

## Introduction

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**T**he idea of a book on Islamophobia to bring together some of the leading scholars and educators on this topic from around the globe arose from incidents and developments I witnessed in the Netherlands over the last few years. They made me fear that Western societies are alienating their Islamic citizens and creating an atmosphere that can only lead to further distrust and hostility.

Countries like the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium and France have large and growing numbers of Islamic youth attending primary and secondary schools in some of the larger urban areas. For instance, in Rotterdam, 50 per cent of the population has a recent immigrant background and half of this group is Islamic. The situation is similar in Amsterdam, where the families of 60 per cent of school-aged youth have a recent immigration history. Since these youth will play a critical role in the future, it is important that their voices are heard and that they are not excluded and marginalised. So we should all be concerned about the developments which led to this book.

- In early 2003 Dutch Politician Pim Fortuyn rose to national fame. After his death his fame became international. He created great controversy by stating in a major Dutch daily (*Volkscrant*) that anybody who believed in Islam was ‘*achterlijk*’. This word fits somewhere between ‘backward’ and ‘retarded’ in English. He also commented that the Dutch

should only accept non-Islamic immigrants, and turn away Islamic immigrants at the border. The right wing party he led (*Leefbaar Nederland* – Liveable Holland) had him removed from the party for his comments. So he started his own (*List Pim Fortuyn*). Contrary to what many believed, he was able to pull most of the *Leefbaar Nederland* members with him and he attracted large numbers of new supporters. His party grew quickly in the polls and after his assassination became the second largest in the Netherlands. This was a shock for civil libertarians who had always promoted the Netherlands as the quintessential progressive society.

- In April 2003 I was watching 25 high school students at the Anne Frank House, where I work, debating how to balance the right to freedom of speech against the freedom to be protected against discrimination. The debate shifted to whether the Neo-Nazi party NPD should be banned in Germany because of its overt racial propaganda. One girl talked about statements by Pim Fortuyn, who had just been murdered, to make a case that that some of the things the NPD was saying were justified and that it was time the majority spoke its mind and identified the threat that Islam represented to society. Three of the group were visibly Muslim (of Turkish or Moroccan descent). I watched in dismay as they slumped back in their chairs and averted their eyes while this conversation went on. A few other students vocally supported the Dutch girl who invoked Pim Fortuyn's political rhetoric. Most students remained silent, however – bystanders. None came to the defence of their Muslim classmates. Neither the teacher nor my colleague intervened in any way. Given the huge support Pim Fortuyn received from opinion makers throughout society, it is not surprising that the girl felt justified to express her dislike for Muslims. The potential consequences for the hundreds of thousands of Muslim school students across this country of 16 million are part of what this book is about.
- Also in Amsterdam, the city was plastered with two posters in 2002 and 2003 that were extremely insulting to the Muslim

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youth I talked with. One was an advertisement for a new Middle Eastern restaurant in the city. On the left was a woman dressed in a burka, with only her eyes showing. On the right side was an image of a blindfolded woman of dark complexion, totally nude. The other poster showed an image of a Muslim woman wearing a *hijab* and the text asked: 'how can we liberate them?' This poster was a government public service announcement. The text of the second poster infers that Muslims are strangers in Dutch society – note the word 'them'. It also invokes the symbolic ghost of the 'white man's burden' to bring civilisation to the rest of the world. Neither poster provoked much criticism.

- Various articles had been appearing in the Dutch and other European press relating to the 'hijab issue'. When talking with a small group of Muslim young women they made it clear to me that they had once worn the hijab out of habit, but that it had now become a political statement of solidarity, and made a statement to a hostile outside world. The wearing of hijab has become the focal point of anti-Islamic actions throughout the non-Muslim world. In the United States, an 11-year-old girl, Nashala Hearn, was suspended from school for over a week in the autumn of 2003 for wearing it. This case is still pending, since the parents have filed a lawsuit against the school district. As this book goes to press, the US Justice Department filed a motion in support of the Hearn, stating that: 'No student should be forced to choose between following her faith and enjoying the benefits of a public education'. More than in the United States, however, the hijab has become the symbolic target for Islamophobic sentiment in Western Europe. French prohibition on the wearing of hijab has gained greatest international attention, but the issue is being hotly contested across Europe, as this book shows.

In my conversations with Muslim youth, I witnessed general disillusionment with society due to such reactions. They felt that the majority population, including their school peers and teachers, did not respect who they were. I could clearly sense a growing alienation among these young people.

I became interested in what was happening in the educational world to combat Islamophobia. After visiting several educational conferences, including two of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), probably the largest research-oriented educational conference in the world, I saw that this phenomenon was a blind spot in educational research. Of the hundreds of presentations at the conferences in 2002 and 2003 (and now in 2004), none directly addressed this topic. I hope this book will encourage research on this urgent issue.

The term *Islamophobia* is used broadly in this book. Though strictly speaking 'phobia' refers to 'a lasting abnormal fear or great dislike of something' (Oxford English Dictionary, 1994) we use the term to refer to an irrational distrust, fear or rejection of the Muslim religion and those who are (perceived as) Muslims.

