



Editor's Note: Exploring Islamophobia in the Spirit of the Late Nasr Abu-Zayd

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Abstract: This is the journal editor's note to the Fall 2010 issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, including the proceedings of an international conference on "Debating Islamophobia," co-organized by co-editors Gema Martín Muñoz (Casa Árabe-IEAM, Madrid Spain) and Ramón Grosfoguel (the Program of Comparative Studies in the Department of Ethnic Studies at U.C. Berkeley) in Madrid, Spain, in May 2009. Highlighting the lead article contribution of the late Nasr Abu-Zayd (1943-2010) to the volume and dedicating this collection of proceedings to him in celebration of his life and work, the editor surveys the main outlines of other contributions included in the collection in regard to the nature and meaning of Islamophobia and its diverse unfolding in specific national and historical contexts.

This Fall 2010 issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* includes the proceedings of an international academic conference on "Debating Islamophobia," co-organized by Gema Martín Muñoz, Director General of Casa Árabe (and its International Institute of Arab and Muslim World Studies) and Professor of Sociology of the Arab and Islamic world at the Autonomous University of Madrid, and Ramón Grosfoguel, Associate Professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and a Senior Research Associate of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris. Grosfoguel and Martín Muñoz also co-edited this proceedings collection.

As the final preparations for the publication of this issue were being made, the editors received word that Nasr Hamed Abu-Zayd, a contributing author and renowned Emeritus Professor of Islam and Humanism at the University of Humanistics at Utrecht, The Netherlands, had suddenly passed away. On the one hand, this deeply saddened us for having lost such a prominent scholar of hermeneutic discourse on Islam and comparative religion. On the other hand, we found ourselves very fortunate to have in this collection what may well have been his last words submitted for publication, one that provides a succinct and accessible presentation of his views not only on Islamophobia and

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its origins, but also on the commonalities of substance and purpose across various religious traditions.

It was for this reason that we broadly adopted his article's title for the theme of this proceedings collection as well, for it expresses quite suitably the common purpose of all the contributions gathered in this volume. The present journal issue titled "Islam: From Phobia to Understanding" is hereby dedicated to the legacy and memory of Nasr Hamed Abu-Zayd, in deep respect for his Islamic Humanism and the genuine and courageous hermeneutic study of Islam and the Qur'an in a comparative world-historical perspective.

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Abu-Zayd's essay that follows the co-editors' Introduction in this collection provides a highly refined and somewhat uncommon point of view in regard to the historical origins and contemporary nature of Islamophobia.

Having noted that "[b]eing the microcosm, the essential mission of man is to know God by knowing himself" (p.19), Abu-Zayd argues that "What is overshadowing spiritual Islam in our modern era is the *shari'a*-oriented dominant Islam, i.e., Islam as a legal system of allowed, *halal*, and forbidden, *haram*, void of the ethical and spiritual underpinning. This is the basic cause of Islamophobia locally and universally" (p. 20).

This self-critical centering of the origins of Islamophobia in the traditional interpretations of Islam arising from within the Muslim community is important to consider, in contrast to other critiques of Islamophobia that focus on factors external to Islam and the Islamic world. Abu-Zayd's thesis arises, in other words, from his broader assessment that,

Through the long journey of every religion in history, layers of inter-

pretation and re-interpretation, or rather interpretation and counter-interpretation, are accumulated around the original texts to the extent that the original socio-historical context is veiled. But fortunately this creates a multiplicity of trends of thought within every religion, a multiplicity that constitutes plurality emphasizing different aspects of it. (p. 15)

It is on the basis of such an historical assessment of the long-standing contention between a rationalist versus a traditional reading and interpretation of Qur'an and Islam that Abu-Zayd concludes,

Rational theology as presented by the *Mu'tazilites*, and Rational Philosophy presented by Averroes later, could be considered solid ground for tolerance. Both present a very open, human, liberal trend of Islamic thought. (p. 17)

