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# A Theoretical Framework for Anti-Muslim Prejudice: Framing Tolerance via Moral Malleability and Entitativity Perceptions

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The need to develop empirically-based interventions to reduce anti-Muslim prejudice, or “Islamophobia,” has become increasingly salient in multicultural societies. In the present literature review, I present a theoretical framework for understanding this specific form of prejudice, a framework based on sociological research documenting that people perceive Islam as a monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to change. Connecting this survey research with the social psychology of prejudice, I argue that the perception of groups as monolithic entities results in increased endorsement of stereotypes, increased justification of social inequalities, accentuation of perceived differences between groups, and perhaps most importantly, assigning group-based responsibility for actions taken by individual group members. Second, the perception of groups as static and unresponsive to change—an entity implicit theory—results in greater stereotype endorsement, greater perceived outgroup homogeneity, and more biased behavior towards outgroup members. I contend that psychologists, sociologists and policymakers can draw upon these two research literatures to develop more effective means of combatting anti-Muslim prejudice by fostering a view of moral character as malleable and Islam as a heterogeneous group of individual believers.

A survey of 1,003 adults by the Pew Research Center conducted in August 2010 found that more Americans have unfavorable than favorable views of Islam, with 38% self-reporting unfavorable attitudes. Other public opinion polls show that Americans suspect Muslims of teaching their children to hate, and believe that Muslims value life less than others (CAIR 2004). Recent events both domestically and internationally—such as the controversy over the building of a mosque near Ground Zero, and the massacre in Norway committed by Anders Breivik, who decried the rising prevalence of Muslims in Europe—highlight how problematic prejudice towards Islam and Muslims can be. Indeed, Muslim immigrants in the U.S. are more likely to feel alienated from community leaders, are less likely to vote, and generally earn lower incomes than Christians (Wuthnow & Hackett, 2003). Muslim immigrants to Canada display lower labor force participation, higher unemployment, and lower occupational status relative to Canadian Christians (Model & Lin, 2002). In 2011, a Mus-

lim community group holding a fundraiser to combat homelessness and domestic violence in their community of Yorba Linda, California, was met with protests by both local community members and Congressional representatives. Deborah Pauly, a local Councilwoman and a Chair of the Orange Country GOP, said: “I know quite a few Marines who would be very happy to help these terrorists to an early meeting in paradise” (Barker, 2011). Such shocking generalizations, in which the actions of religious extremists are generalized to an entire religious group, reveal the pressing need for interventions combatting these biases and prejudices.

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This anti-Muslim prejudice is captured by the neologism “Islamophobia,” defined as “hatred or fear of Islam, especially as a political force; hostility or prejudice towards Muslims” (Islamophobia, 2011). In this review, I will assign “Islamophobia” a deliberately broad scope: prejudice against Islam as an entity and Muslims as individuals. Although Islam is a religion rather than a cultural identity, these two conceptions of Islam are inextricably intermingled. A meta-analysis of articles in the aftermath of the 2005 London bombings reveals two recurring themes concerning Islam: a homogeneous, culturally essentialist view of the Muslim faith as potentially dangerous, as well as criticism of the prospect of a British society in which multiple cultures could peacefully coexist (Wood & Finlay, 2008). The cultural and religious are often conflated in discussions of anti-Muslim prejudice, so my

discussion will not seek to create an overt dissociation between the two; in addition, some scholars argue that Islamophobia is not a distinct form of religious prejudice but a form of cultural racism (Modood, 1997; Purkiss, 2003; Larsson 2005). However, no empirical studies to date have teased out religious versus ethnic hostility towards Islam.

### Empirical Documentation of Anti-Muslim Prejudice

In addition to scrutiny from the media, “Islamophobia” has also been analyzed at a more rigorous level in psychological research. Oswald (2005) conducted an online survey shortly after September 11<sup>th</sup> designed to gauge anti-Arab sentiment, presenting a slightly different focus than our present investigation into “Islamophobia,” since “Arab” is an ethnic rather than religious category. She proposes three unique theoretical perspectives to explain anti-Arab sentiment in the wake of terrorist attacks: feeling threatened, “us” versus “them” social categorization, and individual characteristics such as a “just-world” or social dominance orientation that predict derogation of outgroup members.

