

HYPOTHESES ON PSYCHOGENESIS of ISLAMOPHOBIA

by Dr. Francesco Gallo, M.D., Specialist in Psychiatry

SUMMARY

While **Islamophobia** is underestimated by promoters of intercultural and interreligious dialogues between Muslims and Christians, many Arabs are entering Italy without documents. To do this various psychologic defense ego mechanisms, such as, idealization and sublimation, are used. Psychophobic subjects unconsciously project their "bad objects" to foreigners whose presence destabilizes them as it threatens their egocentrism and narcissism.

Definitions

The term "Islam" means "surrender" in the sense that Muslims surrender to God, not to idols. They are guided by the **Koran**, the sacred text of Islam revealed by **Allah** (God), which they consider the final Testament or Bible.

Historical events that contributed to set the stage for Islamophobia¹

After the **Treaty of Sèvres** (1920) following World War I, Europe gained control of over 85% of the Arab countries that before were part of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, the future of the Arab world was now controlled by the Western world. France and Britain played an important role in the creation of the independent state of **Lebanon** which they hoped would become a homeland for Arab-speaking Christians (Maronites). The **Kingdom of Jordan** was created to fulfill British commitments to the Hashemite family of Mecca.

After World War II the former colonial nations demanded independence from Europe. By creating in 1948 a home (**Israel**) for Jewish refugees who had survived the Holocaust, Europe and the U.N. set in motion a series of conflicts that still persist today. Arabs consider Israel the last surviving European colony on Arab territory.

The bitterness and sense of defeat that Arabs express against the Western Christian world, can be related to their attempt to unify the Arab world in the 1950's and the 1960's under the leadership of **Gamal Abd el-Nasser** (1918-1970), President of the Republic of Egypt from 1956 to 1970. Many Arabs view this failure as an unnatural and regrettable product of European colonialism.

The attacks by Islamic terrorists in New York, London, Paris, San Bernardino (California) and Cairo (Egypt) have shocked the Western world and discourage those who would like to establish a peaceful dialogue between Christians and Muslims. We feel powerless when the mass media show the cruel images of these attacks. This is exactly what terrorists hope to achieve, fear and panic (Islamophobia) to disarm, disorient and confuse us. Thus, we try to avoid the "cause" of these inconveniences (*avoidance psychological mechanism*) and exclude the possibility of a dialogue. We do not welcome those who are different from us because our psyche considers it a threat to the "status quo" of our ego (*xenophobia*).

¹ Dwight F. Reynolds, "Modern Arab Culture", Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK, 2015, pp. 1-13 passim.

As it occurs in claustrophobia, arachnophobia, cynophobia, sinophobia and acrophobia, Islamophobia can become so pathological and disabling that it requires cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy² sessions in subjects in therapy with anxiolytics.

Psychoanalysis indicates that phobia manifests itself when there is an unconscious fear that the ego shifts or projects to an external object which becomes the scapegoat to prevent our unacceptable thoughts and feelings from reaching our conscious awareness.

According to DSM IV-TR, acute and unexplained anxiety persists in phobia, caused by exposure to the phobic stimulus, forcing the patient to avoid it. This could be a factor in explaining why Muslims who emigrate to Italy (approximately 1.5 million) do not receive signs of hospitality.

