‘Their way or no way’: anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiments

In the previous chapter it was argued that there is an aspiration to non-racism among both grass roots and leadership of the EDL, albeit one that is neither fully achieved nor shared universally among those encountered in EDL milieux. In this chapter it is demonstrated that, in sharp contrast to the importance attached to distancing themselves from racism as they understand it, EDL activists openly articulate the belief that there is a ‘problem’ with Islam that is not associated with other aspects of multicultural society. This has led to the conclusion that ‘the EDL is clearly Islamophobic’ (Allen, 2011: 293) and, although having successfully accommodated aspects of the diversity of contemporary multicultural Britain and not espousing a traditionally racist ideology, promotes a form of ‘new racism’ or ‘cultural racism’ (2011: 293).

This chapter starts by critically outlining debates about how we define and measure ‘Islamophobia’, focusing on the question of whether Islamophobia is a new, and distinct, phenomenon or consists primarily in anti-Muslim attitudes, which are adequately understood within the existing notion of cultural racism. The nature and content of perceptions of, and attitudes towards, Islam among EDL activists participating in this research are then explored. After establishing the degree to which Islam is understood as complex and differentiated or as a single, monolithic entity, the dominant tropes of anti-Islam rhetoric encountered among grassroots activists are identified and explored in the context of how they frame campaigns and actions led by the EDL at the time of research. It shows how these views coalesce into a vision of Islam as an ideology (as opposed to a religion) which is (ab)used politically and strategically in the interests of internal oppression (‘Islam rules by fear and oppression’) and external aggression (extremism and terrorism). This expression of hostility towards ‘Islam’, rather than ‘Muslims’ or any particular ethnic group, it is shown, is employed by activists to support claims that the movement is ‘not racist’.

The second section of the chapter engages critically with such claims by considering specifically, and separately, hostility or prejudice towards Muslims. Anti-Muslim rhetoric and sentiment is identified among some respondents and found to be indiscriminately applied to all Muslims in everyday talk and reinforced at EDL demonstrations by songs and chants. The question of whether this hostility
is directed at Muslims as immigrants and members of particular ethnic groups rather than against Muslims as a religious group – as suggested by Halliday's (1999) preference for the term ‘anti-Muslimism’ over Islamophobia – is more complex. Explicit racialisation, in the form of abusive rhetoric, is identified among a number of respondents alongside the explicit rejection of any such racialisation by others. Similarly, the strong association of Muslims with violence and terror (Goldberg, 2006: 346) is accompanied by an equally strong rhetoric of differentiation between ‘extreme’ and ‘moderate’ Muslims.

Coming to a conclusion as to whether the identified hostility constitutes either a distinct ‘Islamophobia’ or is the latest form of cultural racism (Meer and Modood, 2009: 344) may bring some definitional clarity but leaves open the question of why Islam and Muslims have emerged as targets of hostility. Given the rhetorical and symbolic reference to Christianity and the crusades, as well as the use of the St George’s flag by the EDL, the final section of this chapter opens by exploring the contention that such hostility is rooted in a clash of religious views. Finding widespread indifference to Christianity, beyond its use as a general signifier of ‘our’ way of life, the discussion seeks other answers. Drawing on Ezekiel’s (2002: 54) insight that ‘thoughts and feelings about the Self’ constitute the emotional centre of the (racist) group, the focus is shifted from the characteristics ascribed to the target ‘others’ and towards how anti-Muslim sentiments are worked through emotionally-driven, personal and localised experience. Drawing on two strong tropes of anti-Muslim hostility identified in this study – the perception that Muslims seek to ‘impose their rules here’ and Muslims ‘have no respect’ – it is argued that fear and hate do not reside in either the individual expressing hostility or the object of hatred and fear, but circulate within an affective economy (Ahmed, 2004: 127). However, the findings challenge assumptions about the location of power within this economy. Switching the analytic lens from ‘other’ to ‘self’ reveals the power to ‘other’ embedded in models of Islamophobia is too simple. Analysing how anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim sentiments are engendered in personal, localised experience reveals such hostility can itself be the product of perceived ‘othering’.

**Defining and measuring ‘Islamophobia’**

Islamophobia is sometimes argued to be an entirely new phenomenon but, more usually, to constitute a modern manifestation of historical anti-Muslim or anti-Islamic phenomena (Allen, 2010: 13–15). The historically negative representation of Islam has been understood to sit within a wider ‘orientalist’ discourse reflecting that ‘for Europe, Islam was a lasting trauma’ (Said, 1978: 59, cited in Meer, 2014: 501). Goldberg (2006: 344) argues that orientalism became racially historicised in the wake of European colonial domination in the Middle East in the latter half of the nineteenth century when ‘The Muslim … came to be read as inevitably hostile, aggressive, engaged for religious purpose in constant jihad against Europe and Christianity’. In this way, he suggests, the figure of the Muslim, alongside that of the Jew, ‘has historically bookended modern Europe’s explicit historical
anxieties about blackness’ and thus is central to the very construction of race in, and of, modern Europe (2006: 344). The consequence of this historical formation of the image of the Muslim, according to Goldberg, is that in the European imaginary, Islam has come to be associated with a lack of freedom, sense of scientific inquiry, civility, love of life, human worth and equal respect for women and sexual minorities while at the same time, it is imagined, it promotes an aggressive religiosity and violent rejection of the perceived sociocultural conditions of alienation (2006: 345). Thus, Goldberg concludes, in Europe the Muslim is perceived ‘as the monster of our times’ that has come to stand for ‘the fear of the death of Europe itself’ (2006: 346). At the same time, an overemphasis on historicity is cautioned against by some, less it obscures contemporary forms of Islamophobia or oversimplifies the historical continuity of orientalist categories and generates an unfounded impression of perpetual discursive conflict between Muslims and the West from the Crusades onwards (Meer, 2014: 503).

Recognition of Islamophobia as a distinct and contemporary form of prejudice emerged following the publication of the influential report by the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia (CBMI) for the Runnymede Trust (1997) *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*. The report lent Islamophobia public and political recognition and provided a ‘shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam – and, therefore, to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims’ (Allen, 2010: 15). Islamophobia is understood as consisting in a ‘closed view’ on the nature of Islam whereby Islam is seen as: monolithic and static; separate and ‘other’ to other cultures; inferior to the West (barbaric, irrational, primitive and sexist); aggressive and supportive of terrorism; and a political ideology, used for political or military advantage. This ‘closed view’ also means that: criticisms made by Islam of ‘the West’ are rejected out of hand; hostility towards Islam is used to justify discriminatory and exclusionary practices towards Muslims; and anti-Muslim hostility is accepted as natural and ‘normal’. This is contrasted to an ‘open view’ on Islam in which Islam is perceived to be: diverse and progressive; interdependent with other faiths and cultures; distinctively different but equally worthy of respect; an actual or potential partner in the solution of shared problems; and a genuine religious faith, practised sincerely by its adherents. In this mindset: criticisms of ‘the West’ and other cultures are considered and debated; debates and disagreements with Islam do not diminish efforts to combat discrimination and exclusion; and critical views of Islam are themselves subjected to critique.