Abu-Zayd then proceeds to conclude, by drawing on the works and thought of the renowned Muslim mystic of Andalusia, Spain, Muhyi'ddin ibn al-'Arabi, that the inner mystical dimension of Islam and immersion in it can provide a necessary link not only to a deeper spiritual meaning of Islam and in fact all religions, but also to a social utopian agenda (in a positive meaning of the term) that need not fail today, as it did at the time ibn al-'Arabi lived and wrote:

Needless to say that the project, ultimately, failed, as we already know, because what Ibn al-'Arabi attempted was in the end to formulate a utopia of his own, a formula that gained impetus from the increasing tension and conflict within his own society. Why did it not work out, even though it con-

tained the basic elements necessary to establish not only toleration but also to establish peaceful atmosphere of 'togetherness'? This will take us back to our primary analysis of the world situation of conflict and mistrust. Ibn `Arabi's project failed for similar historical reasons, the following reconquest and the crusades.

But, its historical failure does not mean that the project is unworkable. The core of such projects is to reach the utmost inner spirit of any worldview, whether religious or secular, i.e., spiritual religiosity versus religions in their institutionalized structure, such as the Church and the ultra-Orthodox dogmatic expressions of faith. (p. 20)

Moreover, Abu-Zayd is insightfully cognizant and appreciative of ibn al-`Arabi's observation that, "Only the 'heart' of the Gnostic is capable of realizing the Divine truth in its continual transformation," concluding that "It is not difficult to find in this notion of continual transformation of the 'Divine truth' an obvious claim of an 'epistemology of uncertainty'" (p. 19).

Abu-Zayd's emphasis on the "epistemology of uncertainty" is highly reminiscent of other alternative and critical interpretations of Islam as found, for instance, in Omar Khayyam, who, not coincidentally also appeared on the historical scene in the 11th and 12th centuries during a period Abu-Zayd considers to be a golden age of creative Islamic discourse, albeit, amid an otherwise rising atmosphere of religious intolerance as far as the local context is concerned. Omar Khayyam's words in poetic form which, again not incidentally, I argue, are aimed quite consciously at appealing not just to the head, but also to the heart, are also often expressive of the same feel-

ings of uncertainty about the undiscovered nature, meaning and purpose of universal existence:

*This ocean of Being grew from the concealed!
No one ever has the jewel of its truth drilled.
All claimed in vain to have found the jewel,
But nobody has its true nature revealed.*

Or,

*The circle comprising our coming and going
Has no end or start—infinately flowing.
No one has revealed the straight truth about
Where we come from and go to—unknowing.*

And,

*One crowd in religion ponder the way.
One crowd in science supposedly stray.
I fear the day the town-crier shouts:
"Neither is the way, O gone astray!"*

—Omar Khayyam (verse trans. by Tamdgidi)

It is not difficult to understand why Abu-Zayd left this world with a sense of appreciation for the epistemology of uncertainty and bewilderment, as also found in Omar Khayyam who was no doubt himself a highly respected Muslim scientist, philosopher, writer (see his *Nowruz-Nameh*, for instance), and poet, living at the time of rising orthodoxy and intolerance in religious circles. In a conceptual environment of self-critical uncertainty and spiritual open-mindedness, nobody, and no trend in Islam, could claim to have the final and lasting truth about the true nature of the unitary God, the purpose of life and death, and ultimate meaning of life. No fundamentalisms and fundamentalist thinking can survive in an inquiring, critical, curious, and creative atmosphere of epistemological uncertainty—making continual need for hermeneutic interpretations and re-interpretations of any sacred text, including Qur'an, not only an earthly, but also a spiritual, requirement.

