WORKING GROUP ON ANTI-MUSLIM HATRED/ ISLAMOPHOBIA: ENGAGEMENT SESSION

Briefing from Humanists UK, May 2025

ABOUT HUMANISTS UK

At Humanists UK, we want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have. Our work helps people be happier and more fulfilled, and by bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. Founded in 1896, we are trusted to promote humanism by 130,000 members and supporters and around 120 members of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group (APPHG). Through our ceremonies, pastoral support, education services, and campaigning work, we advance free thinking and freedom of choice so everyone can live in a fair and equal society.

Humanists UK is firmly committed to the protection and promotion of human rights and equality, as exemplified in documents such as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Humanist principles of justice and of valuing the dignity of each individual lead us to support equality and oppose unwarranted discrimination. The right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) cuts across almost all the campaigning work we do. The rights to FoRB and freedom of expression are mutually reinforcing, and as such the exchange of ideas is necessary for a tolerant society to flourish because it allows for religious hatred to be challenged. We strongly believe in and defend the right to FoRB so long as such freedom does not interfere with the rights and freedoms of others. We regularly raise these issues at the UN Human Rights Council, whether this is calling for the abolition of blasphemy laws worldwide,[1] or for action to tackle anti-Muslim hatred specifically.[2]

We worked on the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill from when it was first introduced in 2002, until it finally became law in 2006, giving written and oral evidence to parliament and working with and through the APPHG and working directly with Home Office ministers and officials on the policy detail.

ABOUT FAITH TO FAITHLESS

Faith to Faithless is a programme of Humanists UK which works to raise awareness of the issues faced by those who leave high-control religious groups or cults and provide direct support to those affected. Deciding to leave a religion often means rejection from family and community, and apostates may end up homeless, isolated, and at risk of abuse. In addition, many high-control religions prevent members from accessing education or external services, and so individuals don't know where to turn for support. We provide facilitated peer support groups and social groups, provide a platform for apostate voices to be heard, and raise awareness of the issues they face. We train statutory and support organisations like the police, social services, and mental health organisations to better understand the issues apostates face, and the policy and practice

[1] Humanists UK, Blasphemy laws fuel religious intolerance, Humanists UK tells UN, 25 September, 2023 https://humanists.uk/2023/09/25/blasphemy-laws-fuel-religious-intolerance-humanists-uk-tells-un/
[2] Humanists UK, Humanists UK at the UN calls for action to tackle anti-Muslim hatred, 5 March, 2021 https://humanists.uk/2021/03/05/humanists-uk-at-the-un-calls-for-action-to-tackle-anti-muslim-hatred/

implications this might have for them. We also provide asylum support to non-religious asylum seekers who would be at risk of persecution due to their non-religious beliefs. Founded in 2015, we are now run by a staff team of two and advised by a voluntary Leadership Team of apostates with lived experience.

SUMMARY

- Prejudice against Muslims is a real scourge in British society and the Government needs to do more to tackle it. We would support a definition of anti-Muslim hatred if it advances this goal.
- Attempts at creating a definition must be grounded in human rights principles, particularly the right to freedom of religion or belief, and the right to free expression, and principles of equal treatment. It must avoid privileging anti-Muslim prejudice over other forms of discrimination, ensuring equal protection under the law for all.
- Criticism or mockery of religious beliefs, even if offensive, should never on its own be classified as anti-Muslim hatred.
- The *Rabat Plan of Action* offers a robust framework for understanding and addressing religious hatred within human rights frameworks.
- We encourage the working group to pay particular attention to ex-Muslims' right to question and criticise Islamic teachings and practices, recognising this as a crucial aspect of their identity and freedom of belief and allowing them to voice their experiences and perspectives without being wrongly accused of anti-Muslim hatred.
- Whether a definition should feature race is a complex question. On the one hand, anti-Muslim hatred is frequently racialised. On the other, conflating all anti-Muslim hatred with racism might risk privileging one religious group, distorting existing legal distinctions between race and religion, or potentially limiting freedom of expression. This approach could also undermine public support and make it harder to address both genuine prejudice and problematic religious ideas.
- The term 'Islamophobia' is now more widely used than 'anti-Muslim hatred', but we are concerned about 'Islamophobia' because it conflates prejudice against individuals with legitimate criticism of Islamic beliefs. This is wrong in principle, is used internationally by closed Islamic states in a tactical way to oppose human rights, and as the term is so contested on these grounds, its use will also be a significant (perhaps insurmountable) barrier to acceptance of the definition. We strongly urge that 'Islamophobia' is avoided as a term.

DO YOU THINK THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD ADOPT A DEFINITION OF ANTI-MUSLIM HATRED/ISLAMOPHOBIA?

Prejudice against Muslims is a real scourge of British society and the Government clearly needs to do more to tackle it. We would support a definition of anti-Muslim hatred that advances this goal.

Any definition adopted by the Government on anti-Muslim hatred must be developed in line with human rights standards and with equality law at the forefront. While a definition must protect individuals and communities against discrimination, hostility, or violence because of their religion or

belief, or their perceived religion or belief, it must be carefully framed to distinguish between prejudice against people on the one hand, and criticism of religious beliefs or practices on the other. The definition should also avoid elevating one form of prejudice above others. While anti-Muslim hatred is on the rise, the law must continue to provide equal protection for all, regardless of religion or belief.

A well-drafted definition can provide clarity for public bodies, improve data collection, and strengthen the response to hate crimes. However, it must not conflate critique of Islam as a religion, or its practices, with hatred of Muslims as people. In a free and democratic society, individuals must retain the right to question, debate, reject or even ridicule religious doctrines – including Islam. Protecting this freedom is especially vital for individuals who have left the religion (sometimes called 'apostates'), dissenting Muslims, and those advocating for reform.

