



## ISLAMOPHOBIA IN EUROPE AS A THEOLOGICAL FAILURE

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Mika Vähäkangas

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to theologially describe and analyse European Islamophobia. In the outset, central terminology is defined. Thereafter, there is a very brief introduction of history of Islam in Europe followed by a description of the European political situation in relation to Islam. The latter part of the article assesses European Islamophobia theologially.

In this article Islamophobia is used to cover “hatred, hostility, and fear of Islam and Muslims, and the discriminatory practices that result”.<sup>1</sup> Such features of Islamophobia that are relevant for the discussion below are: Firstly, Islam is seen as monolithic and unable to change meaning that whatever bad is done in the name of Islam, that defines all Muslims at all times. Secondly, Muslims are seen as others meaning that one fails to see the communalities between Islam and Christianity, and overlooks the common humanity of both Muslims and Christians. Thirdly, Islam is viewed as inferior to Christianity or Western values and fourthly, it is seen inherently as an enemy. Fifthly, Islam is seen in racial terms and discrimination against Muslims is condoned.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, Islamism is used to denote political Islam, i.e. such political views in which a specific interpretation of Islam

1 Green Todd H., *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 9.; See also earlier definitions: Runnymede Trust: Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, *Islamophobia: a Challenge for Us All: Report of the Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia*, (Runnymede Trust, 1997), 1.

2 Green, 2015, 12–16.

serves as the guiding principle of politics. When I refer to such forms of political Islam that are violent or threatens with violence their political and/or religious opponents, I use the term militant Islamism.<sup>3</sup> It needs to be stated on the outset that Islamophobia takes violent or threatening forms, too.<sup>4</sup>

Racism denotes in this article a conviction that there are physically separable races of humanity that have an indelible innate effect on the intellect and other capacities. This means that races could also be ranked.<sup>5</sup> I use the term racist far right for such populist political parties, movements and individuals who subscribe some form of racial theory and promote racially hierarchized societies, usually with very strong central governmental powers. Some European parties like the Sweden Democrats, a medium size Swedish political party, can be classified under this category whereas in some others there are factions or individuals who can be counted as racist far right whereas this would not apply to the whole of the party. This would be the case of the True Finns, a medium size Finnish party which has a large clearly racist faction but which has also members and politicians who are not subscribing to an openly racist agenda. I reserve the term Nazism to such political parties belonging to racist far right that openly adhere to the Third Reich type racist and violent ideology and admire Nazi leaders like the medium size Greek Golden Dawn party whose

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3 On Islamism and violence see Green, 2015, 106–107.

4 See Runnymede Trust 1997, 38–42.

5 For an extensive description and analysis of race see Ashley Montagu, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1997).

members and politicians have been involved in racially motivated killings. In some cases it is difficult to judge whether a racist far right party, faction or individual is a Nazi when the political contents are Nazi or very close to it but there are no overt claims of political or historical continuity to Hitler's regime. An example of such a party is the medium size Hungarian Jobbik.

## ISLAM IN EUROPE

In spite of the commonly cherished myth of Christian Europe, the continent has never really been fully Christianised. The Christianisation project was under progress in the northern parts of Europe, latest in Lapland in northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia up to the 19th century. Of areas that have been, and are at the moment, independent countries Latvia was among the last ones to become majority Christian, with much of the rural population remaining effectively pagan throughout the medieval ages. Jewry formed a notable religious minority especially in Eastern Europe until the Holocaust.

Islam was originally viewed by Christians as Christological heresy within Christianity.<sup>6</sup> When it grew, especially in terms of political influence, it began to be regarded as a religion in its own right. Islam entered in Europe at a larger scale in 711 when the

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6 Green, 2015, 47-51.

Umayyad Caliphate conquered areas of today's Spain and Portugal, at a time when the Christianization of the Nordic countries had not even begun. The time of the caliphate is known as an unprecedented era of religious freedom and plurality with all three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam enjoying of a degree of freedom even if Islam as the religion of the rulers had an advantageous position.<sup>7</sup> The Iberian Peninsula was gradually reconquered by Christian rulers. This led to forced conversions of Muslims and Jews leaving them with two other alternatives: leave the Christian dominated areas or be executed. Thus, the Muslim presence in the area became only a historical episode and no notable historical Muslim presence has survived.<sup>8</sup>

The second major entry of Islam in Europe took place through the expansion of the Ottoman Empire that conquered the Balkans in the 14th century and onwards which led Islam to grow its roots in that area. Even though the Ottoman Empire retreated from most of the Balkans in the early 20th century, there remained notable Muslim populations especially in the area what is known today as Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia Herzegovina.<sup>9</sup> Also southern parts of Russia and several areas of Caucasus became more or less Islamic.

