

Chapter 11

Towards a New Definition of Islamophobia

Having concluded upon the existence of a 'certain identifiable phenomenon' and that at this present juncture, 'Islamophobia' is the best, if not only, terminology with which such a phenomenon can be reasonably identified, it is necessary therefore, in an attempt to lessen the problems associated with it being a contested concept, to put forward a new definition and conceptualisation. To do so however will not be to repeat the mistakes of the past, and so it will be worthless merely constructing a new set of criteria through which it might be purported that any given discourse, act or event be identified as Islamophobic or otherwise. To do so would simply continue to obscure the asymmetric multi-dimensions, specificities, complexities and embeddedness of the phenomenon. Any conclusion must therefore begin to give credence and meaning to that 'certain identifiable phenomenon'.

To achieve this and overcome the previously highlighted inadequacies, inconsistencies and inappropriations, a number of pre-requisites have been established, including the need to be able to identify and accommodate diversity and difference without essentialising or reducing, whether self or externally imposed, including those seen to be 'problematic', upon whom blame was/is apportioned, and those attributed with lesser status, for whatever reason. It was also highlighted that Islam must be able to acquire a similar accreditation, overcoming the negation of the reality and diversity of the faith and its expressions, neither employing it as a homogenous common denominator, a substitute for the actions and motivations of Muslims, nor where any claims to the true authenticity of Islam can be made, either by Muslim or non. To achieve this, two essentials needed to be met: first, to identify exactly what needed defining and conceptualising; and secondly, that a solid theoretical foundation underpinned it.

As regards the first, what is established about that 'certain identifiable phenomenon' is that it employs a multitude of products through which meaning about 'Muslims' and 'Islam' is disseminated and through which both are identified, irrespective of whether such products and their disseminative meanings are true or untrue, accurate or inaccurate, discriminate or indiscriminate. Such products can be either separate or interlinked, acquiring myriad forms that incorporate the visual, verbal, linguistic, textual, representational and associative, functioning at times without necessarily even being expressly focused upon Muslims or Islam, or even identifying them directly but instead providing meaning through the shared languages and conceptual maps that already exist in the public and private spaces across the different social strata: shaped not only by contemporary interactions and events but also by historical and atavistic myths and legacies, whether real or imaginary, that reinforce, reinvigorate and re-awaken both passive and active

meanings. These same shared languages and conceptual maps, whilst having similar transferable and transitory disseminative meanings, are contextualised by the social, political, economical, geographical and theological constraints within which they either were or are produced, sometimes taking on a range of different national, linguistic, religious and other dimensions and connotations that are at times unique, and at others concurrent and concomitant.

Secondly, in order that a solid theoretical foundation is established, the different analyses undertaken here – incorporating content, theoretical and practical analyses of the Rumynmede Report and model as well as comparative and correlative analyses of similar theories and phenomena – suggest that three different components of Islamophobia exist. The first is that Islamophobia is an ideology, one that provides meaning about Muslims and Islam in the contemporary setting in similar ways to that which it has historically, although not necessarily as a continuum except in its nature as ideological. That is, that Islam and Muslims are conceived through various systems: thought, belief and symbols, all of which pertain, influence or impact upon social action, interaction, response and so on, shaping and determining understanding, meaning and attitudes in the social consensus: the shared languages and conceptual maps. Being a neutrally conceptualised ideology, so new relationships of interaction, power and meaning that relate to the thought of the Other, the relations of power, and the interaction between ingroup and outgroup exist. Islamophobia thus avoids the tendency to be understood solely in terms of power struggles institutionalised in the modern state, primarily through class and exclusionary practices only. Whilst such remain vitally important, in the contemporary setting, those such as the media can be as equally if not more influential and so Islamophobia cannot be restricted to explicit and direct relationships of power and domination but instead, and possibly even more importantly, to the less explicit and everyday relationships of power that we contemporarily encounter in the classroom, office, factory and so on, and as before, the media whilst not negating those more historically understood relationships, for example those constructed around class. Of equal importance is that Islamophobia does not equate solely in terms of pure illusion. Instead, Islamophobia can be identified in that which is real as indeed it can in that which is clearly not, a line that is increasingly difficult to identify in today's 'mediatised' world.

If Islamophobia is therefore ideological, then it must operate and function as such, where ideological content – meaning about Muslims and Islam – must be disseminated to the public and private spaces through a vast range of different actions, utterances, images and texts, that must also subsequently be recognised and digested as meaningful by its recipients: both dissemination and reception being as equally important and necessary. To achieve this, the second component of Islamophobia is the 'modes of operation' through which meaning is sustained and perpetuated. It is imperative to stress though, that modes of operation are not equatable with the symbolic forms through which Muslims and Islam are either identified or recognised. The modes of operation relevant to Islamophobia therefore include: legitimating, dissimulation, unification, fragmentation and

reification, each of which is made up of a range of strategies that contribute to the sustaining and perpetuating of such meaning including: rationalisation, universalisation and narrativisation; displacement, euphemisation and trope; standardisation and the symbolisation of unity; differentiation and the expurgation of the Other; naturalisation, eternalisation and passivisation respectively. These are not the only modes and strategies nor are they concretised or unchanging, thus suggesting that new modes and strategies may at some stage appear whilst others may similarly disappear, be replaced or substituted. Neither the modes nor strategies are in themselves ideological in that they only sustain ideological meaning, whether intentional or otherwise.