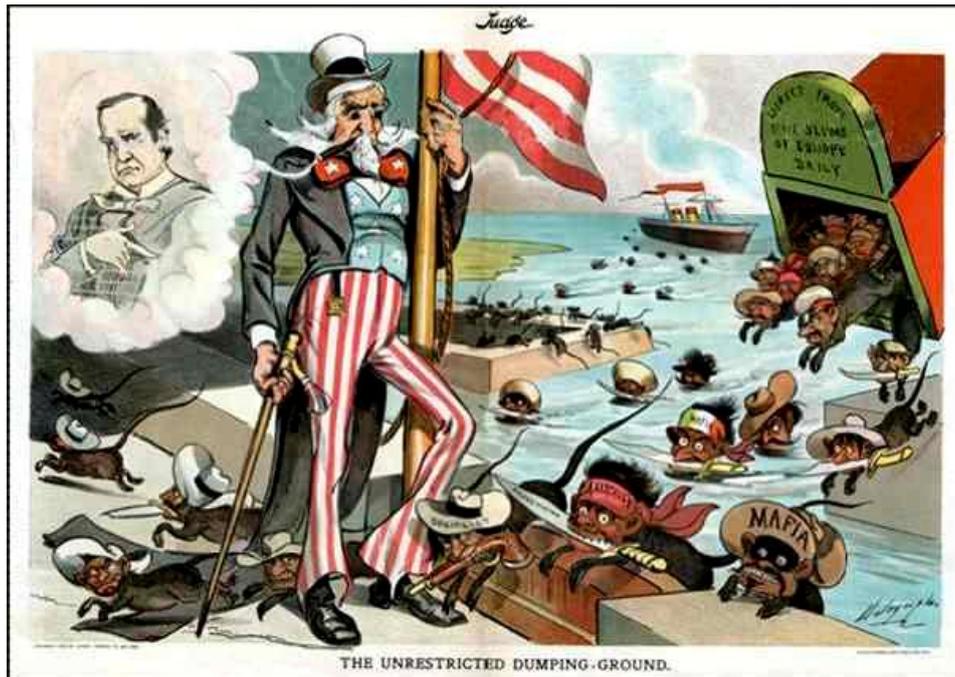
Remember, however, that the majority of Arabs coming from Syria, Eritrea, Somalia, Egypt, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Gambia, Mali, Afghanistan, Senegal and Sudan, are not terrorists but peaceful and grateful citizens trying to escape hunger, misery and persecution.

In the history of humanity, ethno-cultural intolerance against foreigners were always implemented to "protect" local communities from so-called "enemies" to whom equal dignity and rights were not recognized.

Let us remember that Greeks and Romans, foreigners were viewed as barbarians and that in the Middle Ages, there was religious discrimination: those accused of heresy or witchcraft were persecuted and/or executed. In the XIX century, with the rise of nationalistic sentiments in Europe, each nation considered itself superior to others. In the same period, *Joseph Arthur de Gobineau* (1816-1882) considered the father of racism, in 1855 wrote the "*Essay on the Inequality of Human Races*" to support the idea of the superiority of the white race.

From late XIX and early XX century, Italians also emigrated, fleeing from poverty and seeking a better life. Many were exploited and were stereotypically accused of being dirty, criminals (Mafia) and terrorists (anarchists), described as "sewer rats, drunks and murderers" (*Italophobia*). See drawing below.

² The patient is approached in a very progressive way to the stimuli that trigger the phobia, starting from those furthest from the object, e.g. the image of a panorama of the city of Istanbul. The contact with these stimuli is maintained until habit takes over and they no longer generate anxiety. Only then is exposure to a slightly more anxiety-provoking stimulus, e.g. the image of a Muslim, in a hierarchy carefully prepared in a priori session. In this way, within a few weeks, it is possible to climb the hierarchy up to much stronger exposures, e.g. images of terrorist acts, without ever arousing too much anxiety in the subject and repeat each exercise until it has become "neutral".



Disegno *Italo*fobico pubblicato nel 1903 dalla "Judge Magazine" di New York

Islamophobia and our impotence lead us to speculate on the "Islamization" of Christianity in Europe.

Cardinal Giacomo Biffi (1928-2015), of Bologna, in October 2000 declared that "...as they dialogue, Catholics are paving the way for their extinction".

Even **Cardinal Raymond Burke** of Minnesota (USA) believes that Islam is a threat to the whole Western world and that it is useless to dialogue with them.



Login to this video <https://youtu.be/ytdMUddGe-U> to see how Muslims are persecuting Christians.