Islam has therefore been in Europe since from early stages of its birth. However, from the very beginning, Islam has been

7 See e.g. Green, 2015, 39–42; Eric Maroney, *Religious Syncretism* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 24–25.

8 Maroney, 2006, 31–35.

9 See Maroney, 2006, 58–63.

depicted in Europe as something foreign and as an enemy threatening to annihilate the Christian Europe. This enmity between Europe and the East can, however, be traced well prior the rise of Islam. The Roman and Persian empires were at loggerheads even before the rise of Christianity. When Christianity gained official recognition in Rome, the political competition developed religious overtones. In spite of the fact that the Christians in the Roman Empire and the Oriental Christians in the Persian Empire were of different kinds – and often in disagreement or at least marginalised from the Western (Catholic and Orthodox) theological developments – even Oriental Christians became suspect as Roman cronies in the Persian governmental eyes. Whenever the Romans were able to capture areas of Oriental Christians, they were persecuted as heretics. Thus, for example the Egyptian Coptic Christians welcomed the arrival of Muslim rulers as liberation from the Roman oppressors.<sup>10</sup>

The discord between the West and the East grew bitterer through the Crusades which were the Christian Europe's attempt at matching the rising Muslim military and political might in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially in the Holy Land. The cruel Western Christian bigotry was not only directed against Muslims and Jews but also to Oriental Christians who found themselves again between two fires: the Western Christians persecuted them as heretics, and Muslims suspected them as Christians. At times

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10 Derek Cooper, *Introduction to World Christian History* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press 2015), 31–46, 85–128.

the Catholic crusades even turned against the Orthodox Byzantine Empire struggling to survive under the Islamic onslaught.

At the time when Western Europe became a destination of labour-based migration after the Second World War, European Muslim populations were mostly in the south-eastern parts of the continent, and were mostly invisible as they were suffering from Communist suppression like the other religions, too.

Migration caused the numbers of Muslims to soar first especially in Great Britain, France, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. Especially in Great Britain, France and the Netherlands, the Muslim immigrants came from their former colonies whereas the German Muslim population first came mostly from Turkey. Now Islam has become present and visible, but in a very noticeably foreign form. The newcomers represented the other in terms of their outward appearances, language, culture, and religion.<sup>11</sup> They were perceived negatively, in continuum with the old prejudices.<sup>12</sup>

These first immigrants were regarded as “guest workers” who came to meet the demand of low skilled labours and the idea was that once their contracts expired, they would return to their countries of origin.<sup>13</sup> Thus, relatively little attention was paid to assess levels of “guest workers” feel-at-home in order to accommodate them to the new environment. In spite of the governments’ perceptions and in many cases even the “guest

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11 Green, 2015, 154–157.

12 On the levels of European negative attitudes against Muslims see Green, 2015, 2.

13 Runnymede Trust 1997, 15; Green, 2015, 154–155.

workers’ own ideas about their return to home, a great part of the newcomers remained in Europe. Their children and grandchildren had been born in there and they knew little of else than life in Europe.

## ISLAMOPHOBIA IN EUROPE

Old enmities and prejudices die hard. In spite of the fact that Nazism had recently built its lethal ideology on the basis of racial theories, racism proved to survive in Europe. Racism was namely not a symptom of Nazism but Nazism was a symptom of the deep-rooted European racism. In European thought, the Orient has often played the role of the exotic and oftentimes as threatening other. When this age-old picture of enmity is translated into religious terms, Christianity stands for Europe, Enlightenment, and progress whereas Islam stands for the Orient, superstition, and backwardness.<sup>14</sup>

In typical European racist manner, when the public was gradually alarmed by the increase of Islam in Europe, Islam became racialized.<sup>15</sup> Instead of regarding it as an individual’s,

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14 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

15 See Chris Allen, *Islamophobia* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010). When Islamophobia sees Islam as inferior, racism fits to categorize it even if Islam cannot be claimed to be a physical race in the manner of earlier racism. See Runnymede Trust 1997, 4–7. To denote the difference between the racism based on racial theories and Islamophobia as racism, the Runnymede report places racism in quotation marks when it is directed against Muslims as a group. Runnymede Trust 1997, 9.

or even a group's, religious conviction, it became a quality one was born with.<sup>16</sup> It has been viewed as if it were like ethnicity or even a physical trait. Oriental Christians, who often have fled the Middle East in order to escape from religious persecution, found themselves again between two fires. In their countries of origin, militant Islamists persecute them as Christians whereas in Europe they are treated as Muslims because they look and sound like Muslims. Likewise, a secular person of Muslim background, having left his home for political or religious reasons, is forced into the Muslim mould by the European racializing approaches.<sup>17</sup>