The first theoretical perspective, “feeling threatened,” stems from research on integrated threat theory, which proposes that prejudice is the result of both realistic and symbolic threats. Realistic threats are tangible economic, political, physical or material threats to a group, whereas symbolic threats are more intangible challenges to a group’s worldview, moral and culture (e.g., when an outgroup fails to share the ingroup’s family values; Stephan, Diaz-Loving, & Duran, 2000; Stephan & Stephan, 2000). The perception that minority groups pose both realistic and symbolic threats predicts prejudice towards Blacks (Stephan, Ybarra & Bachman, 1999; Stephan et al., 2002), Mexicans (Stephan et al., 2000), and immigrants (Stephan, Ybarra, Martinez, Schwarzwald, & TurKaspa, 1998). Connecting this research with our present focus, we can see that modern political discourse is rife with dire proclamations about the threat of Islam. For example, Republican politicians including Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum have denigrated Islamic Shari’ah, the set of individual and social duties prescribed on every believer of the Islamic faith, as an existential threat to America and cite this threat as a valid basis for anti-Muslim rhetoric (Siddiqui, 2011). Thus, one source of anti-Muslim prejudice may be the perceived threat of

the religious/cultural group to people's tangible and intangible values.

The second theoretical perspective that Oswald (2005) sought to investigate is an "us" versus "them" social categorization between Arabs and non-Arabs. Oswald highlights the fervid, post-9/11 emphasis on patriotic solidarity that gripped America in the wake of an external threat. President Bush declared that "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (Hirsch, 2002), creating an "us" versus "them" distinction in which the outgroup was no longer confined to terrorists, but implicitly encompassed a much broader category: members of the Arab race (Hirsh, 2002). Self-categorization theory proposes that categorizing people based on social groups leads to an accentuation of both intragroup similarities and intergroup differences, as well as negative affect and attitudes when one's ingroup is cast as sufficiently powerful (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; for a review, see Devine, 1995). Thus, the portrayal of the U.S. ingroup as a powerful force combating a terrorist outgroup can lead to the accentuation of differences between religions and ethnicities associated with each of these groups. This theoretical perspective is also relevant for understanding anti-Muslim prejudice in Europe. After comparing anti-minority prejudice across 30 European nations, Strabac and Linstead (2008) found a higher degree of prejudice towards Muslims than for other immigrant groups and hypothesized that the prominence of international geopolitical events involving Muslim countries (e.g., the Rushdie affair, in which Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran sentenced British author Salman Rushdie to death for his satirical book on Islam), led to greater animosity towards Muslims. Importantly, the survey respondents expressed their opinions *before* September 11<sup>th</sup>, indicating that an "us" versus "them" bifurcation had occurred even in the absence of major terrorist events.

The role of personal ideologies and individual differences in prejudiced attitudes comprise the third set of theoretical approaches that Oswald proffers to explain the origins of anti-Arab sentiments. Unlike theories that trace instances of prejudice to group-level acrimony, in which a majority group feels threatened by or separate from a purportedly hostile minority, the individual differences approach suggests that personal ideologies may lead to the derogation of outgroups. The first ideology proposed by Oswald as a potential source of anti-Arab sentiment is *belief in a just world*, the philosophy that one gets what one deserves (Lerner, 1980; Rubin & Peplau, 1975). In this

worldview, the world is a just place—"good people" are rewarded and "bad people" are punished—and so if a minority group is stigmatized, members of the group must have committed actions that made them deserving of stigmatization. In the case of anti-Muslim prejudice, individuals may believe that Muslims have taken actions to deserve the animosity directed at its members, a belief that leads just world theorists to firmly maintain their prejudicial attitudes. In addition, terrorist attacks and other violent acts perpetrated by Muslims may reinforce these theorists' beliefs that the group deserves to be labeled as violent and irrational.

Social dominance theory is another personal ideology that may contribute to anti-Arab sentiment. The theory proposes that individuals with a high *social dominance orientation* desire group inequality and endorse attitudes that reinforce social hierarchy (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). These individuals rely upon legitimating myths as a crutch; in other words, they believe that their prejudicial attitudes have a moral and intellectual basis. Oswald argues that terrorist attacks may be used to legitimize anti-Muslim prejudice among people with a high social dominance orientation.

