In this section, I describe how we can find all of these characteristics in anti-Muslim racism in Europe today. Various subsections will explain how group stereotyping of Muslims is related to markers of ‘Muslimness’ (2.1), how this group membership and its attributed characteristics are naturalized (2.2), and lastly, how this leads to social consequences (2.3).

#### *Group stereotyping*

Defining how racism against Muslims exists in Europe today raises the question who should be considered a Muslim in the first place. Although in everyday discourse, we seem to know what we mean by ‘Muslims’, a closer investigation immediately runs into problems. Is a Muslim someone who identifies as Muslim? Someone whose parents are Muslim? Or who was born in a Muslim country? An Arab? Someone who practices Islam? And what exactly is Islam? These questions are hard to answer, if not unanswerable. However, this is the wrong way to approach the question of what anti-Muslim racism entails. The reason for this is that racism does not target a group based on who they actually are. Racism targets a racialized category of ‘Muslims’ which exists only in the racist imagination. This subsection explores which characteristics are attributed to such a group of ‘Muslims’ in Europe today, and which markers place individuals in that group.

In most anti-Muslim discourses across Europe today, the stereotype of ‘the Muslim’ is generally associated with three main, and related, characteristics: foreignness, backwardness and danger. Firstly, foreignness is identified in comparison to Europe or European nation-

states, from which Muslims are portrayed as inherently different. All Muslims are believed to be practicing Islam, which is seen as an alien religion or an incompatible culture. This discourse is often combined with a charge of backwardness: Muslims are believed to be intolerant, unreflective, authoritarian, illiberal, theocratic and sexist (Runnymede Trust 1997; Parekh 2006). Such character traits are mirrored in a self-image of Europe or European countries as enlightened, liberal, secular, neutral, progressive and tolerant. Secondly, this negative portrayal of Muslims and Islam as essentially foreign results in a portrayal of Muslims as inherently dangerous. Muslims are believed to have high immigration and birth rates, which would lead to a destabilization of European societies, or even a disruption of European civilization (Shooman and Spielhaus 2010, 205). Sometimes this is combined with conspiracy theories of Muslims purposefully taking over Europe ‘from within’, in order to form a ‘Eurabia’. This taps into the stereotype of Muslims as disloyal to both European cultures and European regimes (Meer and Noorani 2008, 211). But perhaps the clearest discourse which constructs Muslims as a threat rests on the racist stereotype that Muslims are inherently prone to violence and associated with fundamentalism and terrorism. The conflation of “Muslims” with “terrorists” is enhanced by media reports which often use ‘terrorism’ and ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ as synonyms. Although there have been terrorist attacks conducted by Islamic fundamentalists, anti-Muslim racism assumes that “unless proved to be “good,” every Muslim [i]s presumed to be “bad” (Mamdani 2005, 15).

The characteristics of foreignness, backwardness and danger are simultaneously related to Islam and to Muslims: Muslims are believed to have a different mindset by virtue of their connection to Islam. There is somewhat of a paradox here, as stereotyped Muslim character traits are believed to be natural, while at the same time induced by Islamic teachings. Still, within the racist imagination, this position is sustainable and quite common. It allows for Muslims to be seen as a singular community with certain inherent characteristics.

What we see here is clearly a racist logic. In the racist stereotype of ‘the Muslim’, any complexity of faith identity is erased in favor of a stereotyped image of Muslims that is believed to refer to *all* Muslims. This stereotype emphasizes the Otherness of Muslims, dissociating them from the European self. As Klug (2014, 451) argues, the set of traits attributed to this Muslim Other is open-ended: new traits might be added while others drop out. Nonetheless, there is some ‘family resemblance’ between the various images of ‘the Muslim’. These are largely consistent with earlier representations of Muslims in Europe. Although there is some disagreement about the start of negative image formation of Muslims in European culture and politics (e.g. Daniel 1960; Goldberg 2006; Taras 2013), there is general agreement that many of the characteristics historically attributed to ‘Muslims’, ‘Moors’ or ‘Saracens’ echo in the contemporary European racialization of Muslims.

