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ANTI-SEMITISM YESTERDAY AND ISLAMOPHOBIA TODAY: A CENTRAL-EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE*

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Abstract. The author compares the mediaeval and early-modern discourses on anti-Semitism with the today discourse of Islamophobia focusing on the contextual framework of Central Europe in general and the Czech Republic in particular. The article describes the broad context of the nowadays Islamophobia in the Czech Republic, which has grown and expanded greatly in recent years though the Czech Republic's historical experience (different forms of direct interaction with the Muslim minority in the country with the roots that can be traced back to the 1970s) has been prevailingly positive. The majority of the Czech Muslims are, and have long been, well integrated or even assimilated into the Czech society. The Czech Islamophobia is therefore described in the article as a kind of a paradox; it seems to be rather a strange 'product' (a result and a consequence) of people's everyday perception and interpretation of international events (for instance, of the so-called 'international war on terrorism') than a 'product' of their direct everyday experience in their home country — of the face-to-face interaction with the Muslim minority. The second part of the article focuses on the Islamophobic discourse developing in the Czech Republic and identifies some of the key issues and topics it shares with the well-known phenomenon of anti-Semitism that historically preceded Islamophobia: 'the internal enemy', 'the threats to the security', 'the secret conspiracy for the world dominance', 'the "other" incompatible with the European society in cultural, religious and other respects', 'the unproductive parasite living at the expense of the (Christian) majority society', 'the sacrificial lamb', and finally 'the community trying to segregate and create parallel values and institutions' (so as not to be integrated into the Czech or Central-European society). To a certain degree Islamophobia today revives the previous anti-Semitism for it constructs an image of the Muslim as a dangerous stranger/foreigner, which resembles the negative image of the Jew and Judaism constructed on the eve of the Holocaust.

Key words: Islamophobia; anti-Semitism; Czech Muslims; Jews; integration; assimilation; Central Europe; Czech Republic; stereotypes

The stereotype that Muslim migrants in the West deliberately segregate themselves from the rest of the society and adhere to their own rules is an integral part of the Western-European historical long-term experience of interaction with the Muslim communities in the region in general and in the United States and the Czech Republic in particular. For instance, for more than forty years the Muslims in the Czech Republic have pre-

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vailingly followed the path of *integration* into the Czech society; such a model of adaptation leads to the migrants' forming deep and manifold ties with the majority of the society while preserving their cultural and religious distinctive features. Such Muslim migrants usually have many friends among the majority of host society, among their colleagues and business partners, make friends with people they share the same interests or hobbies with, former classmates and relatives 'acquired' through mixed marriages. According to the data of Daniel Topinka based on dozens of in-depth interviews and published, for example, in *Europe under the Crescent* [8], the key factor of successful integration is knowledge of the local language and the resulting ability to understand the cultural rules that determine the very essence of the Czech society.

However, the integrated Muslims try to preserve or, as happens in a free society, even to expand and develop their cultural and religious distinctiveness, which at the same time they must continuously, with small adjustments or compromises, harmonise with the life in a Western-style secular society. They remain the 'real' Muslims who follow the 'five pillars' of the Islamic faith. Moreover, the vast majority of the Czech Muslims, after many years of practicing Islam in a Western-style secular society, do not see any contradictions between adhering to the 'five pillars' of the Islamic faith and living a full and active life in a Western society. They can practise a *privatised* or a *deprivatised* religious life. Religion in this sense can be understood as a purely private matter within the family and the privacy of one's home, or the emphasis can be placed on the community religious practices and the development of religious infrastructure including the construction of mosques. Communities of Muslims who prefer to organise their lives in such a way promote an interfaith dialogue in the Islam-oriented civil society and strive to foster understanding with the majority of host society and demonstrate their civil outlook and loyalty to the Czech Republic, for instance, by organising public funds collections to help the local communities who suffered from floods, by donating blood, and by protesting against any extremist acts in the world. From the perspective of future integration of new migrants, a key factor for the successful integration is a well-developed and united religious community functioning as a 'bridge' between the majority of population and new immigrants and helping new immigrants to orient themselves in the new social framework and to integrate into the society. The state, therefore, should not undermine and destabilize the functioning of religious communities.