Instead of generalizing and negatively consider all Muslims, we should distinguish fanatics from moderates, welcome newcomers, even if we feel closer to those who share our own religion and culture. In fact, instead of trying to complement ourselves with what we're lacking, we allow to become afraid of what "decompensates" us. We prefer a mirror to reflect our own image (*narcissism*), to self-celebrate or self-indulge (*self-reference*) ourselves.

Analogously we can compare our contact with foreigners with what happens at the **cellular membrane** level of body tissues. The newcomer should have the opportunity to get in touch with us as happens between nutrient molecules and cells. Some molecules such as oxygen and water, cross the cell membrane easily, by **simple diffusion** (they always have the door open), while others, such as sodium, potassium, amino acids and glucose, find it more difficult to enter equally and need to be supported by **carrier proteins**.

If, with a bit of imagination, we apply these biological phenomena on a social level, the carrier proteins could symbolically represent charitable or philanthropic organizations who open the doors to newcomers.

In foreigners, the separation from their family, the new emotional, social and cultural environment of their adoptive homeland, can create anxiety and the loss of pre-established equilibrium. They will have to elaborate *grief due to separation* from the original group, from the childhood bonds solidly internalized at a psycho-emotional level and the new environment might be considered a "foreign body" from which they reject.

Psychic disturbances can give rise to reactive depression, behavioral disorders, persecution manias and paranoid reactivity, alienation processes and depersonalization.

In Arab lands, the educated upper class citizens and members of religious minorities, such as Christians, hope for a widespread **secular** ideology where the power of religious leaders would be limited. These Muslims called **Salafis** or **Sunnis** wish to return to the religious ideology practiced in the time of the Prophet Mohammad who lived from 571 to 632 AD. The more orthodox, conservative group (**Shiites**) believe laws and government should follow the **Koran** or the sacred text of Islam and obey the dictates of the "ayatollah" or "imams".

Briefly, the ideology of Islam can be subdivided into three groups:

1. **Sunnis** make up 85-90% of Muslims and are faithful to the Prophet Muhammad. Ruled by caliphs, they do not approve of the intolerance of extremists even if ISIS is derived from Sunnis and is called "Sunni Muslim militia".
2. **Shiites** 10-15% of Muslims, are faithful to Ali, cousin, son-in-law and fourth successor of the Prophet. They exalt the value of martyrdom and it's the most extreme group. They are distinguished in:
 - a. **Zaydis** almost all in Yemen, are the most orthodox;
 - b. **Imamites** in Iran, Afghanistan, India, Syria and Iraq, are the most numerous and most important politically;
 - c. **Ismailites** in Egypt, northern Africa, India, Syria and some district of the Arabian Peninsula, are the least orthodox;
3. **Ibadites** in Libya, Algeria, Oman, Zanzibar and Tunisia, played an important role in the political and religious history of Islam.

Sufists are mystics that include both Sunnis and Shiites.

Thus, these different ideologies make univocal dialogue difficult.

Some fanatic Muslims barbarously kill many infidels and their religion is as militant as it was for Christians during the Crusades, the Thirty Years War, the Inquisitions and persecutions that forced the "infidels" or "heretics" to emigrate. Crusaders killed in the name of Christ, they wished to Christianize the world with force.

It is difficult to dialogue with those who follow the law of retaliation ("eye for an eye, tooth for tooth"), with those who take advantage of our "weakness" to turn the other cheek and "love our enemies" (Matthew 5:39).

Some Islamic countries, instead of loving their neighbors, finance "Jihad" (Holy War) to Islamize the world as written in Koran chapter 2, verses 190-2. Contrarily, "Dhimmis" were non Islamic people (Christians, Jews, Buddhists and Hindus) who were granted freedom of religion as guaranteed by the Koran in chapter 2, verse 256.