### *Markers*

The stereotype of ‘the Muslim’ described above is projected onto certain individuals. The question now is on which individuals this image is projected. There seem to be two main markers which identify the group of ‘Muslims’ today: religious-cultural attire (non-somatic), and markers of ethnic descent (somatic and non-somatic). Both religious and ethnic markers which indicate ‘Muslimness’ are perceivable. The strongest markers to identify a ‘Muslim’ seem to be visual identifiers that are connected to Islam, in particular the hijab (Allen and Nielsen 2002, 16). Non-Islamic markers that call to mind pictures of an exotic Orient (cf. Said’s *Orientalism* (1978)) can also serve as markers for ‘Muslimness’. Sikhs wearing turbans, for example, are often victim of anti-Muslim racism, because a turban is interpreted as a signifier for ‘Muslimness’ (Allen and Nielsen 2002, 8).

Apart from such religious or cultural markers, there is also an ethnic factor involved in identifying ‘the Muslim’. This is mainly associated with skin color. Across Europe, ‘Muslimness’ is often attributed to darker individuals with an Arab or Middle Eastern

appearance, because they ‘look like bin Laden’ (Meer and Modood 2009, 341-2). The connection between perceived ‘Muslimness’ and color is reflected in public discourses when politicians and journalists refer to relations between ‘Muslims’ and ‘whites’, implying that one is the opposite of the other (Kundnani 2007, 30). Other ethnic markers are also used in the racialization of Muslims, such as the use of the Arab language, Middle-Eastern names or nationalities. What becomes clear from this description is that *perceived* religious affiliation, rather than religion itself, seems to be central in anti-Muslim racism. One does not need to identify as Muslim to bear the brunt of racist hostility towards Muslims.

### *Reduction and naturalization*

What characterizes anti-Muslim racism is the fact that individuals are reduced to the stereotyped Muslim identity, which is believed to be deeply anchored in their bodies. ‘Muslimness’ is naturalized. In the eyes of a racist, the Muslim individual does not possess the agency to change his or her Muslim identity. This is related to the fact that ‘Muslimness’ in a racializing discourse is often not a voluntary choice, but an ascribed identity. Although religion is not an innate characteristic, but something acquired during a person’s life, for anti-Muslim racists, the Islamic identity is set at birth. Individuals with origins in predominantly Muslim countries are necessarily categorized as ‘Muslim’. Ethnic descent is conflated with religion. In the racist imagination, all Christians are white and European, whereas all Muslims have a darker skin and are from South-Asian, Middle Eastern or Arab origin (Moosavi 2015). By virtue of their ancestry, all individuals with origins in a Muslim country - whether they practice Islam or not - are attributed an affiliation to the Muslim community, and the attached prejudicial stereotypes. Muslim individuals, then, are attributed certain innate and unchangeable ‘Muslim’ characteristics.<sup>5</sup>

A clear example of this attribution of pseudo-inherited characteristics can be found in the following two statements, both taken from the German website PI (quoted in Shooman

and Spielhaus 2010, 216, emphasis in original). The first statement is addressed at Muslims in general, the second concerns animosity towards German politician Cem Özdemir, who is called a “Muslim hypocrite and liar”.

If one notices . . . how unpopular and unwelcome one is here as a Muslim (vulg.), actually one should go to hell voluntarily. But ignorance simply belongs to the many *innate*, unpleasant attributes that the Muslims have.

For me the guy [German politician Cem Özdemir] is a Turk with German passport. A cow that is born in a horse barn remains a cow.

Although these examples do not explicitly refer to biological or genetic characteristics which Muslims share, they do imply that there are certain natural characteristics that can be found in *all* Muslims. The first example argues that Muslims share an ‘innate’ ignorance and other innate ‘unpleasant attributes’. The second example refers to the ancestral lineage of Muslims, or, in this case, inhabitants of a predominantly Muslim country. Having ancestry in a predominantly Muslim country, according to the second example, rules out that one can ever be truly German. In these examples, Muslims are attributed a certain intrinsic ‘nature’, which clearly points to anti-Muslim racism.