The application of this typology, drawn from Milton Rokeach’s concept of the ‘closed’ or ‘open’ mind, attracts strong criticism from Allen (2010: 67) on grounds of methodological lack of rigour in the derivation of the original typology by Rokeach and with regard to its particular application in the Runnymede Trust report where the ‘closed mind’ becomes both the foundation for theoretical development and the definition of Islamophobia. This, he argues, means the features of ‘closed’ views are equated to the features of Islamophobia (2010: 69). The ‘closed–open’ binary establishes a series of dualisms that appear to reinforce many of the ‘closed views’ themselves and, since ‘closed’ and ‘open’ are largely interchangeable with ‘negative’ and ‘positive’, it follows that the report appears to suggest that
Islam be both understood and engaged with ‘openly’ or ‘positively’, irrespective of whether any ‘closed’ or ‘negative’ realities exist (2010: 74). Following this model, Allen (2010: 77–78) argues, disagreeing with or criticising individual Muslims, for being intolerant of other faiths or of preaching messages of hate, could be legitimately construed as being Islamophobic. The Runnymede Trust’s report has been criticised also for providing a definition of Islamophobia that fails to sufficiently differentiate between doctrines within Islam or recognise diversity within British Muslim communities (Meer and Modood, 2009: 341; Allen, 2010: 75; Jackson, 2011a: 13); a particularly damning criticism given that this homogenising view of Islam is one of the characteristics ascribed by the report’s authors to a ‘closed’ view of Islam. It is also said to understand Islamophobia in a limited sense – as the aggregate of acts or practices of discrimination or prejudice – rather than as a broader ‘ideological phenomenon’ that can shape wider discourse and consensus on who ‘we’ are, through the construction of Muslims as ‘the other’ (Allen, 2011: 290).

Allen’s extensive critique of the Runnymede Trust definition and understanding of Islamophobia leads him to redefine Islamophobia as consisting of three components: the process or phenomenon; the signs and visual identifiers; and the consequences of its enactment (Allen, 2010: 189). In terms of the phenomenon itself, he suggests that ‘Islamophobia is an ideology, similar in theory, function and purpose to racism and other similar phenomena, that sustains and perpetuates negatively evaluated meaning about Muslims and Islam’ (2010: 189). In terms of the signs and visual identifiers, he suggests that these signs shape and determine understanding, perceptions and attitudes about Muslims and Islam as Other in similar ways to that which they have historically, although not necessarily as a continuum. Finally, he suggests that, as a result of this, there is evidence of the existence of exclusionary practices that disadvantage, prejudice or discriminate against Muslims and Islam in social, economic and political spheres, including their subjection to violence. In arriving at this position, Allen effectively rejects that anti-Muslim sentiment is the same as racism or xenophobia; there is a distinctive phenomenon, he suggests, but, for this to constitute Islamophobia an acknowledged ‘Muslim’ or ‘Islamic’ element (explicit or implicit) must be present. Thus he rejects Halliday’s (1999: 898) suggestion that a more appropriate term is ‘anti-Muslimism’ (Allen, 2010: 135) or that Islamophobia is simply a manifestation of ‘new racism’ (‘cultural racism’). Indeed, seeing Islamophobia as cultural racism, Allen (2010: 155) argues, may inadvertently homogenise perceptions and essentialise Muslims by attributing universal importance to characteristics that are in fact specific, for example, to the particular dominant groups within British Muslim communities.

Meer and Modood (2009: 353) also embrace the notion of Islamophobia and argue for the recognition of anti-Muslim hostility as being distinctively rooted in anti-Islamic sentiment, or at least that anti-Islamic sentiment is inseparable from anti-Muslim sentiment. This, they suggest, is evident from the experience of Muslims who, when reporting street-level discrimination associate it with when they appear ‘conspicuously Muslim’, for example, when wearing
Islamic dress (2009: 341). However, they argue that ‘anti-Muslim sentiment’ and ‘Islamophobia’ are valid specifications of a wider cultural racism and racialisation and suggest that resistance to accepting anti-Muslim sentiment as racism among opinion-makers lies in the understanding of religious identity as chosen rather than (like race) involuntarily ascribed alongside a reluctance to sympathise with a minority that is perceived to be disloyal or associated with terrorism (2009: 344).

Since, as noted above, claims to non-racism by EDL activists draw on the direction of their hostility towards ‘Islam’, rather than ‘Muslims’, it is worth briefly addressing the question of how we might, in practice, measure whether a particular prejudice towards Muslims, beyond that extended to them as immigrants or members of various ethnic minority groups, exists. To test this, Bleich (2011: 1582) suggests operationalising the concept of Islamophobia as the presence of ‘indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims’. This posits Islamophobia as consisting of attitudes or emotions rather than behaviour and extends its scope beyond a strict or clinical definition of a ‘phobia’ – an irrational/unwarranted fear of an object/phenomenon – to include a range of attitudes such as aversion, jealousy, suspicion, disdain, anxiety, rejection, contempt, fear, disgust, anger that range in source, type and intensity (2011: 1586). It also suggests that to constitute Islamophobia, these attitudes or emotions must be indiscriminately directed at Islam and Muslims – that is, people must make generalisations about a group of people on the basis of traits that can be ascribed to a minority of its members at best (Helbling, 2012: 7), while negative attitudes or emotions directed at some interpretations of Islam by some Muslim communities does not necessarily constitute Islamophobia (Bleich, 2011: 1585). Third, these negative attitudes or emotions must be directed at Islam or Muslims, not just out-groups in general. This suggests any definition of Islamophobia should include either Islam as a religious doctrine, or Muslims, as the people who follow it, since Islamophobia is ‘multidimensional’ and ‘Islam and Muslims are often inextricably intertwined in individual and public perceptions’ (2011: 1587).

