

Anti-Muslim hate must be challenged. Silencing criticism of Islam won't help

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Both the Government and civil-society have a role to play in challenging anti-Muslim hate, but efforts to silence criticisms of Islam will only be counterproductive, argues Stephen Evans.

In the wake of yet more manifestations of violent Islamism and anti-Muslim bigotry, the Government used this week's Queen's Speech to signal its intention to introduce new legislation to counter so-called 'non-violent extremism'.

Despite this being a preoccupation of the Government for some years now, ministers have consistently failed to identify any clear gaps in the legislative framework that any new laws could fill.

This is unsurprising given that the UK already has in place one of the strongest legislative frameworks in the world to protect people from hostility, violence and bigotry. A point the Government readily acknowledges. Nevertheless, their urge to pass to new laws appears as strong as ever.

Earlier this year, Home Secretary Amber Rudd [admitted](#) that plans for more counter-extremism legislation have not advanced because of lack of a clear legal definition of extremism. It is therefore concerning that in her response to the dreadful attack in Finsbury Park this week, Theresa May described 'Islamophobia' as [a form of extremism](#), suggesting it was "every bit as destructive of our values and way of life" as violent Islamism.

If you're seeking a clear legal definition of extremism, it seems incredibly unwise to throw 'Islamophobia' into the mix. Islamophobia is a highly problematic word. According the Oxford English Dictionary, Islamophobia is defined both as "Intense dislike or fear of Islam, esp. as a political force"; and "hostility or prejudice towards Muslims".

Any right-minded person would deplore hostility or prejudice towards Muslims, but are we really going to brand 'dislike of Islamic theocracy' as a form of extremism? This is ludicrous and dangerous nonsense. In a liberal, secular society, individuals should be afforded respect and protection, ideas should not.

[As the writer Kenan Malik puts it](#), "The trouble with Islamophobia is that it is an irrational concept. It confuses hatred of, and discrimination against, Muslims on the one hand with criticism of Islam on the other. The charge of 'Islamophobia' is all too often used not to highlight racism but to stifle criticism....All too often Islamophobia is used as an excuse in a way to kind of blackmail society".

Just two days before he was murdered by violent Islamists, Charlie Hebdo's editor, Stéphane Charbonnier, completed a short book in which he rallied against the term, describing 'Islamophobia' as a trap, set by an unholy alliance of Islamist radicals and the unthinking, liberal Western media. He's right – and by conflating prejudice against Muslims with criticism of Islam, we seriously risk a return to a censorious blasphemy law.

As David Anderson QC, the senior lawyer tasked with reviewing the Government's legislation on counter-extremism, has [noted](#), "the answer to extremism is not to be found in undermining the foundations of democracy". Free speech, including the right to mock, insult, ridicule and criticise religion, is the bedrock of genuinely free society.

Hostility towards Muslims on the basis of their faith is unacceptable. But concern over Islam, and its influence on society is understandable. If any form of ideology fosters its tenets into people's beliefs, and thus into their actions, people have every right to be concerned about exactly what those ideologies teach.

Immediately after the murderous attack on Charlie Hebdo, the BBC conducted an [opinion poll of the views of the British Muslims](#). It found that one in four sympathised with terrorists behind the attacks. 10% of UK Muslims aged 18-34 agreed with the statement that "organisations which publish images of the Prophet Mohammed deserve to be attacked".

A more [recent poll commissioned by Channel 4](#) found that 52% of British Muslims thought homosexuality should be illegal and 23% supported the introduction of Sharia Law.

Clearly there is no homogenous British Muslim community. There are Muslims who view their faith as compatible with human rights and secular liberal democracy. There are Muslims who view their faith as a theocratic edict. There are British Muslims working every day working to challenge bigotry, and there are British Muslims promoting sectarianism and intolerance.

But in the face of these findings, a certain degree of social anxiety and scepticism about Islam is understandable – even healthy, one might suggest. Civil society is right to call out anti-Muslim bigotry whenever it rears its ugly head, but if your response to anyone raising concerns about the influence of Islam in Britain is to simply point and shout "Islamophobia", then you're doing nothing to help the many British Muslims who are just as repulsed by this vile theocratic mindset as the rest of us.

And if the Government really plans to use the law to stamp out 'Islamophobia', then we have very serious problem. Ordinary people risk being criminalised because their views don't fit the Government's accepted interpretation of Islam or ideological straitjacket of 'British values'.

Showing a healthy lack of deference to religion *is* a modern British value. Secularism has long challenged religion's desire to control every aspect of people's lives. Secularism has dismantled religion's control over women's reproductive rights, its control of who can marry, who can have sex, who is permitted to sit Parliament, what we can or cannot say about religion.

In Britain, those battle have primarily been fought against Christianity. The growing presence of Islam in the West means many of these battles may need to be re-fought. Now is not the time to give up our own traditions of free speech and inquiry.

If we allow the concept of 'Islamophobia' to close down discussions about Islam we will be giving one religion an unfair and dangerous advantage in the free marketplace of ideas.

Challenging extremism and those that seek to ferment division and hatred is the duty of all responsible members of society. As we've seen this week, anti-Muslim hatred can lead to anti-Muslim violence. This must not be tolerated. At the same time, we must allow space for reasonable concerns to be expressed about Islam, in all its forms, and its influence on the society we all share. Closing down such dialogue and debate risks feeding a grievance narrative and pushing people to the extremes.

The Government knows full well how difficult it is to legislate non-violent extremism away. After years of struggling to think up news laws, perhaps this is why it has now passed the buck to a new 'commission for countering extremism'. But one thing is certain, any strategy to tackle anti-Muslim hate must not go down the road of seeking to silence criticism of Islam. To do so would be to deny a basic human right.

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