#### *Justification for social consequences*

Anti-Muslim racism fits the racist logic of creating a marker-based and stereotyped group, membership of which is naturalized. It also fulfills the last criterion of racism: the stereotyped characteristics attributed to Muslims offer a justification for social consequences. As we saw in the description of Muslim stereotypes, anti-Muslim racism can best be seen as a form of differentialist racism. It generally does not refer to the natural inferiority of Muslims, but to

the incompatibility of their beliefs and culture with Europe. There is ample evidence that such denigration of Muslims has led to negative social consequences in various European countries (e.g. Allen and Nielsen 2002; European Islamophobia Report 2017; Šeta 2016). Individual incidents range from cases of hate speech against Muslims or individuals who look ‘Muslim’, to bus drivers who refuse to pick up women wearing a hijab, and pig’s heads being left outside Mosques (e.g. Van der Valk 2017; EIR 2017). On a more structural level, traditional and new media often play a role in providing a platform for anti-Muslim attitudes. Anti-Muslim prejudice is often implicit in reporting on terrorism. The Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant*, for example, caused controversy by illustrating a news article on airport controls against terrorism with a picture of an individual with a stereotypical ‘Muslim’ appearance being checked by the police (Remarque 2016). Lastly, anti-Muslim racism also appears in a more institutionalized form, for example in the political programs and statements of various European populist parties (e.g. Hafez 2014), as well as in labor market discrimination and ethnic profiling (e.g. Silberman, Alba and Fournier 2007; Eijkman 2010; Kaas and Manger 2011).

Anti-Muslim racism is not only a possibility but is present in today’s European societies. In a racialized discourse, Muslims are seen as a homogeneous group, essentially different from Europe as a whole or European nation-states in particular. Although Muslims are not a ‘race’, they are racialized, in the sense that negative group stereotypes are attached to human bodies that bear so-called ‘Muslim’ markers in a fixed and unchangeable way. As such, it seems that although “religions provide material that is grist for the racist mill” (Klug 2014, 452), the emphasis in anti-Muslim racism is not on religion per se, but on an imagined and stereotyped idea of ‘the Muslim’. Nevertheless, an element of Islam must be present: when Muslims are discriminated without any reference to Islam, then we are more likely to

deal with a case of xenophobia or color-based racism. In the next section, I analyze how anti-Muslim racism is related to other possible forms of Islamophobia.

#### **4. Religious and cultural bigotry**

If Islamophobia is a prejudicial and wholesale rejection of Islam and/or Muslims, then anti-Muslim racism clearly falls within this category. However, it is possible to think of forms of Islamophobia that are not racist, because they do not include a hostility towards Muslims as a homogeneous and pseudo-biological group with certain ‘innate’ characteristics. In this section, I argue that we ought to distinguish between two ideal types: religious and cultural bigotry on the one hand and racism on the other.

Religious bigotry, first of all, often also referred to as ‘religious prejudice’ or ‘religious intolerance’, denies that religions are contingent and dynamic (Asad 1993). It assumes that religions can be reduced to an essentialist core, which is rejected based on prejudicial views. The distinction between religious bigotry and racism is mostly researched in relation to antisemitism in contrast to anti-Judaism. Hannah Arendt (1951) famously argued that we can identify antisemitism as a modern racist theory which assumes that Jewish people are inherently degenerate. Anti-Judaism, by contrast, implies a prejudicial animosity towards Judaism, which arises from a rivalry with Christianity. Such anti-Judaism, however, allows Jews the possibility to convert. Antisemitism, in contrast, attributes certain *innate* characteristics to Jews, leaving them no escape from their alleged degeneracy.<sup>6</sup> Here we find the crucial difference between religious bigotry and racism. The religious bigot primarily has a problem with a religion, not with its followers as such. Religious bigotry separates a person from their faith and condemns them for the latter. Religion is seen as a choice, which individual followers of a religion are assumed to have the agency to change. Although calls for conversion can also occur in a racist context, conversion is only a real possibility in

religious bigotry. Fredrickson (2002, 6-7) gives the example of regimes that were religiously prejudicial, but not racist:

Even if a group—for example, Muslims in the Ottoman Empire or Christians in early medieval Europe—is privileged in the eyes of the secular and religious authorities, racism is not operative if members of stigmatized groups can voluntarily change their identities and advance to positions of prominence and prestige within the dominant group. Examples would include the medieval bishops who had converted from Judaism and the Ottoman generals who had been born Christian.

Religious prejudice can be separated from racism, but it had a strong influence on the construction of racial categories. Recent research has emphasized the interrelatedness of religious and racial categories at the time when races were first constructed (e.g. Rana 2007; Meer 2013a; Topolski 2017). Religious bigotry also plays a large role in racism against Jews and Muslims. The racialized category of Jews in antisemitism was based on the image of the Jews as a theologically condemned group (Poliakov 1975, 458-9). As we have seen in the previous section, moreover, prejudices against an essentialized version of Islam play a large role in anti-Muslim racism. Religious bigotry and racism, then, are often intertwined. Nonetheless, religious bigotry cannot be reduced to racism and vice versa. As long as there is a real possibility of conversion, we cannot speak of racism, because this means that group membership is not naturalized.

Cultural bigotry, or ‘culturalism’, strongly resembles religious bigotry. It similarly denies the fluid, historically contingent and heterogeneous nature of cultures in favor of a bounded and essentialist image of the culture (Parekh 2000). A cultural bigot is unable or unwilling to tolerate cultural differences. Such cultural bigotry arose with the Renaissance and

Enlightenment, which laid down the basis of secular identities in Europe, although religion continued to play a key role in the definition of European cultures (Delanty 1995; Yeğenoğlu 2006). Cultural bigotry was closely related to the construction of nations and the rise of the nation-state in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century (Grillo 2003). Such culturalism is primarily self-referential: it concerns the identity of one's own culture or nation. Often, however, it results in cultural bigotry, when the identity of the self is shaped in relation to a cultural 'Other'. The formation of nation-states drew upon cultural as well as racial distinctions and definitions (Balibar 1991). At the same time, however, cultural bigotry cannot be reduced to racism. We can think of various instances where cultural nationalism was directed against a cultural enemy, without the racialization of this distinction. We find perhaps the clearest examples in cases of separatism, such as Scottish cultural prejudice against English culture or Catalan cultural prejudice against Spanish culture. Although such national minorities are rarely only inspired by cultural motives, political and economic motivations are often accompanied by a cultural bigotry. Such bigotry implies a prejudicial aversion to another culture and its cultural practices, but does not necessarily channel these prejudices into a racist attitude towards the individual people who make up that culture. As long as individuals maintain the genuine possibility to assimilate into a different culture, we cannot speak of racism. Whereas in cultural racism, a religion or culture is attributed to someone by birth because of the presence of certain markers, bigotry understands religion or culture as a choice, which can be renounced through assimilation or conversion.

In today's European society, religious or cultural bigotry is often seen as less problematic than racism. This is partially due to the to the taboo on racism and race that exists in Europe since the Second World War (Lentin 2008). Moreover, the assumption is often made that it is only morally problematic to be prejudiced against or to reject people, not their beliefs, thoughts or ideas (Ramsey 2013). Religious or cultural bigotry, which starts from the

assumption that one's religion or culture can be individually defended or rejected, would then not be directed at people, but 'merely' at their religion or culture, and hence would not be morally problematic. This reasoning is fundamentally flawed, however, because religious or cultural bigotry necessarily has an impact on individuals, as it results in the exclusion of the people who practice a certain culture or religion. Moreover, for many people, one's religion or culture cannot be reduced to a contingent choice. As such, religious or cultural bigotry is deeply problematic.