While there are few dedicated surveys of Islamophobic attitudes at the individual level, analysis of the findings from those empirical studies available suggests Islamophobia is hard to distinguish from other prejudices (xenophobia, racism and anti-Semitism) (Helbling, 2012: 8–11) since the same individual-level variables (unemployment and financial difficulties) appear to increase or reduce (higher education, higher socio-economic status and urban residence) anti-Muslim prejudice as anti-minority prejudice (Strabac and Listhaug, 2008: 279–81). However, both Helbling’s (2010) and Strabac and Listhaug’s (2008) studies employed a single question, asking, ‘Which of the following groups [Muslims] would you NOT like to have as a neighbour?’ In addition to the dangers of making conclusions on the basis of a single survey question (Bleich, 2011: 1591), this particular question clearly asks about attitudes to Muslims not Islam and since it does not itself differentiate between different groups of Muslims (Sunnis, Shiites) or Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds, it is impossible to know whether those answering the question have indiscriminately negative attitudes or
not. Moreover, even if the same people show hostile attitudes toward both immigrants and Muslims, it does not imply that Islamophobia is the same as xenophobia; the same people might be xenophobic and Islamophobic for different reasons (Helbling, 2012: 10). In this study, therefore, perceptions and attitudes to Islam and to Muslims are analysed discretely.

**Perceptions of Islam**

If Islamophobia is to be considered a distinct phenomenon from wider racism, then an identifiably Islamic or Muslim dimension to the prejudice or hostility must be demonstrated (Allen, 2010: 189). Islam is clearly singled out by EDL respondents as a ‘problem’ in a way that other aspects of multicultural society are not: ‘All religions and races get on apart from Islam’ (Connor). Islam is understood by respondents as ‘separate and other’ in a way determined by the Runnymede Trust (1997) to be characteristic of an Islamophobic mindset. According to Matt, ‘the bad side of Islam’ is ‘the biggest threat this country’s got’, while for Declan, ‘Islam … always will be a problem unless like myself and everyone else does something about it.’ This appears to confirm Allen’s (2011: 293) conclusion that ‘the EDL is clearly Islamophobic’ in as much as it creates ‘a “form of order” that confirms Muslims and Islam as against “our” way of life’. Before considering the particular tropes that underpin this perception of Islam as culturally alien in the narratives of EDL respondents in this study, it is important first to establish exactly what ‘Islam’ is being referred to.

**Islam as monolithic and undifferentiated**

In official documents, such as the movement’s mission statement, the EDL refers to its object of concern not as Islam per se but ‘radical Islam’ or ‘Islamic orthodoxy’. At EDL demonstrations speakers also distinguished between ordinary Muslims and ‘extremists’:

> I am not talking about the guy you carpool with. I am not talking about the guy you see at the school gate picking up their children. … I’m talking about the extremists, the loons … the clerics and Imams who want to preach a seventh-century ideology in a twenty-first-century world. (Mark Robinson, Luton national demonstration, 2014 recorded in field diary, 22 November 2014)

Grassroots activists in this study also differentiate within Islam, in particular between ‘moderate’ and ‘extremist’ forms of Islam. Thus Matt says he is only against ‘militant Islam’, while for Euan being an EDL supporter is ‘all about the radical Islam’. Some respondents compare Islam with other world religions and conclude that it is no different in having ‘extremist’ elements: ‘you get Christians with different views as well. Same as you get Muslims who are just Muslim by culture and you get extremist ones who that’s all they think of all day in their mind’ (Andrew). Lisa, who, unlike Andrew, is not religious herself, concurs that
'you'll get extremists from every religion, you know, even Christianity' and, on the basis of her own reading of the Qur'an, suggests that Islam is actually 'a very peaceful religion. Nothing wrong with it at all'. Tim also decouples ‘extremist’ mindsets from the faith itself. Based on two sets of experiences – with a Muslim man with whom he had ‘carpooled’ and the family of a Muslim friend – he argues that ‘avid Muslims’ (those strongly committed to their faith) are not necessarily extremist since, at the same time, they ‘embrace other cultures and stuff. They are not on a one way track.’ Thus, he concludes, ‘It’s not Islam I’ve got a problem with’ (Tim). Respondents also recount narratives of differences between Muslim communities of different ethnic origin or branches of Islam, although such discussion is rarely at the theological level but rather describes tensions at a cultural or community level between, for example, Pakistani and Somalian communities (Matt) or positive relations with individual Muslim community groups (Euan).

However, among respondents in this study, there was also routine slip-page into talking about Islam or Muslims as single entities and failure to distinguish between different branches of Islam, different ethnic groups among Muslims or between ‘extremist’ and ‘moderate’ readings of Islam. The youngest interviewees were the most inclined to see Islam as monolithic, as indicated in the exchange below during a group interview with three local youth division members:

**BRETT:** Stuff like, I look at my little sister some days and I think like if it was living under their conditions in their country, which is what they are trying to bring here, my sister would be raped and beaten and I think I couldn’t live like that.

**INT:** Do you think all of Islam is like that?

**CONNOR:** Yeah there’s no such thing as moderate is tha?

**BRETT:** It’s a culture. The way that it’s set everybody’s like it. So with Catholic, it’s a religion so everyone within that religion is set to the same way.

**NEIL:** And it’s always gonna be that way.

**BRETT:** From birth it’s brought into your head.

Notwithstanding the official line of the EDL, this kind of statement could also be heard by speakers at EDL events. At the 2014 Luton demonstration, Dave Russell stated that ‘There are no moderates. There is only Islam. And Islam is certainly not moderate in its teachings’ (field diary, 22 November 2014). Talking about ‘Islamic State’ (IS), Islam is referred to as a ‘supremacist death cult’ and Russell cites a number of verses of the Qur’an ‘Book of death and slavery’ on punishment and the importance of jihad to argue that IS had not hijacked the Qur’an but ‘taken it as instruction, exactly how it was written’. As Russell pauses for effect following this claim, he is greeted with a chant from the crowd of ‘Stick your fucking Islam up your arse’ (field diary, 22 November 2014). The lack of complexity in the understanding of Islam in ‘front stage’ messages of the EDL noted by Jackson (2011a: 13) thus appears to have strengthened in the recent period.
Islam as backward-looking

In this section, the key tropes that underpin the perception of Islam as culturally alien found in narratives of EDL respondents in this study are outlined. While for the purposes of the analysis they are separated into four themes – Islam as backward-looking, Islam as oppressive and intolerant, Islam as aggressive and supportive of terrorism, and Islam as ideology – in everyday talk negative characterisations or associations of Islam are often interlinked. For example, the perceived anachronistic nature of Islam is central to its characterisation as a ‘cult’ or ‘ideology’ rather than a faith. Similarly, attitudes to women in Islam are perceived as evidence of both the ‘oppressive’ nature of Islam as well as its ‘backward-looking’ nature.

