

# ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD



## Director's Report

### THE CONTEXT AND THE CONFERENCE TITLE "ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD"

This Conference was the last conference of the online Series **Othering and Hatred of Diversity** and took place on the 30, 31 January & 1<sup>ST</sup> February 2026, after **Antisemitism and Otherness** 11, 12 & 14 September 2025 · and **The Double-Absence Despair, Displacement, and Hope in Migration** 5–7 December 2025.

The title was **ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD**.

"Phobia" comes from the Greek word φόβος = fear, panic, terror, aversion

In Greek mythology, Phobos was also the personification of fear, the son of Ares (god of war) and Aphrodite. He was said to accompany Ares into battle, spreading terror among soldiers — very on-brand for the meaning

**Islam** comes from the Arabic word *islām* (إسلام).

It means "**submission**" or "**surrender**" to **God** — specifically, willingly aligning oneself with the will of one God.

It shares the same Arabic root **S-L-M** as:

- **salām** → peace
- **muslim** → "one who submits (to God)"

So the deeper idea is that by surrendering to God's will, a person finds **inner peace**. It's not about forced submission — it's meant in a spiritual sense of trust, devotion, and alignment.

The history of Islamophobia is complex and deeply rooted in centuries of political, religious, and cultural conflict. Islamophobia has evolved significantly over time from historical religious rivalries and colonial attitudes into a modern-day phenomenon shaped by geopolitics, media, and extremist actions, as well as by social anxieties. Islamophobia, as the fear, hatred, or prejudice against Islam or people who are perceived to be Muslim, Arab or both, often stems from ignorance, misinformation, or political agendas. It is or becomes a form of racism.

Islamophobia is not simply a set of hostile attitudes. It is a psychic and political defence, — a way of warding off strangeness, allowing the 'in-group' to project all sorts of unintegrated fears and social contradictions into the Other. So **Islam becomes a screen and mirror**, it embodies **the legacy of colonial knowledge. Identity, integration, and unbelonging**, the tension between visibility and erasure, and the emotional toll of being labelled "suspect," an "exception", are some of its challenges today.

Lets move on to An "**Upside-Down world**" which means a world that feels **reversed, inverted, or completely out of order**. It is a **figurative description of a situation where** normal rules don't apply, right seems wrong and wrong seems right, things feel strange, unfair, or surreal, everything feels flipped from how it *should* be. Is this the world in which we are living? Is the figurative dimension becoming real?



# ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD



This online Conference was an opportunity for us all in our different roles coming from diverse backgrounds, regions and generations, to examine these dynamics in “here-and-now events”, in larger and small groups, as well as review sessions

The primary task of the conference was:

**to explore how Islamophobia, as a form of Othering and Hatred of Diversity, manifests itself in our inner worlds and in our upside - down societal context today**

## OUR VISION OF THE CONFERENCE

**ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD** is a very complicated and challenging theme, as for the whole Series. Being part of the group of Directors of the online Series. including the Director of the final in-Person Conference, I have been working with my colleagues almost weekly for a year I was aware of what was going on in the other two conference preceding my own, and I had the privilege of being able to build on their outcomes. Thus, part of the design was similar in all three conferences, for example the Societal event, which had the greatest number of sessions in this conference.

A conference, including one held online, can be seen as a transitional space in Winnicottian terms. Having this in mind, our aim was to offer a space for exploration of Islamophobia as a form of Othering and Hatred of the Other and racism. This meant creating a space, both through the structure (the design and technology) and the content (in terms of food for thought), where participants could develop new insights, experiment with new learnings, and also could take different roles and develop working hypotheses). For the staff it meant developing the capacity to contain such dynamics and to contain the Other within us without expulsion and projections, for example through polarization or stereotyping. A motto has been “perfection is not of this world”. It seemed to help to get in touch with vulnerability and to use mistakes a means for understanding the dynamics and learning.