To make a definition on anti-Muslim hatred workable in practice, it should be accompanied by a publicly developed Code of Practice. Ted Cantle is preparing a proposal on this titled *Reimagining Muslim Communities in the UK (and the concept of Islamophobia)* , supported by Belong (the Cohesion and Integration Network) and Humanists UK. This would draw on real experiences across diverse communities, offering real-life examples to distinguish between harmful, targeted prejudice and lawful but challenging expression. Such a Code would also support education and dialogue, helping institutions and individuals navigate sensitive issues in ways that uphold both respect and free inquiry. By pairing a principled definition with practical guidance, the Government can foster both protection and cohesion. We recommend the Working Group discuss the proposal with Ted Cantle in depth.

HOW CAN GOVERNMENT ENSURE A DEFINITION IS PRACTICAL AND APPLICABLE?

Discriminatory actions, incitement to violence, or hatred based upon a person's race or religion or belief should not be tolerated. However, all measures to address prejudice and discrimination must be in line with human rights principles, specifically the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief (including the right to change your religion or belief), and the right to freedom of speech and expression.

Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) protects more than just the right to freedom of speech – it protects the right to hold opinions and express them through a variety of media, as well as to receive and impart information from and to others.[3] However, the right is not unqualified. Article 10(2) permits public authorities to restrict freedom of expression if restrictions are 'prescribed by law' and are necessary and proportionate to achieve a legitimate aim, such as the prevention of crime or to protect the rights of others. Article 9 of the ECHR – the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) – has a similar two-part structure: while there can be no limitations on or interference with the *forum internum* of thought or belief (i.e. the private realm of what someone

[3] Equality and Human Rights Commission, 'Article 10: Freedom of Expression' last updated 3 June 2021, https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/human-rights/human-rights-act/article-10-freedom-expression

thinks), the manifestation (the outward expression) or the *forum externum* of FoRB is subject to limitation necessary for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

This standard is reflected in Articles 18 and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), with Article 20(2) of the ICCPR specifically prohibiting '[any] advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence' – sometimes described, and perhaps over-simplified, as 'hate speech'.

The *Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence*[4] is intended for this purpose. It is the most comprehensive and authoritative document produced to date on the relationship between freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), including the extent to which 'offensive' expression on grounds of religion can be protected or prohibited. It has the support of the UN Human Rights Council, the UN General Assembly, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination as well as UN special mandate holders.[5] The threshold it sets is necessarily high to prevent the criminalisation of even hostile criticism of religion or belief, but low enough to ensure adherents are not prevented from manifesting those beliefs through abusive attacks.[6] *Rabat* identifies a six-part threshold test for criminal incitement: (1) the social and political context, (2) the status of the speaker in society and to whom the expression is directed, (3) the intent of the speaker, (4) the content and manner of the expression, (5) the reach of the expression, and (6) likelihood of causing imminent harm. Crucially, the plan says that blasphemy laws should be repealed to avoid stifling healthy debate and dialogue about religion, and suppressing the right to FoRB itself.[7]

The human rights framework exists to protect people from discrimination, violence, and other forms of harm. It does not protect ideas, objects, or institutions. Nor does it protect people from feeling insulted when their ideas – including their religion or beliefs – are challenged, criticised, or even ridiculed.[8] However, blasphemy laws do just that and as such they were repealed in England and Wales in 2008 and Scotland in 2024. Further, the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006, states:

> *'Nothing in this Part shall be read or given effect in a way which prohibits or restricts discussion, criticism or expressions of antipathy, dislike, ridicule, insult or abuse of particular religions or the beliefs or practices of their adherents, or of any other belief system or the beliefs or practices of its adherents, or proselytising or urging adherents of a different religion or belief system to cease practising their religion or belief system."*[9]

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[4] UN Human Rights Council, *Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence*, UN Doc A/HRC/22/17/Add.4, https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/outcome-documents/rabat-plan-action

[5] Sejal Parmar, 'The Rabat Plan of Action: A Critical Turning Point in International Law on "Hate Speech"', in Peter Molnár (ed) *Free Speech and Censorship Around the Globe* (Central European University Press 2015)

[6] Paul Taylor, *Freedom of Religion: UN and European Human Rights Law and Practice* (Cambridge University Press 2005) 78-79.

[7] *Rabat Plan of Action* paras 19 and 25.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006, Schedule: Hatred against persons on religious grounds, para 29J https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/1/schedule

Beyond this baseline, we agree that there may be lawful expression that is nonetheless prejudiced and undesirable and that might be officially discouraged, though it should not become unlawful. Even here, we maintain that the right to criticise Islamic beliefs and practices must be protected.

WHAT DO YOU THINK SHOULD BE INCLUDED/NOT INCLUDED IN A DEFINITION OF ANTI-MUSLIM HATRED/ISLAMOPHOBIA? ARE HAVING SPECIFIC EXAMPLES IN A DEFINITION HELPFUL?

In this section we will look at the merits and drawbacks of different definitions – the 2017 definition used by the Runnymede Trust, and the definition proposed by the APPG on British Muslims.