The discussion begins with the understanding of Islam as anachronistic, or ‘backward-looking’, not because it is the most frequently encountered but because it underpins a number of more specific narratives and helps respondents make sense of their feelings that Islam is culturally alien whilst not, in their minds, relying on racist constructions of otherness.

A common argument that Islam is anachronistic in nature is that the Qur’an has not been adapted to modern society.

… the Bible has been updated hasn’t it so many times to fit in with society and to fit in with the day. The Qur’an hasn’t changed for 1,400 years. That’s why you get all your paedophiles and things like that because, that even happened in the Bible years ago, do you know what I mean? But they’ve moved forward, they’ve moved forward with society. In Islam they haven’t have they? (Rob)

This failure to move with the times rather than Islam itself is blamed for what Euan sees as a cultural clash:

I mean the modern-day Bible, they update it don’t they? … [I]t wouldn’t be half as bad if they’d allow them to do that with the Qur’an. … When they want them to worship it in this barbaric form, you know, in our civilised country, you know, then it just doesn’t seem like it’s gonna be a happy ending in it. (Euan)

Another Local Organiser, chatting informally at a demonstration noted that in his local area a new mosque had been opened by a group who had ‘modernised the Qur’an to fit with contemporary English life’ and that he doesn’t have an issue with them (field diary, 14 July, 2012).

The emotional dimension of EDL activism is particularly evident in discussions of Islam that posit it as non-progressive or backwards-looking. This is important to our understanding of ‘Islamophobia’ since emotional responses (as distinct from, for example, stereotypes) are stronger predictors of discrimination and social distance (Bleich, 2011: 1586). Brett identifies Islam as allowing people to ‘get away with’ beating children and raping wives and concludes ‘It’s just wrong. That’s like old-style Britain. It’s bringing us back to how we used to be. It’s not moving forwards, it’s moving backwards.’ In the course of discussing whether
the Prophet Mohammed should be considered a ‘paedophile’ as a result of his marriage to Aisha⁶ (discussed below), Connor becomes passionate and aggressive: ‘All these little Muslims you see round here ain’t living in the twenty-first century. They’re living in the seventh century where it was all Sharia law and all that bollocks. Well fuck that. You’re in England. You live by our rules.’ Chas calls Islam ‘barbaric, backwards’, citing ritual slaughter, the stoning to death of those convicted of adultery and the ‘selling off’ of child brides. Declan, who heads the LGBT division of the EDL, complains that the problem is that Islam ‘needs to evolve’ and seeks to ‘take us back to that belief that being gay is not normal’. Indeed, the terms ‘barbaric’ or ‘disgusting’ are commonly used to describe a range of practices associated in respondents’ minds with Islam, including: physical abuse of women and children, sexual violence towards women, genital mutilation, polygamy, paedophilia and ‘grooming’, forms of punishment permitted under Sharia law (stoning of women found guilty of adultery, ‘chopping hands off’) and marriage within families (between cousins for example).

The single most frequent association made with Islam by respondents relates to ‘paedophilia’ and ‘grooming gangs’ and is expressed collectively in the chant ‘Allah is a paedo’. The centrality of this issue in respondent narratives reflects a number of high-profile court cases of such gangs that took place during the course of the research and the fact that it was one of the key campaigning issues of the EDL. For some supporters it was also a very personal issue; Peter recounted that his sister had been a victim of one of the gangs recently prosecuted for grooming. The attention to the ‘grooming gang’ issue in speeches at demonstrations, in line with wider media coverage, grew considerably over the period of research. If at the start of the fieldwork, speakers might mention, inter alia, the need to ‘protect our little girls’ (Tony Curtis, Dewsbury National Demo recorded in field diary, 30 June, 2012), by the end it had become the cause for the establishment of an EDL protest camp outside the police station in Rotherham (see Figure 4.3), and a long, impassioned speech by Ian Crossland at the national demonstration in the town (September 2014) in which he attacked both the police and the social services for being ‘too scared to offend Muslims’ (field diary, 13 September 2014).

A number of respondents qualify the connections they make between Islam and grooming gangs by the recognition that paedophilia and grooming is committed by people of all ethnicities and religions. Lisa, for example, cautions against speeches that link grooming of girls to Muslims because there are ‘a lot of white paedophiles’. Matt also makes clear that ‘it’s not just Muslims … white people can do that as well, black people, Chinese people can do it, it’s happening in any race, any culture’ (Matt). A number of respondents said they felt the ‘Allah is a paedo’ chant was ‘wrong’ (Tim), although for Rob this was on the technical grounds: ‘I don’t believe that Allah is a paedo but I believe Mohammed is a paedo so I think that’s wrong in how they say it.’

However, a local speaker at the Rotherham demonstration (September 2014), who described himself as ‘half-English, half-immigrant’, makes explicit the logic that is implicit in many respondents’ statements when they insist on ‘grooming gangs’ being referred to as ‘Muslim’ rather than ‘Asian’. The raping
of girls, he says, continues a tradition going back 1,500 years when Mohammed, upon conquering lands, allowed the raping of conquered women (field diary, 13 September 2014). The most consistently cited argument among respondents for the direct link between Islam and the current phenomenon of grooming is that the veneration of the prophet Mohammed in the knowledge of his marriage to Aisha sanctifies sexual activity with underage girls. This, it is argued, provides the basis for the legitimation of groups of men of Muslim faith engaging in sex with girls under the age of consent: ‘Mohammed, when he was 73, he married his 6-year-old niece, which is why they think it’s okay. They think it’s okay to marry a child and do all this child sex and it’s not’ (Theresa). The problem as Tim sees it is a white paedophile, such as Jimmy Saville, is treated, rightly, as a ‘sick bastard’, while Mohammed, who ‘married a five-year-old girl and had sex with her at like about six or seven’, which ‘in our day and age that’s a paedophile, definitely’, is worshipped (Tim). This is expressed more emotionally by Tina: ‘when I look at my daughter and think of a grown man, I can’t … I just don’t understand how you can pray to a man who thinks it’s okay to have sex with a nine-year-old girl’ (Tina). The logic of this argument is extended to the claim that white girls are the primary target of this grooming activity because attitudes within Islam to non-Muslims make them an object to be treated without respect (see below).

Islam as oppressive and intolerant

Grassroots EDL members make a range of associations of Islam with intolerance and discrimination. Islam is described as anti-Semitic and anti-Christian (Declan) and as ‘the only religion that is against all other religions’ (Local EDL Organiser recorded in field diary, 14 July 2012). A number of respondents claim that Islam or the Qur’an preaches hate (Connor, Declan) and, at the 2014 Luton demonstration, Islam is described as ‘an ideology that preaches hate towards everything else other than Islamic doctrine’ (Mark Robinson, cited in field diary, 22 November 2014). Other respondents complain that extremist Muslims (such as Anjem Choudary, co-founder of Islamist organisation al-Muhajiroun) are allowed to make speeches or display placards expressing hate without arrest (Lisa, Michelle).

