

S

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## Images of Islam

**No one loves a monster like the British press – and Islam is always there to hand when the need arises and the time is ripe**

Islam has been feared and loathed by the West since it first made its appearance in Europe in the eighth century – within a century of its creation in the deserts of Arabia. Centuries later, Richard the Lionheart of England placed the nobility and chivalry of Saladin, his opponent in the Crusade to recover the Holy Places of Jerusalem, above that of his own side. Then as now, it made little difference to the popular perception of Christianity's only rival.

Muslims are the largest religious minority in Britain, around 55% of them from the Indian subcontinent with the majority settled in south-eastern England. It is on the latter community that Islamophobia is dominantly visited. While the term Islamophobia, coined to express the mix of fear and dread that characterises western attitudes to Islam, is of relatively recent date, modern anti-Muslim sentiment, as expressed in the British press, for instance, is simply one version of a well-established tradition more or less coterminous with the first confrontation of the two communities all those centuries ago.

Throughout their mutual history, the powers of western Europe, fearing contact with Muslims could lead to conversions to the new religion, demonised Islam and its believers in the interests of whipping up Christian resistance among a population little inclined to go to war with the invader whom they found little worse than their present lords and masters and, often, rather more civilised than less. Then as now, the representation of 'the other' in a negative light legitimised existing power structures and served as propaganda in the long centuries of the battle against Islam. Spain was occupied and ruled by its Muslim conquerors for seven centuries: Granada did not finally fall to the Christian rulers Ferdinand and Isabella until 1492. The armies of the

## MANUFACTURING MONSTERS: ISLAMOPHOBIC CARTOONS

Turkish sultan were last at the gates of Vienna as late as 1683. Perceptions and conceptions of Islam in the West have had plenty of time to mature.

Although there have been times of mutual learning and understanding, these are isolated moments in the general climate of ignorance, conflict and demonisation in which it has been easier to accept the most outrageous of the myths: Muslims were – and still are – defined as barbaric, ignorant, closed-minded semi-citizens, or maddened terrorists and intolerant religious zealots.

Today's Islamophobia feeds on history to fill out its stereotypes, but it also has features that stem from more recent narratives such as colonialism, immigration and racism. The Runnymede Trust, a British funding body, identified seven features of Islamophobia: Muslim cultures are monolithic; substantially different from others; implacable and threatening; Muslims use their faith for political or military advantage; their criticism of western cultures and societies is rejected out of hand; fear of Islam is linked to racist hostility to immigration; Islamophobia itself is assumed to be 'natural' and therefore unproblematic.

The term 'fundamentalism', first applied to Islam after the Iranian revolution in 1979, added to the existing wealth of historical prejudice and heralded a new, particularly adversarial phase in Muslim-Christian relations. As represented by the media, 'Islamic fundamentalists' became the 'true' Muslims', and all Muslims were Islamic fundamentalists. The *Observer* referred to 'the phenomenon of the new, or rather very old Islam, the dangerous fundamentalism revived by the ayatollahs and their admirers as a device, indistinguishable from a weapon, for running a modern state'. The article referred to the 'new Islamic states' as 'little more than intolerant, bloody and finally incompetent imitations of the Holy Book. Comparisons between the Qur'an and Hitler's *Mein Kampf* referred to the chopping off of hands and gouging out of eyes, concluding that there was 'more blood and stupidity than glamour in the theocracy of the Sons of the Prophet'.

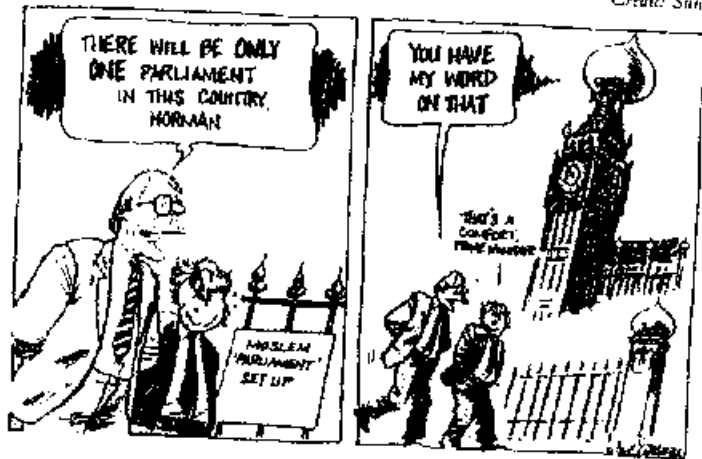
The period following the Rushdie affair in Britain (1989) and the Gulf War (1990-1991) gave the press and its cartoonists – the broadsheet 'quality' papers as much as the tabloids – their head with scarcely a voice raised in protest at images and comments that were racist and Islamophobic, and deeply offensive to Muslims at a time when they were soft targets for vicious lampoons that took advantage of their weakness.

Particularly when the groups concerned were largely unrepresented in the mainstream press and silenced by the lack of any alternative voice.



"HE SAYS HE WASN'T GETTING ANYWHERE IN THE OTHER BRITISH PARLIAMENT!"

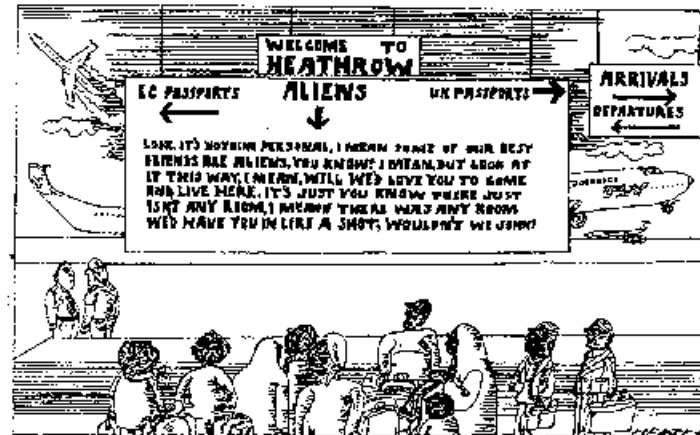
Credit: Sun, 1992



Credit: Today, 1992

In the *Sun*, Neil Kinnock, then leader of the Labour Party in opposition, seeks to improve his political fortunes. *Today's* cartoon is self-explanatory. Both images imply a sense of the enemy within: Muslims are infiltrating Britain and plan to overtake government from inside the

borders of Britain. As do those that home in on immigration.



Credit: Independent, 1991



Credit: Sun, 1992

The *Independent* cartoonist criticises the apparently open government policy on immigration and asylum, while the *Sun* puts Asian immigrants at the bottom of the social heap.



Credit: The Times, 1992

The *Times* cartoon with an article by Bernard Levin headlined 'Prayers of Poison' fills the Indian subcontinent with violence, confrontation and intolerance for which Islamic fanaticism is to blame.

Tahir Abbas is co-author, with Alex Hall and Nusrat Shaheen, of *The Demonisation of Muslims in the British Press: Islamophobes, Fundamentalists and Political Cartoons, a report funded by the Rumymede Trust. He works at the Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations at the University of Warwick, UK*

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