

## ISLAMOPHOBIA BETWEEN YOUNG PEOPLE

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW, WE FEAR

CINTIA TAYLOR

**P**rofessor HENK DEKKER FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF LEIDEN (The Netherlands) has conducted a study on how young Dutch people perceive Muslims and the Islam. The findings were surprising: 54% of the respondents had negative feelings towards Muslims and the Islam. He was astonished by it and asked: "Why should such young people be so negative?"

He chose a sample of 581 students, between 14 and 16 years old, from thirty-three classes throughout eleven schools in the country. All secondary types of education in The Netherlands were taken into account. The respondents had to answer questions regarding how they perceived these minorities, and the way they related to them.

He found the main reason explaining this negative perception was the lack of contact these youngsters had with foreign communities. On top of that, he came to understand that the respondents talked about Muslims, Turks and the Islam with their best friends and parents. This could be a main source of influence of opinion, as they believed that both their friends and fathers had negative perceptions towards these communities (34% and 33% respectively).

Mr Dekker feels that this is important to understand the problem. This negative attitude comes not from experience but from the fact that the majority of the young Dutch people have no direct contact with these minorities, and their ideas are based on what they hear at home and amongst peers.

Media can also play a role in this general attitude, as these youngsters have admitted to considering the press to give a negative opinion on Muslims in general and on Turks more specifically. This transmits feelings of threat, insecurity, fear and anger, to them, resulting in rather negative ideas, stereotypes and clichés.

Although the Internet plays a major role in the lives of today's teenagers, it is not used as a mean to uncover Islam or Muslim lifestyles. In fact, half of the respondents say they do not know much about it. He explains this by saying that: "The most important parts of perceptions are general views and emotions. Knowledge is not that strong in influencing a perception".

According to the Political Science researcher, in this kind of study it is normal to find that the negative feelings towards others

correlate with low self-esteem. However, this assumption proved to be different in this case. Nine out of ten of the respondents were very positive about themselves. Together with this, rates on Nationalism and on National Superiority, although not reaching the majority, were not that low – around 42% each. This translates into a sense of belonging, and strong positive feelings towards your group which produces negative attitudes towards others. In effect, "the higher the Nationalism, the higher the Islamophobia".

The professor believes that by promoting more direct contact between different cultures we could be able to reverse the situation. Although he is aware that in direct contact there are specific conditions that need to be met in order to produce a positive effect, he is certain that segregation is not the solution: "Mixed, multicultural schools are better", he adds. "No type of segregation is helpful. If TV news are negative and young people have no contact with these cultures, this negative attitude will remain, as there are no contradicting factors to it". He also calls the attention to schools, which ought to accept that everyone has negative stereotypes on others: "It is inevitable! We work with categorisation. As soon as we meet someone, that person is specified as a member of a category: man or woman, Dutch or non-Dutch, for example." Teachers

should therefore understand how students acquire their perceptions and work on it.

These results could mean that there has been a failure in education, but Professor Dekker is not sure about that: "Saying we should consider everyone equal is not easy. Society should teach that peace and democracy are the most important values, but I don't know if this is taught in schools".

In this study political preferences were not taken into account, preventing the academic to say with certainty that this youth is more likely to vote for extreme right parties. However, he could say that "if there is a candidate who expresses these same negative feelings, he will be very attractive for these young people".

So how can we predict the future with such negativity amongst young people? "This kind of attitude will have a long life. It doesn't change easily. If people at age fifteen think this way, then

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they will probably think like that for life. The question is, how important is this matter? Is it as important as the employment and the economy? If it is a basic issue, then it can be translated in the election results. It will have an effect, but I can't say to which extent. But if political leaders express the same kind of negative attitudes, this perception will strengthen”.

This is also why Mr Dekker accuses politicians: “Now we have politicians who express negative ideas. I miss politicians who have positive messages. Political parties should have the courage to do this. But politicians want to have power. This is all very idealistic”.



Photo by David Chen



The Professor explained he tried to find other studies that could measure *Islamophobia* and concluded that this was the first one. Other colleagues have been collecting complaints from police files on discrimination, but that cannot offer a guaranteed measurement, as not everyone files a complaint. He is now hoping that other countries will conduct this type of research, to collect more data, and set a network that will allow for a comparative study. However, he fears not everyone finds interest in this kind of study as it uncovers problems people are not willing to face.

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