## PRE-CONFERENCE STAGE

### *Membership recruitment*

Since this conference was the last of the Series, most of the recruitment was done from the beginning of the Series for all three conferences, followed by a specific emphasis on this conference’s recruitment in the final two months. 14 members had already participated in at least one of the other Series’ conferences, so that had its own path. The others came in slowly and three people registered on the boundary of the registration deadline.

# ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD



## *Staff*

Following my appointment as Director, I immediately invited Olya Khaleelee (United Kingdom) as the Associate Director to whom I am extremely thankful for her ongoing availability to think together and work with me all through a complicated and challenging journey, and to Nicola Sahhar (Germany) as Administrator and Consultant, for his ongoing presence, ideas and continuous commitment and to Katarzyna Gębala (Poland), as Technical Assistant, who joined the staff two weeks before the conference, for her admirable dedication and enthusiasm. The four of us formed the Directorate. The Consultants were: Soulmaz Bashirinia (United Kingdom), Mira Erlich-Ginor (Israel), Mo Khan (USA), Luca Mingarelli (Italy), Ben Neal (United Kingdom), and Allan Shafer (Australia) to whom I am very grateful for their dedication, support and ongoing engagement before and during the conference. The staff group varied in terms of age, personal and professional background and approaches and institutional affiliations, citizenship and nationality, and group relations experience.

Before and during the conference mentorship was offered to the new generation staff, which seemed to be helpful.

The online conference required an enormous amount of preparation. The conference management met regularly for months, the administration was tightly supervised. All the staff met three times before the conference. A lot of invisible and amazingly generous and dedicated work was done before and during the conference. All staff adhered enthusiastically to this new pioneering project. Although the schedule was tight and even tighter for the staff, staff was able to have enough space for reflection and to address the issues at stake. Among many other things that emerged from the conference material, it was noted that as staff, we deeply engaged with our different identities and the challenges we go through in our lives. This work on identity was mirrored in the membership in a parallel process. During the preparatory staff meeting the two Social Dreaming hosts ran two Social Dreaming Matrices for the Staff which was helpful in creating a collaborative environment.

## **THE CONFERENCE**

### *Technology*

We used the Zoom platform with only one link for all the events, hoping that this would make everything quite simple and accessible. We used Padlet for the conference notice boards. Apparently, things worked quite smoothly for the participants who were able to use these online resources. Nevertheless, it created a dynamic in the staff, see the themes below in this report.



## *The Conference Time*

The conference took place over three days from the 30<sup>th</sup> of January to the 1<sup>st</sup> February. Working online can have some challenges and can be stressful for the body, the mind and in terms of learning. So, we designed a sustainable timetable with quite a long break for lunch, working with members between 10.30 and 17.30 CET. The timetable seemed sustainable for most people and at the same time there was enough space for learning.

## *Composition of Membership*

On the final day before the conference, we had 29 registered members. Unfortunately, 2 participants withdrew at the last moment, 2 did not turn up, a few went and came back during the conference. So, we had 25 members in the conference, 20 women, 4 men and 1 not declared. Age-wise the membership comprised: 1 member between 23-34, 4 members between 34-45, 7 members between 45-54, 11 members between 54-65 and 6 members over 65. 14 members had already attended a PCCA Conference and for 11 it was the first-time attendance. There were 14 countries present: Australia (1), Austria (1), Canada (1), Germany (6), India (1), Ireland (2), Israel (2), Israel/Germany (1), Poland (1), Portugal (1), Russia (1), Singapore (1), Switzerland (1), United Kingdom (4) and the USA (5).

## *Conference Program and Events*

The program consisted of the following events:

**Entry and Exit Groups** – 2 sessions overall, 5 groups, 5-6 members with a consultant in each group.

**Social Dreaming Matrix** – 2 sessions, all participants and staff, 2 staff hosts.

**Societal Event** – An Opening Plenary, a Mid-Point Plenary and a Closing Plenary and 4 group sessions, staff as Governing Body and Consultants.

