

Response to Home Affairs Committee Islamophobia inquiry

January 2019

About the National Secular Society

1. The National Secular Society works for the separation of religion and state, and for equal respect for everyone's human rights so that no one is either advantaged or disadvantaged on account of their beliefs. We regard secularism and freedom of expression as essential features of a fair and open society.

Opening remarks

2. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Home Affairs Committee Inquiry into Islamophobia. The National Secular Society opposes sectarianism, bigotry and discrimination against individuals or groups because of their religion. Both the Government and civil society have a role to play in challenging the very real phenomenon of anti-Muslim bigotry and hatred. We do however caution against use of the term Islamophobia, due the way in which it confuses and conflates criticism of a religion with anti-Muslim prejudice. We believe that any efforts to silence or stifle criticisms of Islam will be deleterious to free speech and counterproductive to social cohesion.

Distinction between 'anti-Muslim bigotry' and 'Islamophobia'

3. The right to free speech is of paramount importance to free societies. In a liberal, secular democracy individuals should be afforded respect and protection, ideas should not. Freedom of speech and the right to freedom of expression applies to ideas of all kinds and we reject the idea that any set of beliefs should be privileged or protected from criticism.
4. The word 'Islamophobia' has entered common usage, but it conflates legitimate criticism of Islam, or Islamic practices, with anti-Muslim prejudice, bigotry and hatred. There is therefore a pressing need to separate anti-Muslim bigotry from criticism of Islam, both of which are routinely labelled as 'Islamophobic'.
5. Accusations of 'Islamophobia' are often used to silence debate about (and within) Islam and to try and taint people by association. Secularists opposing religious and gender segregation in schools, forced hijab wearing and the non-stun slaughter of animals have all been condemned as 'Islamophobic'.

6. Furthermore, far from combatting prejudice and bigotry, erroneous claims of 'Islamophobia' have become a cover for it. LGBT rights campaigners have been called 'Islamophobes' for criticising the views of Muslim clerics on homosexuality. Meanwhile, ex-Muslims and feminist activists have been called 'Islamophobes' for criticising certain Islamic views and practices relating to women. Even liberal and secular Muslims have been branded 'Islamophobes'. It has become impossible to fight for any internal change in Muslim communities without encountering the slur.
7. The APPG report includes many examples of anti-Muslim bigotry and hate crimes which should be universally condemned. However, the genuine problems identified in the report will only be exacerbated by adopting the vague and unworkable definition of 'Islamophobia' it proposes.
8. The report's core point is that the Government should make it policy to define Islamophobia as "a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness". However, "expressions of Muslimness" can effectively be translated to mean Islamic practices. In a society which is free and open, such practices must remain open to scrutiny and debate.
9. A case in point was a recent decision from Lancashire Council to stop supplying meat from animals that have not been stunned before slaughter from council-supplied school meals. Under this policy, halal meat will still be supplied to meet the dietary preferences of pupils from Muslim backgrounds, but will be from animals slaughtered humanely and in accordance with animal welfare standards. The decision was taken solely on the grounds of animal welfare, yet the council was accused by a spokesperson for the Lancashire Council of Mosques of being both "Islamophobic" and "racist".¹
10. The backers of the APPG's report are keen to stress the need to avoid shutting down criticism of religion. However, advancing the report's ill-defined concept of 'Islamophobia' and aligning it with the five 'tests' it recommends to determine whether speech is 'Islamophobic' will clearly render legitimate commentary and debate about Islam beyond the bounds of reasonable public debate.
11. Whilst it is necessary to confront anti-Muslim bigotry, efforts to do so must not undermine the precious and essential fundamental right to speak freely. Racism and anti-Muslim bigotry need to be challenged, but proposals to promote the vague concept of Islamophobia seriously risk restricting public discussion and making matters worse. The Government must not treat the civil liberties of British citizens as an afterthought in its efforts to tackle anti-Muslim prejudice.

*This consultation was prepared by
Stephen Evans, CEO, National Secular Society*

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/12/lancashire-council-bans-non-stunned-halal-meat-from-schools>