Racism and Islamophobia

Islamophobia is a relatively new word in the English language: the realities it refers to, however, have been around in European cultures and societies for many centuries.

A major report into the phenomenon of Islamophobia, by the Runnymede Trust in 1998, defined Islamophobia as dread, hatred and hostility towards Islam and Muslims perpetuated by a series of ‘closed views’ that imply and attribute negative and derogatory stereotypes and beliefs to Muslims. This dread, hatred and hostility can, and indeed is, expressed towards Muslims in a range of ways, including:

- negative or patronising images and references in the media, and in everyday conversations
- attacks, abuse and violence on the streets
- attacks on mosques and cemeteries
- discrimination in employment
- lack of provision, recognition and respect for Muslims in most public institutions

Over recent years, the identifier for prejudice and discrimination has been seen to shift towards religion than race, colour or nationality. However, Islamophobia has similarities with these other forms of European prejudice – racism based on colour and physical appearance, for example, and anti-Gypsy racism and anti-Semitism:

- it involves ignorance and misinformation, often sustained and perpetuated by sectional interest groups.
- it involves attributing the whole community with the same negative qualities without differentiation, although these may be observable in only a few from that community.
- it is manifested in a variety of ways – it can be malicious and direct, but also subtle and indirect, can be expressed through institutional practices as well as by individuals, and completely unintended at the level of the individual perpetrator.
- it is all-pervasive – it can and does affect all aspects of daily Muslim living in Britain.

Furthermore, as with the inaccuracy of such terms as ‘antisemitism’, to describe the anti-Jewish hostility that developed in the late nineteenth century, ‘Islamophobia’ bears many similar hallmarks.

Tackling Islamophobia, however, can never be a mandate for stifling free and fair comment. It is not Islamophobic to disagree or disapprove of Muslim beliefs, practices or actions. Indeed, within the Muslim community, both in Britain and globally, it is recognised that disagreements, discussions and debates are an important part of contemporary Islam and Muslim societies, and absolute requisites to maintain the relevance of Islam. Legitimate disagreement and criticism by non-Muslims, is therefore, not only expected but appreciated. However, we would urge that this is done sensibly and sensitively.

Further Reading
