Racialization and religion: race, culture and difference in the study of antisemitism and Islamophobia

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Abstract

It is striking to observe the virtual absence of an established literature on race and racism in the discussion of Islamophobia; something that is only marginally more present in the discussion of antisemitism. This special issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* locates the contemporary study of antisemitism and Islamophobia squarely within the fields of race and racism. As such it problematizes the extent to which discussion of the racialization of these minorities remains unrelated to each other, or is explored in distinct silos as a series of internal debates. By harnessing the explanatory power of long-established organizing concepts within the study of race and racism, this special issue makes a historically informed, theoretical and empirical contribution to aligning these analytical pursuits.

> Those heeding Pope Urban II's exhortation at Clermont in 1095, to take up the cross in the First Crusade, remembered him saying that the Holy Land and much of Byzantium had been taken by "the Turks", an "accused race", a "slave of the demons". He urged his coreligionists "to exterminate this vile race from the lands of our brethren".' (Drakulic 2009, p. 234)

> The challenge, then, is to trace the inter-coursing connectivities of the ethno-racial. (Goldberg 2009, p. 1280)

Beyond internal debates

In his poignant *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Giorgio Agamben (1999, pp. 42–5) makes a provocative observation, one that he partly sources to Primo Levi, in reminding readers of the widely used term

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'*Muselmäner*' to describe the most wretched of those incarcerated in the camp. Often bent double, in a prostrate position as if in prayer, the *Muselmäner* became 'the name for those Jews in the Holocaust camps that had left life but not yet given into death' (Goldberg 2006, p. 346). This stirring semantic connection, however, is not substantively pursued in his full account because Agamben recoils from *relating* the ways in which the condition of the *Muselmäner* may signal, as Rana (2007, p. 158) puts it, 'a shared and overlapping racial history of the Jew and the Muslim'.[1] This *relational* problematic, as a mode of inquiry, is only relatively recently being charted in the works of scholars such as Junaid Rana, Gil Anidjar, Erik Love, Moustafa Bayoumi and, in a broader sense over a longer duration, by David Goldberg. This special issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* speaks to this intellectual activity by locating something of the contemporary study of antisemitism[2] and Islamophobia squarely within the fields of race and racism. As such it problematizes the extent to which discussion of the racialization of these minorities remains unrelated to each other, or is explored in distinct silos as a series of *internal debates.*

With some important exceptions, it is striking to observe the virtual absence of an established literature on race and racism in the discussion of Islamophobia; something that is only marginally more present in the discussion of antisemitism.[3] By harnessing the explanatory power of long-established organizing concepts within the study of race and racism, this special issue makes a historically informed, theoretical *and* empirical contribution to aligning these analytical pursuits. This is not an easy task, of course, for it must overcome, on the one hand, a historical narrative on the emergence of race as an explicitly secular and 'modern' phenomenon – one that has its genesis in Atlantic slavery and Enlightenment-informed colonial encounters (an account that has become entrenched as the prevailing view). On the other hand, we are cautioned that 'the usage of "racialization" so broadly in the literature is at the very least ambiguous, and may sometimes be vacuous. One cannot always tell, either explicitly or contextually, whether it is being invoked as a merely descriptive term or with deeper normative, critical thrust' (Goldberg 2006, p. 332). To this we can add an obstacle that is less *analytical* and more *political*: namely, the discursive opposition to placing antisemitism and Islamophobia within the same tier as each other, and in the same register as race.[4] So, in attempting to bring to bear ideas of racialization in the conceptualization of these matters, we are, first, engaging in a degree of historical revision; second, seeking analytical precision; as well as, third, remaining politically cognizant.