Runnymede Trust definition

The Runnymede Trust's definition explicitly focuses on prejudice against people, as opposed to criticism of ideas, beliefs or practices. It defines 'Islamophobia' as 'anti-Muslim racism', and in its longer form, as:

> '*...any distinction, exclusion, or restriction towards, or preference against, Muslims (or those perceived to be Muslims) that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.*'[10]

If this specific definition is applied:

a) **It should be recognised that it implies that Muslims can be prejudiced against Muslims or those they perceive to be Muslims.**

- Prejudice against ex-Muslims would rightly appear to be covered by this definition. There is no question that many ex-Muslims suffer the '*effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life*'. And many remain 'closet' ex-Muslims because they fear these consequences of 'coming out'. This is a significant issue for them, and for British Muslim parents and communities who find it difficult to accept that freedom of religion or belief includes freedom to change religion or belief.
- This definition would also rightly include sectarian discrimination suffered by Muslims at the hands of other Muslims. The most obvious example is discrimination, sometimes hatred, suffered by Ahmadiyya Muslims.
- Arguably, the use by some Muslim activists of epithets such as 'Native Informant', 'House Muslim', 'Coconut', or 'Oreo' when referring to other British Muslims with whom they disagree is also an example of anti-Muslim prejudice.

[10] Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia: Still A Challenge For Us All*
https://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/islamophobia-still-a-challenge-for-us-all

b) It must be made clear what anti-Muslim hatred/Islamophobia is *not*.

- Under the Runnymede Trusts' definition, it is not anti-Muslim hatred to express criticism or mockery of the beliefs, ideas, or practices of Islam (in common with any other religion, belief, or philosophy, including humanism), even if that criticism is ill-informed, in bad taste, or even offensive. That is freedom of speech. While we all have a responsibility to use freedom of speech wisely, and are free to criticise the way others use it, we do not have a right not to be offended. On the other hand, if that criticism or mockery is used to foment bigotry against Muslim people, then that application can be considered anti-Muslim hatred.
- It is not anti-Muslim hatred to discuss accurately-reported facts about the British Muslim communities – or any other ethnic or religious grouping in the UK – even if these are 'uncomfortable'. For example, a survey conducted by a reputable research company (ICM, 2015) showed that more than 50% of the British Muslims sampled did not think that homosexuality should be legal in this country.[11] On the other hand, it would be anti-Muslim prejudice treat an individual Muslim differently on the basis of generalised statistical information about British Muslims.
- There must be give-and-take in a secular, plural society, and there will inevitably be disagreements. But it will only cause further prejudice against Muslims if claims of anti-Muslim hatred/Islamophobia are used as a means to seek unreasonable religious privilege. For example, it is not anti-Muslim prejudice if a supermarket job implicitly or explicitly requires the employee to deal with items containing pork or alcohol, but a genuine and legitimate requirement of the occupation concerned. But it would be anti-Muslim prejudice to reject a fully-qualified Muslim applicant, and who is happy to meet these requirements, primarily because she or he is a Muslim.

c) Any definition of anti-Muslim hatred or 'Islamaphobia' must not lead to privileging of one form of racism/prejudice over others.

- Use of the term anti-Muslim hatred or Islamophobia to cover all forms of prejudice, going beyond specifically anti-Muslim attacks to include, for example, discrimination in employment, must not be allowed to imply that it is of greater concern than similar prejudice against other groups. It is no better, and no worse, for a suitably-qualified person not to be selected for a job simply because they are a Muslim than because they are, say, brown- or black-skinned, or Jewish/Hindu/Sikh, or have a 'foreign-sounding name', or have the 'wrong' sex, sexual orientation, or other protected characteristic.

d) A working definition of Islamophobia must be consolidated within a rights framework, particularly freedom of speech.

- To repeat our earlier point, the rights to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression must be protected at all costs, including the right to criticise or mock or verbally attack to express criticism or mockery of the beliefs, ideas or practices of Islam (in common with any other religion, belief, or philosophy, including humanism), even if that criticism is

[11] Reported by *The Guardian*, 'Half of all British Muslims think homosexuality should be illegal, poll finds' 11 April 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/apr/11/british-muslims-strong-sense-of-belonging-poll-homosexuality-sharia-law

ill-informed, in bad taste or even offensive. While we all have a responsibility to use freedom of speech wisely, and are free to criticise the way others use it, we do not have a right not to be offended.

- We find the Foreign Office's 2014 paper on *Hate speech, freedom of expression and freedom of religion: a dialogue*[12] helpful in understanding how the competing interests here can be balanced.
- We also would draw the working group's attention to Humanists International's Oxford Declaration on Freedom of Thought and Expression which summarises our position. In particular:

> '***There is no right not to be offended, or not to hear contrary opinions.*** *Respect for people's freedom of belief does not imply any duty or requirement to respect those beliefs. The expression of opposition to any beliefs, including in the form of satire, ridicule or condemnation in all media and forms is vital to critical discourse and any restraint that is exercised in this expression must be in accordance of article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, namely to protect the rights and freedoms of others. The best response to the expression of a view we disagree with is to reply to it. Violence and censorship are never legitimate responses. All laws that criminalise language on grounds of "blasphemy" or of offence to beliefs and values impede human freedom and should be abolished.'*[13]

APPG on British Muslims definition

Looking next to the APPG on British Muslims' definition of Islamophobia, which defines it as:

> '*…rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.*'

We are very concerned that it does not properly recognise the difference between prejudice against people who identify as Muslim with criticism of the various beliefs, ideas and practices under the umbrella of 'Islam'.

While the APPG's *Islamophobia Defined* recognises this distinction in theory, it fails to reflect this in practice. It claims that the definition of 'Islamophobia is by no means conceptualised as an attempt to silence debates around Islam, but to understand the framework within which the debate can take place'.[14] We agree that the definition must be conceptualised in this way. The report then sets out five criteria presented by Professor Tariq Modood by which criticisms can be branded as illegitimate. These suggested criteria for defining acceptable discussion of Islam do not establish the distinction sought. Ultimately they boil down to whether a Muslim person would like to hear such criticisms, and not whether they actually show prejudice against them because they identify as Muslim.