Young European Muslims of second or third generation find themselves in a situation of cultural uncertainty. On one hand, they have never lived in Muslim countries of the origin of their grandparents. On the other hand, as ethnically Muslim, they are perpetually excluded from the European societies on the basis of Muslim like features and having a Muslim name, irrespectively of what they believe or how they act. For example, finding a job is more difficult if you have a Muslim name. In this situation of double exclusion, the youth become easy recruiting targets for militant Islamist hatemongers. The racist Europe has failed them and they usually have no realistic ways of relating to the countries of their cultural roots.

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16 Thus, racialization of Islam is one example of essentialization where a characteristic or identity dimension of a person defines essentially, i.e. in an unchanging manner, the person. See Green, 2015, 24; Runnymede Trust, 1997, 1. On conflation of race and religion in Islamophobia see Green, 2015, 27–29.

17 On hate crimes against Muslim “look-alikes” see Green, 2015, 286–287.

Militant Islamism draws from the sources of historical Roman–Persian and eventually European–Oriental enmities, making use of especially the history of the Crusades, European colonial dominion over Islamic areas in the 19th and the 20th centuries, and the recent United States–led wars in Islamic countries. Likewise, the emerging European far right draws from the very same imaginary, effectively utilizing the old prejudices. Right wing racist propaganda resembles militant Islamism in the sense that they both make effective use of social media, and both engage, or at least flirt with, violence. Both of them feed with fears of the other, and conspiracy theories of global domination. Militant Islamism and European far right live from violence or threat thereof. Militant Islamist violence is mostly directed against Muslims of “wrong” type, mostly in countries in turmoil, like Iraq or Syria but the expressed wish is to create as much havoc in the “Christian” West as possible. The way the terrorist attacks are carried out in Europe, however, does not make a difference between Christian and Muslim. Far right violence in Europe claims to target Muslims but the deadliest act of anti–Islam terror in Norway actually killed many more Christians than Muslims. In the Islamic world, Breivik was presented as an extremist Christian, much like the extremist Islamists are presented as Muslims in the Western media. And this was quite equivalent to what happens with militant Islamists because Breivik considers himself a Christian.<sup>18</sup>

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18 See e.g. Green, 2015, 217, 287–291.

In Europe, racist and anti-Islam far right has been gaining both popular votes and media visibility more than ever since the Nazi regime. Expressions of racism and Islamophobia that were previously taboos in the public realms have become commonplace,<sup>19</sup> and even open manifestations of overt Nazism are tolerated. Populist nationalist parties flirting more or less openly with racism and Islamophobia are receiving ever higher numbers of votes and even traditional parties and their leading politicians yield to the racist and Islamophobic language in hopes of greater popularity. In some countries, populist anti-immigration (which usually primarily means Islamophobic) parties have seized the power. Often, these parties claim to have strong Christian credentials: The Hungarian notorious Viktor Orban and his FIDES-party have strong connections to the Reformed Church whereas the Polish PIS-party running the government is staunchly Catholic. The churches' reactions to the wooing politicians have been varying. In some cases, the conservative sections of the churches are happy with the development, seeing a possibility of increased social importance for the churches. More often, the churches attempt to remain outside of the political arena, thereby leaving Christianity as a political weapon in the hands of right-wing populists. In some cases, however, the churches take clear positions in support of democracy, the rights of minorities and other human rights.

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19 See Runnymede Trust, 1997, 10-11, 20-30.

It is clear that this kind of Islamophobia increases the European Muslims' feelings of alienation and thereby feeds into radicalisation of political Islam in Europe. This results in Muslim expressions of enmity against Western values and ways of life. The rare epitome of this enmity is terrorist attacks. These, in turn, give rise to feelings of insecurity and Muslim threat thereby boosting the popularity of racist far right. Racist far right and militant Islamism are, therefore, Siamese twins. The progress of one benefits directly the other, and the stronger the democratic forces supporting undivided and general human rights are, the weaker these Siamese twins get. Unfortunately, even some states not governed by racist far right populists, like Great Britain, add fuel to the flames of Islamophobia through overdriven anti-terror legislation. In Great Britain, even the academic study of Islam has become difficult because of laws prohibiting the distribution of Islamist documents. It is unclear exactly which documents would be illegal to distribute to the students so the safest bet is not to study the political dimensions of Islam at all.

