Universalism and anti-Muslim sentiment

Mark Elchardus[*], Bram Spruyt

Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels, Belgium

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Social scientists debate the nature of the critique of Islam that has recently become prominent in various European societies. Some consider it as a mere focussing of more general feelings of xenophobia on a new target group, and therefore regard it as an expression of Islam phobia. Others see it as, at least in part, the result of a defence of values and rights that should be universal. This paper seeks to gauge the extent to which anti-Muslim feelings can be considered the consequence of general forms of xenophobia, to what extent they are inspired by adherence to a universalistic conception of human rights. That question is answered on the basis of a sample of 522 university students surveyed in 2009. Besides anti-Muslim feelings four kinds of prejudice are measured. Confirmative factor analysis shows that these can be distinguished from each other in a measurement model. Yet the relationships between the different forms of prejudice are very strong and more than half of the variation in anti-Muslim feelings can be attributed to more general forms of prejudice. Yet, even after controlling for the effects of the four forms of prejudice, adherence to a universalistic conception of human rights adds significantly to anti-Muslim feelings.

1. Introduction

The first decade of the 21st century has witnessed a shift in the discourse about diversity in Europe. The focus of a number of politicians, journalistic and intellectual commentators has shifted from 'immigrants' and 'non-natives' to 'Muslims' (Betz & Meret, 2009; Zuquete, 2008). As a result of this Islamization of the stranger, the expression of anti-Muslim feelings has become more widespread in several European societies. It is no longer limited to extreme right wing parties (Mudde, 2007, p. 84; Rostbøll, 2010), but often divides the left (Raymond, 2009) and frequently gives rise to tensions that reverberate throughout society, such as those surrounding the Danish cartoons, the legislation and regulations concerning the headscarf and the Burka and Turkey's membership of the European Union. Among social scientists these developments have given rise to a lively debate concerning the nature of the opinions and sentiment that are addressed by and expressed in this Islamization of the stranger. A number of researchers claim that the anti-Muslim feelings are but a focussing of more general feelings of xenophobia on a new target group (e.g., Stolz, 2005; Strabac & Listhaug, 2008), and should therefore be regarded as expressions of Islam phobia. That conclusion is called into question by other authors, on the basis of the analysis of the discourse of Islam skepticism (e.g., Meer & Modood, 2009) but also on the basis of a growing body of research findings that explicitly address the question to what extent negative attitudes with regard to Muslims can be seen as an expression of general forms of prejudice (Imhoff & Recker, 2012; Kalkan, Layman, & Uslaner, 2009; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007; Van Bohemen, Kemmers, & De Koster, 2011; different contributions in Helbling, 2012). This paper situates itself in this emerging research tradition. It attempts to assess the extent to which anti-Muslim sentiment can be considered an expression of general forms of xenophobia and to what extent it can be considered a form of Islam skepticism that cannot be reduced to

* Corresponding author at: Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Research group TOR, Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium. Tel.: +32 02614 81 46.
  E-mail addresses: Mark.Elchardus@vub.ac.be (M. Elchardus), Bram.Spruyt@vub.ac.be (B. Spruyt).

xenophobia. Confirmatory factor analyses reveal that in a measurement model anti-Muslim feelings can be distinguished from more generalized feelings of ethnic prejudice. Subsequently, regression analyses show that the position taken in the universalism versus relativism debate, influences anti-Muslim feelings over and above what can be explained on the basis of several forms of ethnic prejudice.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The Islamization of the stranger

In the debate about the nature of the values and sentiments that are expressed in anti-Muslim attitudes a core issue concerns the extent to which such attitudes should be considered an expression of general forms of ethnic prejudice. That question is approached from quite different vantage points and with different methodologies.

