Book Review

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Allen, C. (2010). *Islamophobia*. Farnham, UK & Burlington, USA: Ashgate Publishing Company.

Islamophobia presents itself as filling a significant gap in the current literature, but not in the sense that there is a lack of usage of the term. Quite the opposite; the term has become increasingly prevalent and societally acceptable, as the summary statement in the book identifies, especially in the wake of September 11. This is precisely why there is a need for this book, for while the use of the term Islamophobia is becoming increasingly common, a wide range of different interpretations and definitions appear to exist, thus highlighting a lack of common understandings of the term and the concept. In this book then, Chris Allen explores not only the history of Islamophobia as a phenomenon, but also the usage of the term itself. This exploration starts from the fundamental question of whether Islamophobia as a phenomenon actually exists, or whether it is simply a different name and extension of earlier identified and defined phenomena, such as racism or anti-semitism. Similarly, if Islamophobia indeed exists, is it simply a continuum of earlier versions of anti-Muslimism or anti-Islamism, or is it an entirely modern concept? These are important questions to consider, for the answers may provide the key to addressing the phenomenon, while the current vague definitions and usage of the term that Allen identifies in this book may instead exacerbate the ways in which it affects people's lives.

Islamophobia is usefully and clearly divided into six parts, starting with an introduction that discusses the 'first decade of Islamophobia', with the starting point being identified as the publication in the UK of 'The Runnymede Report' (1997): *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all: report of the Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia*. Furthermore, this introduction traces some of the high profile media cases (e.g. the Kilroy case in the UK, or Geert Wilders and Ayaan Hirsi Ali in The Netherlands) and their associated debates, which show the extremes of those who denounce any criticism of Muslims or Islam as 'Islamophobic', and those who openly espouse hatred. Between these poles there is a wide continuum of smaller and less explicit incidents and opinions (e.g. debates about whether the *niqab* is a barrier to integration in various European nations), but despite plenty of media debate, there is still a large question mark over which of these incidents can rightfully be called cases of 'Islamophobia'. The second part of the book provides some useful historical context, and traces anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiment back to the Crusades, the Reformation and Colonialism, while also touching on the influential literature related to Orientalism and the Clash of Civilisations. Especially the latter has become highly influential in debates about the supposed 'incompatibility of civilisations' and thus of 'cultures', which in turn forms the basis of various contemporary political anti-immigration platforms in the European context. In response, one of the central arguments of *Islamophobia* is that there is an urgent need for empirical research to test some of the most influential claims associated with what the Runnymede Report calls a 'certain identifiable phenomenon'.

The other central argument is that the definition and conceptualisation of Islamophobia are imprecise, which in turn leads to a variety of interpretations that suit whoever appropriates them. Allen identifies The Runnymede Report as the main cause behind that as the (flawed) definition used in the report has become rigidified as *the* definition since its publication. Part 3 is therefore entirely devoted to the Runnymede Report and its influence during the decade after its publication. In an extensive critique of the report, Allen argues convincingly that despite its good intentions, the report may inadvertently be exacerbating Islamophobia, primarily through imprecise and inconsistent use of terminology. This again leads to the main question: what then is Islamophobia?

The next three parts of the book are an attempt at answering that question, starting with a more in depth discussion of Islamophobia in context. However, it is here that some of the main weaknesses of the book surface. Firstly, there is a very heavy emphasis on the UK as *the* context for the discussions in this book, despite claims of a global phenomenon. While there is some discussion of the wider European context and the US context, these sections are limited, and it would therefore have been more fitting if the book had been called 'Islamophobia in the UK'. Secondly, there is a focus on discussions around the appropriateness of the term Islamophobia, and these discussions become rather repetitive, and are frequently slowed down by 'sidebars' into various areas of the literature that are not always directly relevant. It is not until a discussion about ideology in Chapter 10, that Allen begins to develop a key argument, and even then he remains rather reluctant to state a firm argument. However, the value of the book lies in its ultimate identification of three different components of Islamophobia: its ideological component; its related 'modes of operation' through which meaning is sustained and perpetuated; and resultant 'exclusionary practices' targeted at Muslims and Islam. This is useful because it creates a clear focus for the identified and urgent need to empirically test the exclusionary practices in particular.

Overall then, this book provides a comprehensive overview and discussion of Islamophobia, even if it is mostly limited to a UK context, and even if it ultimately ends up with an unworkable definition that is 20 lines long! As such it nevertheless provides a good starting point for what could be important potential follow-up projects: an edited collection with contributors from a wide variety of global contexts, and a series of empirical studies that would provide the necessary evidence to back up political actions to address 'a certain identifiable phenomenon' called Islamophobia.