

Book Review: *Secularism, Race, and the Politics of Islamophobia*, edited by Sharmin Sadequee, University of Alberta Press: Edmonton, 2025.

Maryam Qureshi, MSc, PhD Candidate
University of Calgary

This edited volume *Secularism, Race, and the Politics of Islamophobia* provides an excellent series of case studies supporting the argument that Islamophobia consists not only of racialization, but religious discrimination inherent to the history and policies of secularism around the world. The primary aim of this text is to explore how secularism is implicated in Islamophobia. This is explored across various geographical contexts, and on individual, ideological, and institutional levels. Editor Sharmin Sadequee is a cultural anthropologist of religion and secularism whose research in this area spans over a decade, and focuses on Islam and Muslims in North America. Her expertise combines the interdisciplinary fields of law, religious studies, Islamic studies, secularism studies, political science, environmental studies, and colonialism.

Sadequee foregrounds this volume by problematizing the concept of Islamophobia as *only* racism, positing instead that there are two entwined processes which need to be recognized: (a) Muslims being turned into a subordinate racial category (i.e., anti-Muslim discrimination), and (b) Islam as a religion being subordinated by hegemonic secularism (i.e., anti-Islamic discrimination). Secularism is recognized by most authors in this book as an illusion of state neutrality that is still deeply entrenched in the dominant or supremacist religious ideology of that nation, and continues to operate based on some assumptions of the dominant religion. Sadequee argues that Islamophobia consists of racial and religious subordination; in other words, to omit or misunderstand the systemic impact of secularism would risk missing crucial depth in one's

systemic analysis of Islamophobia. As such, this book emphasizes how secularism is implicated in race-making when it comes to Islamophobia.

The authors of each chapter contribute to the discussion in unique ways from policy analysis to discussing the communal experiences of Muslims. Authors present case studies from various sociocultural contexts and disciplines, allowing the reader a view into the politics of race-making, Islamophobia, and the situated histories of secularism/religion in various socio-geographic contexts: Canada, France, the United Kingdom, India, Japan, and Denmark. Analyses are further nuanced with some authors focusing on gendered experiences in India, or the experiences of Black Muslim women in Canada – intersectional perspectives which may go unnamed in popular discourse and advocacy. These ideas are elaborated on in the text which is arranged into three thematic sections. Part I: Post-secularity, ethnosphere, and neoliberalism, Part II: Law, gender, and secular translations, and Part III: Combatting compounded Islamophobia.

Approaching this field as a scholar whose work focuses on surveillance and Islamophobia through an intersectional and critical hermeneutic lens in the field of Psychology, I perceive four significant contributions this book brings to the field.

- (a) Although secularism has been understood previously as rooted in the dominant religious ideologies of a state, the case studies in this book offer the reader clear evidence of this secular-religious tie and its contribution to Islamophobia. Both of these have been demonstrated with utmost clarity in the case studies presented. For example Jahangir and Takahashi discuss how France, Denmark, and Japan criminalize the mundane behaviors of Islamic orthodoxy. Hurd and Gabon further illustrate how the state attempted to govern Islamic doctrine, through US military chaplaincy in Afghanistan and France's government policies for mosques, respectively. In these cases the secular policies of nation states betrayed their underlying roots in Christianity or other dominant religions, resulting in the policing of Islamic religious practice.
- (b) The inclusion of examples from around the world is valuable because it strengthens the thesis even further by demonstrating that the Catholic-secularism of Quebec, the Hindu-secularism of India, and Christian-Secularism of Denmark overlap in how they use the language of secularism to promote Islamophobia. At the same time, each author situates their case in the unique history and context of their country, allowing the reader to understand the caveats of how secularism and Islamophobia function in each environment.
- (c) The inclusion of a neoliberal analysis layered on top of the question of secularism and Islamophobia also produces valuable insights. Bastaki in particular outlines how the deeply entrenched secular-Islamophobic apparatus can be temporarily suspended for economically desirable Muslims.
- (d) Lastly, an intersectional analysis within the frame of secularism and Islamophobia also deepens our understanding of how these systems function. Jackson-Best highlights how secular definitions of humanity and secular-orientalist imaginations of who Muslims

are, both exclude Black people, despite the fact that Black Muslim women often experience the highest rates of Islamophobic violence.

In conclusion, this text will prove to be useful for academics and researchers working with Muslims or studying Islamophobia, those looking to build national anti-Islamophobia strategies, and organizations or professionals looking to include anti-Islamophobia initiatives in their mandate, as well as community-builders or activists looking to create new initiatives, collaborate, or make use of existing resources (outlined in the last chapter).

The authors raise two compelling questions that any reader involved in working with Muslims or Islamophobia would benefit from exploring:

First, how do we define Islamophobia and what are the repercussions of how we define it? (a) Defined as simple ignorance, it would lead to solutions that involve trying to convince the public of how ‘human’ Muslims are. As outlined in Valerio and Al-Qazzaz’s chapter, this approach alone has serious limitations. (b) Defined as a racial category, we would apply racialization theories to the work, but risk losing the nuance of discrimination arising from systemic anti-religious rhetoric due to a long history of secular hegemony, laced with the undertones of dominant or supremacist religious ideology. (c) Defined as racialization due to race-making *and* secularism/supremacist religious ideology, in addition to neoliberalism, and colonialism (all of which occur in the personal, ideological, and institutional dimensions), we may capture a more comprehensive picture and design interventions that address the systemic roots of Islamophobia.

Second, authors also raise the question: How do we understand post-secularism? Some may define it as a sincere attempt at Habermasian neutrality that requires translation of the religious to the secular. Others may define it as an effort that originated from a milieu of Eurocentric bias which was further concentrated by the far-right and elite throughout the political spectrum – culminating in the antithesis of neutrality. These vastly different understandings will also have implications on the solutions sought to address Islamophobia.

Copyright of works published in Religious and Socio-Political Studies (RSS) Journal is jointly held by the author and by the RSS Journal. The author(s) retain copyright of their works but give permission to the RSS Journal to reprint their works in collections or other such documents published by or on behalf of the RSS Journal. Author(s) who give permission for their works to be reprinted elsewhere should inform the Editor of RSS Journal and should ensure that the following appears with the article: Reprinted, with permission, from Religious and Socio-Political Studies Journal, Volume 3, Issue 1, 2026: pp. 13-15.