

Preface

Welcome to the *Journal of the Council for Research on Religion*'s special issue on Analyzing the Discourse of Religious Phobia, distributed through the McGill University Library's OJS platform. This issue of *JCREOR* stems from a symposium held on October 25th and 27th, 2023, at McGill University's School of Religious Studies, which specifically engaged with Hindu-phobia, Islamophobia, and Anti-Semitism in the public sphere. In March 2023, a new study put out by the Angus Reid Institute reported that unfavourable views of Islam were prevalent across Canada at varying levels and highest in Quebec. It was reported that "two-in-five Canadians outside of Quebec (39%) hold an unfavourable view of Islam. In Quebec, that number reaches half (52%)."¹ However, these views take more concrete forms than just the overall sentiment that the religion receives. Its followers risk being unwelcome in several areas of Canadian society. At the same time, reports emerging from CIJA (Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs), citing Statistics Canada data, indicated that, with the exception of the Yukon, hate crimes have increased in every province and territory since 2021. Of these, the Jewish community was the target of over 55% of all reported incidents.² Likewise, in February 2023, the Canadian Parliament was alerted to the rising extent of Hinduphobia in Canada.³ These reports have increased from all three faith communities in Canada and abroad. So much so that various communities have established their own venues to discuss and debate what, and how, to acknowledge the detrimental effects on society of these increased violations of individual rights. In 2023, the McGill School of Religious Studies received a SSHRC Connection grant, which supported the organization of a colloquium to discuss this ongoing issue with several stakeholders.

1. "Islamophobia in Canada: Four Mindsets Indicate Negativity Is Nationwide, Most Intense in Quebec," *Angus Reid Institute*, March 13, 2023, <https://angusreid.org/islamophobia-canada-quebec/>.

2. "Police-reported Hate Crime, 2021," *Statistics Canada*, March 22, 2023, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/230322/dq230322a-eng.htm>.

3. Canada, Parliament, *House of Commons Debates*, 44th Parl., 1st Sess., vol. 151, no. 151 (1 February 2023) 1400 (Hon. Anthony Rota), <https://www.ourcommons.ca/documentviewer/en/44-1/house/sitting-151/hansard>.

The Study of Religion

The history of the study of religion can be seen as undergoing four phases: 1) from insider to insider, 2) from outsider to outsider, 3) from outsider to insider, and 4) from insider to outsider.

In premodern times, when the religions of the world evolved in relative isolation, the study of religion mainly took the form of insider-to-insider. That is to say, the knowledge of that tradition was transmitted through the generations by insiders to the tradition to other insiders to the tradition. This was the standard pattern across the various world religions.

With the expansion of the West over the rest of the world, knowledge of the various traditions the West came into contact with was then transmitted by Western observers and scholars to Western audiences. This was the phase in which the study of religion started being transmitted from outsiders to outsiders, even as the various religious traditions continued to transmit knowledge of their tradition from insider to insider.

Once imperial Western rule was established over most of the world, education in these parts also came to be institutionalized along Western lines and was mainly carried out through Western languages. So, in addition to the transmission from insider to insider and from outsider to outsider, another dimension in the study of religion emerged in which the knowledge of the tradition came to be passed from the outsiders, namely the Westerners, to the insiders, that is, the followers of the various traditions, through the educational system.

Through these three modes of transmission of the knowledge of various religions, we may add the fourth, which emerges in the post-Second World War period when the various erstwhile colonies became independent and grew sufficiently confident and competent to question and challenge, where necessary, the depiction of their respective religions by Western academia and media. The discussion of religiophobia emerges in this fourth stage.

Orientalism

There is a special dimension of this fourth stage to which attention has been drawn by Edward Said, through his widely read work *Orientalism* (1978). One central claim made in this work was that when Western scholarship started describing the religions and cultures of the non-West, it then conjured up its own image of what these religions and cultures were like, which was not on all fours with what these religions and cultures considered themselves to be. In other words, the knowledge of these religions and cultures was more in line with what the *West thought* these cultures were than what these religions and cultures *actually were* or considered to be by the believers. As the Talmud states: “We do not see things as they are; we see them as we are.”⁴

The phobia associated with religions is best understood in this broader historical context, which pertains to the claim that some features of religions and cultures being studied by the West may have been depicted in such a way, or may have been exaggerated in some cases to such an extent, that they give rise to a sentiment of fear in relation to those religions and cultures. The purpose of this conference was to focus on this aspect of the study of religion and to consider ways in which the situation could be corrected.

4. This is a general sentiment expressed in the Talmud; it is not a direct quotation. The quotation comes from Anaïs Nin’s *Seduction of the Minotaur*, where one of her characters makes the statement. See Anaïs Nin, *Seduction of the Minotaur* (Alan Swallow, 1961), 124.

Religiophobia

This point may be explored in more detail through illustrations from the various traditions. Let us first consider an example from Judaism. The Jewish people have often been described as a “chosen people.” The idea of Jewish chosenness has sometimes been interpreted to mean that the Jews consider themselves a special group chosen by God, and, on that basis, that they regard themselves as superior to others. This led to the publication of various tracts claiming that a Jewish cabal was bent on achieving global domination – see, for example, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1903).⁵

In Jewish culture, however, the idea that they are a chosen people has always meant that they have been charged with special responsibilities, and not that they are a cut above other human beings. It is claimed in Jewish folklore that God offered the Torah, as a form of a special relationship with him, to various communities around the world, but that these communities turned down the offer as too heavy a burden for them to bear. It was only the Jews who agreed to submit to its requirements.⁶

The word “phobia” denotes an irrational fear of something. The perception that Jews seek global domination is clearly an irrational fear based on a misunderstanding of their culture and the concept of the chosen people, and therefore serves as an example of Judeophobia, or Anti-Semitism. Let us now turn to the case of Islam.