This already complicated situation was made even more complex through the so-called European refugee crisis. In 2015, more than a million mostly Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan and African asylum seekers landed largely in Greece and Italy in rickety boats. Thousands of prospective refugees drowned and are still drowning in the Mediterranean. Most of these newcomers are Muslims even though there are also plenty of persecuted members of religious minorities

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from Muslim countries. Often even Muslims flee religious, ethnic or political persecution or simply insecurity created by wars. Within Islam, Sunni-Shia divide creates a lot of havoc in Near East and propels the refugee crisis. The sudden influx of refugees is stemmed from European Union's total failure in its refugee policies and the international community's dismal performance in dealing with the Syrian civil war. By not creating legal ways of seeking asylum in Europe, EU helped to create a massive market of human trafficking and total chaos in the Balkans when the hordes of desperate people headed from Turkey to Western Europe. There was little doubt that the situation would benefit the political extremists when European racist far right was already on the rise and more frequent occurrences of Islamist acts of terror were taking innocent civilians lives in various Western European cities. It was clear that there were war criminals among the million people on the move and Islamist terror networks also utilised the chaos to infiltrate into the EU. To manage the situation, the EU stroke a deal with the Turkish despotic ruler, Erdogan, to block the influx of refugees. It means that by so doing the EU recognised Turkey as a safe country – this is a country engaged in a long and brutal war against its own citizens in the Kurdish areas and has incarcerated thousands of opposition political supporters in jails. This stabilised somewhat the European political situation, at the cost of human rights of millions of refugees and indirectly Turkish citizens, as well. By so doing the EU cynically and routinely dismisses the international

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responsibilities that it has agreed to follow. European self-congratulating discourse about human rights has been proved hollow.

The so-called European refugee crisis is rather an ethical crisis whereby European high moral standards are proved as empty speeches. Considering that the EU with its over 510 million inhabitants is among the world's economic superpowers, it is not credible that a million refugees would exceed European economic capacity, comparing especially to Turkey (almost three million refugees among 79 million citizens) and Lebanon (one million refugees among the population of just over four million). Rather, what is lacking in Europe is empathy and respect of human rights of people who differ from us. Basically, it is a matter of a moral crisis. As relatively much of European argumentation against Muslims revolves around Christian identity and when Christianity has had a thorough influence on the formation of European notions of morals, it is justified to analyse Islamophobia from a theological perspective.

## THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOTERIOLOGY: DID CHRIST DIE FOR MUSLIMS, TOO?

One of the basic theological problems with Islamophobia is related to the racialisation of Islam. From a theological point of view, this has two major failures, one in the realm of theological

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anthropology and the other in soteriology.

When Islam is racialized, religion becomes an indelible quality of a person. It is something one is born with, which one cannot leave behind or change. While it is credible to maintain that one cannot completely wipe away one's cultural or religious background, such fatalism that sees Muslims as incapable of changing is untenable. While Protestant theology often sees that a human being per se is not able to choose to become saved but it is all God's work, fatalistic attitude towards ethical, political and cultural choices is not commonplace.<sup>20</sup> In Christian theology, one has rather often argued that a human being is *imago Dei* due to his/her rationality.<sup>21</sup> And, as a rational being, he/she is able to make decisions that are beneficial to himself/herself and to the whole community.

There is yet an existentially deeper dimension to *imago Dei* that clashes with the Islamophobic racializing tendencies. Namely, human being possesses self-awareness that is profoundly interlinked with the nature of human existence. Human being's self-awareness opens up horizons of becoming. Being human is not primarily about what we are but what we are becoming. In Christian life, the focal point is not what we are (sinners) but rather what are becoming (children of God, saved).<sup>22</sup> According to Thomas Aquinas,

20 Thus, e.g. Augsburg Confession, In *The Book of Concord* <http://bookofconcord.org/augsburgconfession.php> 1530§ XVIII (Accessed 2017-01-27).

21 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation* (Reprinted 1991, London: Methuen, 1989), 112-113 (1a 76,1).

22 Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 306.

in the great cosmic play, the creation is on the move towards its Creator, reflecting its maker. Humans, as a part of this creation, are created to fulfil our nature.<sup>23</sup> This nature as *imago Dei* is partly our rationality but it also is existential openness. This existential openness reflects Christian understanding of God's nature. God is not a static being but an eternal process of becoming whereby the Father begets the Son in the Holy Spirit in the eternal moment. To see human being as static and unchanging is a negation of human nature as *imago Dei*. Therefore, being human is becoming human. The more human you are, the closer to your Creator you are. Claiming that a Muslim is incapable of moral or religious change amounts to denying his/her basic humanity.