Based on this research, Oswald finds evidence for an integrated model incorporating the perception that Muslims pose a threat to the majority group, self-categorization into a Muslim "them" and a majority "us," belief in a just world, and a social dominance ideology that condones existing racial and ethnic inequalities that accounts for a large degree of anti-Arab sentiment. Her model demonstrates that threatening actions undertaken by even a few members of an ethnic group may be used to justify prejudice through a variety of different mechanisms.

Yet Oswald's research fails to capture the phenomenon of "Islamophobia" as a prejudiced attitude that is unremitting and that can exist in the absence of threat; I contend that anti-Muslim prejudice has deeper roots than 9/11 and other terrorist events. Thus, my proposed theoretical framework accounts for three existing gaps in the existing literature on anti-Muslim prejudice. First, as Kalkan et al. (2009) observe, animosity towards Muslims is not solely linked to discrete, one-time tragedies; future research should investigate attitudes that have a more complex source than the perception that the religion is responsible for violent terrorism. Second, research documents how Muslims are viewed much less favorably than other religious and cultural minorities, with a high percentage of

Americans arguing that Muslims “do not at all agree with my vision of American society” (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006). In this sense, prejudice towards Muslims requires a unique explanatory framework that takes distinct, documented perceptions of the cultural/religious group into account. Finally, many investigations into anti-Muslim prejudice *measure* existing prejudice and do not propose theoretically informed strategies for reducing these hostile, prejudicial attitudes; few studies have attempted to *change* the attitudes of those harboring negative opinions of Muslims. In the following sections, I propose a theoretical framework for a social-psychological intervention that treats anti-Muslim prejudice as a persistent attitude rather than as a discrete response to terrorism. My framework also aims to capture the unique features of Islam that contribute to an especially pronounced degree of anti-Muslim prejudice.

#### Proposed Framework: Correcting the Perception that Islam is a Monolithic, Static Entity

In 2006, The Runnymede Trust, a UK research and social policy agency, identified eight features of negative opinions towards Muslims. These features include a perception of Islam as a monolithic entity, static and unresponsive to change, adherents to Islam cast as separate and the “other,” the perception that these adherents possess value systems in conflict with those of other cultures, a characterization of Islam as barbaric, irrational, and violent, and the sentiment that anti-Muslim prejudice is natural or normal. This suggests that Islam is fertile ground for exploring the underlying bases of prejudice and hostility towards a group identified as separate and homogeneous.

Gibbon (2005) provides a more precise analysis of some of these features, analyzing responses from a 2003 Religion and Diversity Survey. The author constructs an “Islamophobia” scale by summing responses to a question asked in the Religion and Diversity Survey: “Please tell me if you think each of these words applies to the Muslim Religion” followed by negative words (e.g., backward, closed-minded, fanatical, violent, strange) and positive words (e.g., tolerant, appealing, peace-loving). Gibbon found that Islamophobia was most highly correlated with religious particularism, a belief in the exclusive authenticity of one’s own religion (e.g., “Christianity is the best way to understand God”). Islamophobia is also highly correlated with lack of contact with Muslims and with

nativist orientation, the idea that America has a superior way of life and that immigrants should “learn to be like Americans.” Of interest is that “Islamophobia” was not correlated with fear of terrorism, supporting my position that “Islamophobia” is a phenomenon with deeper origins than reactions to violent extremism.

These sociological findings suggest that Islamophobia is a measurable phenomenon. Accordingly, recent research has attempted to document prejudice against Muslims and Arabs as distinct from other types of racial and religious prejudice (Altareb, 1998; Ecchebarria-Echabe & Fernandez-Guede, 2007; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Yet despite the proliferation of measures documenting anti-Muslim or anti-Arab prejudice, the only known anti-Islamophobia intervention was not informed by precise social-psychological principles. Zine (2004) created a multi-media resource kit that was used in 75 anti-Islamophobia workshops in schools across Ontario. The resource kit contained historical vignettes highlighting the contributions of Muslim societies to world culture and knowledge, media literacy where students were taught to analyze political cartoons related to Islam and Muslims, and interactive exercises where a Muslim woman is depicted as a self-sufficient soccer captain. Although Zine’s intervention is admirable for its multi-pronged approach to reducing “Islamophobia,” the researchers did not empirically measure whether the intervention reduced anti-Muslim prejudice. In addition, the plethora of techniques used in the anti-Islamophobia research kit makes it impossible to determine which specific portrayals of Muslims are most effective in reducing prejudice. Therefore, I suggest a role for a more precise theoretical analysis of the issue at hand by isolating the specific mechanisms by which “Islamophobia” may operate.