The position of women in Islam has alienated many students of that religious tradition, from ordinary people to feminists. The fact that women are sequestered in some Islamic societies, that their testimony may carry half the weight of men’s, or that they were, until recently, prohibited from driving in Saudi Arabia has cumulatively led people to portray the position of women in Islam as abysmal and to fear what life for women must be under an Islamic dispensation. An extreme formulation of this perception can even be found in the pages of the *New York Times*, where it was once claimed that women have no souls in Islam.⁷ This is clearly false. Women have the same metaphysical status as men in Islam. The example of Rabi’a al-Adawiyya⁸ provides a direct repudiation of this kind of statement. Such a claim is not merely a gross exaggeration, but is, in fact, outright false and therefore qualifies as an example of Islamophobia. An example from Hinduism will further help illustrate the point.

In popular perception, the Nazi flag is represented by the *swastika*. The word comes from Sanskrit, an ancient Indian language, and represents a sacred symbol in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain culture. It is puzzling that this symbol, as used by the Nazi regime, should be called a *swastika* because, as far as we know, this word was not used to describe the symbol in Nazi literature, wherein it is described as the

5. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, serialized in *Znamya* (St. Petersburg, 1903); republished in full as an appendix to Sergei Nilus, *The Great in the Small and the Antichrist* (Redaktsiia Sviato-Troitskoi Sergievoi Lavry, 1905). The document purports to be the confidential minutes of a clandestine assembly of Jewish leaders, known as the “Elders of Zion,” outlining a purported coordinated scheme for global dominance. It falsely alleges that they devised plans to undermine Christian civilization and to exert control over international media, banking institutions, and governments. Extensive investigations by historians, judicial proceedings, and journalistic inquiries have consistently demonstrated that the text is entirely fabricated. Despite being thoroughly discredited over more than a century, this document continues to serve as a foundational text for contemporary international conspiracy theories.

6. The Midrash, where we specifically encounter these ideas, is in *Sifre Devarim* 343 and *Pesikta Rabbati* 21.

7. Fergus M. Bordewich, “Letters: In Defence of Islamic Women,” *The New York Times*, December 30, 1973.

8. Rabi’a al-Adawiyya, a prominent Sufi mystic and saint from the eighth century, pioneered the doctrine of divine love (*mahabba*). She transcends the status of an ordinary believer and is regarded as one of the most revered saints and spiritual authorities in Islamic history. It is inconsistent to suggest that a religion perceives women as soulless when that very religion venerates a woman as a master of divine love, whose spiritual teachings were studied and honoured by leading male scholars of her time.

“hooked cross” (Hakenkreuz). How the Hindu symbol of a swastika came to represent the Nazi regime is baffling. It seems that an English translator of Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* used the word *swastika* to describe the symbol, which in the original German was referred to as *Hakenkreuz*. One wonders whether this was done to relieve the Christian world of the burden of its own Christian cross being used by Hitler, who was then gaining notoriety, by instead associating the symbol with Hinduism and other religions of Indic origin. The associations this symbol carries are literally formidable, namely, inspiring fear. We know that the symbol, in its use by the Nazis, had nothing to do with Hinduism, thereby illustrating the point at issue.

These examples, in turn, allow us to state the goal of the symposium in clear terms. The academic pursuit of religions is a *rational* pursuit, and religiophobia involves the *irrational* fear of something. Perhaps, then, we can use rational investigation to overcome the prejudices generated by irrational fear.

Of course, this would presume that the difference between the rational and irrational can be clearly delineated. But even if it could, how does one rehabilitate generations of false thinking? It is our belief that Wilfred Cantwell Smith was correct in characterizing the comparative studies approach as essentially a dialogue. It is only through encounters between people who hold, at times, diametrically opposed views that we can begin to destabilize the notions that undergird various phobias.

For Smith, the old model of Comparative Religion was to be replaced by “the study of religion comparatively.” As a consequence, a comparative study should focus on how persons of faith live and respond to the transcendent rather than simply comparing abstract systems of texts and rituals. If scholars study how human beings seek meaning and respond to the divine, they can uncover the shared spiritual quest underlying all religions. Through this approach, the religious other is humanized, inviting empathy and understanding. By stressing shared human faith rather than fixed differences, Smith’s comparative method undercuts the “us vs. them” mindset that we argue fosters religious phobia. For Smith, dialogue was a mutual exploration of truth; as such, it became a process of cooperative truth-seeking, not conversion. True dialogue demands openness to the other, and an acknowledgment that one’s own understanding of God or the transcendent is partial and can be deepened through encounters with others of different faiths. The underlying assumption was that, in a world marked by religious suspicion, dialogue could break down stereotypes. When people of different faiths meet as co-pilgrims, fear diminishes and trust grows.

The symposium allowed us to extend Smith’s ideas through dialogue with one another. Therefore, we focused on the believer rather than the “religion,” shifting the focus from abstract doctrine to lived human experience. As we listened to one another, we did so through a hermeneutic of generosity and viewed ourselves as a global religious community, focusing on the world’s religious life rather than on separate religious religions. Understanding faith comparatively thus becomes an ethical act, one that dismantles prejudice and contributes to peacebuilding.

In all of this, we seek to compare in order to connect, to engage in dialogue in order to deepen our understanding of different faiths, and to study not to objectify but to humanize. A comparative study grounded in empathy and dialogue opens spaces where individuals can listen, learn and recognize the sincerity of another’s faith.

The essays from the symposium were shaped by the many opportunities the participants had to engage in dialogue and, therefore, reflect the comparative process Smith envisioned. We trust that they will illuminate our understanding of religiophobia and stand as a testament to how religious phobias might be broken down and destabilized.