Islam is described as intolerant also in relation to sexual minorities. Connor associates Islam with ‘the executing of gays’ while Declan claims Islam preaches that gays should be thrown off the top of a mountain. As leader of the LGBT division, this was a particular source of concern for Declan who also recounted a personal experience of homophobic attack and the failure of the police to act on his complaint:

Outside Bradford I was attacked by Muslims for being gay and I went to the police … This was after the Bradford march. I didn’t have my hoody up, this was when I first started up, and I had the gay flag around my shoulders. They attacked me, called me a fag, I’m dirty, I’m a queer, I deserve to die and all that. I went to the police, ‘no evidence’. Black eye, broken nose, cut lip. (Declan)
It is gender inequality and the abuse of women, however, that features most frequently in the characterisation of Islam as oppressive and intolerant. Jack sums this up as ‘Women are second-class citizens; they have to walk behind their husband.’ The burqa is widely deployed as a symbol of this inequality although it is recognised by a number of respondents that its wearing is a cultural norm rather than a religious requirement. Thus the burqa is described as being imposed by fathers (Jordan) or husbands (Chas, Matt) as a means of control over women:

… nowhere in the Qur’an does it say they [Muslim women] have to cover their face. Nowhere. … I asked a Muslim guy who’s a dead religious Muslim like and he said ‘No I don’t make my wife, that’s just men who feel like women shouldn’t be seen.’ (Tim)

For other respondents, however, the burqa is seen as inherently Islamic and as containing a more sinister meaning. Andrew notes that ‘the Islamic faith forces women to cover up, and … it allows husbands to beat the wives’ and that this is one of ‘many things that they do which are oppressive to women’. This suspicion that Islamic dress can conceal violence towards women is repeated by Kane: ‘It makes me think as well, why does Muslims wear burqas? Do they get beat up underneath there and they are hiding bruises?’ (Kane).

This is indicative of a wider association of Islam with systemic violence towards women through the mechanism of Sharia law. Thus Islam is associated with the brutal punishment of women for adultery or disobedience to their husbands (Chas, Connor), legitimising the rape of women and girls (Chas, Connor, Declan, Jack) and of punishing women rather than the perpetrators of rape:

‘I seen in the YouTube video she is buried chest high cause she is raped by another Muslim man. When she got taken to a Sharia court, her case is half of a man’s so they buried her up to her chest and they stoned her to death which I think is barbaric.’ (Declan)

The conclusion drawn by Declan is that ‘Islam rules on fear and oppression.’

**Islam as hostile and aggressive**

Another Islamophobic trope, as defined by the Runnymede Trust, found widely among this respondent set is a perception of Islam as hostile and aggressive. This is expressed in concerns that Islam is both a rising power and has imperialistic designs. Declan argues that Islam ‘has still kept its old fifth-century sense that we must control the world’, while others point to placards carried by Islamist protestors proclaiming ‘Islam will dominate the world’ (Lisa). A number of respondents discussed conversions to Islam as one means of imperialist expansion.

… [T]hey started forcing their laws on the streets on a night, beating people up. … If you are not Islamic or part of the Muslim community you’ll get done over and it installs intimidation and fear into everyone who lives there. So it’s easier
for them when they can get someone who can sort of give them leaflets going ‘you’ve gotta join this, you’ve gotta be a Muslim’. … [T]hat’s why they claim to be one of the fastest-growing religions and it is only through fear, violence and intimidation. (Euan)

Respondents and demonstrators talked about members of their family who had converted (Jordan; field diary, 12 January 2013). For Tina, conversion was a particular source of anxiety. She recounted how in an area in which she had previously lived, young Muslims had begun to convert Afro-Caribbean youth leading subsequently to turf wars over drugs sales. She also talked about the high rate of conversions to radical Islam in prison, recounted how she had seen a boy being ‘converted’ on the street and showed me a YouTube video of a similar incident. Her fear is for her own children: ‘I don’t want to be in a situation where my kids are bullied into converting into Islam when they’re older’ (Tina).

Islam is felt to be growing in strength, especially in comparison to the decline in believers in Christianity (Andrew), and to represent a direct threat. The creeping imposition of Sharia law in districts of large multicultural cities is often cited as evidence of the imperialistic designs of Islam and blamed for pushing out those who do not conform. Declan claims that the previous leader of the LGBT division of the EDL had been forced to move out of London after ‘being attacked by that Sharia police’. Jack expects Sharia law to be implemented to some extent in the UK within the next 10 years and believes politics is increasingly being infiltrated by those with extremist views. Euan confirms this view, arguing that ‘radical Islam’ has ‘corrupted near enough every tier of our democracy … From the police upwards’, and cites the attempted terrorist attack on Glasgow airport by a British-born doctor of Iraqi background as evidence. Although not expressed as a ‘fear’, there is a real sense in respondents’ narratives of Islam as an unstoppable power: ‘Islam is the strongest religion in the world. … [A]nd it does dominate most of the world, Islam, if you look on the maps’ (Lisa).

Natural population growth is also presented as threatening. In the region in which the research was conducted one-fifth of the population identify themselves as Muslims and in one town from which respondents were drawn the Muslim population had grown by over 200 per cent between 2001 and 2011 (Jivraj, 2013). Fears about Islamisation being an automatic consequence of population growth are expressed (Connor, Richard) and Theresa predicts ‘an Islamic takeover’ within two generations ‘because they are out-populating us’.

**Islam as ideology**

The argument that Islam functions as an ideology rather than a religion is another characteristic of Islamophobia, according to the Runnymede Trust (1997) definition, that is widely referenced among grassroots EDL members. Connor refers to Islam as an ‘ideology’ while Chris notes ‘It isn’t a religion. It’s a cult’, and Tina
describes young British Muslims as ‘brainwashed’. This is an image invoked in official EDL messages also. In the movement’s mission statement, for example, ‘radical Islam’ is described as a kind of oppressive cult that distorts ordinary Muslim faith:

Radical Islam keeps British Muslims fearful and isolated, especially the women that it encases in the burqa. It misrepresented their views, stifles freedom of expression, and indoctrinates their children, whilst continually doing a discredit to those who do wish to peacefully co-exist with their fellow Britons.8

In his statement at the press conference hosted by Quilliam at which he resigned from the EDL, Tommy Robinson declared that he wanted ‘to lead a revolution against Islamist ideology not against Muslims’.9 This is echoed in Declan’s statement that ‘I don’t hate anybody as a person-wise I just hate the ideology of Islam.’ The attempt to distinguish between Islam as a religion practised by sincere, and unthreatening, adherents and Islam as an aggressive ideology is common. It was noted above in Tim’s description of a Muslim friend’s family as ‘avid Muslims’ but who embraced ‘other cultures’. It is also evident in Matt and Casey’s respect for a local pharmacist who is a devout Muslim: ‘All he does is pray, pray and pray but with like militant Islam, he’s got no time for ’em, he’s just a strict Muslim, he doesn’t hurt anyone else … people like that I’ve got time for’ (Matt).