Christian anthropology relates closely to soteriology. In Protestant theology, one usually emphatically underscores human depravity in front of the holy God. No human being is able to free himself/herself of sin by his/her own powers. There are different Protestant views on how to view the human state in relation to salvation. From a traditional Reformed perspective of double predestination, one is not able to choose whether to receive or not to receive the salvific faith because God has predestined who are to be saved and who are not.<sup>24</sup> In this scenario, a Muslim cannot decide to be saved. However, it is healthy to remember that in this regard, he/she is

23 Aquinas, 1989, 19 (Ia 6,1-4). This thinking is in line with Augustine, 1960, 172 (VII,12).

24 John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, Tony Lane & Hilary Osborne (eds.) (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986), 213-214 (III 21,1); *Westminster Confession of Faith*, <http://www.feedbooks.com/book/4154/the-westminster-confession-of-faith>, 1646, 4 (III § 6-7) (Accessed 2017-01-27).

no different from a Reformed Christian who is not able to make that decision, either. Thus, in principle, they are both in the same position in front of God – in complete dependency on God's mercy. In spite of this, could one not consider that having been born in a Reformed Christian family is one of the signs of one having been elected for salvation? While this may be a tempting idea for the insider, it seems to violate grossly against the very theological idea that double predestination was supposed to address, namely God's total sovereignty vis-à-vis human being's powers to decide. Grace is to reign supreme, not human will or human perceptions who is elected. To maintain that a Muslim is beyond God's salvific power amounts to minimizing God's might.

However, many Christians do not subscribe to predestination but see some kind of human role in salvation.<sup>25</sup> Here theological anthropology plays a more central role. A fatalistic view on a Muslim's inability to change portrays him/her as an irredeemable one. Therefore, by imagining an impossibility of reconciliation between Christians and Muslims, Europeans and Orientals, one grossly underestimates the scope of salvation. Christ's work of redemption is no longer universal but rather a limited Christian business. Here, the racialized view of Islam is theologically close to South African Apartheid-politics following the analysis of *Confession of Belhar on Apartheid*.<sup>26</sup>

25 One of the most famous theologians of this line of thinking was Jacob Arminius whose followers wrote *Five Articles of Remonstrance*, <http://www.theopedia.com/five-articles-of-remonstrance>, 1610 (Accessed 2017-01-27). See especially § 3-5.

26 *Confession of Belhar*, [https://www.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/theologyand-worship/pdfs/belhar.pdf](https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/theologyand-worship/pdfs/belhar.pdf) 1986, § 2 (Accessed 2017-01-27).

## THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

The above mentioned theological arguments against racialization of Islam should be rather uncontroversial. The implicit theology of religions behind it has been exclusivist but similar results would have been reached even if presupposing a different theology of religions. Now, we move on to questions that are more disputed, namely how to view theologically the value of Islam as a religion.

In relating to Islam, Christians initially regarded it as Christological heresy because Muslims do not consider Jesus of Nazareth as divine but rather as a great prophet. This was due to the fact that Islam does not claim to worship a different God from that of Jews and Christians.<sup>27</sup> All of them are spiritual children of Abraham.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, Islam does not reject Jewish and Christian Bible but rather considers that it has corrupted. Muslim idea of God is that He is the Creator who is interested in human affairs and wants everyone to follow His laws. However, in spite of the strong ethical demands, God is considered as merciful. Thus, it seems obvious that the God worshipped in these religions is conceived as the same by the religions. However, it is clear that there are different ideas about who and how this God is. These ideas vary

27 In anti-Islamic Christian propaganda, Muslims are depicted as worshipping a God different from Christians'. This can be seen as othering of Muslims – making Muslims very different from “us”. See Runnymede Trust, 1997, 4–7.

28 On the development of the concept of Abrahamic religions see Risto Jukko, *Trinitarian Theology in Christian–Muslim Encounters: Theological Foundations of the work of the French Roman Catholic Church’s Secretariat for Relations with Islam* (Helsinki: Luther–Agricola Society, 2001),

not only between three religions but even within each religion. Thus, just as one may wonder whether the picture of God one gets from Qur'an means that the God worshipped in Islam is different from the God worshipped in Christianity, one may also wonder whether the God depicted in Calvin's Institutes is the same as, for example, in Luther's Heidelberg Disputation.<sup>29</sup> From the point of view of history of religions, the answer is clear: He is the same God. From a theological perspective one may wonder how different one's understanding of God must be in order that it is question of altogether different God. But then one must take into account the chance that even some theological images of God within Christianity are not pointing to God the Creator and Redeemer but rather they are idols.