#### *4.2. Anti-Islam bigotry today*

The distinction between racism on the one hand and religious or cultural bigotry on the other can also be made with regard to Islamophobia. Religious bigotry against Islam would entail that one emphasizes the inferiority of Islam to other religions, or that one understands Islam as a religion that is essentially unsuitable for a secular separation between church and state. Cultural anti-Islam bigotry could, for example, involve the idea that Islamic culture is fundamentally at odds with the allegedly democratic, humanist and sometimes (Judeo-Christian culture<sup>7</sup> of European states. It is possible to have an aversion of Islam, without having a problem with Muslims who reject their religion or cultural heritage. Such Islamophobes could not be accused of racism, because 'Muslimness' is not attributed as an inherent nature, based on someone's (assumed) Muslim origins, but seen as an individual choice. An example is given by Brown (2000), who mentions a note which members of a French group for Muslim-Christian dialogue received in the post. It read:

The Qur'an is a web of absurdity, a complete heresy. Islam is a religion of imbalance. Only the Gospel is the source of truths. Mrs. Raimonde Debeir, 96 rue de l'abbé Lemire in Lambersart, offers a reward of 1000 francs to an Islamist if he converts to the Gospel. May someone tell him!

In this case, hostility towards Islam is induced by the conviction that Islam as a religion is inferior to Christianity. It reflects not a (theological) critique of Islam, but a prejudicial rejection of Islam in particular as a “religion of imbalance” and the Qur’an as a “web of absurdity.” Moreover, the author of the note speaks of Muslims as “Islamists”, thereby conflating Muslims with fundamentalism. As such, it is clearly a form of Islamophobia. However, we cannot argue that the author of this letter is racist, as she disconnects Islam from its followers by strongly urging Muslims to convert to Christianity. As such, religious and cultural bigotry are conceptually distinct from anti-Muslim racism. Religious and cultural bigotry wrongly assumes a homogeneous and essentialist core of Islam, denying the fact that both religions and cultures are fluid and heterogeneous because they depend on their followers. However, this type of intolerance distinguishes between the individual and his or her religion or culture: it assumes that religion is a choice and that individuals have the ability to *change* their personal religion and cultural practices. This distinguishes it from anti-Muslim racism, where it makes no difference whether someone is converted or assimilated: Muslims will *always* be Muslims.

## **5. Islamophobia in political discourse**

This article has made a conceptual distinction between two ideal types of Islamophobia: anti-Muslim racism and anti-Islam bigotry. Both are problematic and distinct from critiques of Islam. In order to illustrate how this conceptual distinction can be applied in practice, I will briefly look at Islamophobic discourse in Europe, as it appears in the statements of politicians from various European political parties. The two ideal types of Islamophobia can be found in various individual statements. The following statement by British National Party leader Nick Griffin, for example, would point to anti-Muslim racism. Griffin was secretly filmed at a BNP meeting, where he denounced Islam as “wicked and evil” and promoting the rape of “infidel

women” (Rattansi 2007, 109-110). This, Griffin argued, explained why “Asians”, who he conflates with Muslims, are “rapists of vulnerable teenagers.” This statement is clearly racist. Although Griffin locates the cause of misbehavior in Islam, he conflates Muslims with all Asians as an ethnic group, and attributes them an almost natural propensity to rape.

