



Sociology, Politics and
International Studies

Islamophobia: A Form of Cultural Racism

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A Submission to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims in response to the call for evidence on 'Working Definition of Islamophobia, 1 June, 2018.

Proposed Working Definition of Islamophobia:

Islamophobia is the racialising of Muslims based on physical appearance or descent as members of a community and attributing to them cultural or religious characteristics to vilify, marginalise, discriminate or demand assimilation and thereby treat them as second class citizens.

It was not very long ago that Anglophone scholars of racism understood it in terms of biology, and specifically in terms of the black-white binary. At the same time, other scholars, especially in continental Europe, understood racism in terms of anti-semitism, especially in the recent biologised forms that Europe has manifested. When it began to be clear that these two paradigms were failing to capture some contemporary experiences, such as anti-Asian cultural racism in Britain or anti-Arab cultural racism in France, some scholars began to move away from these paradigms.¹ Yet, following the assertive Muslim agency triggered off by *The Satanic Verses* affair and other Muslim controversies, as Muslims responded to such hostilities and articulated their misrecognition, they were constantly told, especially in Britain, that there is no such thing as anti-Muslim racism because Muslims are a religious group and not a race. Hence Muslims could legitimately ask for toleration and religious pluralism but not for inclusion in anti-racist egalitarian analyses and initiatives. While this view continues to be expressed even today, and some deny that there is a racism that could be labelled ‘Islamophobia’, it no longer has the hegemony it once had.

While a number of Anglophone authors, including myself, started using the concept of Islamophobia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was the Runnymede Trust, with its 1997 report, *‘Islamophobia: a challenge to us all’*, which launched the career of the term as a concept of public discourse in Britain and much beyond it. It presented Islamophobia as ‘a useful shorthand way of referring to dread or fear of Islam – and therefore to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims’. While the report was groundbreaking and played a crucial role in getting people to think about anti-Muslim prejudice I felt it did not sufficiently locate Islamophobia as a racism, like say, anti-semitism. I continued to write about Islamophobia as a form of cultural racism, which may be built on racism based on physical appearance (eg., colour-racism) but was a form of racism in its own right – like anti-semitism.² This also became the approach of UNESCO and I am pleased to see that it has been explicitly embraced by the new Runnymede Trust report of November, 2017.

Islamophobia is a form of cultural racism because while the perception and treatment of Muslims clearly has a religious and cultural dimension it, equally clearly, bears a physical appearance or ancestral component. For while it is true that ‘Muslim’ is not a (putative) biological category in the way that ‘black’ or ‘south Asian’ (aka ‘Paki’), or Chinese is, neither was ‘Jew’. In that instance it took a long non-linear history of racialisation to turn an ethno-religious group into a race. More precisely, the latter did not so much as replace the former but superimposed itself because even though no one denied that Jews were a religious community, with a distinctive language(s), culture(s) and religion, Jews still came to be seen as a race, and with horrific

¹ Introduction and Chapter 1 in Modood, T, *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity and Muslims in Britain*, Edinburgh, 2005.

² Modood, 2005, Intro and chp 1; N. Meer and T. Modood, ‘For “Jewish” Read “Muslim”?’ Islamophobia as a Form of Racialisation of Ethno-Religious Groups in Britain Today’, *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, 1(1), Spring 2012: 36-55.

consequences. Similarly, Bosnian Muslims were ‘ethnically cleansed’ because they came to be identified as a ‘racial’ group, that is to say, as having a perceived line of descent by people who actually were phenotypically, linguistically and culturally the same as themselves. The ethnic cleanser, unlike an Inquisitor, wasted no time in finding out what people believed, if and how often they went to a mosque and so on: their victims were *racially* identified as Muslims in terms of community membership based on a perceived line of descent.

Race, then, as I understand it is not just about biology or even ‘colour’, for while racialization has to pick on some features of a people related to physical appearance and ancestry (otherwise racism cannot be distinguished from other forms of groupism) it need only be a marker. This is illustrated in the conceptualisation of cultural racism as what I have called a two step process.³ While biological racism is the antipathy, exclusion and unequal treatment of people on the basis of their physical appearance or other imputed physical differences, saliently in Britain their non ‘whiteness’, cultural racism builds on biological racism a further discourse which evokes cultural differences from an alleged British, ‘civilised’ norm to vilify, marginalise or demand cultural assimilation from groups who may also suffer from biological racism. As white people’s interactions with non-white individuals increased, they did not become necessarily less conscious of group differences but they were far more likely to ascribe group differences to upbringing, customs, forms of socialisation and self-identity than to biological heredity.