Claims of Islam as idol worship or even as Satan worship cannot be empirically proven, and do not find support in Islamic theology. However, it is important to note that religion can turn, and often does, into repressive human system whereby it effectively belongs to the realm of evil. From a Protestant perspective there should not be anything strange in this because all this supposedly stems from human sinfulness. However, a true Protestant acknowledges this sinfulness also in Christianity. In that sense, all religion is (potentially) destructive and sinful. I place the qualifier "potentially" in brackets because a Barthian reading of the religions sees religions as inherently sinful human attempts to reach God

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29 Martin Luther, Heidelberg Disputation in *Book of Concord*, <http://bookofconcord.org/heidelberg.php> 1518 (Accessed 2017-01-27).

– Christianity included –<sup>30</sup> whereas in less pessimistic theological anthropologies religion does play a positive role. And then, even non-Christian religions can have a positive role in salvation. This positive role could be seen as a result of God’s work that extends the Christian realm. Christ and the Holy Spirit are then not only active in the Church but also in the world. This inclusivist approach is challenged by pluralists who want to regard all the religions as equal manifestations of the divine revelation. In such thinking, there is not much ground for making major distinctions between different religions.

The theological value of Islam can be approached from both revelation’s and salvation’s perspectives. In terms of revelation, one may point out that Qur’an and Hadith contain plenty of same material as the Bible and Christian traditions due to the fact that the conception of Islam was heavily dependent on Judaism and Christianity in Near East. Thus, Islam contains much of the content that is considered as special revelation in Christian theology. However, the interpretation of this revelation differs from Christian interpretations, and not all Christian revelation content is accepted by Islam. There are also such Muslim doctrines that Christians do not subscribe. However, many such dimensions of Islam that are perceived as strange or threatening by Islamophobia, are familiar to Christians from earlier stages of Christian history or from Oriental Christianity of even today. For example, women’s

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30 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics vol. 1/2* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 302–303.

inferior status in relation to men is no Muslim specialty. Often Christian churches have been conservative opponents of women's emancipation even in the West. In many historic minority churches in the Muslim world, women's role is not noticeably better than in the surrounding society in general. The United States has never had a female head of state unlike Indonesia, Pakistan or Bangladesh, which are all populous Muslim countries.<sup>31</sup>

Likewise, holy war is not an unknown phenomenon in Christianity, either. Crusades are the most notorious case in point, but e.g. Finnish wars against Communist Soviet Union during the Second World War were often depicted as a holy duty, and the Serbian Orthodox Church spoke of the struggle for Serbian independence after the fall of Yugoslavia in sacral terms. Even United States' war on (Islamist) terror is sometimes depicted in terms of war between Christians and the Satan.<sup>32</sup> Actually, *jihad* is not only interpreted as holy war, either defensive or offensive but primarily as a Muslim's attempt at a virtuous life, so-called inner or greater jihad.<sup>33</sup>

In case one subscribes to the idea of salvation extending even to outside of Christianity (like in today's official Roman Catholic doctrine<sup>34</sup>), one needs to question what kind of role the non-Christian religion plays. Is a non-Christian saved in spite of

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31 Green, 2015, 134-141, 229-230.

32 Green, 2015, 26, see also 122-123.

33 Green, 2015, 123-124.

34 Lumen Gentium, The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*(1964) 320-385, Austin Flannery ed., (Bombay: St Paul Publications, 1992), § 16. It needs to be noted that Muslims are specifically mentioned here.

his/her religion or with the help of his/her religion? No matter what the answer is, the religion obviously constitutes no block to a salvific relation to God.

In the case of theology of religions, the only possibility for entertaining Islamophobia is within an exclusivist position as pluralist position aims at regarding all religions equal and the inclusivist position does not consider the other religions blocking divine grace and thereby inherently evil. Even in the exclusivist position, when religions are viewed as non-salvific and sinful, this sinfulness stems from general human fallenness. That means that, theologically speaking, all religions are sinful and therefore at the same level.

