

Book Reviews

Islamophobia Issues, Challenges, and Action: A Report by the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia

Hugh Muir and Laura Smith, researchers

Robin Richardson, ed.

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This report is actually a comprehensive and highly informative two-part report put out by the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, which was established by the Runnymede Trust in the United Kingdom in 1996. In 1999, Dr. Richard Stone (vice chair of the Runnymede Trust) was appointed chair of the commission.

The first part details the issues and challenges Muslims face in Britain, while the second part focuses on the actions taken to deal with and combat Islamophobia. As a report, its applicability is limited to the socioeconomic and political conditions prevailing in Britain and, in particular, that country's urban areas. However, the substantial issues raised (namely, a broader discussion of the concept of Islamophobia; the relationship of Islamophobia to racism; and whether racism as a concept ought to include intolerance, bias, stereotyping, and discrimination on the basis of religion) have a greater resonance.

The backdrop to the report consists of the events of 9/11 and the growing intolerance displayed in the media, governmental institutions, and society at large toward Muslims, both individually and collectively. Centrally, the report asks how a secular society like Britain can provide a safe space, one that is free of discrimination, disrespect, and intolerance, in which Muslims can observe and practice their faith. In addition, the authors also ask two vitally important questions: "Why is the anti-racist movement so reluctant to address prejudice, hate, and discrimination based on religion?" and concomitantly: "Should Islamophobia be defined as a form of racism, in much the same [way] that anti-Semitism clearly is, and should the full force of race relations legislation be brought to bear to defeat it?"

In the first chapter, the authors identify progress in the positive measures taken by the government and the work done by Muslim organizations. Their conclusion is that while the government deserves some credit for combating and reducing Islamophobia since 2001, the real credit goes to Muslim organizations at all levels of British society. The war in Iraq, the Terrorism Act (2000), and the Anti-Terrorism Crime Security Act (2001), as well as the increasing abrogation of the Muslims' civil liberties in Britain, however, have all led to increased Islamophobia.

Chapter 2 adopts a historical perspective, arguing that Islamophobia has been present in western societies for centuries and that its manifestations have changed as the sociopolitical circumstances have changed. Chapter 3 traces the demonization of Islam post-9/11 and during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It links this process to the neo-conservatism of Margaret Thatcher, who claims that "Islamism is the new Bolshevism" (p. 17). Chapter 4 concentrates on the argument that the very use of the term "Islamophobia" injects a chill into the discourse and thus stifles debate and discussion. The authors note that there are two predominant views of Islam: open and closed. Open religious communities seek alliances and partnerships, while extremists of the closed tendency form cliques, factions, and sects that can resort to militant action (p. 23).

Open conceptions of Islam are more inclusive, while closed conceptions infer the "other"; Islam's [presumed] inferiority and backwardness when compared to Christianity; Islam and aggression; and the stereotyping of Muslims in predominantly Christian societies. The open/closed debate is present within and among Muslims and Muslim scholars as well (both with respect to Islam and to conceptions of western secular societies). The chapter ends by calling for the development of an inclusive open-mindedness within the media and in mainstream society (p. 26).

Chapter 5 presents interesting data on the socioeconomic circumstances of Muslims in Britain. Demographic data are linked to data on unemployment, youth unemployment, levels of poverty, and levels of urbanization and religious concentration. This chapter is closely linked to chapter 7, which looks at the challenge of unemployment among Muslims, as well as the barriers to entering the labor market and accessing services. The chapter points out that it is now illegal in Britain to discriminate on the basis of religion, and that a reasonable accommodation must be reached in the case of religious differences, as well as a reasonable adjustment to the needs of Muslim entrants in and to the labor market.

Chapter 6 assesses the treatment of Muslims when they are victims of hate crimes, harassment, and religious hatred. The authors note that although the treatment of Muslim offenders has improved in recent years, the public perception remains that the law is soft on Muslim fundamentalist terrorists. Chapter 8 looks at identity formation, particularly among Muslim youths post-9/11, while chapter 9 analyzes the British government's social cohesion agenda. At a theoretical level, the report seeks to situate the concept and reality of social cohesion in the discourses around community and conflict. The report notes that despite some initial challenges, the social cohesion agenda does hold promise as long as it is explicit (in policies and programs) in dealing with the multiple manifestations of Islamophobia and "Westophobia," criminality and drug use among Muslim youths, and leadership and authority among certain Muslim communities.

Chapter 10 provides concrete ways for combating the negative stereotyping of Muslims in the media. Essentially, the question posed is who holds the media accountable for how they reproduce negative images of Muslims. The authors discuss the role of the Press Complaints Commission and strongly argue for the adoption of a professional code of ethics among journalists. They reproduce a very useful set of guidelines for journalists seeking a more balanced portrayal of Muslims.

The final chapter assesses the progress made on the 60 recommendations contained in the 1997 report authored by the Commission on British Muslims. The review is mixed. The authors conclude that some progress has been made, despite the increased level of anti-Muslim prejudice in both the media and society. The overall conclusion is that the most pressing priority is for the British government and the Commission on Racial Equality to "actively encourage all public bodies to incorporate a commitment to avoiding religious discrimination in their race equality schemes and policies" (p. 80). This would require a concomitant duty to accommodate and promote respect between members of different faiths. Several other short-to medium-term priorities are identified, including priorities for the media, public institutions, and service delivery agencies.

While the report is extremely useful and informative, the various chapters need a tighter structural organization of the material. The conceptual chapters (namely, 2, 4, and parts of 9) could have been more closely aligned, and the chapters that look at data, demographics, and indicators of exclusion could have been more readily integrated. In addition, the report weaves together both anecdotal evidence of Islamophobia and data from a variety of official sources. The latter point to manifestations of exclusion

from the labor market and from society, to the higher rates of impoverishment faced by various Muslim communities, and to the alienation and disaffection among Muslim youths.

While the data sections are very strong, the sections detailing anecdotal evidence are correspondingly weak. There is a place for narrative and anecdotes, but the authors owe it to the readers to be more analytical. If they conclude that incidents of Islamophobia are on the rise, is the evidence anecdotal? Are there human rights complaints? Are there more anecdotes now than there were before 9/11? Interestingly, the authors cite Ahmed Versi, editor of *The Muslim News*, who noted that even though the war in Iraq triggered fewer cases of abuse than 9/11, concern remains high (p. 31). Certainly, the anti-Muslim climate contributes to heightened fears, but it is not clear from the report that this climate has resulted in quantitatively more cases of Islamophobia than before. The report did not address these questions adequately.

Overall, the report makes a very useful contribution to identifying the issues and challenges faced by Muslims in Britain. This report will be of interest to government, the anti-racism movement, Muslims individually and collectively, as well as mainstream society in Britain.

Zubeida Saloojee
Professor, Child and Youth Worker Program, Community Services Division
The City College George Brown, Toronto, Ontario, Canada