The Runnymede Report and Gibbon sociological study suggests several psychological mechanisms that an anti-Islamophobia intervention could target. In the present review, I will focus on the first attitude towards Islam documented in the Runnymede report: the perception of Islam as a monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to change. This attitude captures two perceptions of Islam: the perception of certain groups as monolithic entities rather than pluralistic amalgamations of different beliefs, and the perception of people and groups as static and unresponsive to change.

### “Monolithic”: Entitativity

The term entitativity was first coined by Campbell (1958) to describe the perception that group members are bonded together into a unified, coherent unit (Brewer & Harasty, 1996; Gaertner & Schopler, 1998; Lickel et al., 2000; Yzerbyt, Cornille, & Estrada, 2001). Researchers assert that the defining characteristic of entitativity is the degree of interdependence of its members in terms of common goals, social norms, shared knowledge and interaction (Lickel et al., 2006). Entitativity seems particularly important in understanding anti-Muslim prejudice, because media coverage often reveals the lay perception of Muslim minority groups in Western societies as isolated, interdependent, and sharing common social norms and goals. In addition, among eight religious groups, including Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Atheism, Muslims were assigned some of the highest ratings of entitativity (Toosi & Ambady, in press).

*Entitativity and intergroup relations.* In turn, the belief that a group is high in entitativity is associated with increased endorsement of stereotypes of that group (Bastian & Haslam, 2006), increased attention to stereotype consistent information (Bastian & Haslam, 2007), increased justification of social inequalities (Verkuyten, 2003), accentuation of perceived differences between groups (Yzerbyt & Buidin, 1998), and dispositional attributions for members' behavior (Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Fiske, 1998). More specifically, Lickel et al. (2003) found that entitativity ratings predict group-based responsibility. By examining people's judgments of collective responsibility following the Columbine tragedy, the researchers found that the degree of entitativity assigned to a given group predicted the extent to which that group was blamed for the shooters' actions. Thus, people ascribe more collective blame to a group for an individual group member's actions when the group is perceived as highly entitative.

Stenstrom et al. (2008) extended these findings to show that perceptions of an outgroup as high in entitativity predict levels of vicarious retribution, in which a person seeks retribution against an outgroup's members, even if those members were not the perpetrators of the original attack. In other words, even if people know that only one or two Muslim terrorists were responsible for a specific attack, they are more likely to seek retribution against Muslims in general if Muslims are per-

ceived as highly entitative. Since many lay theories about the origins of “Islamophobia” trace anti-Muslim prejudice and anxiety to terrorist attacks such as 9/11, the July 2005 London bombings, or Palestinian suicide bombers, understanding the process by which people apply collective blame and seek vicarious retribution against Muslims is a salient concern. Newheiser, Tausch, Dovidio and Jewstone (2009) found that anti-Muslim prejudice *predicts* the degree of entitativity participants assigned to Muslims, suggesting that harboring prejudicial attitudes towards a group may precede categorizing the group as a cohesive unit, but the researchers point to the importance of further experimental research teasing out the causal link between prejudice and entitativity.

*Rationality perceptions and intergroup relations.* Another line of research that could inform an anti-Islamophobia intervention is work on the degree of bias and rationality people impute to terrorists. Since anti-Muslim prejudice could stem from generalizations of religiously motivated terrorist acts to the entire religious group, it is important to understand how these terrorists are perceived. Pronin et al. (2006) identified two distinct perceptions of terrorists found in previous research (Crenshaw, 1998; Pape, 2005; Post, 2005; Margalit, 2003; Merari, 2004). The first perception is that terrorists are irrational fanatics who are battling for revenge, symbolic immortality, and the promise of a paradise in the afterlife. From this perspective, terrorist actions are viewed as biased by unbridled hatred, radical ideology, and an extreme pressure to conform to group ideals. The second perception is that terrorists are rational warriors who are fighting for a specific cause with specific goals in mind. From this perspective, their actions are viewed as rooted in an objective analysis of their circumstances and the options they believe are available to them.