Othello and Shylock walk into a Bard

Beginning with the first issue, there is a long-standing methodological (and indeed philosophical) question as to whether 'the possession of a concept can predate the possession of a corresponding word' (Thomas 2010, p. 1739). Without seeking to resolve this, if one is persuaded that language is both constitutive *and* reflective, then one can take issue with a central tenet of the highly influential realist (and for our purposes illustrative) 'racial formation' thesis put forward by Omi and Winant (1994). In focusing upon the place of race in culture, economics and law, these authors maintain that a 'conception of race does not occur until the rise of Europe and the arrival of Europeans in the Americas' (Omi and Winant 1994, p. 61). Theirs is a wide-ranging and highly engaging account, and it is most relevant to our discussion because of how they limit precursor articulations of antipathy toward Muslims and Jews as expressions of *religious* bigotry, in the following manner:

> [T]he hostility and suspicion with which Christian Europe viewed its two significant non-Christian "others" – the Muslims and Jews – cannot be viewed as more than a rehearsal for racial formation, since these antagonisms, for all their bloodletting and chauvinism, were always and everywhere religiously interpreted. (Omi and Winant 1994, p. 61)

While the authors concede that the prospect of the negative treatment of Jews and Muslims reflects a 'rehearsal' of racial formation, temporally, in my view, this reading assumes too linear a conception, moving as it does from pre-modern-irrational (entrenched religious bigotry) to modern-rational (racial discrimination within a matrix of economic imperatives) (cf. Arendt 1968). This alleged trajectory is punctuated, for example, in noting that the word *race* in Sebastian de Covarrubias's infamous sixteenth-century dictionary was in fact synonymous with the words 'blood' and 'religion' (see Mignolo 2010, p. 29). Indeed, there is ample evidence that religious culture and biology are deemed as co-constitutive of a racial category prior to its articulation in Atlantic slavery and Enlightenment-informed colonial encounters, even prior to the *Reconquista*. For example, when Islam is first encountered in Europe, 'the Prophet Mohammed (with his Jewish parents and Nestorian/heretical teacher)' is embodied as a dark-skinned, satanic menace (Matar 2009, p. 217). To the extent that:

> allusions to animals were allegorically, anagogically or historically applied to the Muslim . . . As English prejudice against Jews had led to their association with a special "odour", so prejudice against

Muslims led to their association with animals; and as Jews were stigmatized for "crucifying" Jesus, so were Muslims stigmatised for circumcising Christians. (Matar 2009, p. 218)

What is being argued is that while the racial formation thesis accurately captures many of the *mechanics* of racialization, the account needs to commence earlier in order to observe how racialized categories have saturated cultural portrayals of Muslims and Jews, endowing each with characteristics that offered 'reassurance that their difference could be easily identified by Christians' (Thomas 2010, p. 1747).

In different ways both Nabil Matar (1999) and James Shapiro (1996) have provided a rich discussion of how ideas of *the* Moor and Jew featured in Elizabethan England, and in the period's most celebrated author we find illustrative depictions of each. Namely, Shakespeare's characterization of the tragically violent Othello and the shrewd and sinister Shylock. While each are replete with redeeming qualities, and even by today's standards imbued with striking degrees of ambiguity, they nonetheless make sense as racialized affectations of their time. In the case of the former, the moral panic over Moors in London is well documented. Popular depictions in which Muslims 'raged and lusted, killed their children or enslaved and brutalized Christians' (Matar 2009, p. 219) were widely circulated. As Harris (2000, p. 35) reminds us: 'To Elizabethan Londoners the appearance and conduct of the Moors was a spectacle and an outrage, emphasizing the nature of the deep difference between themselves and their visitors, between their Queen and this "erring Barbarian".' (For more polysemic readings of the context of *Othello* see Lerner 2000; Soyinka 2000). Thus, and complaining to the Lord Mayor of London that they were 'infidels, having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel', Queen Elizabeth expelled Turks from her realm (quoted in Jones 1971, p. 20).[5] In the case of Jewish minorities in Elizabethan England, who were yet to be formally readmitted following their expulsion in 1290, the character of Shylock was at least partly sustained by a mythology and 'threat of Jews circumcising Englishmen, taking Christian servants, and racially contaminating the English nation' (Shapiro 2000, p. 128). The point is that for Shakespeare no less than his audiences, these ideas of the Moor and the Jew had achieved traction as corporeal shorthand for non-Christian difference, and in so doing problematizes the familiar Atlantic narrative. As Thomas (2010, pp. 1738–9) summarizes:

Most scholars still conceive of race as a post-Enlightenment ideology built upon the Atlantic slave trade, hinged upon observable phenotypical human differentiation.... Yet, discourses of modern racism not only antedate the social taxonomies arising out

of nineteenth-century scientific thought, but it was Christianity which provided the vocabularies of difference for the Western world...