Other statements point to anti-Islam bigotry, rather than anti-Muslim racism. We find an example of religious bigotry in the writings of Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Herself an ex-Muslim, Hirsi Ali rejects Islam as “backward” and the Qur’an as “terrible”. At the same time, however, she calls upon Muslims to engage in an “Enlightenment project”, based on the example of Christianity (Brookes 2010). Such statements can be seen as Islamophobic, because they reject an essentialized and stereotyped idea of Islam. At the same time, Hirsi Ali believes that Muslims can distance themselves from Islam – as she herself has done – or engage in a project of fundamentally reforming their religion. As such, her statements in themselves cannot be considered racist. The same holds for the statements of Belgian politician and mayor of Antwerp, Bart de Wever. De Wever advocates the Enlightenment values of liberalism, neutrality and tolerance, and argues against all religions and convictions that conflict with this. However, he often argues that *especially* Islam is at odds with what he believes to be European and Belgian core values. Although in some interviews, De Wever has claimed that there is only a problem with certain extremists groups within Islam (VTM Nieuws 2015), in other interviews he argues that Islam constitutes a threat to “neutrality” and to Europe’s “Enlightenment values”, and that Muslims in general are more prone to conflict than followers of other religions (De Standaard 2018b). In response to this, he argues for more appreciation of Enlightenment values within Belgium, and for integration of Muslims in order to avoid “apartheid” and segregated societies (De Standaard 2018a). De Wever’s statements show a prejudicial rejection of an essentialized vision of Islam, and as such can be seen as anti-Islam bigotry. This leads to a problematic exclusion of Muslims and should be

condemned. However, his calls for integration and support for Muslims who do not wear the headscarf and advocate what he calls Enlightenment values, would suggest he cannot be accused of anti-Muslim racism.

Although public statements can give an indication of the stance of a certain politician or party, it is impossible to retrace whether such statements reflect their actual intentions and ideas. That is why the conceptual ideal types outlined in this article can better be used to assess general trends in political discourse as a whole. The remainder of this section describes several recurring tropes in Islamophobic political claims. These show that anti-Muslim racism seems to be dominant in Islamophobic political discourse, although it hides behind a cloak of anti-Islam bigotry. As anti-Islam bigotry is socially more accepted, most Islamophobic discourses hide behind a cover of anti-Islam statements which, on the surface, do not imply a hostility against Muslims. Upon closer examination, however, they carry racist implications.

*“We are not against Muslims, merely against Islam”*

Many populist radical right parties have replaced discourses against ethnically defined immigrant groups with anti-Islam language (Hafez 2014). The Latvian Action Party of Eurosceptics, for example, published the following slogan in their program: “We are not against Muslims, we are against the Islamization of Latvia and Europe.” (European Islamophobia Report 2017, 14). Similarly, Geert Wilders, leader of the Dutch Freedom Party, often reiterates that he is not against Muslims, while criticizing Islam as an aggressive and backward ideology (Wilders 2012). At the same time, though, many of his speeches are directed against ‘Moroccans’, who he regularly conflates with Muslims. This implies that Wilders’ rhetorical division between anti-Muslim racism and anti-Islam sentiment does not hold up in practice. We see a similar conflation of Muslims with certain nationalities or with ‘migrants’ or ‘refugees’ in general in other Islamophobic statements, such as this statement by the National Alliance in Latvia: “[we are] in support of not letting into Liepāja illegal

immigrants called ‘refugees’ – potential criminals, terrorists and idlers! There will be no mosques here!” (European Islamophobia Report 2017, 14). The conflation of Muslims with ‘Arabs’, ‘migrants’ or ‘newcomers’ points to a racialization of Muslims, and clearly indicates that we are dealing with something more than anti-Islam bigotry, despite statements of several parties that they are not against Muslims, but ‘merely’ against Islam. The racialization becomes even clearer when Muslimness, along with being an Arab or migrant, is contrasted with whiteness (e.g. Galonnier 2015; Kundnani 2007; Younes 2017).

The nexus between Muslimness, non-whiteness and migration, is increasingly accepted as self-evident. We see this conflation most clearly in the discourses of far-right parties, such as AfD in Germany, FPÖ in Austria, Front National in France, Northern League in Italy and the PVV and FvD in the Netherlands. However, their discourse is also picked up by parties that occupy the political center and by the media at large (for a more in-depth analysis of political developments in Europe, see the European Islamophobia Report, 2017).

