

Islamophobia: The complex problem of defining prejudice

Dominic Kennedy



Opponents of the term Islamophobia fear that it may be used to stifle criticism of religious beliefs and customs because it fails to distinguish between individuals and faith.

Peter Tatchell, the human rights campaigner, found himself branded Islamophobic when he protested against an Islamic extremist group that endorsed the killing of LGBT people, women who have sex outside marriage and Muslims who turn away from their faith. He has since said he uses the term “anti-Muslim hatred”.

Fiyaz Mughal, founder of Tell Mama, which records anti-Muslim incidents, also rejects the term Islamophobia. He said: “All of our criminal and civil laws are based on the protection of people, and rightly so. Which means that anti-Muslim hatred is measurable and recordable, unlike the nebulous term Islamophobia.”

The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights uses the term “bias against Muslims”.

Maajid Nawaz, the anti-radicalisation campaigner and broadcaster, offers Muslimphobia as an alternative.

Islamophobia can be seen as broader than antisemitism, which pinpoints hatred of Jews, and different to racism, which involves discrimination on the grounds of attributes such as colour or ethnicity.

Islam is practised by people of all racial backgrounds. British Muslims come from many ethnic groups such as Pakistanis, Turks, Somalis, Arabs and Bangladeshis.

The source of the term Islamophobia is murky. It has been attributed to French colonial officials in the early 20th century critiquing people who demonised Islam.

The word reached Britain in the 1980s. Both the late sheikh Dr Zaki Badawi and Fuad Nahdi, founding editor of the Muslim-interest magazine Q News, have claimed authorship, according to the Policy Exchange report *On Islamophobia* published today.

Yet it was only made popular in Britain when the Runnymede Trust produced a report in 1997, identifying the prejudice as a major problem.

Internationally, the fight against Islamophobia has been taken up by the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation (OIC), made up of 57 nations, describing itself as “the collective voice of the Muslim world”.

The OIC played a key role in having the United Nations recognise Islamophobia as a form of racism at a conference in Durban in 2001.