What this means is that the category of race was co-constituted with religion, and our resurrection of this genealogy implicates the formation of race in the racializiation of religious subjects. Frederickson (2002), for example, has charted the relationship of the race concept to religion in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spain, proposing that the othering and ethnic cleansing of Jews and Muslims is paradigmatic of European racialization. Yet while Fredrickson retreats somewhat and characterizes this as a matter of *culturalism* instead of *racism*, François Soyer (this issue) offers a different reading of the same history of the Muslim presence in Spain from the early Middle Ages until the beginning of the seventeenth century. In so doing he charts the processes through which the crypto-Muslim minority in Spain, the *Moriscos*, came to be racialized as a subversive threat. His analysis of the unprecedented measures that the early Spanish state initiated to address the perceived 'Morisco problem' charts how these came to represent a perfect model for the study of the mechanism that underpinned the Muslim experience in the Iberian peninsula. Soyer therefore provides an important reading of the ways in which race has an older pedigree than is currently registered, especially the 'political effects informed by prior relations of power existing throughout Europe' (Thomas 2010, p. 1739).

Re-articulating racialization

This last point leads nicely to the next. In my contribution (this volume), I note that the *idea* of racialization boasts a long pedigree, even if the term itself does not (Barot and Bird 2001), and proceed to elaborate a reading from Banton, Miles, Modood and others. Here at the outset, however, a helpful means of addressing Goldberg's earlier concern for precision in the use of racialization is to turn to Kushner's (2006, p. 209) summary of Small's distinction 'between "the racialization problematic", a theoretical framework of analysis, and the "process of racialization", that is 'a process of attribution which has been unfolding historically, and continues to unfold".' Where the previous section takes up the first issue, this one takes up the second. In so doing it allows us to observe some of the ambiguities of racialization, an issue that is returned to below, but more immediately provides an opportunity to showcase how racialization can be a *meta-concept* that is nimble enough to host a number of potentially competing concerns. Perhaps most importantly, it allows us to:

guard against the characterization of racism as a form of single "inherentism" or "biological determinism", which leaves little space to conceive the ways in which cultural racism draws on physical appearance as one marker among others, but is not solely premised on conceptions of biology in a way that ignores religion, culture and so forth. (Meer and Modood 2009, p. 344)

This analytical challenge is resolutely taken up in Raymond Tara's wide-ranging contribution; expertly moving through the multidimensional components of racism, but more broadly recognizing how racialization has been pervasive in European imaginaries of Jews and Muslims, old and new, and so never 'stands still'. Let us, however, offer more detail as to the component parts of racialization that we are using.

In their elegant overview of racialization in theory and practice, Murji and Solomos (2006) note the myriad ways in which racialization is appropriated and contested, often corresponding to different national traditions of inquiry (e.g. its meaning in the USA in contrast to the UK). The objective here is much narrower, however, and takes its cue from Miles's (1989, p. 75) conception of racialization as a means of understanding the ways in which *racial processes* can attribute 'meaning to somatic characteristics' in a way that 'presumes a social psychological theory which explains the nature and dynamics of the process'. This characterization captures several of the core components of antisemitic and Islamophobic sentiment and behaviour; most specifically the ways in which 'signifying processes' interact to 'construct differentiated social collectivities as races' (Miles 1989, p. 79). What is important about this formulation is that it speaks to both ideational and structural tendencies, as well as their interactions with each other, for example the features comprising institutional racism (see the excellent discussion by Murji, 2007).