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[12]Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, *Hate speech, freedom of expression and freedom of religion: a dialogue*, March 2014, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hate-speech-freedom-of-expression-and-freedom-of-religion-a-dialogue

[13] Humanists International, *The Oxford Declaration on Freedom of Thought and Expression*, 2014, https://humanists.international/policy/the-oxford-declaration-on-freedom-of-thought-and-expression/

[14] All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims, *Islamophobia Defined*, p36

For example, the second and third criteria are 'is [the criticism] about Muslims or a dialogue with Muslims, which they would wish to join in?' and 'is mutual learning possible?' The principle of freedom of speech does not necessitate that expression must be a dialogue for it to be legitimate criticism. The fourth criteria is 'is the language civil and contextually appropriate?' The principle of freedom of speech does not necessitate that the language used has to be civil or that the speaker has to be well informed for it to be a legitimate criticism. These criteria are not about what is 'legitimate' criticism of Islam, but what a Muslim person might find to be offensive. This principle is perhaps best summarised by the quote often, though wrongly, attributed to Voltaire, 'I disapprove of what you said, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.'

Such a definition would have chilling effects. For example, in 2018 Lancashire County Council voted in favour of ensuring that all meat provided in school meals in maintained schools in the county is produced in accordance with certain minimum animal welfare standards. This meant removing meat that was produced without the animal being stunned and therefore excluded some meat slaughtered in inhumane ways prescribed by some religious codes. The Council, by proposing this policy, was accused of racism and Islamophobia.[15] This resulted in the policy, which had been democratically agreed, being delayed by over a year and largely shut down legitimate debate about both animal welfare and what it is legitimate for public services to sanction. If we compare this situation to Professor Modood's five tests, objectively the Council's policy was entirely legitimate (it didn't stereotype, it was a dialogue in which the language was civil, mutual learning was possible and a sincere motive was presented). Yet, nonetheless it was accused of being Islamophobic. The reason for this is that these criteria are subjective and open to abuse to close down discussion that one side does not wish to partake in. They are insufficient to protect freedom of speech. Ultimately, Lancashire County Council was branded Islamophobic, not because it had in any way been bigoted or prejudiced against Muslims, but because it disagreed with a specific Islamic practice and the accusation was seen as an easy means of closing down the discussion without having to critically engage with it.

'Expressions of Muslimness'

The term 'expressions of Muslimness' is vague and does not adequately differentiate between the criticising of religious beliefs and acts of prejudice against individuals. For example, a Muslim woman may choose to wear various forms of head covering as an expression of her Muslim identity and as a manifestation of her religious beliefs. We believe that it would be an unjustified interference with her right to freedom of religion or belief to attempt to prohibit her from doing so or to discriminate against her because she chooses to do so. In some contexts, such as calls by the far right to 'ban the burka,' the intent of the criticism is to promote discrimination against Muslims in general and so should be seen as part and parcel of unacceptable prejudice.

However, although it is an 'expression of Muslimness', the concept of Islamic head coverings should be freely open to discussion and indeed criticism. Muslims and non-Muslims should be able to state

[15] *The Guardian*, 'Lancashire bans non-stunned halal meat from council-supplied school meals', 13 July 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/12/lancashire-council-bans-non-stunned-halal-meat-from-schools

that they do not like it or what they see it as symbolising without being pilloried as anti-Muslim bigotry. Some objections arise from a feminist perspective, from the perspective that it gives justification to the forced wearing of head coverings in this and other countries, or that it simply does not fit in with that person's ethical worldview. These are valid objections to this aspect of Islamic expression without such criticism constituting prejudice or hate against Muslims. This distinction is lost in the APPG's definition, which is drafted so broadly as to encompass any expression of Islamic practice. It also ignores differences between Muslims and with ex-Muslims towards certain expressions of Muslimness.

In 2017, there were calls by the East London Mosque to ban the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain from partaking in London Pride because they criticised Islamic-inspired homophobia. This is an example of how the right to free speech and of apostates to express their beliefs can be unfairly chilled by accusations of Islamophobia.

To state views, such as the examples provided above, is not to subject Muslims to abusive or discriminatory treatment. Rather it is to express views that some Muslims might disagree with or find offensive. Muslims, and indeed all people, have the right to hold religious beliefs or not, and to live free from abuse, but to disagree and even to insult Islamic beliefs is not abusive or prejudiced towards Muslims or Islamophobic in itself. In this regard, the intent of the speaker and the context in which the criticism is made, rather than the perception of the recipient, should form the test and be specified in the definition of anti-Muslim hatred. This is similar to the way the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 takes into account the intent of the speaker. It is also the approach outlined by the *Rabat Plan of Action*.

The impact upon ex-Muslims

In the case of those who have left Islam, sometimes called 'apostates', being able to question, criticise, and openly oppose Quranic teachings and all expressions of Muslimness is an important aspect of their identity, can help them to come to terms with abuse they have experienced, and is a legitimate expression of their new religion or belief. It is an important part of their reconciliation process, akin to 'coming out' for an LGBT individual who was previously part of an anti-LGBT community.