A similarly common model of adaptation to the Czech society is *assimilation* of Muslims. In this case, they also establish deep and strong ties with the majority of society, but do not preserve their distinctive cultural and religious features; instead, they adopt the culture of the host society. Such Muslims would typically say about themselves: 'Yes, I'm a Muslim, but I do enjoy a beer'. Such immigrants are not interested in anything in their country of origin so much as to visit it periodically. They tend to avoid their compatriots in the Czech Republic because they have nothing to say to them. On the contrary, they enjoy talking to their Czech friends about sports, politics, or workplace 'gossip'. Instead of the mosque, they prefer to go to the disco, hockey games, or the pub, and frequently their life partner is a person from the majority of population. They favour the individualistic values of the majority of the society and appreciate local freedoms more than the binding traditions or authoritarianism of their country of origin. They are very well aware of their Muslim identity and even tend to reveal it whenever they

hear lies about the Islamic faith from friends or the media, so such 'attacks' can make them defend Islam and identify more strongly with other Muslims.

In Western Europe, there are large socially excluded communities of Muslims with the immigrant background that can be called *marginalised.* In this case, the lack of ties with the majority of society is also accompanied by the rejection of their former cultural and religious distinctiveness. The suburbs inhabited by the people in such a 'situation' are considered a serious problem for today's large cities, and the roots of this problem are primarily of social nature. In the Czech Republic, this is the situation with the isolated groups of Muslims who came from sub-Saharan Africa. They are embarrassed about their little-used prayer rug, search in vain to find work legally, and try to get rid of their sense of isolation by watching TV all the time. These Muslims prove that abandoning one's cultural and religious distinctiveness is not a secure ticket to the smooth integration into the host society. In exchange for the alienation from their roots, they receive nothing but isolation from the majority of population. Thus, they do not feel at home in any of two worlds, they are in despair due to loneliness and life failure, they lose self-confidence under the crisis of identity, which further complicates their integration. These Muslims often dream about finding meaning and direction for their life and about becoming successful; they also dream that in their old age they will return to practising Islam or even to their country of origin so as to forget their godless life in the West.

Finally, the last model is *separation*, that is, the lack of ties with the majority of society accompanied by strong adherence to the cultural and religious distinctiveness. It is the separation that creates and keeps up the stereotype of Muslims as people who strive to establish a parallel society governed by their own rules and reject the rules of the majority of society. One illustrative example from Western Europe is the sectarian-oriented communities of Salaphists that adhered to a very strict version of Islam and opposed not only the majority of society but also all Muslims who had allegedly fell from the 'straight path'. An individualised version of separation that occasionally can be seen in the Czech Republic is the 'imported' wives of Muslims who live in the West for a long time but instead of marrying an emancipated European prefer an arranged marriage with a less emancipated and more obedient woman from their country of origin. These women do not understand the Czech language or culture, and they did not choose and did not wish to move to the Czech Republic. Their only contact with the host society is when they go shopping with their husband and are surprised by the lack of hospitality among their Czech neighbours, who prove incapable of a reciprocal invitation for coffee or an exchange of sweets. They cope with their social isolation by creating a familiar everyday 'environment' with the help of cultural and religious artefacts (water pipes, carpets, TV series, etc.) of their country of origin, turning their homes into 'a little Syria' or 'a little Turkey'; they spend a large part of the day talking on the telephone with their relatives; thus, they strive to continue to live the life of their homeland. However, this model in the West is typical only for a minority of migrants, and despite variously expressed forms of social distance from the majority in most such cases there is nothing about the lives of these alienated Muslims that somehow opposes the laws, norms and behaviour patterns of Western countries [7].

An immigrant may combine various adaptation strategies and move from one model to another. The strengthening Islamophobia of the majority (considering the inability of Muslims to integrate) has the effect of a *self-fulfilling prophecy*. As we all know, people do not necessarily act according to what the world is really like, but rather according to how they understand, see, and interpret the world. To orient themselves in the world, among the competing and ready-made *definitions of the situation,* they choose the one that suits them best. The key role in this belongs to the conformity with the opinions of other people and of the groups they want to belong to. Certainly, if a large number of people of sufficient influence define a situation as real it becomes real in its results for it determines actions that radically transform the reality, which helps to confirm the correctness of the originally incorrect definition of the situation. If the erroneous definition of Muslims as incapable of integrating, as constructing a parallel 'mediaeval' world, and as representing a threat is supported by the media, state administration, police, secret services and political elites, then the Muslims do begin to separate. If they endure on an everyday basis countless small insults to their culture and religion or more serious threats and physical attacks, they try to minimise their unpleasant, confrontational and increasingly dangerous contacts with the majority. If they feel animosity or discrimination from the state, they cease to have faith in its institutions and laws. Thus, even the integrated and assimilated Muslims would consider the claims for integration is an illusion for they would support the definition of integration is impossible or even undesired. Then even the integrated and assimilated Muslims would begin to separate from the majority, become uncertain and shut themselves in their communities in search for a sense of security, a sense of certitude and social recognition. The islamophobes in the society, media and state institutions would then point to this in triumph and satisfaction because it is exactly what they had for long warned about. The voices of islamophobes would be joined by the voices of Muslim leaders who never supported integration and built their personal career on the model of closed ghettos and sects living in isolation from the majority. Thus, the mechanism of mutual alienation between the majority and the minority continues in a cycle, and it is the extremists among both the majority and Muslims who profit. The only way to bring this self-reinforcing mechanism to a halt is to introduce an alternate definition for the majority of society, state institutions, and the Muslim minority, which defines the latter as capable of becoming a full-fledged part of the host society and of being loyal to the state and its laws.