Cultures and cultural practices are usually internally diverse, containing and omitting various “authentic” elements, and adaptations and mixes. So to racially group all Jews or Muslims together as one cultural ‘race’ or as one ethnoreligious entity, it follows that the culturalized targeting is expansive, rather than purist, aiming to catch most if not all cultural minorities in that targeted group. For example, a non-religious Muslim might still be targeted as a cultural Muslim or Muslim by community, which of course means Muslim by background, which means birth and ancestry. Hence my point that Muslims, no less than Jews, are identified ‘racially’ and not simply in terms of religious beliefs or behaviour. Moreover, if we accept that racism does not necessarily involve attributing qualities which inhere in a deterministic law-like way in all members of a group, then we do not have to rule out cultural racism as an example of racism. As such we should guard against the characterisation of racism as a form of biological determinism which leaves little space to conceive the ways in which *cultural racism* draws upon physical appearance as one marker amongst others.⁴

Danger of Reducing Muslims to Islamophobia

While understanding some contemporary treatment of Muslims and aspects of their societal status in terms of ‘racialisation’ clearly is an advance, we should beware that the conceptualisation of Muslims in the West is not reduced to racialisation or any other ‘Othering’ theoretical frame such as Orientalism. By definition ‘othering’ sees a minority in terms of how a dominant group negatively and stereotypically imagines that minority as something ‘other’, as inferior or threatening, and to be excluded. Indeed, the dominant group typically projects its own fears and anxieties on to the

³ Modood, 2005, Intro and chp 1

⁴ Modood, 2005, Intro and chp 1

minority. Minorities, however, are never merely ‘projections’ of dominant groups but have their own subjectivity and agency through which they challenge how they are (mis)perceived and seek to not be defined by others but to supplant negative and exclusionary stereotypes with positive and prideful identities. Oppressive misrecognitions, thus, sociologically imply and politically demand recognition. Our analyses therefore should be framed in terms of a struggle for ‘recognition’ – the recognition of one’s own identity.⁵

The danger of reducing Muslims to racialised identities is particularly high at the moment because the Islamophobic ‘othering’ of Muslims is acute, and if anything, rising. This can be seen in how aggressive negative portrayals of Muslims is standard in so much rightwing nationalism, whether in President Trump’s Muslim bans, Marine Le Pen’s Front National, Alternative für Deutschland in Germany or in various parties in central and eastern Europe. I do worry, however, that just as in the 1970s and 1980s some anti-racists, including academics, reduced blackness to a form of anti-racism, anti-Islamophobia activism and studies risks seeing Muslims only in terms of racialisation and anti-racialisation. Because like all ethnic or religious groups Muslims are not merely created by their oppressors but have their own sense of identity too. Multicultural inclusivity means recognising and respecting these identities.

Recognition of course does not mean thinking of Muslims as a group with uniform attributes or a single mind-set, all having the same view on religion, personal morality, politics, the international world order and so on. Muslims are just like any other group – they cannot be understood in terms of a single essence. Groups do not have discrete, nor indeed, fixed boundaries as these boundaries may vary across time and place, across social contexts and will be the subject of social construction and social change – and Muslims are no different in this respect. This ‘anti-essentialism’ is rightly deployed in the study of Islamophobia and Muslims. It is a powerful way of handling ascriptive discourses, of showing that various popular or dominant ideas about Muslims, just as in the case of, say, women, gays etc, are not true as such but are aspects of socially constructed images that have been made to stick on to those groups of people because the ascribers are more powerful than the ascribed. Anti-essentialism is an intellectually compelling idea and a powerful resource in the cause of equality.

Reasonable Criticism

Merely identifying the unreasonable and the populist, however, is not enough; our frames of analysis should lead us to the reasonable, to what criticisms may be made of Muslims and/or Islam and what criticisms that Muslims want to make of contemporary western societies too are worthy of hearing.

How, however, are we to distinguish reasonable criticism from Islamophobia? Take the proposition:

‘Muslim views about women are oppressive and not appropriate for modern Britain’.

Is this Islamophobia or reasonable criticism?

⁵ T. Modood, ‘Islamophobia and the Muslim Struggle for Recognition’ in *Islamophobia: Still a Challenge for us All*, Runnymede Trust, 2017: 66-68.

My suggestion is that we should apply the following five tests:

1. Does it *stereotype* Muslims by assuming they all think the same?

- Does the criticism(s) seem to suggest that all or most Muslims have this blameworthy characteristic and that this feature defines Muslims, indeed drowns out any worthy characteristics and ignores contextual factors?

2. Is it *about* Muslims or a dialogue *with* Muslims, which they would wish to join in?

- Does the mode of criticism consist of generalising about a group in a way that tends to exclude them rather than treat them as conversational partners who share common concerns?

3. Is mutual learning possible?

- For example, one may criticise some Muslims for sexual conservatism or puritanism but is one willing to listen to those Muslims who think that contemporary societies like Britain are over-sexualised and encourage sexually predatory and undignified behaviour?⁶

4. Is the language civil and contextually appropriate?

- Is the behaviour or practice being criticised in an offensive way and seems to make Muslims the target rather than stick to the issue? (A good analogy is here is how reasonable, contextual criticism of Zionism can become a diatribe against Jewish people as such.)

5. Insincere criticism for ulterior motives?

- Does the person doing the criticism really care about the issue or is using it to attack Muslims (in the way that many use feminism and homosexuality)?

If the answer to any of the five is a 'Yes' then we may be dealing with Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism.

Conclusion

Proposed Working Definition of Islamophobia, which may not capture everything meant by 'Islamophobia' but which captures the core features of the contemporary phenomena for Muslims in Britain:

Islamophobia is the racialising of Muslims based on physical appearance or descent as members of a community and attributing to them cultural or religious characteristics to vilify, marginalise, discriminate or demand assimilation and thereby treat them as second class citizens.

⁶ In the post-Harvey Weinstein and #MeToo climate it might be easier to understand the point here than it might have been a few years ago.

References

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