

# Islamophobia: Unpacking a very difficult question...

Some say 'Islamophobia' is a form of racism. Others say there is plenty to hate and fear in Islamic theology.

Islamic fundamentalists try to threaten and silence any criticism or mockery of Islam, while tabloid newspapers print scare stories demonising ordinary Muslims with regularity.

And of course, the far-right use supposed opposition to "Islam" as a proxy for racism.

In the meantime, secularists are hoping for an honest discussion about a religion with increasing influence in the social and political life of the country.

Yes, there is a lot to talk about.

## Secular Charter

### The creation of a just and equitable secular society in Britain

The National Secular Society seeks a society in which religion and the State are distinctly separated, and where human rights always take precedence over religious demands. We would like to see the following ten objectives incorporated into a written, secular constitution:

- There should be no established state religion.
- The state should not fund religious activities.
- The state should not fund religious proselytising in any form and the provision of all services using public money should be religiously neutral.
- The state should not prescribe, proscribe, or amend religious doctrine.
- The state should not interfere in religious hierarchies, nor interfere in issues strictly related to membership.
- No action by the state should have the primary effect of engaging in religious practice.
- No state action should have the primary effect of restricting religious practice.
- The state should not express any religious beliefs, or in any publication, speech, or other implement of state power such as currency, sworn testimony, oath of fealty to the state, or endorsements of national pride. The state should not imply any derivation of authority from any religious authority, nor should it express temporal supremacy in relation to religious belief or practice.
- Political leaders should not express religious preferences in the course of their duties.
- No religion or denomination should have the power to prescribe, proscribe, or amend civil or common law.

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# UNPACKING ISLAMOPHOBIA

# Unpacking Islamophobia

There is no doubt that Muslims - like any other minority - do suffer unfair discrimination and bigotry. In the effort to define and address the problem, particularly in the wake of the 9/11 and 7/7 atrocities that increasingly linked Islam with terrorism in the public's mind, the term "Islamophobia" was coined. This term was soon linked to racism.

Atheists treat religious ideas no differently from any other. Whether it is philosophy, politics, economics, religion, city planning, or filling a hole, there are good ideas and bad ideas. While *people* should be protected from persecution and discrimination, *ideas* are fair game. Like Christianity, or Buddhism, or Scientology, Islam is just a set of ideas.

A bigot may refuse to sit next to a Muslim woman on the bus, but there is nothing bigoted or 'Islamophobic' about criticising an Islamic view of a woman's court testimony. It should be considered no worse questioning an Islamic idea than it is critiquing a political party's election manifesto.

Unfortunately, too often those criticising religious ideas - or even failing to treat them with sufficient reverence - have attracted accusations of 'Islamophobia' (and by implication 'racism').

Gay Rights campaigner Peter Tatchell was called an Islamophobe for criticising Muslim cleric Yusuf Qaradawi's views on LGBT people. Iranian feminist Maryam Namazie was called an Islamophobe for campaigning against the hijab. Even liberal Muslims like Irshad Manji have been branded Islamophobes!

Almost all public debate concerning any Islamic belief or practice is silenced, derailed or shrouded by accusations of "Islamophobia". The political Islamist movement is most adept at making false 'racism' charges against its critics.

What's worse is that many far-left political groups now join in the chorus of accusations and act as enablers for the real bigots. Left-wing groups would not hesitate to describe the misogyny, homophobia and social conservatism of the Catholic Church as "reactionary", but they are quite willing to turn a blind eye to the same attitudes and behaviour in parts of the Muslim community in the name of "resisting Islamophobia".

Far from combatting prejudice and bigotry, bogus cries of 'Islamophobia' in fact become a cover for it. Most regrettably, it cuts off victims - principally women - from outside support. In effect it puts discussion of Islam off limits. This cannot be healthy for any community or for wider society. Without feedback, without *criticism*, there is no growth or progress.

Yes, many Muslims face bigotry and discrimination and it must be incredibly oppressive to read all the bad press Muslims get - some very unfair. But there is a lot in Islam to criticise: attitudes to women, sexual minorities and non-believers are frequently at odds with a modern secular liberal society.

**There is a lot to talk about, but we can't have an honest and open debate if terms like "Islamophobia" are used cynically to silence important parts of the conversation.**

## Scrap the term "Islamophobia"

It is true that many Muslims face discrimination and bigotry and may be victims of racism. But the term "Islamophobia" is not an appropriate description of this problem. The expression "**anti-Muslim bigotry**" is a more suitable alternative, or - where race is really the issue - just '**racism**'. Islamophobia is about a fear of an ideology, but people must be free to challenge, fear and even hate ideologies. The term "Islamophobia" pathologises a legitimate response to an ideology that many might find unsatisfactory, particularly when the human rights records of Muslim-majority countries are reviewed, or the demands of the political Islamist movement are analysed, or the socially-conservative values of mainstream Islam are considered.

## Islamophobia's "Chilling Effect"

Much like the threat of expensive libel litigation has a "chilling effect" on free speech, so critics of religion, particularly Islam, are silenced by fears of violent reactions. These are not unfounded fears. Author Salman Rushdie had to go into hiding after upsetting Muslim fundamentalists and film director Theo van Gogh was murdered in the street for the same 'crime'.

But there is a new way to silence Islam's critics and that is the redefinition of Islam (a religion) as a race, rendering all critics "racists". Indeed one website - Islamophobia-watch - defines Islamophobia as "Anti-Muslim Racism". The fear of unfairly being branded a racist - and the social consequences in today's society - effectively shuts people up.



## Far-right uses religion as a proxy for racism

The far-right racist British National Party (BNP) is making a concerted effort to frame its war against immigrants and non-white British people as a religious war. Fascist parties use religion as a proxy for racism. The BNP borrows the concerns of secularists, humanists and atheists and dresses up its sinister agenda.

This puts legitimate critics of religion in general and Islam in particular into a very difficult position.

Some secularists have concluded that criticising Islam gives aid and comfort to the racists and therefore ought to be toned down if not abandoned altogether. Others worry that they may be confused with the far-right and thought to be racists themselves. Still, some believe that a secular society is worth defending regardless of the consequences.

Secularists who take this principled position must however be ready to confront the racists who stereotype Muslim people and spread dangerous lies about Muslim communities. Examples of these include the fantasy that Muslim immigrants are part of a plot to swamp Europe and annex it to a mythical Caliphate, that Muslims condone rape and practice sexual grooming (particularly of white girls), and that Muslims are principally behind the global drug trade.