**Review Groups** – 2 sessions, 5 groups, same configuration as in the Entry and Exit Groups: 6-7 members with one or two consultants.

**Plenaries** – Two plenaries: an Opening Plenary at the beginning and a Closing Plenary at the end of the conference.

Due to the strong emphasis on the societal dimension of this online conference, it was decided not to have a Large Group (LSG), but only a Social Dreaming Matrix to enable the unconscious to emerge in a floating horizontal way, differently from a more hierarchical dimension of the Large Group “here and now”. Based on the experience this seemed appropriate.

# ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD



After each session the 2 hosts posted the dreams on a Padlet, a technological wall, available all the time for both staff and members. This task was very demanding for the staff, Mo Khan and Allan Shafer, who very generously worked before the conference and after staff meetings to carry out this job and to whom I am really grateful. Social Dreaming was valuable, serving as a channel for creativity and emerging unconscious themes for the system.

The **Societal Event** involved all members and staff. There was a Governing Body formed by the Directorate. For the plenary opening we provided two consultants, Soulmaz Bashirinia and Ben Neal, to whom I am very thankful for a great job. Other consultants were allocated to some of the territories for the first two sessions and one territory was left without consultants After the Midpoint Plenary, all consultants returned to the Governing Body and consultancy was provided when requested by membership groups or, on request, to any intergroup meetings that may take place.

The **Primary Task of the Societal Event was:**

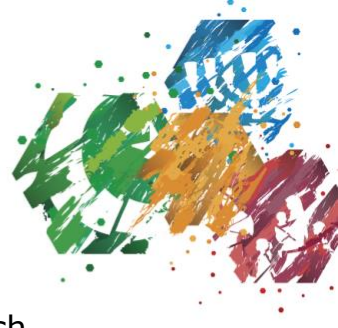
**To provide a space in which participants can explore ideas, fantasies and feelings about belonging to their own group, and their developing relationship and relatedness to other groups in this learning society, taking into account Islamophobia as a particular theme of othering and hatred of diversity in an upside-down world.**

## **SOME OF THE MAIN THEMES**

### *Anxiety re Technology*

In this specific conference technology was an ongoing challenge in the Directorate. On the one hand, its members were not fully familiar with it. Three weeks before the conference a technical assistant was recruited. And things improved a great deal, nevertheless, emotionally there continued to be tension and much anxiety about how and whether the technology would work. The evidence was that a great deal of discussion in the Directorate was about this issue. We all wanted to offer a safe space for members to be able to explore and address hot topics connected to the theme of the conference, which undoubtedly was challenging. One hypothesis is that we, also on behalf of the system, projected our anxiety on the container 'technology', a less familiar one than a physical location, since it was so difficult to address "Islamophobia in an Upside-Down world". Another hypothesis could be that the overwhelming influence of technology has a controlling, almost dominating, presence in and on our work.

# ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD



In the Social Dreaming Matrix a hypothesis emerged according to which “preoccupation with whether any container (room, safe space, relationship, conference, identity) can hold when the outside world feels chaotic and intrusive!” and we were caught in it,

## *Islamophobia*

The theme of Islamophobia was present at the conference, it was not avoided, although often members switched to others as described below.

A member in the Opening Plenary said that they had come to encounter their Islamophobia. Throughout the conference it became clear that it was quite difficult to encounter the Other without the presence of the Muslim/Arab (also online). Unfortunately, there were not many participants from that group, but those who were there contributed to the exploration.

This manifested itself in the names of the group’s members formed in the Societal Events: Christianity and Lost Power, Terror and Phobia, Islam, Nomadic/ Liminal Group. Interestingly Judaism was not included as a group.