The stereotypical theory that all Muslims have to spread their religion because Islam is covertly seeking world dominance is a continuation of the anti-Semitic stereotypes that were very widespread in the decades before the Holocaust. It is a reminder of how the stereotype of the Jew as an enemy of Christian Europe before the Second World War was used to form a stereotype of Muslims as the 'fifth column' and a threat to the West. This stereotyped Muslim as if allegedly uses perfidious means such as the twisted ethic principle of lying to non-believers (so-called *Taqiya*). This stereotype is a reminder that there is still a threat of a new holocaust. It is a reminder that all today's efforts to appeal to reason and to the facts that break stereotypes and prejudices about Jewish or Muslim parasitism and disloyalty are not enough to combat xenophobia; that if the perfect integration or even assimilation of the Jews in the past was not enough to protect them from anti-Semitism, pogroms, and the Holocaust, the integration or

even assimilation of Czech, European or American Muslims today is not enough to automatically prevent escalating Islamophobia, hate crimes and open verbal threats of total annihilation. Finally, it is a reminder that today's Islamophobia is not conceptually unique for it follows the strategy of the earlier anti-Semitic stereotypes.

The nowadays stereotype of the Muslim is a revival of the early-modern stereotype of the *Talmudic Jew* and of the international Jewish conspiracy. In about 1700, the anti-Semites began to claim that they succeeded in uncovering the secret principles of Jewish morality by the 'true' translation of the Torah and by deciphering the real meanings of the Talmud. They alleged that the Jews were to behave properly with other Jews but to do the very opposite to the peoples of other faiths. They allegedly never showed a non-Jew pilgrim the path to where he was going or to a source of water; it was their holy duty to deceive, cheat, steal, not to help, obstruct, and, if possible, even kill; the aim of this deviant and inhumane morality that excludes Jews from the society was to gradually exterminate all non-Jews. The loudest voices on Judaism in the past and on Islam today are the xenophobes who believe that they understand the essence of the religion much better than its followers.

The stereotype of the Talmudic Jew was a kind of umbrella category that embraced all previous anti-Semitic stereotypes dating back to the Middle Ages: the accusation of blood libel (that the Jews needed Christian children to make blood sacrifices in their mysterious religious rituals); the accusation that Jews all across Europe were secretly poisoning wells (that was an explanation of the otherwise hard to understand plague epidemics in 1347—1361); and, finally, the malicious claim that synagogues were nothing than taprooms and brothels, or the hideouts of bandits and villains, or even the caves of demons. These three mediaeval stereotypes have in common their depiction of the Jews as a security threat, as a threat to the Christian society from within. Today the Muslim minority is considered through the same lens with mosques usually described as 'terrorist factories'.

The threat of the secret *Jewish conspiracy* aimed at conquering the world is a modern stereotype. According to this conspiracy theory, the leaders of the world Jewry met secretly twenty-four times and planned how to bring all humanity under its control. The main precondition for the rise of the international empire of the Jews is the destruction of strong nation-states and extermination of competing religions. A secret Jewish organisation is supposed to be the vehicle of this upheaval; everything is allowed in the name of this noble aim, so all moral considerations must be swept aside. Thus, the Jews are considered to be a driving force of all revolutions and to push nations into violent conflicts that would ultimately terminate the world in catastrophic war. They also as if promote alcoholism amongst workers, prostitution, epidemics, famines, and manipulate the prices of food; the Jews are as if responsible for shackling the masses in illiteracy, exploitation and terrible regimes holding the power for the Jews are considered to secretly control revolutionaries, political parties, the media, cultural institutions, banks, business, and governments. The world managed to learn of the deadly threat posed by the Jewish conspiracy with the 'leak' of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which was first 'made public' in the late XIX century and since then has been an anti-Semitic bestseller. Its success was determined by the fact that the *Protocols* explained the complicated and incomprehensible modern world through a simple conspiracy theory.