*“We accept Muslims, as long as they integrate”*

Another trope that we encounter frequently in contemporary Islamophobic discourse is the idea that Muslims are perfectly acceptable, *as long as they integrate properly* into European societies. Upon closer examination, many of such claims are accompanied by a racist logic. One such example comes Hans Fehr from the Swiss party SVP (quoted in Cheng 2015, 573), who argues that integration is important with regard to Muslims today, but simultaneously assumes that Muslims are not likely to be willing to integrate. He argues:

‘Integration’ is a wonderful term. Who doesn’t want it? Integration is, also in relation to Islam, a really current issue. But it is also a question of willingness – and I doubt that this exists with many Muslims.

Fehr then goes on to argue that Muslims are “non-white” people who have no Greek or Latin elements in their culture. Although this statement refers to the possibility of integration and thus seems to be a case of anti-Islam bigotry, it also implies that the lack of willingness to integrate would be *inherent* to Muslims as a racialized group. Moreover, it puts the responsibility for discrimination on Muslims themselves, by implying that ‘our’ receiving cultures are open to integration, but the fault lies with Muslims.

A rhetorical reference to demands for integration is far from always a guarantee against anti-Muslim racism. In other cases of Islamophobia, demands for integration are accompanied by ever-changing and often arbitrary demands of what ‘integration’ would entail (Cheng 2015, 569). Relatedly, many Islamophobic discourses suggest they do not have a problem with ‘good’ or ‘integrated’ Muslims, but simultaneously place these individuals under suspicion. This is what is called the “assimilation paradox” (Arendt, 1951; Jansen 2013): even secular, converted or assimilated Muslims are still subjected to anti-Muslim prejudices. They are constantly asked to reaffirm that they distance themselves from other Muslims and prove their loyalty to Europe. This, of course, emphasizes, rather than eradicates, the difference with ‘normal’ Europeans. Although racist discourses embrace *tokens* as ‘proof’ that they are not racist, it is precisely in the constant focus on their differentness that racist assumptions reveal themselves. This too is seen across the political spectrum, and is pervasive in the media, where Muslims are often asked to answer for terrorist attacks from ‘their people’ or to distance themselves from the foreign policy of predominantly Muslim countries. Fatima (2013) explains how Muslim-Americans experience the expectation to animate a patriotic American script. In Europe, a similar tendency can be discerned, as Muslims – or individuals with roots in a predominantly Muslim country – are expected to constantly express their support for ‘Enlightenment values’ and their loyalty to ‘European

culture' (Topolski 2016).

## **Conclusion**

Many Islamophobes have argued that Islamophobia does not exist and that the term is merely an excuse to pathologize and delegitimize critiques of Islam (e.g. Doornaert 2016; Philips 2018). If we are to maintain its critical potential in condemning and combating instances of hostility against Muslims and Islam, it is necessary to define what Islamophobia consists in, and how it is different from critiques of Islam. I have argued that many instances of Islamophobia should be seen as a form of racism. The fact that anti-Muslim is directed at a group that is primarily defined by religion cannot be an excuse to deflect charges of racism. At the same time, not all instances of Islamophobia are necessarily racist in nature. In this article, I have described two ideal type forms of Islamophobia. Anti-Muslim racism rejects a racialized group of 'Muslims', which is based on ancestry and is attributed certain innate characteristics. In anti-Islam bigotry, by contrast, being Muslim is not attributed based on origin, but seen as an individual choice that can be altered. Both forms of Islamophobia are problematic and have historically led to social, political and economic exclusion. Both forms of Islamophobia are also distinct from critique of Islam. However, the two ideal types are driven by different logics. Not making this distinction means we lose the critical potential to address instances of Islamophobia on the correct grounds. If we simply conflate Islamophobia with anti-Muslim racism, we either fail to identify certain instances of Islamophobia as problematic, or are compelled to apply the charge of racism too broadly.