The tenuous nature of this distinction, however, can be seen in discussion of, and activism against, mosques. On the one hand respondents did not articulate a general hostility towards mosques nor challenge the right of Muslims to worship. However, the building of mosques is viewed in some cases as a symbolic incursion (see Figure 5.1); a sign that Islam is ‘taking over’ or that the Muslim community is treated in a privileged way. Among respondents in this study, this occurred where the building of new or so-called ‘super mosques’ (Lisa) was proposed in areas that already had mosques, or permission to convert existing buildings into mosques or Islamic prayer centres was sought where there was no significant Muslim community (Peter, Michelle, Tim, Tina). This would appear to be in line with a minority opinion within the wider population; surveys suggest that around one-third of the population objected to any new mosque being erected in their neighbourhood (Field, 2012: 151).

However, one Division Organiser recounted how he had rejected an activist’s call to register an objection to a planning application for conversion of a property into a Muslim community centre because there was no reason to object: ‘To me, it’s a Muslim area, it’s owned by a Muslim and he wants to make his shop, which is doing very good, into a Muslim community centre for the local people’ (Matt). Objections to the use of public money to finance the building of mosques (when other community projects had not received funding), however, were articulated (Declan, Euan, Matt).

A number of respondents also expressed concerns that extremist preaching took place in some mosques (Michelle, Tim, Tina). When challenged about
an EDL chant that threatens ‘Burn our poppies and we’ll burn your mosques’, however, Tina responds that mosques are referenced purely symbolically without any intent: ‘I would never burn their mosques, you know what I mean? It’s ridiculous really that we sing it … it’s just to say this is what’s pissing us off, you know, you burning our poppies’ (Tina).

Respondents denied that they themselves engaged in the symbolic violation of mosques and other Muslim community sites and complained that the EDL was blamed for graffiti and other attacks on mosques when it was not in their repertoire of actions (Michelle). However, a former NF and Combat 18 activist who attended a number of EDL demonstrations early on in the fieldwork period (until arrested at a demonstration for possession of drugs) had been given a suspended prison sentence for putting a pig’s head on the wall of a local mosque in May 2010 (field diary, 30 June 2012). Damon, another ex-NF member, also recounted how a new scar on his face had been the result of having been ‘slashed’ after he had thrown a pork chop at a mosque (field diary, 18 May 2013). He tells this story on the way to a flash demonstration against a planning application to turn a disused church into an Islamic prayer centre and, whilst protesting in front of the building, he repeated the symbolic violence by throwing a piece of pork (from a sandwich purchased en route) over the wall into the church yard (field diary, 18 May 2013).
‘We are not anti-Muslim, we are anti-Islam’: Islamophobia or anti-Muslimism?

EDL respondents in this study consistently placed Islam, not Muslims, as the object of their anxiety and hostility: ‘We are not anti-Muslim, we are anti-Islam’ (Declan). Some respondents talk about their ‘Muslim mates’ (Ed, Sean, Tim, Tina) and work colleagues with whom you can ‘have a laugh’ (Kane) or express empathy or solidarity with Muslims as ‘the first victims of Islam’ (Declan).

While the Demos online survey of EDL supporters confirms that support is motivated first and foremost by views on Islam (not immigration) (Bartlett and Littler, 2011: 6), this rhetorical shift clearly has strategic value; it allows generalised anti-Muslim sentiments to be replaced with a critique of Islamic doctrine or teachings and thus underpin claims to non-racism by the movement. Moreover, being anti-Islam does not exclude being anti-Muslim also. Hostility towards Islam can be used to justify discriminatory and exclusionary practices towards Muslims (Runnymede Trust, 1997) while racialisation of Muslims is not excluded by phenotypical dissimilarity; racialisation takes place because of the unity of the ‘gaze’ not of the object (Garner and Selod, 2015: 14). Thus Muslims are racialised as ‘other’ through their interpellation (regardless of physical appearance, country of origin and economic situation) solely as Muslims on the basis of visible markers (such as dress) of their faith (St Louis, 2002: 17). Thus, respondents’ claims that their hostility is directed exclusively towards Islam as a doctrine (or ‘ideology’) rather than towards Muslims, as followers of Islam, or indeed as racialised immigrant groups requires critical assessment.

Indiscriminate hostility? Anti-Muslim sentiment

Notwithstanding claims to be not anti-Muslim, generalised or indiscriminately negative attitudes or emotions towards Muslims were found among some respondents in this study. Sean expresses a generalised anxiety exclusively in relation to Muslims: ‘I haven’t got a problem with any other race, colour whatever’ (Sean). Tina is careful to say that she doesn’t hate all Muslims but her logic of argument proceeds to generalise about Muslims on the basis of characteristics ascribed to a minority: ‘I don’t hate all Muslims. I hate extremists, I hate grooming gangs, I hate paedophiles full stop, but when 95 per cent of grooming gangs are Muslims, then I think you’ve got to deal with the bigger problem first, you know’ (Tina). Jack also first qualifies his statement by saying he is not referring to all Muslims, before labelling not only Islam but also Muslims as ‘filth’.