In the past, the various leaders of both religions (Popes and Ayatollahs) were unaware of their **delusions of omnipotence**, their **sadism**, **masochism** and **indifference** regarding the suffering and death of themselves and others. They never followed the **Golden Rule** that underlies every religion and every moral concept: "Do good to others as you would good to be done to you".

In the **Document "Nostra Aetate"** of the Vatican Ecumenical Council II (1965) the points of contact between Christians and Muslims are pointed out: they both worship the only God of Abraham, while the Muslims worship the Mother Virgin Mary and Christ as a Prophet, worshiping God with prayer, almsgiving and fasting. The Document invites all human beings to consider themselves common brothers and sisters, condemning "... any discrimination between men or persecution perpetrated for reasons of race or color, social condition or religion".

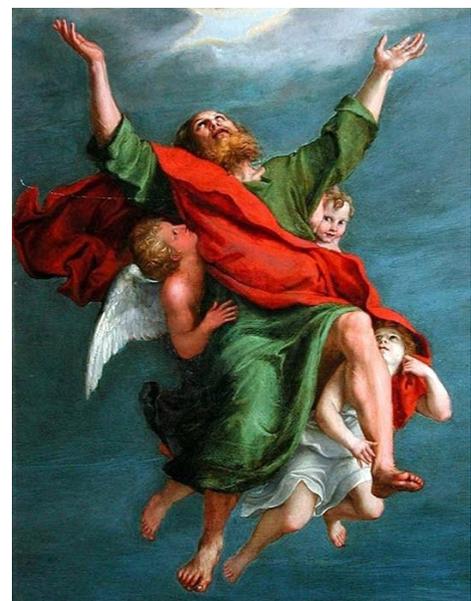
To understand the psychogenesis of Islamophobia one can resort to the theory of **object relations** of Melanie Klein (1882-1960) who affirms that during the projective identification process, the child introjects feelings and emotions towards the mother who, as she takes care of this infant, she is considered trustworthy ("*good*" *object*). This becomes the basis for a positive identification of the self (*self-esteem*).

The immature ego of the infant considers the mother's breast a "good" object when she breastfeeds him and a "bad" object when he is hungry and the mother is not present. From this psychodynamic concept originates the **schizo-paranoid persecutory disorders** and in our case, the relationship of suspiciousness and ambivalence towards strangers or foreigners. It makes us understand the psychogenesis of various psychopathologies, for example, in Islamophobia the "bad" breast is projected towards "others" (Muslims). Furthermore, with "religious" issues, the **ego** (reason) depends on the **super-ego** (faith, morals and a sense of guilt or "sin") which originates in the infant from a sense of guilt when he fears that his aggressive impulses could destroy "good" objects or breasts.

Intercultural dialogues between Muslims and Catholics should consider the positive or negative role of our **defense mechanisms** to protect the "Ego":

With **denial**, Muslims create a symbolic magical world (prayer) where the superego disables the rationality of the ego which unconsciously is considered unacceptable.

Photo: "Ecstasy of St. Paul" by Dominichino 1607 Louvre



By **acting out** (for example, by blowing themselves up to inflict damage on enemies) they engage in **masochistic-sadistic violent behavior** to further cancel out rationality. They also deny that "Imams" prefer not to be suicide bombers but indoctrinate naive young idealists to do so. The ideal candidates are young people from 18 to 23 years of age and these trainers ("Imams"), taking advantage of their immaturity and vulnerability, can better plagiarize the youth, convincing them to become martyr-heroes through self-injurious pathological behaviors.

Catholics, in proposing inter-religious dialogue with Islam, neglect the fact that they do not know the true nature of their interlocutors (*denial*) who in disembarking on our coasts without documents, show they do not wish to formally let others know who they are. These Christians through mechanisms of **sublimation** and **denial**, do not realize Muslims plan is to destroy the Christian world, as the President of Algeria **Houari Boumediène** (1932-1978) said at the United Nations in **1974**: *"One day, millions of men will leave the Southern Hemisphere to go to the Northern Hemisphere. And they will not go there as friends. Because they will go there to conquer it. And they will conquer it with their sons. The wombs of our women will give us victory"*.