Of course Miles has been critiqued on a number of fronts (see Cohen 2002 in Murji and Solomos 2006; and especially the revised critique from Banton 2002), and in my contribution there is a refinement of it based upon Modood (2005), Meer and Noorani (2008) and Meer and Modood (2010). Suffice to say here in its defence that as long as racialization does not need to be anchored in materialist conceptions of racism, what it facilitates is a focus not on religious bigotry or prejudice per se, but on people, groups and minorities who are the sites of racial inscriptions. What is no less relevant to this understanding is that racialization so conceived provides us with an alternating (inclusive and exclusive) account, and can connect, for example, to Kushner's (2006, p. 211) argument:

The racialization processes in relation to the Jews have been in constant flux, pronounced often at time of crisis and less so in periods of greater stability. Moreover, it has been rare for *all* Jews to be racialised, or more accurately, for all Jews to be racialised negatively. It has been common, for example, to accept as "one of us" what were perceived as westernized Jews as against the essentially "oriental Jews" from the East.

One illustration of this in Britain is how during the First World War the status of the new Russian Jewish immigrants, in contrast to long-established groups, was problematized because they were not naturalized and could not therefore be conscripted. This was compounded by these refugees' principled opposition to aligning themselves with a Czarist Russia responsible for the pogroms; paradoxically at a time when public discourse widely held that Russian socialism was the ideology of 'the Jews'.[6] In the contemporary period, we find that the 'good Muslim/bad Muslim' dichotomy has achieved significant traction, especially in the ways with which boundaries of legitimate and illegitimate Muslim political descent are drawn (Mamdani 2004). These two logics of racialization are presented as enduring in Simon Weaver's study of virtual humour (this issue). In his account, Weaver argues that logics of *inclusive* racialization usually employ racial stereotypes, whereas *exclusion* often depicts violence or removal. Drilling deeper still, Weaver shows that while the stereotypes and exclusions of Jews and Muslims presented in the humour under study are not the same, having both different histories and different trajectories, he nonetheless argues that the underlying logic of racialization is the same (and can be split into inclusive and exclusionary jokes, the former using stereotypes solely while the latter show death or removal). In his reading, anti-Muslim jokes are more active as a form of racism; they rely on contemporary events and stereotypes. In his discourse analysis, antisemitic and Islamophobic jokes are constructed through linguistic devices that resemble metaphor and other rhetorical manoeuvres, in a manner that enables humour to racialize in various scenarios.

The protocols of Eurabia

Turning to the third issue, the best available data set offering a statistical comparison of attitudes towards Muslims and Jews can be found in the Pew Global Attitudes (PRC 2008) project surveying almost 25,000 people across twenty four countries (see Meer, this volume). Among its findings, it reports:

a strong relationship between anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim sentiments in the West. Indeed, among the U.S. and the six European

countries included in the survey, the correlation between unfavor-
able opinions of Jews and unfavorable opinions of Muslims is
remarkably high. (PRC 2008, p. 9)[7]

This is crucial and worth restating because, as Figure 1 shows, it points
to the overlapping articulation of both phenomena as something that
emerges not in a tiered hierarchy but as a conjoined activity (the fuller
data show quite persuasively how antipathy towards Muslims and
Jews increases and decreases by consistent percentages over the same
intervals). Analytically, this problematizes the bifurcation proposed by
a number of authors, repeated by Rensmann and Schoeps (2011,
p. 52), that the two are incommensurable because:

> …antisemitism has motivated mass movements, declared Jews as
> "enemies of mankind," and, in its past and present forms, attributes
> to Jews global conspiracies, hidden power, control over the media
> and politics, the subterranean global destruction of societies…none
> of which we tend to find even in the most radical forms of public
> anti-Muslim resentments.

