**OSCE Chairmanship Conference on Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims**
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<u>Session 1</u>
<u>Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims:</u>
<u>old prejudices and new targets</u>

These days, I hear, Muslims dread switching on the radio or television.  Another terror plot uncovered?  Muslims again under attack for the way they dress, or the school they go to?  A terror suspect?  A veiled woman?  Or better still, as some one said, a veiled terror suspect?  The last, not such a ludicrous thought - in late October last year, the headlines of the London *Times* read 'suspect in terror hunt used veil to evade arrest.'  And it is not just media sensationalism either.   In Britain (and dare I say, Europe), politicians have been piling in ever since former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw declared earlier this year that the *niqab* (that some Muslim women use to cover their faces) represented a symbol and statement of separation.  The *Daily Express* led with "Veil should be banned, say 98%".  A *niqab*-wearing assistant teacher lost her job.

The 'veil phobia', earlier thrust into the limelight with France's banning of it from public schools and institutions in 2004, has spread across the European Union.  Recently, half the people in a survey conducted in Sweden wanted Islamic headscarves to be banned (26 September 2007).  And here in Spain, eight year old Shaima Saidani, suspended from school for refusing to take off her *hijab*, was allowed back last month only after the Catalonian government quashed a "discriminatory" ban on the wearing of headscarves.

The situation of Muslims is, accordingly, one of the most pressing issues facing western societies today.  A huge rise in the number of attacks on Muslims in countries in Europe, together with increasing threats to civil liberties in the name of security measures, raise serious questions about the levels of prejudice, intolerance and discrimination experienced by members of these communities.  Indeed, the fact that the term 'Islamophobia' has become part of the public discourse, whether people agree or disagree with it, reflects this current situation.  As the Runnymede Trust's 1997 report entitled <u>*Islamophobia*</u> contended, if anything the demonising of Muslims had become 'more explicit, more extreme and more dangerous' over the preceding two decades.  Muslims, to judge from press and government reports alike, have become, thanks to political events far beyond their control, the targets of physical attack and verbal assault.  Since 9/11, the mainstream media has continued to reproduce stereotypes of Muslims as 'violent fanatics', and individual Muslims have suffered on account of their religious identity.  Last month, Doudou Diene, investigating racism and racial discrimination for the UN reported an alarming rise in intolerance, and in particular Islamophobia.   More and more political leaders and influential media and intellectuals were, he said, "equating Islam with violence and terrorism".

Anti-Muslim sentiment, whenever it occurs, is influenced by the wider context of developments and events elsewhere.  It would not be an exaggeration to say that many influential institutions in the West have come to perceive Islam, particularly since the collapse of the communist states of Eastern Europe, as the principal threat to the survival and progress

of so-called 'western civilisation', a civilisation that was obviously founded on and informed by Christian ethos and values. The arguments in Samuel Huntington's (by now) infamous piece on 'The Clash of Civilisations' – that Islam is 'the underlying problem for the West' and Muslim societies represent 'fertile ground for the recruitment of violent religious fanatics and terrorists ' - have worked their way, in complex forms, into much of the West's collective psyche. But what I would like to emphasise today is that it is also influenced by history – both distant and more recent. If we delve back into our collective pasts, what we find is that these levels of intolerance and discrimination are not necessarily as new as we might believe. Indeed, it could be argued that today's negative attitudes rest on foundations that have been laid down over centuries of interaction between Islam and the West.

Is there, as sometimes is contended, 'a continuous line from the Crusades through the Ottoman Empire and European colonialism to the Islamophobia of the 1990s (and beyond)?' If we survey the history of Islam's encounter with the West what we witness is that, for centuries, Europeans have viewed Islam as a dangerous threat and a challenge to Christendom. The power of Islam, as it penetrated Europe from the beginning of the $8^{th}$ century, and even later on when it had been subdued, has shaped the largely antagonistic European attitudes. Away from the Muslim world, fantastic images of Islam were conjured – it was a heresy, the Prophet was a sorcerer and a debauch, for whom sexual ecstasy was the most coveted of paradise's rewards.

