Islamophobia


*Islamophobia*, from its evocative cover to its engaging introduction, immediately draws the reader’s interest through the visual stimuli of an image of an Arab-looking man with stereotypical labels plastered all over his face and its discussion of controversial topics like the French ban of the face veil or *niqab*. This would be in keeping with its stated aim of “being both timely and relevant: to contribute to the better understanding of this ongoing and rapidly developing phenomenon” (p. 4). The book arguably achieves this relevance, not by discussing Islamophobia as a phenomenon or potential cures to this condition, but rather by squarely focusing on academic debates on the definition of Islamophobia.

Other recent books on Islamophobia, such as *Thinking Through Islamophobia: Global Perspectives* or *Islamophobia: the challenge of pluralism in the 21st century*, take a very broad view of the term and combine various cases and analyses to formulate policy recommendations, providing a global sense of its meaning in practise. In contrast, Allen discusses these matters as just one part of painstakingly deriving a definition of Islamophobia, which could potentially make these types of surveys more effective and precise. This specialist orientation becomes clearer when looking at the organisation of the book. After introducing the need for a scholarly baseline definition of the term ‘Islamophobia’ and discussing its possible origins and their implications, Allen proceeds to place this debate within the larger realms of Orientalist critique, post-Colonial study, and in opposition to Samuel Huntington’s (1996) ‘Clash of Civilisations’ argument. Although these are effective frameworks for the discussion of Islamophobia as a phenomenon with historical and cultural bases, they are mainly used to assess whether the present usage of the term is one which simply reflects a historical continuum, or one which has unique contemporary characteristics. This seems to unnecessarily limit the usefulness of the term for those who would wish to engage with it outside the exclusive study of contemporary events. Likewise, Allen’s examination of Huntington’s influential ‘Clash of Civilisations’ book and the role it plays in creating discourses that could be described as Islamophobic, is one which is very engaging, but as his own analysis is limited to just a few pages of text, it leaves the reader wanting more.

The following chapters look in further detail at the attempt to understand and address the apparent increase in anti-Muslim sentiment in Britain through the work of groups like the Runnymede Trust and the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations. This is followed by a detailed critique of the methodology used in the Runnymede Report. Here, Allen’s expertise is amply demonstrated as he makes a compelling case that this seminal report, one which is frequently utilised by press and advocacy groups, actually commits many of the same errors of essentialising and victim-blaming that it seeks to understand and correct. Most effective is his observation that whilst it would be absurd to view a racially-motivated killing through the lens of how some black males exacerbate racial stereotypes and thus exacerbate racial tension, the same logic does not apply when studies into anti-Muslim sentiments and violence implicate actors seen as representative of Muslims in making these crimes more likely.

Having established the academic and governmental engagement with Islamophobia, Allen seeks to contextualise it in both British and European settings. In his discussion of Islamophobia in the UK, his chapter is provocatively titled “They’re all the Same.” This immediately prepares the reader to engage with the issue of Islam and/or Muslims as an essentialised other. He then details official reflections of the wider public’s unease with Muslims through accounts of various leaders’ public statements on issues of extremism and otherness, as expressed through symbols like the wearing of the veil. This dynamic of ‘us’ and ‘them’ could then be exploited by fringe groups like the British National Party (BNP). Similar accounts of the provocative nature of the Muhammad cartoons crisis and the film *Fitna* in Chapter 7, “Different Forms of Discourse, Speech and Acts: Islamophobia in Europe”, further reinforce his view of “how embedded and receptive people are to such anti-Muslim, anti-Islamic messages” (p. 100). Interestingly, Allen claims that “Islamophobia is therefore not explained or better
understood from this perspective... “ (p. 100). The perspective he mentions here is specifically that of anecdotal and statistical explication.

At this stage, it is vital to point out that Allen has yet to establish his own definition of Islamophobia, though it is readily apparent through his argument that he is in the process of doing so through an accretion of corrections to earlier models. One could be forgiven for expecting this long-awaited definition in the next chapter, chapter 8 entitled “What is Islamophobia?” Instead the next three chapters look at how studies of racism can provide useful points of comparison and departure for those seeking to understand and prove the existence of Islamophobia as a distinct phenomenon. It is not until page 190, in the 11th chapter of the book that he finally and explicitly defines Islamophobia.

Allen’s concluding remarks perfectly summarise the greatest strength of the book (its precision and careful approach to definition):

    Having finally answered ‘what is Islamophobia?’ by positing a suitable definition and conceptualisation, so a final question is necessary: that is, to what extent might this research impact upon Islamophobia as a contested concept in the public space?

(emphasis added, p. 195)

This work will serve as an invaluable model of careful and methodical use of terminology and will be particularly helpful to scholars who study anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic sentiment in Western contexts. It establishes a strong foundation for future research that applies its definition to the real world occurrences of Islamophobia, which may allow it to fulfil its self-proclaimed aspirations of timeliness and relevance.

**Bibliography**