This is most noticeable in Faith to Faithless service users who are also non-religious asylum-seekers. Having fled their home countries – such as Bangladesh, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia – because they were persecuted or at risk of being persecuted for being so-called 'apostates', they report feelings of anxiety over the news that two men were arrested earlier this year after burning copies of the Quran, and questioning how safe it is to express their non-religious views freely in the UK. As an example, an asylum seeker from Iraq who currently lives in a Muslim-majority area in the UK reports that he doesn't know if it is safe for him to ask around for local atheist groups after reading those news articles, and after hearing the Prime Minister commit to 'tackling all forms of 'hatred and division, including Islamophobia' in a response to a PMQ

requesting the prohibition of the desecration of sacred texts in and of itself.[16] In this case, a lifetime of trauma as an atheist has left him with complex PTSD, and the results of this narrative around Islamophobia causes him to re-experience that trauma in the present, resulting in extreme responses such as blackouts.

His fears may not be entirely irrational. We know an ex-Muslim activist who damaged a Quran as a form of protest against Islam. The backlash was so immense he now feels that it is not only this particular form and visibility of activism that is unwise, he will no longer speak up about his beliefs and experiences at all. Nor will he engage with support for his experiences with other ex-Muslims, atheists or humanists. This is not only because of a fear of Muslim extremists, but also because of his fear of how the police will react if an act of protest against Islam is deemed 'Islamophobic'.

Ex-Muslim women who use the Faith to Faithless programme have reported that their testimony, as a woman, is worth half of that of a man's. This can mean that speaking out against their husband in a domestic abuse case would be considered an act of blasphemy, according to the community they want to escape. LGBT ex-Muslims report that their very existence is treated as an act of blasphemy, because – some have been told – God couldn't have created them in that way, especially if they have an Islamic name. Some are told they are therefore deserving of execution. In other cases, ex-Muslims report that, according to the community they have left, or want to leave, it is not possible to leave Islam at all. One ex-Muslim woman, who will not express her atheist views to her family or community, instead still wears a burka and attends religious events with other women because it is not safe for her to be 'out' as an atheist.

In 2017, there were calls by the East London Mosque to ban the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain from partaking in London Pride because they criticised Islamic-inspired homophobia. This is an example of how the right to free speech and of apostates to express their beliefs can be unfairly chilled by accusations of Islamophobia.

These examples above illustrate why the term 'Islamophobia' itself can be frightening for many ex-Muslims who use the Faith to Faithless programme. They question whose version of Islam – or in the case of the APPG definition, whose version of 'Muslimness' – is protected from being 'targeted' in undefined ways, or which aspects of Islam are ex-Muslims (and non-Muslims) expected to treat as sacred despite not holding any reverence for it.

UN working definition

The UN definition, proposed in 2020, defines Islamophobia as:

> *'...a fear, prejudice and hatred of Muslims or non-Muslim individuals that leads to provocation, hostility and intolerance by means of threatening, harassment, abuse, incitement and intimidation of Muslims and non-Muslims, both in the online and offline world. Motivated by institutional, ideological, political and religious hostility that transcends*

[16] Hansard, Engagements, Volume 757: debated on Wednesday 27 November 2024, https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-11-27/debates/5CDC74BA-B602-4676-A97A-B678AF436F85/Engagements?highlight=islamophobia#contribution-D073FB70-772E-41F0-9021-620C7CA6538F

> *into structural and cultural racism which targets the symbols and markers of being a Muslim."*[17]

The assertion that Islamophobia 'transcends into… racism which targets the symbols and markers of being Muslim' carries with it the same risks as the APPG's definition. However, the UN is clear 'international human rights law protects individuals, not religions'.[18]

UN Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18

This reflects the UN Human Rights Council's hard-won consensus of resolution 16/18[19] which promotes the exchange of ideas as necessary for a tolerant society to flourish because it allows for religious hatred to be challenged. Resolution 16/18 was adopted by consensus every year from 2011 until 2023. After a series of Quran burnings in Europe, the controversial resolution 53/1[20] was voted on in 2023 with 28 votes in favour, 7 abstentions and 12 votes against – including the UK Government.[21] The UK voted this way because equating attacks on religion, including religious texts or symbols, with incitement to hatred, violence, or discrimination goes against the well-established and well-balanced consensus resolution 16/18.

Both resolutions are led by Pakistan on behalf of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. Regrettably, Pakistan did not attempt to renew resolution 16/18 in 2024, which coincided with its attempt to renew 53/1. However, Pakistan ended up withdrawing the renewal of the regressive 53/1 as well due to 'internal divisions'.[22] Resolution 16/18 was adopted by consensus again in 2025 with resolution 53/1 nowhere in sight, thereby returning to the long-established international standard.

It should be noted however that, while resolution 53/1 is controversial because it evokes anti-blasphemy language with repeated references to the burning of holy books, it affirms such an act can only be prohibited by law as a manifestation of religious hatred when coupled 'with the intent to incite discrimination, hostility or violence'.

UN Special Rapporteurs' reports

The Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief Nazila Ghanea's report on *Hatred on the basis of religion or belief* explicitly supports this position. She recognises that:

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[17] United Nations, International Day to Combat Islamophobia, https://www.un.org/en/observances/anti-islamophobia-day
[18] ibid.
[19] UNHRC, Resolution 16/18 on Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against, persons based on religion or belief, UN Doc A/HRC/RES/16/18, 12 April 2011, https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/RES/16/18
[20] UN Human Rights Council, Resolution 53/1 on Countering religious hatred constituting incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, UN Doc A/HRC/RES/53/1, 17 July 2023, https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/RES/53/1
[21] UK Government, UN HRC53: Explanation of vote on countering religious hatred, 11 July 2023, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/un-hrc53-explanation-of-vote-on-countering-religious-hatred
[22] Article 19, UN: Progress at the 56th session of the Human Rights Council, 15 July 2024 https://www.article19.org/resources/un-progress-at-the-56th-session-of-the-human-rights-council/