Moreover, there is also an issue of *Jewish anti-Semitism,* i.e. the 'Jewophobia' of former Jews who renounced Judaism, converted to Christianity (in most cases) and became professional, ardent and implacable critics of Judaism. The credibility of their criticism was built on the assumption that as former Jews they know Jewish 'secrets' and can reveal them to protect the majority from the Jewish world dominance. Perhaps the best-known Jewish anti-Semites were Otto Weininger and Arthur Trebitsch, who stylized himself after the figure of Christ, denied his Jewishness and warned emphatically against the Jewish conspiracy as 'the Jewish disease that poisons host nations'. Similarly, today many former Muslims build their careers on their ability to persuade the majority or state institutions that they know the treacherous 'secrets' of their former brothers, who are a threat to the safety and freedoms of the West. These bashers of Islam tend to be militant and hateful in order to prove their radically new identity as the right choice and their loyalty and commitment to their new group.

The modern era introduced a counter-stereotype to the conspiracy of powerful Jews in the image of the poor Jew as an *unproductive parasite.* According to this stereotype, the Jews are lazy, dirty, selfish and degenerate (*Entartung*) for they lost the ability to exist on their own. Therefore, they as if have to seek food like parasites and to live at the expense of the productive Christian majority; they are allegedly abetted in this by cunning, hypocrisy and usury. The Muslims in the West are portrayed in a very similar way today: as sly migrants systematically abusing social benefits and parasiting on the welfare state; as people with no solidarity, who provide nothing in exchange and have no intention to do so. It is not just a matter of a religious or cultural threat, but of a social and demographic one; due to their high fertility rates the number of 'parasites' grows exponentially to the point where the Western welfare states would collapse. The Jews — wealthy and poor, assimilated and Orthodox — were equally subjected to anti-Semitism. One group faced suspicion and rejection because it was assimilated, prosperous and influential, others — for possessing the very opposite of these attributes, for being distinctive, poor and dependent on others. This no-win situation is similar to the one the Muslims face today.

The Jewish minority in the past and the Muslim minority today serve as society's *sacrificial lamb.* They are blamed for all problems; they form a 'smokescreen' and deflect attention away from the real problems and their roots. Simply put they are used to explain the complexity of the world. Aggression directed at the sacrificial lamb continues to function as a vent for the ongoing release of accumulating tensions: stored-up frustrations are not vented at their real source. Finally, the image of an internal enemy and threat reinforces solidarity in an otherwise increasingly more disorganised and disoriented society and makes it possible to marshal the population behind the politics that promises to protect the frightened society. The sacrificial lamb is to be weak and defenceless, and it must be differ from the majority. In the past the Jews met these two criteria in Europe, today it is the Muslim minority.

Another analogy with the repertoire of anti-Semitism is the stereotype that the Muslim minorities *separate* themselves, are not loyal to the state and respect only their own

laws. This is an extremely ancient issue mentioned as far back as in the *Book of Esther* in the *Old Testament*: "Then Haman said to King Xerxes, 'There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them'". According to the historian Walter Laqueur in *The Changing Face of Anti-Semitism* [4], this topic has constantly revived ever since, for example, when Cicero in Ancient Rome warned against the influence of the Jews because their religion was incompatible with the Roman values and traditions for the Jews refused on the grounds of their 'intolerant and retrograde religion' to worship Caesar. Moreover, they were considered to have double standards of morality — to behave towards each other according to one set of rules, and towards people of other faiths according to a different set of rules. Finally, Jews were also accused of trying to destroy the society because they deliberately and suspiciously separated/segregated themselves from it, were always loafing around doing nothing because of the Sabbath, practised male circumcision and made animal sacrifices (and human sacrifices too). In the early modern era, the most ardent proponent of the Jewish stereotypes was Bernard Lazar, a Russian Jew whose *Anti-Semitism, Its Causes and History* (1894) became an essential reading for the anti-Semites. Its main idea is that the victim of anti-Semitism is actually the one to blame for it: the Jews are to be blamed for their persecution because the Talmud makes them isolated, anti-social, and haughty/arrogant. This was the very language that was also used at that time in the media, for example, in the *Alldeutsche Tagblatt* published in Linz one could read (1907): "The Jews are a state within a state; they follow their own laws and know how to get around the laws of the land. They show contempt for everything that we hold sacred, while they are permitted to everything that we could consider sacrilegious".