A cursory, let alone detailed, reading of history is replete with evidence
of the ways in which Jewish experience(s) have given rise to new
vocabularies of persecution. Racial logics, however, as Goldberg

Figure 1. *Negative views of Jews and Muslims in the West*

Correlation = .80.
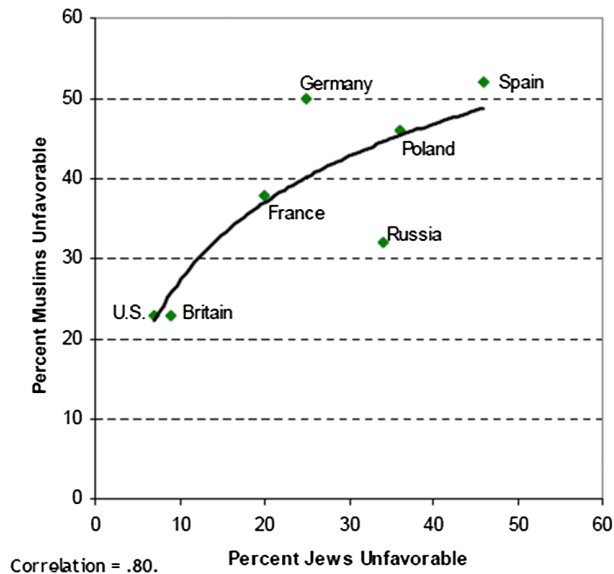
insists, do not respect Rensmann and Schoeps' hierarchies. One need not look far for evidence of this. The widely received conspiracy theory, initially proposed by the polemicist Bat Ye'or (2001, 2005), reflected in the notion of 'Eurabia' – foretelling the planned numerical and cultural domination of Europe by Muslims and Islam – has achieved significant traction and features prominently in the accounts of various best-selling authors. These include the late Italian intellectual Orianna Fallaci (2001, 2003), the German economist Thilo Sarrazin (2010) and the British polemicists Niall Ferguson (2004) and Melanie Phillips (2005), among many others. It also includes Mark Steyn (2006a), who has made the confident prediction that 'much of what we loosely call the Western world will not survive this century, and much of it will effectively disappear in our lifetimes, including many, if not most Western European countries.' Remarkably similar to anxieties over western decline in the late 19th century (see Bonnet, 2008), in his best seller *America Alone: The End of the World as We Know It*, Steyn (2006, p. 5) casually offers the following prescription for 'dealing' with Muslim population growth:

> Why did Bosnia collapse into the worst slaughter in Europe since World War Two? In the thirty years before the meltdown, Bosnian Serbs had declined from 43 percent to 31 percent of the population, while Bosnian Muslims had increased from 26 percent to 44 percent. In a democratic age, you can't buck demography – except through civil war. The Serbs figured that out – as other Continentals will in the years ahead: if you can't outbreed the enemy, cull 'em. The problem that Europe faces is that Bosnia's demographic profile is now the model for the entire continent.

Of course the predicted (inflated) levels of population growth have not gone undisputed, and indeed have been refuted by Carr (2006), Hawkins (2009), Jones (2005), Kuper (2007) and Laurence and Vaisse (2006), among others, principally on the grounds that they both radically overestimate base figures and then extrapolate implausible levels of population growth. The demography panic has nonetheless achieved a degree of traction, and the same demographic fatalism is shared by Christopher Caldwell (2010) in his *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe* (subtitled: *Can Europe Be the Same with Different People in It?*). These assessments have led Matt Carr (2011, p. 14) to note the ways in which 'Eurabia bears many of the essential features of the essential features of the invented antisemitic tract, the *Protocals of the Elders of Zion*, in its presentation of European Muslims as agents in a conspiratorial of world domination.'[8]

Fertile ground then for Muslim–Jewish collaboration. And yet, alas, the *political* space for solidarity among Muslim and Jewish groups is

increasingly squeezed by geopolitical imperatives. Indeed, and perhaps greater than the intellectual obstacles to any kind of alignment in our understanding of antisemitism and Islamophobia, are the contentions over what Pnina Werbner elaborates in her article: namely, the extent to which globally transmitted violent encounters can transform racist imaginaries (about the essential and unchanging nature of protagonists) amongst Jews and Muslims, as well as beyond them. Depicting three paradigmatic racist folk devils, her contribution examines the particular conundrums associated with anti-Zionism and its equation with a 'new antisemitism', which raises at least two questions: one conceptual and one empirical. Rather than discourse, she proposes, the challenge facing anti-racist scholars is to grasp the nature of the social imaginaries that constitute contemporary racisms and their mutations in the face of changing historical circumstances (cf. Taguieff 2004).