The medieval accusations against Islam and Muhammad continued throughout the Renaissance and the Reformation into the $18^{th}$ century to shape the Christian/European imaginary. Martin Luther, denounced Islam as the work of the devil in Christendom and Voltaire attacked it in his tragedy, *La Fanatisme ou Mahomet le prophete*. Dante in his poem *Inferno* conjured up a ghastly punishment for Mohammed, consigning him to hell to be continually and eternally ripped apart from anus to chin.

In the $19^{th}$ century, as imperial expansion and sense of civilisational superiority gathered pace, together with the old Christian prejudices, new forms of denigration of Islam emerged. Edward Lane and the French novelist Gustave Flaubert revived the association of Islam with sex, fanaticism and violence. Sensuality oozed from Renoir's 1870 Algerian odalisque, as did violence in Henri Regnault's *Summary Execution under the Moorish Kings of Granada.*

Popular hostility towards Muslims subsequently became caught up in anti-Ottoman sentiment, fuelled by a stream of horror stories about 'unspeakable Turks' massacring their Balkan and Armenian populations. Thus, a three-fold line of attack against Islam – that it was sensual, violent and fraudulent – endured from the late nineteenth century onwards. Not surprisingly, such rhetoric encouraged widespread outpourings of emotion and agitation against Turks, who were regarded as evil and cruel, lacking in terms of education, respect for women, and scientific and constitutional progress. Persistent stereotypes about Islam developed in tandem, which were common across the period and which political developments, abroad and at home, did little to dispel. The Muslim mind was considered to be incapable of rational modern thought and as such unable to effect change. The French philosopher Ernest Renan thought that a Muslim was 'incapable of learning anything or of opening himself to a new idea'. Muslim misrule, decadence and corruption was a compelling view in Victorian England, making it a target of contempt. Gladstone, four times British Prime Minister, in one public speech, for instance, asserted that for as long as there were followers of "that accursed book" [in other words, the Quran], Europe would know no peace.

'Muslim' and 'fanatic' became almost synonymous as Muslims put up strong resistance to European domination. When we look more closely at the history of engagement between Islam and the West, then, it is remarkable how often the same themes and

stereotypes have been used to represent Islam and Muslims, how frequently stories from the past are invoked to re-ignite fears, anxieties and animosities generated by events in the present.  Time and again, for instance, the Crusades, together with the somewhat later events of 1453, get mentioned when relations between Islam and the West are placed in their longer-term historical perspective.  Indeed, President George Bush has shown how deeply the crusades are embedded in the West's consciousness when he spontaneously used the term while preparing to invade Afghanistan and Iraq.  When Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, Cardinal Bessarion, writing to the Doge of Venice, encapsulated the view which dominated western perceptions for centuries:  'a city which was once so flourishing … has been captured, despoiled, ravaged and completely sacked by the most inhuman barbarians … by the fiercest of wild beasts'.  Some might suggest that this view is not too different from opinions circulating in our own time?

In a somewhat different context – though again a context informed by the expansion of Western political power into Muslim lands – there is the case of places such as Syria and Algeria that came under French rule.  Such views were obviously used to legitimise the colonisation of most Muslim countries by European powers that had taken place by the early twentieth century.  In 1920, for instance, when the French army entered Damascus, their commander marched directly to Saladin's tomb and declared, famously, the equivalent of 'here we are again!'  It was the end, so he believed, of an episode which had begun as far back as November 1095 when Pope Urban II had urged his audience to undertake a 'just' war or crusade against Muslims.