Islamophobia confronted differences and bias. The fear of being labelled (e.g. terrorist) shaped the interaction. For example, there was a strong desire to distinguish Islam from jihadism and terrorism. Broader themes of othering, stereotyping, and societal prejudice emerged and were explored, for example the idea of “good Muslim/bad Muslim”.

So, it emerged that Islamophobia could oscillate between curiosity, fear, and avoidance. Islamophobia becomes more than prejudice—it reflects anxiety about the “Absolute Other”. Islamophobia is present not only as an external threat but as an internal organizer of attention—shaping what feels discussable, respectable, and “safe to be seen”, especially around Muslim identity, professionalism, and intimacy. Full understanding remains partial, fragmented, often resisted. This can enhance the feelings of being lost, overwhelmed, or “not fully understandable”.

Addressing the Muslim/Arab in ourselves did not seem enough and could lead to only partial understanding, leaving the rest under a veil. There was a persistent struggle to engage with what feels radically different or unknowable

Reflections on Islamophobia, white supremacy, and colonialism took place. Members tried to explore both personal and societal prejudice, developing more awareness of how individuals and groups project fear onto others.

# ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD



## *Identity, Belonging, Fluid Selfhood, Othering and Prejudice*

Identity was shown as unstable, relational, and contested. The tension between self-definition and imposed labels (e.g. religion, gender, group names) together with the experiences of being inside/outside, majority/minority emerged, leading to polarizations and to identity shifts across contexts, highlighting its fluid and constructed nature in how identity shapes experience and perception. It highlights differences in background (race, religion, gender and post-colonial past), the tension between individual identity and group belonging, influencing power relations, our viewpoints, and the recognition and awareness that “reality” is often subjective and perspective based.

“Othering” and prejudice were central and explicitly named in all dimensions. Since there were a limited number of Muslims/Arabs, the Series title was attractive, easier to work with and influenced the dynamics.

All this also led to fear, trauma, and unconscious survival dynamics and revealed the anxiety linked to war, violence, and historical trauma. Survival responses (fight, flight, freeze) shaped both individuals and groups. Transgenerational trauma and collective fear influenced the dynamics. For example, succession and the future: gifting light vs inheriting violence emerged.

## *Silence, Communication, and the Struggle to Think Together*

Silence was visible, especially in the plenaries, communication was marked by both expression and avoidance. Important topics remain unspoken, shaping the group as much as spoken content. Barriers included language, virtual setting, emotional overload, and fear of conflict. The group struggled to “think together”, sometimes fragmenting or retreating into silence. This was a manifestation of the complexity, uncertainty, a difficulty in making sense of the experience. The recognition that complexity cannot easily be simplified and that learning may remain incomplete or unresolved, was difficult to accept.

## *Gender*

The limited number of male participants was perceived as a loss for exploration also of that different perspective. Whilst because of the numbers women inevitably dominated the scene, men felt deprived of that experience of the dimension of their collective identity. This was also a contradiction in the exploration of Islamophobia, apparently and publicly a male dominated culture.



# ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD



## *Learning, Reflection, and Transformation*

Despite the challenges (i.e. being exhausted, overwhelmed, frustrated, confused), the experience was also framed as meaningful and transformative. There was emphasis on reflection, “digestion,” and ongoing learning that could lead to personal growth, increased compassion, and self-awareness. and that acceptance that transformation is ongoing rather than complete process that continues also after the conference.

## ***Acknowledgement***

I would like to thank the PCCA Board and Management Committee for the trust shown in authorizing me to direct this conference. It feels that it was a significant conference for all participants, staff and members. I am truly grateful to all the staff for their very generous dedication, contribution, passion, availability, insights. I am very thankful to all the members who accepted our invitation to attend the conference, making it so rich and powerful. Our hope now is that this conference has been a learning experience for members, even though with different degrees for different people, because this is the *raison d'être* of this work and what makes it meaningful to run a conference.

Louisa Diana Brunner

Director  
Islamophobia in An Upside-Down World