The current societal mood in the West places Islam under a cloud of suspicion and promotes stereotypes regarding Muslims. Contributors in this book refer to this disturbing trend in different countries. Such negative attitudes and resulting discrimination are rarely based on actual exposure to Islam or its adherents. In fact, the great majority of Western citizens have never consciously interacted with somebody Muslim and if they had, would likely not have been aware that the person was Muslim. This same large majority has also never bothered to inform itself about this major world religion or the teachings of the Qur'an. For this reason, the popular media, politicians and other agenda setters can have a disproportionate influence on public opinion.

This book brings together experts from academia and the non-profit world to reflect on the general and specific nature of Islamophobia in Western society, but especially to discuss possible ways of confronting this phenomenon. It is clear from their contributions that Islamophobia is in some ways connected to intolerant attitudes towards minority groups in general, bearing a strong relationship to its cousin Xenophobia. It is also clear, though, that certain aspects of Islamophobia are specific. The solutions proposed in this book reflect this. All the authors, however, underscore the importance of anti-bias programmes in schools.

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Tackling stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination in school settings and encouraging an approach that celebrates diversity will not always provide the safe learning environment that traditional Muslim families need. Many progressive and modern approaches to education can be insulting and disrespectful of the culture of Islam. Hermans, who has conducted extensive research among Moroccan families in the Netherlands and Belgium (in press) identifies succinctly but accurately the tensions that can exist between traditional Muslim families and modern Western educational institutions:

Many Moroccan parents said that schools and teachers did not endorse those aspects of education that they considered important, such as respect, discipline and morality. According to them, although children may acquire knowledge and skills at school, they do not receive a moral education. Schools gave children too much freedom, did not value religion and did not sufficiently recognise the authority of parents. Moreover, children were encouraged to have their own opinions and to question everything too much, even the certainties they were taught at home...

In many other respects parents said that their religious values and traditions were not respected. Schools forbade girls to wear headscarves, did not respect Muslim holidays, did not always respect religious dietary laws, and gave sexual education that was contrary to Islamic principles...

Similar feelings were voiced in relation to Moroccan culture. Parents felt that their culture was being disparaged at school. Their children received the message that their culture was backward, primitive and problematic. Morocco was always portrayed as an underdeveloped country and Moroccan traditions and customs were presented as old-fashioned. Moroccan youngsters were portrayed as academically hopeless and in danger of becoming drug addicts or criminals. Women and children were represented as the victims of a harsh patriarchal and traditional culture. It was high time that Moroccans gave up their quaint customs and started to integrate into modern Western society...

Because of such experiences, some Moroccan parents became convinced that schools had a hidden agenda. They said that in the name of integration, their children were under pressure to dis-

tance themselves from their original culture and to loosen the links with their parents.

These disconcerting research results point to some of the many challenges ahead for the mostly secular public educational systems of Western societies. We can deduce from Herman's study that religious families from various traditions (including fundamentalist Christian families, orthodox Jewish families, traditional Chinese families, etc, feel uncomfortable sending their children to modern secular schools. This has led to the growth of religiously-inspired private schools throughout the West, and with it has come increased segregation.

For many Muslim parents, sending their children to Islamic schools is a preferred solution to removing them from what they consider to be immoral, decadent, selfish, and individualistic influences associated with Western schools. Whether this is a step towards confronting Islamophobia, however, is debatable. Separating Muslim children might allow them to receive the education their parents desire, but it prevents them from exposure to other ideas, values and perspectives. Furthermore, it makes it more difficult for children to acquire the skills to function successfully in a multicultural society, where the majority has a different world-view. If one of our goals is to confront stereotypes, then separation and lack of exposure to others will not help matters.

Another challenge for secular education systems is to define how the word 'secular' is interpreted and what its practical implications should be. Secularism can be defined in such a way that it implies the banning of all talk of religion and belief systems in schools. This is the interpretation given in France, for instance. Secularism can also be interpreted as protecting the religious beliefs of all communities *without favour* and exposing students to the many belief systems represented in classrooms today. This approach has been adopted in the UK educational system, though biases have not disappeared. For many children – and their parents – religion has a major impact on their world view. It shapes their attitudes towards worldly affairs, helps determine what is deemed unacceptable, immoral and taboo, and provides them with meaning in life. When confronting Islamophobia or any other form of

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religious intolerance, it is difficult to do so successfully when ignoring a key part of one's identity.

The contributions in this book, taken together, show that the phenomenon of Islamophobia has deep historical roots and that the problem is multi-faceted. They also show that it is not only Muslim students who suffer, but that if this phenomenon is not tackled we can *all* potentially become victims of the consequences of Islamophobia. On a positive note, though the authors point to the complexities of the challenge ahead of us, they clearly identify a good number of concrete steps that can be taken in everyday school practice. The many suggestions put forward can significantly alter educational environments to make them more respectful of Islam, its history, Islamic culture and Muslim students. The end result will be a broader view of the world in which we live but – more especially – a safer learning environment for all students.

I would like to end by thanking the many people who supported the publication of this book. All the authors were willing to have their important work edited for clarity and reduced in length to fit the format. It was difficult to cut into texts that contained so much vital information. I especially thank Judy Ford and my wife Fiona Passantino for their suggestions on how to make the book accessible to a larger audience and their editing of various chapters. Fiona, a writer, designer and creator of children's literature, also designed the appealing and striking cover of the book. She helped with the book in numerous ways. If it were not for Gillian Klein this book would have never happened. It was a conversation with Gillian that made it clear to both of us that this book, and more like it, needed to happen. And her editing skills have greatly improved the quality of the book.