Pronin found that when participants were presented with depictions of terrorists that described their decision-making as distorted by irrationality and bias (versus rooted in rationality and objectivity), participants were more likely to advocate military action against terrorism and less likely to advocate diplomacy. This finding suggests that perceiving members of a group—even terrorists within that group—as motivated by rationality, rather than by irrationality and bias, may lead to more diplomatic attitudes. Thus, an anti-Islamophobia intervention may be able to decrease the tendency to universalize terrorist acts to the entire group by presenting terrorist acts as the result of rational,

long-deliberated decisions made by individual Muslims rather than as stemming from an entire religion that promotes violence in all of its believers.

“Static and unresponsive to change”: static versus dynamic theories of group perception

The second sociologically documented feature of Islam is its perceived non-malleability. Dweck (1999) has shown that lay theories of characteristics as fixed (*entity implicit theory*) or dynamic (*incremental implicit theory*) are relevant across numerous content domains and may refer to a specific attribute (e.g. intelligence, morality), to personal attributes as a whole (i.e. “person” theory), or to one’s social world. Stemming from this research, Levy et al. (2001) found that entity and incremental beliefs about human nature are associated with important differences in key aspects of group perception and behavior. According to their findings, an entity view of human nature is often more likely than an incremental view to elicit the following:

*Greater stereotype endorsement.* Entity theorists more strongly endorse both positive and negative stereotypes, even towards novel groups to which participants have had no exposure (Levy et al., 1998). In addition to endorsing stereotypes more strongly, entity theorists show higher endorsement of *negative* stereotypes than incremental theorists when intergroup conflict is salient (Chiu & Hong, 1999; Chow, 1996; Hong & Yeung, 1997). To investigate this phenomenon, Levy et al. (1998) asked U.S. college students to list every stereotype that came to mind of different ethnic groups, including African-Americans and Latinos, and then to evaluate how personally true they thought each one was. Both entity and incremental theorists were *aware* of a similar number of ethnic stereotypes, but entity person theorists endorsed the stereotypes more strongly than their incremental theorist counterparts. Stemming from these findings, the researchers hypothesize that although entity theorists do not have a tendency to evaluate others more negatively, they *do* react more negatively towards outgroups when intergroup conflict is salient (Chiu & Hong, 1999). This is because entity theorists view wrongdoing as the result of stable, dispositional factors, so they may attribute a conflict to permanent, violent tendencies rather than malleable situational factors. Future research could investigate whether inducing an entity view of human nature leads to decreased endorsement of negative stereotypes about Muslims.

*Greater perceived outgroup homogeneity effects.* Entity theorists also judge a novel group to be more internally similar than incremental theorists, in that entity theorists believe that the behaviors of some group members reflect on the group as a whole (Levy et al., 1998; Levy & Dweck, 1999). For example, Chow (1996) asked college students from Hong Kong to list stereotypes of Mainland Chinese, a population the students cast as an outgroup, and had the students indicate how many individuals out of 100 Mainland Chinese citizens possessed the listed attributes. Entity theorists reported that a greater percentage of Mainland Chinese citizens possessed the stereotypical traits, whether positive or negative. They tended to view the group as more internally similar, suggesting that the behavior of a few group members reflects on the group as a whole. This element of group stativity aligns with the perception of Islam as monolithic; Muslims are cast as a homogenous outgroup, and the actions of a few extremist members result in the derogation of the entire group.

