

## Islamophobia – The Experience in Worlds Old and New: Lessons from Europe and Australia

Organized jointly by the Australian Intercultural Society, the Australian Catholic University, and Monash University together with the Gülen conference a few days earlier, this conference was devoted to a particularly impor-

tant and pressing topic: the anti-Islam discourse slowly becoming a standard feature of western political competition and media coverage. As the topic is similarly a rather polarizing one, an event of high scholarly quality could not be taken for granted. However, this is just what organizers, speakers, and audience managed to achieve during this event, held during 18-19 July 2009 at Monash University in Melbourne. The phenomena subsumed under the term Islamophobia, their expressions, preconditions, and multiple roots and facets were discussed through different approaches in theoretical, descriptive, and analytical terms.

Raelene Frances (Dean of Arts, Monash) showed how Irish Catholics were formerly subject to many of the same stereotypes now connected with Muslims in Australia. Douglas Pratt drew attention to the fact that contemporary conceptions of Islam are often dominated by misrepresentation and distorted images arising both from misunderstanding and ignorance. Author Hanifa Deen pointed to the recent nature of the problem by revisiting the progression from largely indifference toward Muslims to Islamophobia in Australian society within a few decades. A highly thought-provoking presentation was given by Dan Madigan, who highlighted the problematic nature of the term *Islamophobia* itself and even convincingly discouraged its use. Apart from its basis in psychological terminology, which seems to imply that the holder of anti-Muslim prejudices is the mere victim of an affliction (just as the one suffering from claustrophobia, for example), the term also seems to obscure the fact that hatred often plays a greater role in the issue than fear. Tellingly, it became evident during the conference that a number of other scholars felt uneasy with using the term and opted for such expressions as *anti-Muslim prejudice* or *anti-Islam discourse* instead. The historical roots of this very discourse, which go back almost a millennium to the time of the First Crusade, were then discussed by Jonathan Lyons. Gary Bouma analyzed the relationship between the growing religious diversity in western societies and religious resurgence, which has led to a growing commitment to put faith into practice and a form of competition between religions that, at times, spills over into outright conflict with the respective parties employing dehumanizing discourse regarding their opponents.

Likewise, the second day provided very valuable perspectives on the problem. Greg Barton set out to formulate a conceptual framework for studying the phenomenon by taking into account its many different elements that often are actually hardly connected to religious issues at all, as well as including a justified fear of violent expressions of Islam that have become more visible in the last decades. Stephen Fontana provided rare insights into

the strategies of the local police to overcome both the fear of Islam as well as the isolation of local Muslim communities, whereas David Tittensor took up an important feature of contemporary pseudo-scholarly discourse on Islam, namely, the frequent reference to the Islamic legal concept of *taqiyah* (religiously sanctioned deception) used to discredit liberal Islamic movements as mere dissemblers. Also very enlightening was also Benjamin MacQueen's presentation on how fear of so-called Islaist parties was usually primarily connected in the West with a fear of the establishment of Islamic law, when the evidence of recent years shows that its imposition was indeed hardly a top priority whenever Islamic parties gained access to a measure of political power. Moreover, the whole concept seems to have been turned upside down by the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan, where the imposition of religiously-based civil law took place under the sponsorship and supervision of the West. Eventually, Irfan Ahmad rightfully stressed, anti-Islamic discourse in the West as well as in places such as India is closely related to the desire of majority populations to protect an idealized status quo in an imagined home, which is constantly threatened by the tireless forces of (for example, demographic) change.

It says much about the local interest in confronting the problem of Islamophobia that the list of presenters featured figures such as Monash's Dean of Arts and representatives of both Victoria state's police and of its Human Rights Commission. Unfortunately, turnout on the second conference day was sadly very low, which seems to point in the opposite direction. However, the conference was doubtlessly of great contemporary relevance and yielded many thought-provoking results, inviting a more thorough future engagement with the topic despite the fact that international developments will most probably dictate such engagement anyway. The presentations and discussions were mostly truly objective and far from mere apologetics. For one thing, the conference also showed that even aspects of common historical knowledge have to be stressed over again in order not to vanish from public consciousness in the present circumstances. Indeed the view of religious conflict as major cause for violence in human history has gained such public currency that people already have to be specifically reminded that neither the two world wars nor the major atrocities of the last decades, such as the genocide of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and the bloody wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda had any connection with religion.