Jack is not alone in using generalised terms of abuse towards Muslims. Muslims are referred to as ‘scummy bastards’ by Connor in the context of discussing his concern about grooming gangs and rape. Lisa admits that she has chanted ‘scum, scum’ at demonstrations, even though she says she is not prejudiced towards Muslims (‘I don’t treat Muslims any different’). Racist abuse was encountered most frequently at demonstrations, occurring especially when there were direct interactions with local Muslim communities or suspected Muslim
Defence League (MDL) counter-demonstrators. Thus, at the Walthamstow demonstration (September 2012), where the march passed through a heavily populated multicultural area and demonstrators were highly frustrated by the fact that counter-demonstrators had blocked the route of the march and halted the EDL demonstration, spontaneous hostility emerged on sighting groups who were taken to be Muslim. This was articulated in chants of ‘You can stick your fucking Islam up your arse’, ‘Allah, Allah, who the fuck is Allah?’, ‘Muslim bombers off our streets’ or ‘Muzzie scum’ (field diary, 1 September 2012). Late in the fieldwork, a chant not heard previously of ‘If we all hate Muslims, clap your hands’ was struck up by a small group of demonstrators on the coach on the way to the Rotherham demo while, during the demo itself, demonstrators were heard to chant, ‘If we all hate Pakis, clap your hands’ (field diary, 13 September 2014). This was particularly shocking as the term ‘Pakis’ had been repeatedly described by respondents as racist and unacceptable; Michelle explicitly stated, for example, that she would not use the term ‘scum’ in relation to Muslims and would object to others chanting if they started ‘calling people Pakis’. However, even outside the context of demonstrations, some respondents used abusive language. Driving through their home town with a group of young EDL activists, for example, racist comments and ‘jokes’ were made constantly as Asians were passed on the street amidst a relentless refrain of ‘fucking filthy bastards/cunts’ and ‘dirty Paki’ (field diary, 2 February 2013).

When I challenge respondents on generalisations made about Muslims or use of abusive language such as ‘Muzzies’, responses tend to reveal contradiction and ambiguity. When I tell Ian for example that I really don’t like it when he refers to Muslims indiscriminately, he tells me defiantly that he had ‘told the Job Centre that he wouldn’t work for a Muslim’ but then goes on to recount how he had ‘thumped’ a new supporter attending the Bristol demo precisely because of racist comments he had heard him make (field diary, 16 June 2013). Significantly, the unacceptable racism Ian intervened against had been directed towards some black people among the UAF counter-demonstration (the new supporter had started to do monkey chants). This confirms the singling out of Muslims as the object of hostility and is most explicitly stated by Jordan who claims, ‘I’ve got every colour relation, religion, friends but one religion I will not be friends with are Muslims.’

**Muslims as perpetrators of violence and terror**

This contradiction or internal conflictedness is evident in the two most frequently referenced associations with ‘Muslims’ found among the respondent set, which are, on the one hand, perceptions of Muslims as perpetrators of violence and terror, yet, on the other, the distinction between ‘extremist’ and ‘moderate’ or ordinary Muslims.

Speaking at the EDL demonstration in Luton (November 2014), Liberty GB’s Paul Weston declared that Islam and terrorism ‘go hand in hand’, while Mark Robinson used the term ‘Qur’animals’ to suggest an inherent connection between individual acts of violence and Islamic teaching (field diary, 22 November 2014).
Respondents in this study also associate Muslims with ideologically motivated terror. Sometimes these associations take the form of a simple depiction of all Muslims as potential terrorists or scare stories about the exponential growth of the number of ‘terrorists’ in the country:

… there’s fifty-eight thousand terrorists in this country, fifty-eight thousand. Now that’s a lot. Now you imagine every single one of them fifty-eight thousand are having six to eight kids, that more than trebles the amount of terrorists there’s gonna be in fifteen, twenty years’ time. (Tina; emphasis in the original)

Kane also paints a fearful image of contemporary British society, which he sees as characterised by ‘people having their heads chopped off, bomb explosions, kidnapping, rapists’. Sean says he feels ‘uncomfortable’ near someone wearing a burqa: ‘Even stood in a queue or summat I do feel nervous. I do because you’re not safe I don’t think. Someone could walk in right now and fucking blow this place up, you know’ (Sean). Notorious acts of terrorism or violence are mentioned such as the murder of the British soldier Lee Rigby or of Kriss Donald in Glasgow (see Chapter 6) and towards the end of the fieldwork the issue of British citizens heading to Syria as jihadi fighters appeared in speeches at demonstrations (Dave Russell, EDL demonstration, Luton, recorded in field diary, 22 November, 2014). The ‘war on terror’ is conducted symbolically by respondents in a counting-down song sung at, or on the way, to demonstrations (video clip, Walsall demo, 29 September 2012):

It starts … ‘There was ten Muslim bombers in the air. There was ten Muslim bombers in the air.’ Then it goes, ‘Then the RAF from England shot one down.’ Then obviously it goes all the way; ‘there were nine’ and all the way down. (Theresa)

Associations with ideologically motivated terror are less common, however, than reference to localised, everyday ‘intimidating’ behaviour, threats or violent actions perpetrated by ‘Muslims’. Chas attributes this to ‘Muslim youth running round streets terrorising local people’, and it appears to be an issue primarily for the youngest male respondents, who talk frequently about the threats they receive and how they cannot walk in certain parts of town or they will get ‘stamped on’ (Chris). This is how Ray describes his passage through one of these areas of his home town:

If you walk up our area and there’s more than five of you you’ll get arrested you’ll get stopped. They say it’s racist. I walked through there and from one end of the street to the other, you couldn’t move. It was just full of Muslims and they were all … shouting things. It was all about intimidation. There was a hundred of them easily and it was about 11 o’clock at night. (Ray)

Ray, and his brother Connor, come from a family strongly associated with the local division of the EDL and they recounted a period when ‘they [the Muslims]
put five grand on my dad’s head’ (Ray). Local Organiser, Matt, recounted having received death threats and having a petrol bomb thrown at him in the street. Intimidation and bullying in educational contexts are mentioned frequently and discussed in Chapter 6 as part of a wider discourse of victimhood.

**Muslims: extremists and moderates**

Sitting incongruously alongside such generalised associations of Muslims with terrorism, the other most frequently coded reference to Muslims relates to the importance of *not generalising*. Sean recognises in himself a tendency when younger to ‘spout off about “Muslims”‘ but that as he has got older he realises ‘Not every Muslim is the same. … I get that. They are not all the same.’ As noted above, respondents recognise also that extremism is not inherently associated with Muslims, since ‘you get extremists from every religion’ (Lisa). When defining what constitutes moderate and ‘extremist’, Chas suggests extremism emerges when religion is taken ‘far too seriously’ and means ‘you can’t sit back and you can’t say “Oh yes we can talk about this”’ (Chas). The red line for Lisa is the question of attitudes of Muslim communities to the non-Muslim British population; she distinguishes ‘extremists’ (be they Muslim or not) as those who voice ‘hatred’ towards the country and its citizens.

In contrast ‘moderate’ Muslims are described as those who ‘adopt British ways’ and follow ‘our law’ (Kane, Chas) or are not ‘strict Muslims’ (Kylie). However, a number of respondents expressed concern that such moderate Muslims do not resist extremism strongly enough. Talking about conversations he had had in the past with Muslim friends, Tim says:

> If they went and said you know to the extremists out there, if the Muslim community came out in force and just said ‘Do not use the word Islam cause you’re not what Islam represents.’ I said that would kind of squash a lot of things people are saying. (Tim)

Theresa, after making clear that she has no issue with ‘moderate’ Muslims, goes on to say, ‘We can’t understand why don’t these moderate Muslims then come and demonstrate as well against the extreme ones that we do?’ This perceived failure to speak out can lead some back into a position that sees all Muslims as potential extremists: ‘Why ain’t they [moderate Muslims] saying, “We’re nothing to do with those radicals” instead of standing up with them?’ (Euan).

