Guest editorial

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The Geographies of everyday Muslim life in the west

In a global environment of Islamophobia and pervasive fears about violent extremism, there is a need for research that focuses on the everyday lives of Muslims and their lived experiences in the western world. The papers in this special issue look askew at the preponderance of scholarship that has focussed on the difficulties facing Muslims living in Muslim minority countries. The policy commentary and political debate has made assumptions about troubled fit, and has done so on the basis of weak evidence. Dunn et al. argue in this issue that much of the research has sampled at the deeper end of disaffection, meaning that specific cases of troubled fit and controversy have been generalised. It is true that there have been shockingly violent acts by a handful of Muslims in many western settings, or against westerners in Muslim majority countries. Of course, it must be remembered that the most wretchedly frequent transgressions are by a handful of Muslim terrorists against other Muslims. And, there have also been sensational statements by wayward and often self-appointed 'Muslim leaders' or spokespeople. These atrocities and the polemical speech acts become seen as typical of all Muslims. This form of stereotyping has long been recognised as a foundational harm that provides license for all other forms of oppression (Young, 1990). Mainstream news media have assisted with this project of stereotyping, as they pursue business models that benefit from the scandalising of public interest (thus raising subscriptions and advertising).

The Runnymede Trust (1997) coined the term Islamophobia to describe the emerging stereotyping and public ill will towards Muslims in western nations. Islamophobia relied on a set of characterisations that built upon an accumulating antipathy that could be traced to Orientalism (Said, 1981). The five core stereotypes were fanaticism, fundamentalism, radicalism, militancy and misogyny, to which new streams have been grafted that emphasise alien-ness and dehumanisation (Dunn, 2001).

The sub-heading to the Runnymede Trust publication is noteworthy: "Islamophobia. A challenge for us all". Clearly, they had in mind the morbid social impacts of Islamophobia. These included the substantive imposts experienced by Muslims in western countries. Researchers have found, including in this issue: higher than average rates of experience of racism, in all spheres of life, as well as motility and limited mobility, fears about religious visibility and expression, frustrations on blocked mosque and school developments, barrages of anti-halal and anti-Muslim social media and rallies, and a subdued advocacy of Shari'a (Barkdull et al., 2011). Islamophobia has also had a society-wide degrading effect on

harmony, cultural vibrancy and senses of security (e.g. Aitchison, et al., 2007, Mansson McGinty, et al., 2013). Experimental methods have demonstrated that Islamophobia gives rise to uneven treatment in the job market for Muslims and people of Middle Eastern background (Booth et al., 2012), and substantively unequal treatment when seeking rental accommodation (MacDonald et al., 2016). Hassan has used national Census data to compare the socio-economic status of Muslims and to non-Muslims across Australia and found that Muslims have lower weekly incomes than the average, higher rates of child poverty, and lower employment rates (2015:45,52). However, Akbardazeh et al. (2009, p. 35) found that general senses of wellbeing among Muslims were near to the Australian average, with the exception of feeling safe.

Islamophobia is a structural challenge. Mansouri et al. (2015) used the phrase 'The Muslim Question' to stimulate a discussion of this structural issue. Neophyte Nazi propaganda had posed 'The Jewish Question' about cultural fit of Jews in Europe as a segue to a program of dehumanisation. For contemporary critical scholars this 'Question' draws our attention to Nazi racism. Similarly, 'the Muslim Question' for researchers in western countries has to be about Islamophobia.

> The 'Muslim question' in the West, is to be critiqued, deconstructed and debunked rather than accepted at face value as synonymous with an inherently problematic community and its faith tradition (Mansouri et al., 2015: 170).

Research needs to pay attention to the ordinary and everyday experiences of Muslims, and eschew an emphasis on the spectacular and sensational. The latter is well enough catered to by news media and political commentators. While there has been an explosion of research on and about Muslims in Muslim minority contexts, there has not been sufficient attention to the everyday and experiences of 'ordinary' Muslims or what Mansson McGinty (2012) referred to as 'mainstream Muslims'. Again, Mansouri et al. (2015:165) stated that what has been missing from public discussions "is an understanding of what religious practice, especially at the level of everyday spirituality and rituals, entails in terms of cosmopolitan tendencies and local political engagement".