In **conclusion**, our contact with whatever is different from us can emotionally destabilize us if we have not adequately resolved our mother-infant conflictual relationships such as self-centeredness, omnipotence and narcissism which can give rise to xenophobia. In order not to admit that their phobia arises from their precarious balance ("bad" object), some of us generalize and project our insecurities to foreigners.

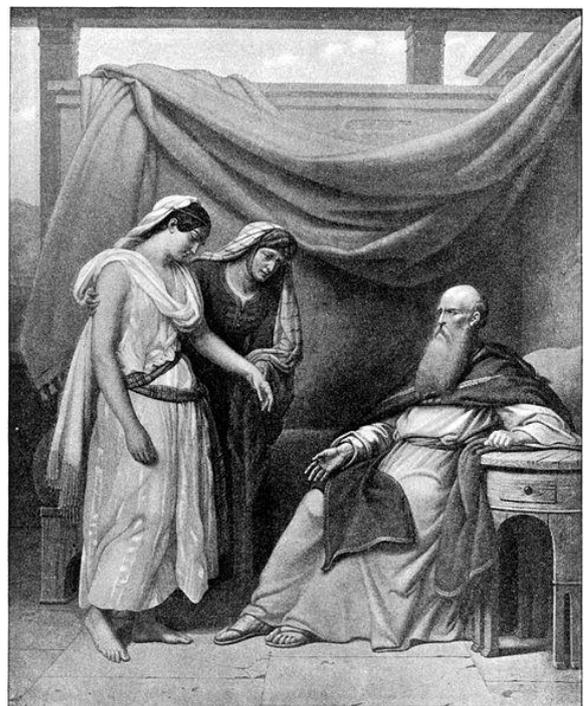
We must learn to accept those who are different from us, to identify with them, show empathy for their struggle to adapt, trying to learn new and different ways of living (*cultural enrichment*).

In this article, while I realize that this is a vast topic that would imply many other sociological and historical considerations, I wish to start a discussion and "dialogue" with readers without claiming to possess a solution.

By trying to eliminate our pre-judgment or prejudice and to improve our psychological weaknesses, we can obtain excellent results as we all have a **common Father, Abraham**. In fact, in the Old Testament (Genesis 1:16, 17:27) we read that Abraham was the progenitor of both the Arabs (descendants of his son Ishmael) and the Jewish people (descendants of his son Isaac) from which Christianity also derives.

This dialogue can take place as it happened during the Reign of **Roger II** (1095-1154) King of Sicily and that of **Frederick II** (1194-1250) the Holy Roman Emperor. During that period, tolerance and collaboration between Christians, Muslims and Jews attracted many educated people from all over the Mediterranean to the Court of Palermo (Sicily) which became very emancipated. Intolerance, on the other hand, based on a closed, one-sided, egocentric and irrational vision of life, blocks cultural progress.

Photo: Sarah (Isaac's mother) introduces Agar (Ishmael's mother) to Abraham



Presently, having recognized its errors such as the Crusades and persecutions, the Catholic Church is experiencing a period of great openness and humility because it became closer to the true message of Christ, love for our neighbor without which there cannot be a true intercultural and interreligious dialogue with Islam.

In the book **Exodus** (Old Testament) 22:21) we read: "**Do not** mistreat or **oppress** a **foreigner**, for you were **foreigners** in Egypt".

Author's comments on this article: It is very difficult to combine psychiatry with history and sociology and when we try to do it, we risk simplifying very complex issues. Realizing this, I attempted to find links of certain prejudices to social phobias. This is a huge problem that would imply sociological and historical interdisciplinary considerations beyond the scope of this publication. Please consider this publication a personal dialogue I undertook with readers with the hope to stimulate them to read further about this topic.

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