Abu-Zayd's final words, of his article as well as his life, in calling for a "creative humanistic hermeneutics" of Islam then should be taken very seriously as the most important statement of his intellectual legacy and inheritance:

The challenge for Muslim thinkers nowadays is how to reconnect the fragmented Islamic culture of the past, which made the great Islamic civilization between the 9th and the 12th century, and contributed to the modern world's values of freedom, equality and justice. It is not an impossible task to accomplish, if the modern thinkers have the courage to critically rethink tradition. A creative humanistic hermeneutics must be developed given that so many creative and courageous thinkers are already active. These voices have to be heard and the world has to listen. (Abu-Zayd, p. 20)

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Those of us who understand Islamophobia not as a kind of controversy but as an analytic category need to face the strengths and weaknesses in our formulation of it. Conceptually, Islamophobia is not defined nor implemented or understood in a coherent and consistent way. ("Introduction" by Grosfoguel and Martín Muñoz, p. 2)

In their Introduction, co-editors Ramón Grosfoguel and Gema Martín Muñoz succinctly present the interconnecting themes of the various articles published in this issue of *Human Architecture*. What I would like to add here is partly an amplification of their call for a need to provide a more coherent and consistent way of defining

and exploring Islamophobia, and partly an effort in illustrating how the studies published herein may be regarded as significant contributions to the kinds of creative dialogue Nasr Abu-Zayd invites his readers to partake in on the subject of Islamophobia in particular.

In her essay, "Unconscious Islamophobia," co-editor Gema Martín Muñoz draws upon the subconsciously internalized dimension of Islamophobia as "a whole series of negative perceptions dominated by prejudices and stereotypes" (p. 26). At the core of this world-historically constituted subconscious imprint is what she calls "the reductionist and monolithic image of "us" and of "them" (the two "cultures")," and in particular of "Islam" as if it is a unitary and singular ideological, cultural, and political monolith. A whole mass of people then become perceived as if it is a "uniform entity" (p. 26). The same is done, Martín Muñoz argues, to the "West" and anything "Western": "It is as if these were closed universes in which millions of human beings are designated as 'Western' or 'Muslims' and represent alien and even antagonistic cultures" (Ibid.). It is for this reason that one finds in her perspective a serious call to find ways to address the reality of Islamophobia, one that is devoid of the dualistic ways in which the dichotomy "Us vs. Them" has itself been unconsciously internalized even in the discourses of those who are critical of the phenomenon and use the term.

This theme is pursued in a different way by co-editor Ramón Grosfoguel, in "Epistemic Islamophobia and Colonial Social Sciences," who insightfully draws our attention to the nature of epistemic racism that continues to feed and shape contemporary discourses on Islamophobia. By focusing on the deeply internalized, often unconscious (as Martín Muñoz would have it), dynamics of our own academic and scholarly discourses in particular (and not just in the historical consciousness of the

public at large), Grosfoguel explores how the dichotomy feeding Islamophobia has been constituted in our epistemologies over centuries by the very structures of the emerging capitalist world-system variously shaped by class as well as racial and gender dichotomies that are *generative* (and not just merely epiphenomenal) in relation to the capitalist world-system. Islamophobia conjures up and is epistemologically enabled by hierarchies of class, race, and gender that are equally *constitutive* of the world-system, rendering Islamophobia itself as not merely an incidental aspect, but as an integral and enabling aspect of the perpetuation of the modern world-system.

In his article "Islamophobia: A French Specificity in Europe?" Vincent Geisser proposes that France is not necessarily any more Islamophobic than other European countries, arguing that "an 'institutional Islamophobia' or 'State Islamophobia' doesn't really exist" (p. 45). What Geisser acknowledges is that French Islamophobia is shaped by what he calls a "missionary mind" that condescendingly seeks to "liberate" Muslims from their own religion. In Geisser's view, it is this aspect of the combined presence of Islam as an institutionally recognized but "ideologized" religion in France on the one hand, and the French missionary attitude toward transforming and "liberating" Islam from its "archaic, obscurantist and despotic" elements, on the other, that makes Islamophobia more visible and recurrent in France.

Farish A. Noor, in his article, "Terror and the Politics of Containment: Analysing the Discourse of the 'War on Terror' and its Workings of Power," explores the interlinkages between the discourse of "war on terror" and "anti-terrorism" (one may argue, as manifestations of Islamophobia) that emerged following the Sept. 11 events, on the one hand, and the "power structures and the institutions that are supported by them" (p. 47), on the other, focusing specifically in the context of Southeast Asia.