In this article, I have applied the conceptual distinction between two types of Islamophobia to the example of Islamophobic political discourse. This discourse is characterised by a predominance of anti-Muslim racism, although it hides behind a cloak of religious or cultural bigotry. This differentiates the case of Islamophobia from religious or cultural bigotry against for example Christians or Buddhists, since we are not confronted with

a dominant anti-Christian or anti-Buddhist racism in European discourse. The conceptual distinction outlined in this article can also be applied beyond political discourse, for example to assess government policy, civil society initiatives or institutional arrangements.<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The distinction between racist and non-racist forms of Islamophobia was recently also pointed out by Fernando Bravo López (“Völkisch versus Catholic Islamophobia in Spain: the conflict between racial and religious understandings of Muslim identity” in *Revista de estudios internacionales mediterráneos* 22[2017], 141-164). He identifies two different logics of Islamophobia, one racist (‘völkisch’), one religious (Catholic), within the extreme right party *Plataforma per Catalunya*.

<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it should be noted that both racism and religious and cultural bigotry are broader phenomena that exist on the macro-level and include institutional arrangements, organizational structure and group relations, as well as the micro level (Teun Van Dijk “Ideologies, Racism, Discourse: Debates on Immigration and Ethnic Issues” in *Comparative Perspectives on Racism*, edited by Jessika Ter Wal and Maykel Verkuyten [Farnham: Ashgate], 91-115).

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘Islamophobia’ has been subject to various criticisms. The reference to a *phobia* wrongly suggests that Islamophobia only refers to irrationality, mental illnesses and pathologies (Ali Rattansi, *Ali’s Racism: A very short introduction* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007]). Moreover, the term suggests a fear of Islam as a religion, not necessarily of Muslims (Fred Halliday’s “‘Islamophobia’ reconsidered” in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22[1999], 892-902).

<sup>4</sup> Although others have used ‘racialization’ in a descriptive and neutral way (see David Theo Goldberg’s “Racial Europeanization” in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29[2006], 332), I speak of

‘racialization’ in a normative manner: I use it in the context of projects and processes of racism.

<sup>5</sup> Although anti-Muslim racism is mostly directed at Muslims who are identified on the basis of their origin, rather than their beliefs, ethnically European Muslims can also be the victim of anti-Muslim racism. Especially when they are identifiable as ‘Muslim’ because they wear Islamic attire, Muslims who are ethnically European often experience the same types of hostility as Muslims from non-European descent. Unlike the latter group, a Muslim who is ethnically European or ‘white’ is not condemned based on the assumption that he or she was born as a Muslim with certain innate and unchangeable characteristics. However, discrimination against a white woman wearing a hijab, for example, *can* take place in a racist context, when the assumption is that this person originally belongs to the European ‘us’, rather than the Muslim ‘them’. The exclusion or discrimination is then based on the charge that this person is ‘collaborating’ with the other group and is seen as a ‘traitor’ of their people (see for example Karin van Nieuwkerk, “Veils and wooden clogs don't go together” in *Ethnos* 69[2004], 229-246 and Leon Moosavi, “The racialization of Muslim converts in Britain and their experiences of Islamophobia” in *Critical Sociology* 41[2015], 41-56).

<sup>6</sup> There is disagreement about the usefulness of this distinction, especially in situations where antisemitism was so prominent that anti-Judaism became a meaningless category, such as in the context of Nazi Germany. See Susannah Heschel’s “Historiography of Antisemitism versus Anti-Judaism: A Response to Robert Morgan” (*Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33[2011], 257-279).

<sup>7</sup> How the idea of a ‘Judeo-Christian’ Europe is increasingly used to construct a European identity which excludes Islam is explained in Anya Topolski’s “A Genealogy of the ‘Judeo-Christian’ Signifier: A Tale of Europe’s Identity Crisis” (published in *Is There a Judeo-Christian Tradition?: A European Perspective*, edited by Emmanuel Nathan and Anya Topolski [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016], 267-284).

<sup>8</sup> One could for example categorize the minaret ban in Switzerland as primarily a form of anti-Islam bigotry, whereas the former Dutch integration tests that affected especially people of Moroccan and Turkish origin, while citizens from ‘western’ countries were exempt (Human Rights Watch 2008) should rather be seen as an instance of anti-Muslim racism.

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