The rise of anti-Semitism was *sometimes* connected with mass *migration*, similar to the escalating Islamophobia today. When pogroms broke out in Russia after the attempted assassination of the Tsar in 1881, two million Jewish refugees flew to the United States and Western Europe. These were Eastern Orthodox Jews who claimed to belong to the religion of 'the chosen' and in public alienated the majority by speaking Polish, Russian or Yiddish. Their distinct visual appearance often served as an overt demonstration of their orthodoxy (side locks, caftans), they lives in closed communities, made no efforts to adapt to the society, and even had conflicts with the assimilated Jews. The organised reaction of the anti-Semites was quick. From the first International Anti-Jewish Congress in Dresden (1882) there were already calls to fight the Jews who were declared not to be able to assimilate and to pose a threat to the Christians. There were appeals to the government not to accept more refugees and to send the army to guard the borders. The Jews already living in the cities in Europe were not granted the same civil rights as others. The political discourse and part of the church also accepted this rhetoric, and anti-Semitism was 'normalised'.

According to the logic of a self-fulfilling prophecy, the Jews who were already assimilated reacted to the rise of anti-Semitism by relinquishing self-identification with

the majority, returning to the roots, and strengthening the Jewish nationalism (Zionism). These were mainly the educated Jews (lawyers, doctors) who had left their faith and converted to Christianity, loved the host country language and culture and considered themselves Germans, Czechs or Austrians; more often than the Catholics or Protestants they entered mixed marriages, died fighting in the armies of their countries; they tended to be liberals because freedoms guaranteed their upward social mobility and prosperity. The same mechanism of returning to the initial religious-ethnic identity and withdrawing into the safe closed communities in response to the Islamophobia determined by the majority's fears due to the immigration can be observed among the Muslims who had already been integrated in the European host societied.

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АНТИСЕМИТИЗМ ВЧЕРА И ИСЛАМОФОБИЯ СЕГОДНЯ: ВЗГЛЯД ИЗ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ ЕВРОПЫ*

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Автор предпринимает попытку сопоставить средневековый и раннесовременный дискурсы антисемитизма с нынешним исламофобским дискурсом, фокусируясь на ситуации в Центральной Европе в целом и в Чехии в частности. Статья описывает тот широкий контекст, в котором сегодня формируется исламофобия в Чехии, утверждая, что в последние годы по всей стране ее проявления усилились и расширились, несмотря на то, что для Чехии преимущественно характерен позитивный исторический опыт принятия мигрантов из мусульманских стран (истоки различных форм нынешне-

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го взаимодействия принимающего сообщества с мусульманским меньшинством можно проследить до 1970-х гг.). Большинство чешских мусульман сегодня (и на протяжении длительного времени) прекрасно интегрированы или ассимилированы в чешское общество. Соответственно, исламофобия в Чехии представлена автором как своего рода парадокс: это скорее «продукт» (результат и следствие) повседневных стереотипных интерпретаций и некорректного восприятия международных событий (например, так называемой «международной борьбы с террором»), чем «продукт» повседневных непосредственных контактов с мигрантами в своей стране (т.е. рутинных личных взаимодействий с представителями мусульманского меньшинства). Вторая часть статьи посвящена исламофобскому дискурсу, который сегодня явно формируется в Чехии: автор обозначает несколько ключевых тематик и понятий, которые отчетливо «роднят» данный дискурс с хорошо известным феноменом антисемитизма, или историческим предшественником исламофобии: «внутренний враг», «угрозы безопасности», «тайный заговор ради мирового господства», «иной/чужак, не вписывающийся в европейское общество в культурном, религиозном и ином отношениях», «бесполезный мигрант, живущий за счет (христианского) большинства», «жертвенный агнец» и, наконец, «сообщество, стремящееся отделиться и создать параллельную систему ценностей и институтов» (чтобы предотвратить свою интеграцию в чешское или центрально-европейское общество). В определенной степени исламофобия сегодня возрождает прежний антисемитский дискурс, поскольку конструирует аналогичный образ мусульманина (опасного чужака/иного), отражающий негативные черты образа еврея и иудаизма, которые были использованы накануне холокоста в целях его оправдания.

Ключевые слова: исламофобия; антисемитизм; чешские мусульмане; евреи; интеграция; ассимиляция; Центральная Европа; Чехия; стереотипы