> *'…that attacks on holy books, or indeed religious symbols, can constitute incitement, but has only once ascertained that the specific case has reached the threshold test of the Rabat Plan of Action.'*[23]

In her report, the Special Rapporteur highlights that 'people may feel the insult, hurt and provocation that flows from acts of gratuitous provocation deeply' but any prohibition on such expression has to be compatible with the whole human rights framework – not only the rights to freedom of religion or belief and of expression, but also the rights to legal recourse, to privacy, and to equality before the law, and the prohibition on the destruction of rights and freedoms. She goes on to outline why insult to religious sentiments cannot and should not be outlawed. She says that:

> *'…"holiness" is a quality that lies entirely outside the scope of human rights. At the international level, human rights mechanisms are neither tasked with, nor equipped for, determining an exhaustive global list of holy books and religious symbols for all "thought, conscience and religion", including allowing for diverse interpretations and intrareligious and sectarian groups. Such a task would be daunting, implausible and "inherently contradictory", considering that it would need to apply to religious or belief communities that may deny the legitimacy of the existence of the other. What can be entrusted to human rights forums is a concern "with religious doctrines only to the extent that it protects the belief of individuals in such doctrines" and the rights of individuals and groups to "undisturbed religious practice". In the majority of instances, the courts would be best placed to decipher whether particular content, in the light of the facts of a specific case, and along with the other elements of the six-part test [of the Rabat Plan of Action], indeed rises to the threshold of incitement.'*[24]

The former Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, also provides a robust report on what does and does not constitute Islamophobia/anti-Muslim hatred. He uses the term 'Islamophobia':

> *'…to characterise the complex and diverse set of processes… that accommodate exclusionary paradigms, which are anchored in the use of essentializations and misperceptions of Islam to stigmatise Muslim individuals and communities'.*[25]

He does nonetheless acknowledge that the term is controversial because:

> *'…charges of Islamophobia have been inappropriately and dangerously levelled at persons who challenge majoritarian interpretations of Islam, such as human rights activists, including women's human rights advocates; members of minority Muslim communities*

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[23] Human Rights Council, *Hatred on the basis of religion or belief: Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea*, 8 January 2024, UN Doc A/HRC/55/47, paras 31-35, https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/55/47

[24] ibid.

[25] UN Human Rights Council, *Countering Islamophobia/anti-Muslim hatred to eliminate discrimination and intolerance based on religion or belief: Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed*, 13 April 2021, UN Doc A/HRC/46/30, https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/46/30.

within majority Muslim contexts; non-Muslims, including atheists and other religious minorities; and dissidents in authoritarian States'.

In doing so, Dr Shaheed reaffirms that human rights law protects people, not religions. He emphasises that criticism of ideas, leaders, symbols or practices of Islam is not to be prohibited or criminally sanctioned. This is not 'Islamophobic' unless accompanied by hatred or prejudice towards Muslims in general. He also recommends the *Rabat Plan of Action* among the tools required to make sure that any definition is accompanied by clear guidance on the obligations of states to protect and promote the rights to freedom of expression.

Ted Cantle's proposal on *Reimagining Muslim Communities*

Rather than focus on a definition itself, former Special Rapporteur for FoRB Dr Shaheed emphasised the need for a better conceptual understanding of 'Islamophobia' – including its manifestations and its impacts on human rights – for the purpose of public education, monitoring and responding to it.[26]

Ted Cantle's aforementioned proposal on *Reimagining Muslim Communities in the UK (and the concept of 'Islamophobia')* does just this.

He suggests that reimagining Muslim communities requires acknowledging the internal diversity within them and rejecting the idea of Muslims as a monolithic group. He proposes a new Code of Practice, co-produced by Muslims and others, to distinguish between legitimate critique of beliefs and practices and unacceptable prejudice or hate. This initiative would humanise Muslim individuals, dismantle stereotypes, and provide space for both self-reflection and mutual understanding – fostering a shared sense of belonging across communities. We recommend the Working Group discuss the proposal with Ted Cantle in depth.

RE Council's resources for REsilience

In 2010, the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC) produced a series of resources for 'REsilience' to help RE teachers address 'contentious' topics – controversial current issues that have a particular link to undermining social cohesion.[27] This includes flashpoint issues on anti-Muslim hatred, including:

- **4.2 Terrorism claiming religious justification** – the resource addresses the negative impact of frequent media reports associating terrorist groups with Islam on Muslims in Britain and worldwide, with the 7/7 bombings as one example.
- 4.3a Religion and conflict: Israel/Palestine – although developed before the most recent escalation of violence, the resource addresses how a variety of aspects of the long history of the conflict are divisive, creating a perceived dichotomy that can result in generalisation, demonisation, antisemitism and Islamophobia.
- 4.3c Religion and conflict: Partition and its aftermath – the resource considers the ongoing impact of the Partition of India in 1947 today, including among its expatriate communities.

[26] ibid
[27] A complete list of REsilience resources can be found at: https://religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/resource/gateway-documents/

- 4.4 Hatred based on religion, ethnicity or 'race' especially when given religious justification – Among other challenges, this resource considers how some students may support, or have parents who support, the sentiments of fascist or far-right organisations, such as the British National Party or the English Defense League, that promote hostility to 'foreigners', particularly non-Europeans, more recently with Muslims as a particular target.
- 4.5 Jihad – this resource identifies different understandings of the word 'jihad' and the problem of non-Muslims encountering the word in the media solely in the context of war, armed conflict or terrorism exacerbating stereotyping and anti-Muslim prejudice.
- 4.9 Violence towards women, especially when given religious justification – this resource considers the link between religion and culture, how so-called 'honour' crimes are often associated in Britain with families from Middle Eastern, North African, and Asian backgrounds, and the assumption that it is therefore a requirement of Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism.
- 4.10 Islamism – explores the meanings attributed to 'Islamism' and 'Islamist', views and beliefs that may be shared by both Islamists and more liberal Muslims, and how media coverage of Islamist-inspired political and social violence has provoked negative attitudes towards Muslims and Islam more generally.

