

School of Social Sciences and Psychology
Religion and Society Research Cluster

Islamophobia in Australia

The Religion and Society Research Cluster of the School of Social Sciences and Psychology present a symposium on Islamophobia in the Australian context. Speakers: Emeritus Professor Riaz Hassan (University of SA), Professor Scott Poynting (University of Auckland), and Dr Jennifer Cheng and Dr Oishee Alam (Western Sydney University). Discussant: Associate Prof Alana Lentin (Western Sydney University).

Date and Time

Wednesday, 11th May 2016: 10.00 – 17.00 pm

Venue

Bankstown Campus Building 3, Room G.55

RSVP

By Thursday 4 May, 2016 to:
a.nixon@westernsydney.edu.au



SPEAKER ONE

**Professor Riaz Hassan,
University of South Australia**
Islam and Muslims in Australia

Australia's democratic system is committed to freedom of membership of religious, ethnic and cultural groups. But for some groups these affiliations have also been central to the experience of disadvantage as demonstrated in the case of indigenous Australians. This paper will report findings of a survey of the perceptions of key religious and cultural groups, with special focus on Muslims, by a representative sample of Australian adults. It focuses on their perceptions of Muslims and Islam and feelings of social distance, Islamophobia and concern about terrorism. These topics are among the subjects that dominate the media in Australia. Understandably, the media's focus is compelled by current events. Their coverage is invariably woven into a narrative that shapes public sentiments. But these narratives may or may not provide in-depth understanding of the events. This is where grounded social scientific research can make a valuable contribution. The paper focuses on Australians' perceptions of Muslims, in particular levels of Islamophobia and feelings of social distance. It examines how demographic and sociological factors such as age, religion, place of residence, employment status and political affiliations affect the likelihood that someone is Islamophobic and feels socially distant from Muslims. It also explores the effects of different research methodologies on ascertaining these perceptions and attitudes.

SPEAKER TWO

**Professor Scott Poynting,
University of Auckland**
*Black Flags, Plastic Swords and other
Weapons of Mass Destruction*

This paper presents a series of case-study snapshots of recent Islamophobic moral panic in Australia. In each case, a supposed threat is identified, exaggerated and diagnosed as a danger to the nation. Popular media and populist politicians prescribe strong medicine, usually involving draconian measures by the state with little consideration of civil liberties. In each case the threat is perceived to come from a Muslim folk devil, and the brunt of discriminatory state targeting in the name of counter-terrorism, and the vilification and hate crime which it engenders, is borne by Muslim communities. The genre of such Islamophobic episodes is now thoroughly globalised across the 'west', and each is sustained with stock anti-Muslim images circulated transnationally. Considered here are the cases of Abdul Numan Haider, the September 2014 counter-terrorism raids, the Charlie Hebdo backlash and the supposed 'politically correct' attacks on free speech, the Lindt cafe siege, and Australia's first convicted 'war-on-terrorist' Zaky Mallah and the furore in 2015 over his purported television championing of the Islamic State.

SPEAKER THREE

Dr Jennifer Cheng,
University of Western Sydney
Justifying and Denying Islamophobia in Anti-Halal Arguments

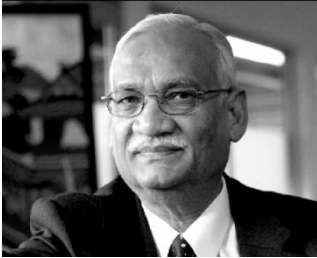
The 'Boycott Halal' movement in Australia took on new resonance when a parliamentary inquiry into food certification started in May 2015. The submissions to the inquiry provide a conducive site in which to investigate the propagation of Islamophobic sentiments. By targeting a certification scheme, opponents of Halal food can voice their negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims with seemingly non-prejudiced arguments. Members of the public who responded to the inquiry try to present their arguments as reasonable and logical, such as not wanting to support a religion they do not follow, or not wanting to pay a 'Muslim tax' on their groceries. They blatantly deny that they are bigoted, racist, anti-Muslim and Islamophobic. However, in many cases, the Islamophobia is present in the very denials of Islamophobia. This paper critically examines the disclaimers submission writers use to deny they are Islamophobic or have anything against Muslims when there is clearly an Islamophobic agenda at play. I argue that anti-racist norms, rather than reducing the propagation of prejudiced views, have simply driven people to use disclaimers to actively justify and deny their prejudices.

SPEAKER FOUR

Dr Oishee Alam,
University of Western Sydney
Islamophobia and the White Nation

What can white Muslim converts tell us about Islamophobia in Australia? Drawing on twenty-nine in-depth interviews with white converts from Sydney, this paper explores the central role that a localised, Australian articulation of whiteness plays in the operation of contemporary Islamophobia. In a nation where Christianity and secularism are both racialised as 'white' and Islam is racialised as 'non-white', the perceived differences between Australia's flexibly-secular-yet-Christian-centric religious identity and Islam are deemed to be not just of theological origin, but of a racial one. Participants described their whiteness being questioned or even challenged after they converted to Islam. In interactions with non-Muslims, this was done explicitly, by framing Islam as a non-white race, or indirectly, through appeals to secularism, nationalism and (white) Australian culture. The experiences of white converts illustrate that Islamophobia can be expressed through racialised frames that locate the categories of 'Muslim' and 'white' as antagonistic and oppositional to one another, unable to coexist in the same individual - or in the same national space.

SPEAKERS' BIOGRAPHIES



Riaz Hassan AM, FASSA, is Director of the International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding at the University of South Australia. He is also a Visiting Research Professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies National University of Singapore and Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Flinders University. In 2005-2009 he was the Australian Research Council Professorial Fellow. His publications include *Afghanistan: The Next Phase* (Melbourne University Press 2014, co-author), *Islam and Society: Sociological Explorations* (Melbourne University Press 2013).



Scott Poynting is Professor in Criminology in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Auckland, and is currently Visiting Professor at the Institute of Criminology, University of Sydney. He is co-author of *Bin Laden in the Suburbs* (Institute of Criminology, 2004), and co-editor of *Counter-Terrorism and State Political Violence* (Routledge, 2012), of *Global Islamophobia: Muslims and Moral Panic in the West* (Ashgate, 2012), and *Contemporary State Terrorism* (Routledge, 2010).



Dr Jennifer E. Cheng is Career Development Fellow in the Religion and Society Research Cluster at Western Sydney University. During her postdoc at the University of Bern, Switzerland she investigated political discourses on Islam and Muslims in debates on the minaret ban in Switzerland. Her research interests lie in Islamophobia, racism, anti-racism, multiculturalism and citizenship, particularly in explorations of Muslim minorities in Western countries.



Dr Oishee Alam has recently completed a PhD at Western Sydney University in the sociology of race and ethnic studies and the sociology of religion. Her PhD thesis, titled 'Race in the Lives of White Australia Converts to Islam,' explored how white converts navigated, negotiated and conceptualised race and racial identity after their conversion to Islam. Her research interests include racism, racialisation, bystander anti-racism, secularism and whiteness.



Discussant:

Dr Alana Lentin is Associate Professor in Cultural and Social Analysis at Western Sydney University. She works on the critical theorization of race, racism and antiracism. She is co-editor of the Rowman and Littlefield International book series, Challenging Migration Studies. Her latest books are *Racism and Sociology* (with Wulf D. Hund 2014) and *The Crises of Multiculturalism: Racism in a Neoliberal Age* (with Gavan Titley, 2011).