Amidst widespread confusion and stereotyping, this is a time of change within Muslim communities. There are internal debates around who gets to speak on behalf of Muslims in public forums. The ideologies and institutions of Islam in Muslim minority contexts are undergoing metamorphoses. It is a pivotal time to take a look at the effects of these trends on those communities. From grounded epistemologies and strong empirical data, the papers in this issue report on findings that are oftentimes a counterweight to those discourses of disaffection and radicalisation that swirl in public commentaries, and which undermine trust and comfort among non-Muslims. The sources of evidence in this special issue are robust, drawing on community surveys with good sample sizes and randomised modes of recruitment, interviews with ordinary Muslims, content analysis of everyday media texts, and grounded ethnography.

The research does find that fear and racism are encountered by a relatively high proportion of the Muslim community. International research in cross-cultural psychology has consistently found a link between the experience of discrimination and a less than optimum sense of well-being among ethno-cultural minorities (Berry et al., 2006). In broad, racism impedes programs of both multiculturalism and assimilationism (especially the former), and it assists with separatism and marginalisation. That research suggests that among minority youth and second generation immigrants, the valency of the discontent borne from discrimination is even stronger. Muslims have a long standing presence in western counties like Australia, and the age profile is young, with almost half being aged 24 years or less (Hassan, 2015). We may therefore expect that these youthful Muslims, who are the second generation of immigrants, would be more hostile to Islamophobia and the substantive impacts of it. The most common birthplace of Australian Muslims is Australia (38% nationally); in Sydney 44 per cent of Muslims were born in Australia (Dunn et al. 2015:20; Hassan, 2015). How impactful is the experience or knowledge of racism on western Muslims' everyday lives? What is the extent of this social morbidity?

In terms of Muslims in western settings, it has been asserted that the disaffection borne of Islamophobia could generate violent extremism. However, the evidence for this causation is poor. Despite the hyper policy and legislative attention, hyped media attention, and public commentary, there has been no evidence reported that establishes an empirical link between disaffection borne of Islamophobia and a vulnerability to violent extremism. This is fortunate, as the exposure to Islamophobia is high, as Dunn et al. show in this issue (see also Carr & Haynes, 2015). If Islamophobia did underpin violent extremism then there would be a profound security threat.

There are links between the discourses of the right wing proponents of Islamophobia and the proponents of Islamist terror. The ideology of Islamic State (IS) and of the racist right in the West are remarkably similar. Both state that the West and Islam are incompatible, and in Australia the organised racist groups assert that Islam does not fit in Australia. IS ideology advocates that Muslims should undertake violent jihad against the West, and racist groups assert that Muslims are predisposed to terrorism. IS asserts that westerners hate Muslims, and the organised racists state that westerners do not want to Muslims / Islam in their space. Their public statements share a perspective of civilisation clash and inherent animosity. These polemical discourses reinforce the need for evidence on everyday attitudes and experiences of Muslims and non-Muslims in the West.

Despite the lack of an evidence-base for causation between Islamophobia and violent extremism, some anti-racists have argued in the wake of violent extremist events that this builds a case for confronting Islamophobia. The anti-racist utility of linking Islamophobia and violent extremism is that it presents an argument to challenge racism, and to specifically address Islamophobia. In general, the more arguments we have for bringing public and policy attention to Islamophobia and racism the better. But unless there is empirical evidence for that relationship it is problematic to assert it. Another concern is the political consequences of this asserted causation. It confirms a core western stereotype about Muslims as pre-disposed