The list above is not exhaustive, but provides the most pertinent examples of how to engage in dialogue to address anti-Muslim hatred. However, examples of issues that give rise to anti-Muslim prejudice and how to engage constructively through dialogue can be found throughout the series.

SHOULD RACE FEATURE IN ANY DEFINITION?

This is a complicated question. On the one hand, anti-Muslim hatred is frequently racialised prejudice. On the other hand, the law would define it as religious hatred under the Public Order Act or, alternatively, discrimination on the basis of religion or belief under the Equality Act. These laws do not treat race on the one hand, and religion or belief on the other, in the same way. Reclassifying all anti-Muslim hatred or Islamophobia as racism would distort this picture. It risks privileging anti-Muslim prejudice above all other types of anti-religious prejudice.

It is certainly the case that many Muslims in the UK share the same protected characteristic of ethnicity. Therefore, anti-Muslim discrimination can and will almost always be indirect racial discrimination. However, this is certainly not always the case and we think conceptualising anti-Muslim hatred only in this way may conflate two equal but separate forms of discrimination.

If a definition were created that treats anti-Muslim hatred or Islamophobia as racism, then careful thought would be required as to the legal implications of this, and how other religions or beliefs are categorised under different laws.

Sections 17 to 29 of the Public Order Act create offences of inciting racial hatred. For example, Section 18(1) criminalises 'threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour' if (a) there is intent to stir up racial hatred or (b) if it is likely to stir up racial hatred. However, the equivalent provision on religious hatred in Section 29B is limited to 'threatening words or behaviour' and only if there is intent to stir up religious hatred. This means that religious hatred has a higher threshold of

'threatening' language used with intent – and not merely expression that is subjectively 'abusive' and 'insulting', and likely to provoke a reaction. The distinction here is emphasised by Section 28J, which applies to all provisions in the Part of the Public Order Act that deals with religious hatred. It affords specific protection for the right to freedom of expression – namely the right to 'insult or abuse' particular religions, or the beliefs and practices of their adherents. To conceptualise all 'Islamophobia' as a form of racism would create a hierarchy of prejudice whereby one community with the protected characteristic of religion or belief is afforded more protection than any other. Specifically, the beliefs of Muslims, when criticised in a subjectively insulting manner, could be deemed racial hatred, but an equivalent insult to an adherent of another religion or belief would be protected under the freedom of expression.

Race and religion or belief are also treated differently under the Equality Act 2010. If Islamophobia is to automatically be understood as a form of racism in all possible cases, it follows that Muslims are also protected under the protected characteristics of race under the Equality Act, on account of being Muslim, rather than being perceived to be of a particular race. It then becomes unclear as to how these protections apply in cases where religious organisations are permitted to discriminate on grounds of religion or belief under Equality Act exemptions.

Schedule 9, paragraph 2 permits religious organisations to impose employment requirements relating to religion or belief where it is necessary to comply with the doctrines of that religion or to avoid conflict with the religious convictions of its followers. For example, a mosque can require an Imam to be Muslim and this is lawful discrimination on grounds of religion. However, if Muslims are to be understood as a race, to require an Imam to be Muslim would become unlawful racial discrimination. Similarly, there are exemptions for religious schools – in relation to admissions, the curriculum, and employment – that would become unlawful discrimination if Muslims were to be considered a race under the Equality Act. The implications of how these provisions would apply to Muslims as a race, as well or instead of as a religious group, requires careful consideration.

We also contend that defining anti-Muslim hatred as a type of racism is unlikely to gain public support due to concerns about conflating religion and race. Jawad Iqbal says that this risks criticism of religion being branded 'racist' and thus creating a blasphemy law by the back door that will further embolden racists.[28] Although Iqbal does not fully explain the connection, Kenan Malik does so. He says that conflating 'Islamophobia' with racism makes it harder to challenge both genuine anti-Muslim prejudice and problematic religious ideas. While religious extremists decry criticism of their ideology as 'racist', bigots dismiss the charge of prejudice as an attempt to silence debate.[29]

[28] The Times, Special protection for Islam will only encourage racists, 4 February 2025, https://www.thetimes.com/comment/columnists/article/special-protection-for-islam-will-only-encourage-racists-wdz7pd5fs
[29] Kenan Malik, Blurring the line between criticism and bigotry fuels hatred of Muslims and Jews, 3 March 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/mar/03/blurring-line-between-criticism-and-bigotry-only-fuels-hatred-of-muslims-and-jews

DO YOU HAVE ANY VIEWS ON TERMINOLOGY, SPECIFICALLY WHETHER GOVERNMENT SHOULD USE THE TERMS ISLAMOPHOBIA, ANTI-MUSLIM HATRED, OR SOMETHING ELSE?