The final component of Islamophobia is exclusionary practices: practices that disadvantage, prejudice or discriminate against Muslims and Islam in social, economic and political spheres. Exclusionary practices must also include the subjection to violence as a tool of exclusion. However, as yet, such exclusionary practices remain far from being empirically proven, a situation that desperately requires additional research be undertaken; firstly to identify and subsequently substantiate their existence; and secondly to necessarily shift the evidence for such away from the anecdotal and over-inflationary. It is recommended that this be the next stage for developing research into Islamophobia and its consequences. Despite empirical evidence being at present wanting, it would seem theoretically fair to presume that Islamophobic exclusionary practices do exist.

If this establishes the necessary theoretical foundation required, what then the 'symbolic forms' that were previously so integral to understanding and conceptualising Islamophobia? Symbolic forms encompass a broad range of utterances, images and texts encompassing the linguistic, either spoken or inscribed, non-linguistic or quasi-linguistic in nature. Such forms therefore have to be relayed, produced or constructed before being disseminated, in order that they are eventually recognised and decoded in the process of reception by others as meaningful, whether real, accurate, erroneous or illusory. Again it is important to stress that unlike previous conceptualisations, ideological content is not only to be found in symbolic forms that are 'unfounded', but also in those deemed to be 'founded', incorporating that which is real and that which is not. Islamophobia therefore is not a purely false doctrine, dependent solely upon misunderstandings and inaccuracies. Consequently, it is neither essential nor necessary for symbolic forms to be incorrect or inaccurate, illusory or erroneous for them to be employed ideologically. It is therefore quite irrelevant and unnecessary to demonstrate if, why or how certain symbolic forms are false or inaccurate, or even to make claims about what might be true or accurate, because both are to little or no avail.

Despite being so integral to previous conceptualisations therefore, symbolic forms find no place in this new ideological conceptualisation. As considered previously, symbolic forms are also socially, politically, geographically, economically, historically and theologically specific, specific that is to the contextual setting within which they are produced, constructed, recognised and decoded, where the ideological content they disseminate and the processes involved in their

subsequent reception creatively and constantly re-interpreting and re-evaluating the symbolic forms in order to 'make sense' for that specific contextual setting. In explanation, whilst a range of recurrent and repetitively employed symbolic forms can be identified, quite irrespective of the symbolic form being employed – for example 'fundamentalist', 'extremist', 'fanatic', 'radical' or as has recently entered popular discourse, 'Islamist' – the *meaning* underlying the symbolic form and the *modes* and *strategies* employed through which this is sustained and perpetuated remains largely the same. What is therefore happening is that the same meaning is being sustained across different symbolic forms, something that occurs quite irrespective of the symbolic form, thus constituting the form quite arbitrary. Placing too great an emphasis on the symbolic form therefore can only detract from understanding what Islamophobia is, thus causing further confusion and greater contestation.

Islamophobia: 'a new definition'

Having offered a conceptualisation of Islamophobia, in returning to the primary research question therefore: what then is Islamophobia? How might Islamophobia be defined?

Islamophobia is an ideology, similar in theory, function and purpose to racism and other similar phenomena, that sustains and perpetuates negatively evaluated meaning about Muslims and Islam in the contemporary setting in similar ways to that which it has historically, although not necessarily as a continuum, subsequently pertaining, influencing and impacting upon social action, interaction, response and so on, shaping and determining understanding, perceptions and attitudes in the social consensus – the shared languages and conceptual maps – that inform and construct thinking about Muslims and Islam as Other. Neither restricted to explicit nor direct relationships of power and domination but instead, and possibly even more importantly, in the less explicit and everyday relationships of power that we contemporarily encounter, identified both in that which is real and that which is clearly not, both of which can be extremely difficult to differentiate between. As a consequence of this, exclusionary practices – practices that disadvantage, prejudice or discriminate against Muslims and Islam in social, economic and political spheres ensue, including the subjection to violence – are in evidence. For such to be Islamophobia however, an acknowledged 'Muslim' or 'Islamic' element – either explicit or implicit, overtly expressed or covertly hidden, or merely even nuanced through meanings that are 'theological', 'social', 'cultural', 'racial' and so on, that at times never even necessarily name or identify 'Muslims' or 'Islam' – must be present.

PART 6 Conclusion