to extremist violence. Those who wish to criticise and defame Muslims can point to this link that is being made, and say: "You see? Muslims are violent radicals, and even they admit it". In Australia, this was infamously played out on live national television (*Lateline* ABC TV, 22nd June 2015) when a young Muslim (Zaky Mallah) said that Islamophobia spread by national political leaders was giving rise to young men flying to Syria to become foreign fighters for IS. The media frenzy afterwards focussed on the pre-disposition to violent extremism, not Islamophobia. Zaky Mallah's comments were an unsophisticated articulation of the specific argument put by anti-racists "That Islamophobia was causing violent extremism". The Australian Grand Mufti similarly pointed to racism and Islamophobia in his response to the shocking terror killings in Paris in 2015. The Sydney tabloid newspaper led with a front page story that pilloried the Grand Mufti: "Dr Ibrahim Abu Mohamed drew criticism following the attacks for dismissing anti-terror strategies as ineffective, while saying the focus should be on racism, Islamophobia, foreign policies and military intervention" (*The Daily Telegraph*, 18th November, 2015:1). This showed that sections of the news media knew precisely how to (mis)use the 'Islamophobia equals violent extremism' argument for sensationalising effect.

The ordinary and non-extreme nature of most Muslims' lives in western countries is over-shadowed by problematic stereotyping (e.g. Hopkins, 2004). In this issue of *Australian Geographer,* the papers report on the ordinary and non-extreme, and they present evidence on the nature of those ordinary attitudes, behaviours, emotions and hopes. Despite claims of 'parallel lives' and of the segregation of Muslims and non-Muslims, Dunn et al.'s (2015:37) surveys of Muslims in Sydney found that a large majority of respondents frequently engaged in interaction with non-Muslims in the workplace and in educational settings (over 90%). Importantly, this also extended to the social life of most Australian Muslims, where two thirds indicated that they frequently mix with non-Muslims in their social lives. This challenges the assumption implicit in a good deal of research which asserts that Muslims self-segregate (see also Gale, 2013, Hopkins and Smith, 2008, Philips, 2006). In this issue of *Australian Geographer* the papers explore everyday Muslim life within micro-publics of post-secularism and ordinary cosmopolitanism thereby contributing to ongoing debates about the nature and form of post-secularism (e.g. Olson et al., 2013). The papers explore grounded religiosity and the sharing of space by Muslims and non-Muslims. The underlying drivers of sharing include care, such as care for people who struggling to settle in Australia, or care for those who are at risk of race hate on public transport. An example of the latter is the #illridewithyou social media campaign, which emerged to support Sydney Muslims' use of public transport after the Sydney Siege terror incident (Colic-Peisker et al., this issue). Everyday drivers of sharing include indicators of humanity, such as vulnerability and grief.

The sharing described in these papers occurs on university campuses, and at work. Johns et al. (2015:171) found that Muslim youth in Melbourne were surprisingly inured to senses of incompatibility. This is surprising insofar as faith has an innate capacity to generate hierarchies and othering. Members of one faith will see another faith as lesser, incorrect or pagan, and members of other faiths can be characterised as 'un-believers'. Religion is not so easily fused, unlike language, cuisine and other cultural performances. For these reasons

there is an apparent incommensurateness to faiths. However, empirical insights from the research presented in this issue do not confirm an innate separatism. The data make the case for a strong sense of belonging among Muslim communities in the west, together with a great deal of civic mindedness and sharing of space. The paper on everyday Shari'a shows that the fusing of principles and ethics is not at all problematic for most Muslims in Australia. It is only the risk of Islamophobic attention that causes ordinary Muslims to be cautious about advocating for further fusion.

The sharing of space by different faith groups does provide the opportunity for disagreement and inconsistency (Isakjee, 2016). Possamai et al. analyse Muslim student views on gender mixing, and haram practise and products on university campuses. The disagreements and inconsistencies do require management. Everyday processes and safe spaces for respectful disagreement are critical, especially for those differences that are unlikely to be reconciled. These matters are not as well covered in the papers collected here, but they would be a virtuous focus of a subsequent collection.

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