The conceptual issue is forensically examined in Brian Klug's article, and focuses on the analytical utility of designating hostility to Israel and Zionism as a new form of antisemitism. His assessment is that antisemitism *can* take this form. But, he maintains, in the literature that detects it, something greater is proposed:

At its strongest, there is the qualitative claim that anti-Zionism and hostility to Israel are, per se, antisemitic. At other times, the claim is quantitative: it amounts to saying that, predominantly and for the most part, these attitudes are antisemitic, and therefore, in any given case, the burden of proof is on those who deny the allegation of antisemitism. (Klug, this issue)

As Klug notes, 'criteria do not, of course, always settle an argument.' Thus the empirical issue is taken up in Tony Kushner's contribution, not just in a discussion of descriptive statistics, but also in terms of our framing and reading of contemporary controversies, and the reminder that 'the Jewish experience [just as the Muslim experience] has not always been about persecution' (Kushner, this issue). The issue is complex and inevitably takes in a number of scales, and so is reminiscent of how Webber (1997, p. 268) once observed that:

European Jews thus live with the awareness that many Israelis see them as part of a people inhabiting an incurably anti-Semitic environment, and some may well accept this to be true. It is quite a different picture from one promoted for example by the European Union. But what, indeed, is more typical for Jews as a model of contemporary Europe: Maastricht or Auschwitz? In practice, many minority groups, Jews included, hold more than one model in their

heads at any one time; some models out of date, some deriving from the inside, and some presented to them from the outside.

The contributions in this collection that speak to the intellectual questions thrown up by such challenges do so with nuance and precision, and so offer much in the way of a means to tackle such politically contested inquiry. It is hoped, therefore, that this special issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* will help create the space for such activity to blossom.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Rana (2007, p. 161) notes how 'other camps had similar terms that tied the Jew to the Muslim: in Buchwald they were called "tired sheiks," and in the women's camp Ravensbruck they were *Muslweiber*, or Muslim women.'
2. The prevailing convention is not to use a hyphen in antisemitism as no phenomenon such as Semitism has ever existed (even though there is a racial-linguistic genealogy of Semites which some trace to Noah's son Shem, and of course this includes Muslims too; see Firestone 2011).
3. For example, since the early 1990s Tariq Modood (1992, 1994, 1997) has been reading anti-Muslim sentiment through a race frame, specifically elaborating a concept of cultural racism that can speak to a series of empirical questions. From a more humanities perspective, Tony Kushner (1995, 2003, 2006) has been studying the problematization of 'white European' migrants through a racialization frame, and relating this to the historical and contemporary dynamics of antisemitism and anti-refugee discourse.
4. It is quite standard to state at the outset that the idea of race is being used under 'erasure' (à la Jacques Derrida) or rejected outright in the manner preferred by Robert Miles. Some however argue that as a social construction it continues to serve as a potential vehicle for subjective and attributed identifications, including a widening of racial equality agendas to include those affected by the social reality of racism (Modood 2005). The outcome is close to what W. E. B. Du Bois understood as a 'socio-historical' concept of race *as a political formation* (see Meer 2010).
5. Honigmann (1997, pp. 2–3) offers one view that the London-residing Moorish ambassador Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud ben Mohammed Anoun was one basis for Othello.
6. As Holmes (1979, p. 208) recounts, 'a central stress was placed upon Britain and the British Empire as the repositories of Christian civilisation and it was this system which was believed to be under attack from Jewish influences.'
7. The correlation is in fact at .80 (well beyond the standard Fisherian and Neyman–Pearson benchmarks for statistical significance).

8.   Carr (2011, p. 11) continues: 'The vicitimisation of unwanted minorities; conspiratorial narratives which present such minorities as a dangerous "enemy within" and exaggerate their subversive potential; the representation of cultural difference as a form of deliberate hostility and intransigence; the paranoia and bigotry of powerful majorities that seek to remake or define themselves in a "them" and "us" struggle for uniformity and "purity" – all these universal components of persecution were present in sixteenth century Spain.'

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