Some people argue the term 'Islamophobia' is unhelpful as it conflates prejudice against people who identify as Muslim with criticism of the various beliefs, ideas and practices under the umbrella of 'Islam'. This confusion dates back to the original Runnymede Trust 1997 report *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all* which says:

> '*The term Islamophobia refers to unfounded hostility towards Islam* [sic]*. It refers also to the practical consequences of such hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs.*' [30]

The consequence of this conflation is illustrated by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), who even cited the Runnymede Trust's 1997 definition in their first annual 'Islamophobia Observatory' report in 2008.[31] The foreword of the first report also stated:

> '*The Muslim Ummah has noticed with utmost concern the continued attacks by a section of marginal groups and individuals in the West on the most sacred symbols of Islam including the Holy Quran and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in an offensive and denigrating manner, the most recent being the reprints of the blasphemous cartoons by 17 Danish newspapers on February 13, 2008 and the release of the film Fitna by a Dutch Parliamentarian on March 27, 2008. This apart, Muslims continue to be stereotyped, discriminated and profiled in many Western countries that have contributed to the issue.*'[32]

The report goes on to pick up the definition of Islamophobia used by the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance in 2007:

> '*a baseless hostility and fear vis-à-vis Islam, and as a result, a fear of and aversion towards all Muslims or the majority of them. [Islamophobia] also refers to the practical consequences of this hostility in terms of discrimination, prejudices, and unequal treatment of which Muslims (individuals and communities) are victims and their exclusion from major political and social spheres. The term was invented in response to a new reality: the increasing discrimination against Muslims which has manifested itself in recent years.*'[33]

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[30] See Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia: Still A Challenge For Us All*, p13
[31] Organisation for Islamic Cooperation, *First OIC Observatory Report on Islamophobia, 2007-2008* http://ww1.oic-oci.org/uploads/file/Islamphobia/islamphobia_rep_may_07_08.pdf
[32] Ibid.
[33] UN Commission on Human Rights, *Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and All Forms of Discrimination*, UN Doc E/CN.4/2005/18/Add.4, 13 December 2004, https://docs.un.org/en/E/CN.4/2005/18/Add.4

Yet in virtually all of these same OIC states, any criticism or questioning of the approved version of Muslim belief or practice is considered blasphemy. Humanists and atheists, and in particular those who seek to leave Islam (sometimes called 'apostates'), are overtly persecuted. As detailed in Humanists International's *Freedom of Thought Report*,[34] in twelve Muslim-majority countries (Afghanistan, Iran, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritania, Nigeria, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen), and no others, apostasy or blasphemy are punishable by death. Adherents of other religions also suffer often severe discrimination. Therefore the OIC's use of 'Islamophobia' is incompatible with the principles of freedom of religion or belief, and freedom of speech.

It is vital that any the use of the term Islamophobia, even if intended to mean 'anti-Muslim hatred', does not add legitimacy to its use by the OIC and others as a means to shut down criticism of Islam while denying those holding other beliefs their rights to freedom of religion or belief and of expression.

The terms 'anti-Muslim prejudice' or 'anti-Muslim hatred' do not have these problems.

We also suggest that even if a definition were to clearly delineate between criticism of Islam and prejudice or hatred against Muslims, there is significant opposition to the use of the term 'Islamophobia'. If its very use is perceived as de-legitimising the definition itself, the definition is unlikely to gain widespread acceptance. For example, Policy Exchange claims that the 'ever-widening use of "Islamophobia"' is applied to acts such as 'commemorating victims of terror' or using 'the term Islamist'.[35] The Telegraph stated earlier this year that an official Islamophobia definition is 'inimical to free expression and corrosive of public trust'.[36] We contend that, as the term 'Islamophobia' itself has become so contested, its use will undermine widespread acceptance.

HOW CAN WE ENSURE A DEFINITION IS INCLUSIVE OF A DIVERSE RANGE OF MUSLIM IDENTITIES AND BELIEFS?

To ensure inclusivity, a definition of anti-Muslim hatred must reflect the immense diversity within Muslim communities – ethnically, theologically, culturally, and in terms of levels of religious observance. One of the most critical failings of existing definitions, such as that of the APPG on British Muslims, is the implied uniformity of 'Muslimness', which undermines both internal diversity and the individual agency of Muslims and ex-Muslims alike.

Ted Cantle's forthcoming proposal on this (which we know he hopes to discuss with you) suggests the need to 'humanise' Muslims by portraying them in their full societal roles – as parents, professionals, and citizens with varied views and practices – not as monolithic representatives of a religious bloc. This shift is essential. Definitions must accommodate not only mainstream Sunni or Shia voices but also Ahmadiyya Muslims, 'cultural Muslims', secular Muslims, and even apostates, many of whom face intra-community discrimination or silencing.

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[34] Humanists International, *Freedom of Thought Report*, https://fot.humanists.international/
[35] Policy Exchange, *A definition of Islamophobia?*, 2024, https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/A-definition-of-Islamophobia.pdf
[36] Telegraph View, 'An official 'Islamophobia' definition would threaten free speech', 6 January 2025, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/2025/01/06/an-official-definition-of-islamophobia-threaten-free-speech/

For example, ex-Muslims require the ability to critique Islamic teachings without being accused of hate – a right recognised under freedom of belief. But at the same time, they are also often perceived to be Muslims so can be victims of anti-Muslim hatred themselves.

This inclusivity can be achieved by designing a definition and accompanying Code of Practice in collaboration with a wide range of voices, not just religious leaders or established organisations. These consultations must engage grassroots organisations, women, youth, LGBT Muslims, minority sects, ex-Muslims, and free speech advocates. Additionally, any working definition must clearly state what is not anti-Muslim hatred—such as good-faith criticism of religious ideas or cultural practices, satire, or advocacy for secular values.

Ultimately, inclusivity requires that the definition be co-produced with diverse communities, grounded in real-world experiences, and paired with educational efforts that promote mutual understanding. This approach supports integration, fosters trust, and encourages shared values – rather than reinforcing division or defensiveness within and around Muslim communities.

For more details, information, and evidence, contact Humanists UK:

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