Noor's study reveals that the "war on terror" is not a particularly new or unique phenomenon in the region and dates back to similar discourses during the Cold War; that it is very similar to how oppositional forces use identity politics to pursue their aims; and finally, that it is just another way in which both anti-democratic regimes and fundamentalist opposition forces utilize the discourse to control and influence their conflict.

Heike Henkel's paper, "Fundamentally Danish? The Muhammad Cartoon Crisis as Transitional Drama," following a similar interest as in Farish Noor in understanding the local context of global Islamophobia, contributes well to insights into the domestic dynamics and functions/utilities of the cartoon affair in Denmark. Henkel suggests, using a conceptual structure borrowed from Axel Honneth, that "the cartoon crisis is part of an ongoing struggle for recognition in Denmark, through which the terms by which Muslims residing in Denmark are recognized as legitimate citizens/residents of Danish society are negotiated—and on which Muslims may recognize the demands of Danish majority society as legitimate" (p. 68). Geisser's study also points, in my reading, to the extent to which instrumentalist violation of cultural rules and sensibilities of other people to "make a point" about one's own civility and "democratic" identity find their dialectical negation in the undermining of cultural/civil/legal rules of one's own culture and practices of democracy. Did majority Danes undermine their own identity as a tolerant people by acting as they did, and did the process as a result turn them into Danish fundamentalists? Geisser's paper provides helpful material for rethinking the affair in more critical and constructive ways while focusing on the domestic political context in Denmark.

In his paper, "Historiographic Narratives: The Discourse Strategies for Constructing Expellable 'Moorish' Subjects,"

José Maria Perceval persuasively investigates the historical background to understanding contemporary Islamophobia, by going back to how decisions were made to expel Spanish Muslims (“Moriscos” or “new Moorish Christians”) not as mere individuals but as an officially recognized collective. The study sheds light on how such a collective expulsion had to be first made plausible based on an ideology that treated all “Moriscos” as “one” community and, second, that the collective represented cultural and behavioral characteristics that “disgusted” old Christians (p. 93).

In “Islamophobia and Sexism: Muslim Women in the Western Mass Media,” Laura Navarro creatively explores the role played by the media in the social reproduction of Islamophobia today. She focuses on how Muslim women are portrayed in general, and also particularly in Spain, highlighting the extent to which the racist discourse underlying Islamophobia is camouflaged under the disguise of women’s “human rights” discourse centering on the “veil affair.” Drawing on other studies, however, Navarro does not ignore the similar process in which the critique of the West in Muslim countries is carried out by using similar arguments that instrumentalize the “condition of women” in the West (p. 112) to advance ethnocentric defense of the Self versus the Other.

In “Discrepancies Around the Use of the Term ‘Islamophobia,’” Javier Rosón Lorente comes back to the meaning and use of the term “Islamophobia,” suggesting that while the advent and use of the term itself indicates the considerable rise of prejudice against Muslims, the term itself has proven to be controversial and widely debated, globally and also in the Spanish context, on religious, racial and ethno-cultural grounds as well as in respect to its etymological, identitary, and political aspects (p. 118). Rosón concludes by stressing that,

In this regard, when observing the discrepancies around any ‘controversial’ concept such as Islamophobia, the only thing which remains clear is that no matter what we call it, there are acts and attitudes against the Islamic and Muslim communities that reside in our close surroundings, and which are specifically addressed to the Muslim population or what we consider as such. This new reality needs to be named, described and defined, as the only way to act vis-à-vis those who consciously or unconsciously position themselves against the Arab and/or Muslim communities in a prejudiced manner. (p. 126)

Finally, in “The Homelessness of Muslimness: The Muslim Umma as a Diaspora,” S. Sayyid argues that an important historical condition that has given rise to Islamophobia in the age of globalization is the failing project of the nation-state as a political project as well as agency to bring about a national community that imagines itself as harmonious and whole (p. 129). This in turn has “opened up possibilities for new forms of political subjectivity that transcend and disrupt national boundaries” (Ibid.). This explains the rise in the perception of threat posed by the globally dispersed Muslim diaspora as an alternative political identity and project, leading to the rise in Islamophobia.