One further example that illustrates the persistence, if not reappearance, of old prejudices is the furore that surrounded the remarks made by Pope Benedict XVI in his speech in Germany in September 2006 that provoked outrage among Muslims and led to demands that the pontiff should apologise for "insulting" Islam.  His comments on Islam, in particular his quoting of the now infamous words of the late fourteenth-century Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologos — "*Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached*" — offended many Muslims as it was perceived to be a denigration of the Prophet that relied upon the old association of Islam with violence.  As with the Danish Cartoons affair in 2005, that hinged to a large extent on an insensitivity towards the religious beliefs of Muslims that make such images of the Prophet Muhammad not just distasteful but unacceptable, the Pope's speech suggests the enduring of old prejudices that in the past have been targeted against Islam, and continue to circulate today:  for instance, that it is first and foremost a fanatical religion, and so are its followers and, similarly, that it is a violent religion just as its followers are too.

This was not the first time Pope Benedict had been at the centre of criticism for his views on Islam. As Cardinal Ratzinger, as he was known before becoming Pope, he, echoing popular opinion across the EU, took an open stand against Turkey's bid to join the European Union, saying it belonged to a different cultural sphere, and adding that its admission would be a grave error against the tide of history. Europeans, it would seem, have not agonized this much about Turkey since the Ottoman Empire was unravelling 100 years ago. The idea widely circulating today in popular and policy arenas, that  Europe's Christian civilisation risked being overrun by Islam if Turkey was allowed entry to the EU, connects directly with 1638 when the Ottoman advance was halted at the gates of Vienna, seems to be powerfully underpinned in the European subconsciousness.

The combined effect of such speeches and cartoons highlights and reinforces existing negative stereotypes of Muslims as inferior, barbaric, sexist and threatening, in effect counter posing them to what is presumed to be the superior, familiar, civilised and highly rational

self-concept of the West.  The right of individual Muslims to practice their religion as they wish is resisted as an unwelcome challenge to dominant cultural values and norms. The view that Muslims do not  understand, appreciate and, therefore, are not committed to European and, dare I say Christian, values then provides validation for violence against them, ranging from physical assaults to the desecration of graves, from vandalising of property, to verbal abuse.  It provides validation for discrimination in employment practices, or in the provision of services, say in relation to education and health.  And it provides validation  for exclusion from public and private institutions.

I would like to end my contribution to today's discussion by making two concluding points:

First, the more obvious comment, that we should not either disregard or underestimate the legacies of our collective pasts – intolerance and discrimination against Muslims today may take somewhat different forms to that of previous times, but this does not mean that the past is not relevant to present day issues and concerns.  What it does mean, however, is that eliminating the sources of this intolerance and discrimination is no easy task.

Second, and perhaps more profoundly, in considering what can be done to address these problems, states, communities and individuals alike in Europe need to reassess the negative assumptions, attitudes and perceptions that exist about both Islam(s?) and the people who practice it in all its varieties.   Knowledge and understanding are essential prerequisites for changing attitudes, and the actions that flow from them, for the better.  The problem is that there has not been any fundamental change in the way that the West sees itself and its relations with the Muslim 'other' from how it did so at the peak of its imperial hegemony over it.  What I have tried to show is the extent to which 'Orientalist' visions of Muslims continue to permeate the West's official and popular imaginary, shaping the knowledge that the West has about them and in the process reinforcing its presumption of its own moral and material superiority, just as 'Orientalism' did in the nineteenth century when western empires extended their control over Muslim lands.  This enduring Orientalism (a style of dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient), reconfigured, is very apparent in the mass media that shapes so much of how people today see the world in which they live.  Take, for instance, films coming out of Hollywood since 9/11 – and here I am referring to so-called 'blockbusters' such as 'Kingdom of Heaven', 'Syriana', '300' and even Spielberg's 'Munich' that to differing degrees of subtlety invoke the stereotypes that shape mass understandings of Islam and Muslims – there is now clearly a resurgence of casting Muslims in highly negative roles.  With the mass media (and similar trends are at work in television drama) promoting, in effect, the innate superiority of Western values, reiterated against a backdrop of Muslim inferiority and brutality, then the old prejudices that I have been discussing earlier will not only survive but flourish, and in the process continue to contribute massively to the levels of intolerance and discrimination experienced by Muslims in Europe today.