However, from the ethical point of view, one can find considerable differences between religions. For example, the Hindu caste-system is inherently essentialistic and unequal and therefore unethical. However, for this kind of ethical comparison to be fair, one needs to compare equal phenomena. Often, anti-Islam argumentation compares certain Muslim communities – often the worst cases – with Christian or secular ideals. For instance, gender equality in the West is not always quite as advanced in practice as one would wish. Another factor leading to a lopsided ethical analysis is that contextual factors are not taken into account. Islamic law, sharia, is usually formulated so that daughter's inheritance is that of half of the son's. However, this is balanced, at least ideally, by the fact that the husband is responsible to provide

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for the family, including the wife/wives even in the case that the wife/wives work. The wives' income is their private property while the husbands' income is first supposed to provide for the whole family. Thus, on theoretical level, the seeming inequality is not quite as striking as it looks like from the Western perspective.<sup>35</sup>

## ISLAM AS A UNIFIED

One could present a number of contextual counterarguments on the example above. In many contexts, like in Afghanistan, women are not allowed to work outside of their homes. Then, whether her income belongs to her or her family, makes little difference. The situation would be completely different, for example, in Turkey, where women often have the chance of taking up paid jobs. Thus, the context in Muslim countries varies considerably. What is true for one Muslim country may be completely false for another. Partly this depends on how sharia is constructed on the basis of Qur'an and hadith and partly how strictly one is willing to follow sharia.

Not only do contexts differ but also the theological rationality behind the different ways of perceiving sharia. Islamophobic propaganda presents Islam as a monolithic theological and

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35 Iyad Zahalka, "Can Islam be Part of Modernity? Possible Relationships between Muslims and Their non-Muslim State," *Lecture in conference Anti-Judaism, Islamophobia, and Interreligious Hermeneutics at Lund University 2016-12-06*.

organizational structure while nothing could be further from the truth.<sup>36</sup> There are countless theological and practical variations of Islam, the greatest divide being between the Sunni and the Shia sects. Actually, most of the victims of militant Islamist attacks are done against other Muslims due to the theological, ethnic and practical differences between various Muslim groups. Thus, one of the great problems of Islamophobia is that it lacks completely a theological analysis of Islam. Even a very rudimentary and superficial analysis would reveal the vast difference between different theological traditions and thereby undermine the presentation of Islam as essentially this or that. Islamophobic approach to Islam is as if one would regard Christianity as one and the same from Moon's Unification Church via Presbyterianism to Catholicism – and draw the conclusion that because the Moonies act or believe in a certain manner, this would apply to all Christians.

Additionally, Islamophobia fails to see the difference between theology and action. Wahhabi interpretation of Sunni Islam has become a target of a lot of Islamophobic criticism. While it is true that many violent forms of Islam, including ISIS, draw inspiration from Wahhabi theology, it does not mean that all Wahhabi would condone terrorism. Likewise, while many militant Islamophobists in the United States are Fundamentalist Protestants, it does not mean that all Fundamentalist Protestants would be bloodthirsty warmongers. It should be quite clear to anyone involved in theology

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36 Runnymede Trust, 1997, 4–6, 8.

that theological ideas can translate in action in many different ways.

Yet another theological failure in Islamophobia is that it has stuck theologically in the Constantinian<sup>37</sup> or Westphalian<sup>38</sup> world where religions are regarded as ideological entities conquering geographical areas. Theologically, many Christians would consider this position problematic because here, religion is made into a political reality rather than a personal conviction. Thus, Christianity would rather be a matter of Christendom than faith, and Islam is seen predominantly as a political Caliphate. While, for some Muslims, such conflation of religion and politics would not be problematic, at least for the most of Christian theologians it would be. The relationship between faith and political power has been an itching spot in Christian thinking and life ever since Constantine the Great. One of the great questions in European reformations was how to manage the relationship between ecclesial and political power. Ethically, the problem of this approach conflating religion with politics is that it threatens freedom of religion. Both in the Caliphate and the Islamophobic Christendom, the religious minorities easily become second class citizens. Islamophobia is one of the major ways in which Western Christians can increase the risk of extinction of Christianity in the Muslim world. The more

37 Referring to the Emperor Constantine the Great who made Christianity the preferred religion in the Roman Empire, creating thus a situation where the Empire began to be regarded as a Christian state,

38 In the peace of Westphalia 1648, ending the era of religious wars in Europe, “*cuius regio, eius religio*” (“whose area, his religion”) principle dictated that the religion of a country followed the ruler’s denominational status. The result was a religious-political balkanization of Central Europe.

one fans the flames of hatred, the more our Christian sisters and brothers in the Muslim world suffer through providing material for anti-Christian propaganda. There are many Muslims sitting on the fence between friendship and enmity towards Christians, and violence or insults against Muslims or Islam are an effective manner of making these people into enemies. The victims of such are primarily the Christians in the Muslim world as the Western world is a very minor target of militant Islamist violence.