Qualitative research tends to focus on the discourse of Islam skepticism. It identifies the themes with which the Islam is associated and analyses the way in which, via processes of 'othering' or 'racialisation' (Dunn, Klocker, & Salabay, 2007), these themes are eventually turned into negative stereotypes. This approach leads to heated debates over the question when and if the processes of 'othering' and 'racializing' do result in xenophobia and racism (compare for example, Bleich, 2006; Hansen, 2006; Modood, 2006). Several authors who base their conclusions on the analysis of the discourse of Islam skepticism reject the thesis that negative feelings about Muslims can be equated to Islam phobia. Their analyses show that this discourse is often construed as a defence of tolerance, democratic citizenship, individual rights, and free speech (Bilsky, 2009). Fernandez (2009) identifies three basic themes in that discourse: (1) threats to the position and rights of women (see also Gottschalk & Greenberg, 2008; Ho, 2007), (2) threats to security, and (3) threats to the separation of Church and State. The nature of that discourse clearly raises the question whether the expressed anti-Muslim sentiments can be regarded as indicators of Islam phobia or should be considered a form of Islam skepticism grounded in a perceived threat to liberal values and rights. Sniderman and Hagendoorn were among the first to raise this question in a clear and nuanced way: "A number of Dutch object to Muslim treatment of women and childrearing practices not on principle but out of prejudice. [. . .] All the same, we expect that a substantial number object to Muslim treatment of women and children for just the opposite set of reasons: not from prejudice but out of a conviction that certain Muslim practices are at odds with the values of Dutch society" (2007, p. 22). Zuquete echoes this statement in his complaint about the 'indistinctiveness' of the term 'Islam phobia': "It places under the broad umbrella of 'fear or hatred of Islam', discourses and criticisms that have different sources, motivations, and goals. [. . .] Certainly a sizeable number of those who pose questions regarding Islam are not necessarily motivated by an illogical attitude, biased mindset, pure fear, or blind hate" (2008, p. 323).

Many authors working quantitatively, on the basis of survey analysis reject that conclusion and conclude that anti-Muslim feelings should be considered an expression of more general forms of ethnic prejudice. That conclusion is based on the observation of strong relationships between scales measuring xenophobia and anti-Muslim feelings, as well as on the observation that both attitudes have the same or very similar causes (e.g., Dekker & van der Noll, 2009; Stolz, 2005; Strabac & Listhaug, 2008; Velasco Gonzalez, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2008). Hagendoorn and Sniderman (2001) summarize this finding as follows: "[. . .] prejudice can be defined as a consistent tendency to evaluate immigrant groups negatively, which is to say that these groups are negatively evaluated in all respects and that all relevant groups are negatively evaluated" (p. 21).

There is surprisingly little cross fertilization between those two approaches. Yet, the opposite conclusions reached and, more broadly, the controversy to which they give rise, call for empirical evidence. There is, as pointed out already, an emerging line of research that tries, on the basis of survey research, to gauge the extent to which anti Muslim feelings can be considered an expression of general feelings of prejudice and to what extent they are a specific form of critique (e.g., Imhoff & Recker, 2012; Kalkan, Layman & Uslaner, 2009; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007; Spruyt & Elchardus, 2012; see also different contributions in Helbling, 2012). This body of literature departs from the observation that prejudice is diffuse and that the attitudes with regard to different groups will be strongly interrelated, difficult to distinguish from one another and determined or influenced by similar causes (occur with similar intensity in similar groups of the population). Kalkan, Layman, and Uslaner (2009: p. 851), for example, investigated the affect among white Americans for eight outgroups – four ethnic, racial or religious groups (Jews, Blacks, Asian-Americans, Hispanics) and four cultural minority groups (gays and lesbians, illegal immigrants, feminists, people on welfare) – and Muslims. They observe, in line with the idea of diffuse prejudice, strong correlations between the affect for the different groups, but also that the groups could be combined into two 'bands of Others': cultural and ethnic minority groups. Muslims, they observe, are the victims of both prejudices held against ethnic minority groups and prejudices held against cultural minority groups. The latter finding dovetails with the results of discourse analysis that shows that contemporary criticism of Muslims often addresses simultaneously Muslims as a religious and as an ethnic category (Dunn et al., 2007; Kalin, 2011, p. 11; Modood, 2010).

Various strategies are used to try to distinguish the general prejudice component of the negative attitudes with regard to Muslims from that part of the attitudes that is inspired by other values and attitudes. Imhoff and Recker (2012) for instance developed a scale that captures secular Enlightenment criticism of certain forms of Islam. That scale is related to a measure of prejudice (called Islamprejudice by the authors). The scales correlate weakly, which leads the authors to the conclusion that a negative attitude with regard to Muslims cannot be (completely) equated with general prejudice or more specific forms of Islamprejudice. A possible weakness of this strategy, to which the authors themselves point, is that the position