*More susceptibility to the ultimate attribution error.* This tendency to perceive outgroup homogeneity is closely related to a cognitive bias in which individuals attribute a group’s negative actions to stable, dispositional factors rather than to situational features of their environment, defined as the ultimate attribution error (Pettigrew, 1979). For example, one could attribute a group’s terrorism to a stable tendency towards violence instead of attributing violent acts to a situation in which the perpetrator felt that terrorism was the only solution. Levy argues that entity theorists are more susceptible to the ultimate attribution error than incremental theorists, because entity theorists attribute the presence of group traits more to innate dispositional factors and less to shared environment and experiences than incremental theorists. Thus, when asked to explain a group’s behavior, entity theorists are much more likely to attribute the behavior to fixed, stereotypical characteristics rather than to malleable factors in one’s environment (Hong, 1994; Levy et al., 1998, Study 2; Levy & Dweck, 1999). In other words, when an individual Muslim engages in violence or terrorism, entity theorists are likely to attribute this behavior to violent tendencies that they believe are innate, present within the entire group, and fixed. In this sense, an intervention that fosters incremental beliefs about people’s characteristics, such as those conducted by Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck (2007) or Yeager et al. (2011), may help individuals to recognize that certain traits are neither fixed nor uni-

versal. Therefore, if a Muslim extremist commits an act of terrorism, the act may no longer be seen as a reflection of fixed, violent tendencies of the entire religious/cultural group; instead, violent actions may be attributed to factors that change over time and are specific to a given terrorist's situation.

*More biased behavior towards outgroup members.* Negative attitudes towards Muslims can culminate in acts of overt discrimination, as evidenced by incidents such as the protest at the Muslim community fundraiser or a Florida pastor's attempt to burn a Koran. Tracing this phenomenon back to theoretical conceptions of groups as fixed versus malleable, it appears that entity theorists often exhibit more biased behavior that negatively affects members of a given outgroup. Chow (1996) investigated discriminatory actions by presenting college students with a fictional newspaper clipping in which a 13-year old was dealt a fatal blow to the head by a 16-year old defendant. The article described both the perpetrator's ethnic information—one condition cast the perpetrator as a member of the outgroup Mainland Chinese and another condition cast him as a member of the ingroup of Hong Kong citizens—and also provided information on his social situation by describing how he came from a poor family and was largely neglected by his parents. Participants were then asked to recommend a jail sentence for the perpetrator should he be found guilty. Entity theorists recommended significantly longer sentences for the outgroup defendant (around 54 months) than for the ingroup defendant (39 months). In contrast, incremental theorists assigned roughly equal sentences on average to the ingroup and outgroup defendant. Overall, these findings suggest that holding an entity theory of people's characteristics as fixed and static is associated with not only biased attitudes but also biased behaviors. Thus, if the goal of an anti-Islamophobia intervention is to counteract overtly prejudiced behaviors towards Muslims, one possible solution may be to induce people to become incremental theorists by training them to perceive human nature as malleable rather than fixed.

### Conclusion: An Anti-Islamophobia Intervention

My review proposes a novel theoretical framework for changing a sociologically documented perception of Islam: the religious/cultural group as a monolithic entity that is static and unresponsive to

change. A promising direction for future research would be a social-psychological intervention designed to change "Islamophobic" attitudes that draws upon two research traditions—studies of group essentialism and studies of individuals' malleability—in order to invoke the following perception of Islam and its members: Islam is a heterogeneous composition of individual believers rather than a homogeneous entity in which all believers are viewed as a monolithic block, and individual Muslim believers and their characteristics are dynamic rather than fixed; they are not static entities with fixed personalities and instead dynamically change and adapt to new situations. A rich research literature has documented the efficacy of incremental implicit theory interventions, which present participants with the idea that one's intelligence or personality is malleable (Hong et al., 2004; Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Yeager, Trzesniewski, Tirri, Nokelainen, & Dweck, 2011). In addition, holding an incremental implicit theory of moral character may decrease stereotype endorsement, perceived outgroup homogeneity, susceptibility to the ultimate attribution error, and biased behavior towards outgroup members (Chiu & Hong, 1999; Chow, 1996; Hong & Yeung, 1997; Levy, 2001). Furthermore, perceiving groups as less entitative may decrease endorsement of stereotypes, attention to stereotype consistent information, justification of social inequalities, and perceived differences between groups. Thus, an intervention designed to foster an incremental theory of moral character and a perception of Islam as a pluralistic amalgamation of individual believers rather than a monolithic entity may be effective in combating Islamophobia.

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