## FAILURE IN LOVE AND MISSION

We will complete the analysis with a few remarks on mission. Islamophobia is not only a theological failure but it also is a failure in Christian life. Namely, labelling the Muslims in bulk as enemies in a manner that questions their humanity is a blatant failure in Christian life. First, even if some Muslims regard Christians as their enemies, by associating the violent actions of some Christians (and sometimes even secularists) with all Christians, the situation is not rectified by making the same mistake about Muslims. It is clear that some Muslims are violently against Christianity and the West in general. As already stated above, this does not make all Muslims enemies of Christianity. Additionally, a Christian is supposed to love even the enemy. Failure in love is the major failure in Christian life. Christian faith minus love equals zero.

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It is all the more problematic when Christian faith is used as an excuse to undermine the human nature of the other, in this case of the Muslims. Thereby, Christianity became the excuse of European's rejection of the human rights of Syrians and Iraqi war refugees during the European moral crisis in 2015 and afterwards. Christianity has become an argument of those Europeans who not only fear Islam and Muslims but also the economic burden related to receiving the refugees. Instead of meaning love, Christianity has become a symbol of collective egoism and prejudice against the other in the hands of European Islamophobia.

Among the Muslim refugees to Europe, a significant movement of conversions into Christianity has arisen. Many converts and their Christian mentors maintain that the motivation for conversion is often the asylum-seeker's disillusionment with Islam in his country of origin and encounter with Christian charity. Charity, in Latin *caritas*, means basically love. In English usage it has begun to mean love in action. Love creates a loving response and attraction whereas hatred calls for mutual hatred.

In Islamophobic propaganda, these conversions are depicted as the asylum-seekers' attempts at securing a religion-based refugee status. This is understandable because Islamophobia presents Muslims as essentially Muslims, unable to change. In spite of the fact that conversion from Islam to another religion, apostasy, is either a crime or calls otherwise the wrath of militant Islamists in countries of origin in turmoil thereby endangering the lives of

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the converts, many converts have been denied an asylum. It is not easy to figure out what has happened with the forcefully returned converts but it is not far-fetched to assume that they need to hide their conversion or if it is made known either they would recant or face death or imprisonment. Islamophobic Europe proves that its talk about human rights is a lip-service and that freedom of religion does not belong to Muslims. In this question, Islamophobia is completely in line with militant Islamists.

## CONCLUSION

Islamophobia sees Islam as monolithic and unchanging, and inherently inferior and evil in comparison to western civilization. As the result, Muslims are not perceived as human beings capable of changing or developing and their individuality is negated. They are seen as a mass of uncritical people blinded by their faith. This view on Muslims is in clear conflict with mainline Christian theological thought because of its fatalism. Understanding of human being as closed as in this case is not in line with the perception of humans as images of God. Trinitarian doctrine points to God's nature as dynamic, and therefore, human nature needs to be seen more in terms of becoming than as unchanging being. Additionally, such closed determinism proposed by Islamophobia virtually negates Christ's atoning work from Muslims by excluding them not only

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from salvation as non-Christians but also regarding them as people who are unable to convert. Thus, they would not even be potential Christians.

As noted above, Islamophobia is a faulty attitude in theological terms even if one would subscribe to a theology of religions totally dismissive of the value of non-Christian religions. However, a closer look at Islam reveals that Islamic views of God in some dimensions are very similar to Christian views. There is the common Near Eastern Israelite background to both. In case one favours a more open theology of religions there is a possibility of an even more positive assessment of Islam.

It seems that Islamophobia arguing on the basis of Christianity is rather arguing for Christendom than Christian faith. These Islamophobists are more interested in keeping Europe as a Christian and secular space of non-Islam rather than Christian faith as such. Christianity is then reified and made into a culturally hegemonic ideological pattern imposed on Europeans on the basis of their origin. This approach results in negating both Christians and Muslims one of their basic human rights, namely freedom of religion. In that sense, Islamophobia violates the very European and Christian values that it claims to protect.

Islamophobia is also diametrically opposed to Christian mission which should be participation in God's salvific love in the world. One of the foundational characters of Christian mission is transformation of humans, societies and the whole world.

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Islamophobic denial of the possibility of Muslims' entering the Kingdom of God and of any change proper effectively annihilates any proper possibility of genuine mission.

Islamophobia can thus be interpreted as a failure in Christian theology and life. It is basically anti-Christian attitude towards the other. However, what needs to be remembered is that one should not conflate sound criticism of specific Islamic practices or traditions with Islamophobia. One may legitimately criticise shortcomings in Muslims' faith and life without becoming Islamophobic just like one can criticise Christians' shortcomings in faith and life without being an enemy of Christianity. What is needed is mutual respect, honesty and criticism that is balanced by self-criticism.

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