This is expressed explicitly by Tina, who, reflecting on my challenge that EDL chants that reference Muslims indiscriminately undermine the movement’s claim to be against only ‘radical’ Islam, suggests that power is on the side of extremists:

> … when Nazis come into power in Germany, they [‘most Germans’] weren’t gonna stand against them … because it was either stand with the Nazis or die, what you gonna pick? You’re gonna pick to live, ain’t you? You know, it’s just survival instinct. So these moderate Muslims, they are not gonna put themselves
in a situation against extremists, do you know what I mean? They'd rather join them than go against 'em, the same as what happened in Germany. ... [I]t's like, let's be honest, if ... this turned into an Islamic state, let's just say ... do you think these moderate Muslims would say, 'Oh, no way, I'm going to stand with them guys? The Brits, the infidels.' They're not gonna go and stand with the infidels, they're gonna go with them. It's a survival instinct. ... [A]t least they've got something in common. They've got Allah and Mohammed in common. What they got in common with the infidels? Nothing. (Tina)

Indeed, Tina rejects the idea that there is a clear distinction between ‘moderate’ and ‘extremist’ Muslims citing her own extended family experience where she claimed that she had found moderate Muslims sympathised ‘with extremists’ because of their opposition to the interventions of British forces in Afghanistan and Iraq.

**Islamophobia: irrational fear or ‘common sense’?**

Notwithstanding a diversity of views across the respondent set and the differentiation made by many between ‘moderate’ and ‘extremist’ Islam and Muslims, this study of grassroots activists broadly confirms what Jackson (2011a: 13) calls the tendency within the movement to talk about Muslims as a single, ‘dangerous and threatening “other”’, which, according to the Runnymede Trust (1997) definition, constitutes a key criterion of an Islamophobic outlook. In this final section, therefore, we return to the question of Islamophobia but ask not what the object of hostility is, but why that hostility has emerged.

It opens by exploring the contention that hostility is rooted in a clash of religious views, given the rhetorical and symbolic references to Christianity in the movement. Finding that, among grassroots members in the EDL there is widespread indifference – sometimes even hostility – to Christianity it seeks answers as to why Islam and Muslims are singled out as targets of hostility in two further tropes of anti-Muslim hostility identified in this study, namely that Muslims seek to ‘impose their rules here’ and that Muslims ‘have no respect’. This discussion moves us away from rationalised, ideological positions into emotionally driven, personal and localised experience. Ezekiel’s (2002: 54) insight, that while ideological messages of the (racist) group focus on the characteristics of the target Others, ‘thoughts and feelings about the Self’ form the emotional centre of the group, is drawn on here. These particular tropes, it is suggested, emerge out of the ‘affective economy’ (Ahmed, 2004) in which fear neither resides in subjects ‘who are scared and who draw important comfort from being members of a group’ (Ezekiel, 2002: 54) nor the object (Ahmed, 2004: 127) but is produced through the circulation of signs of fear which, on the one hand become attached to particular bodies, and encoded as profoundly threatening to society but, at the same time, are worked through individual experiences and contexts in a way that is experienced by subjects as threatening to the ‘self’. In shifting the gaze to this ‘self’, moreover, a mismatch is revealed between the empowered subject of ‘othering’ present in existing models of Islamophobia and the way in which
anti-Islamic sentiments emerge in individual respondents’ narratives in a more complex process of ‘othering’ and feeling ‘othered’.

A new crusade?

Given that the ‘other’ for grassroots activists in the EDL is constituted as ‘Islam’ or ‘Muslims’, it might be anticipated that the ‘self’ that feels ‘infringed’ is also defined religiously. Indeed, the rhetorical and symbolic reference to Christianity, the crusades and the use of the St George’s flag in EDL messages would appear to confirm this (Busher, 2012: 20). Official messages also posit Christianity as underpinning ‘our’ morality and contrast its ‘truly ancient values’ with Islam, which is described as ‘some half-baked concept from a warmongering paedophile’ (Dave Russell, Luton demonstration, recorded in field diary, 22 November 2014).12

However, evidence from this study found that among grassroots members of the movement there is widespread indifference to Christianity beyond its use as a general signifier of ‘our’ way of life and as such an object of preservation. Only two respondents (both members of the Infidels fringe) had strongly Christian identities and only four respondents in total called themselves ‘Christian’. The most common position was ambivalence – ‘I don’t believe but I don’t disbelieve’ (Ian) – or a vague belief in ‘something’, alongside a high degree of scepticism about both biblical teachings (Tim) and the pretension of the Church to ‘tell you what to do’ (Kylie).

Thus Christianity is invoked rarely in relation to ‘self’ and almost always with reference to the imagined ‘other’ of Islam that is aggressive and threatening. Connor, for example, does not identify as Christian; when asked if he is religious he responds, ‘English, that’s my religion.’ However, he sees the mission of the EDL as being to ‘stand up against’ any attempt of other faiths or ethnicities to ‘impose other laws … to impose something on us’ (Connor). This invocation of Christianity in conjunction with national belonging (‘Englishness’) to suggest a civilisational boundary with an alien ‘Islam’ is found also in the symbolic displays and rhetoric of EDL organisers and supporters in Busher’s (2012) study (see Chapter 7).

‘Their way or no way’: everyday experiences of infringement and ‘othering’

One of the key characteristics attributed to the Muslim ‘other’ by respondents in this study is itself the practice of ‘othering’ (of non-Muslims). Expressions of anti-Muslim sentiment thus include perceptions that the Muslim ‘other’ constitutes a direct infringement of, or sets itself in a superior position to, respondents’ ‘self’.

This sense of infringement or imposition is expressed as the belief that Muslims seek to impose their own laws rather than to integrate, do not help the community and are ‘more segregated’ than other cultures (Tim). While survey
data suggest around one-third of the UK population share this perception that Muslims do not fit into British society and tend towards self-segregation (Field, 2012: 158), among EDL supporters in this study, the perceived problem is not simply lack of integration but of imposition – ‘It is their way or no way’ (Lisa). This articulation of the issue illustrates the frequent reference by respondents to concerns that unacceptable practices and rules (including aspects of Sharia law, attitudes to women and the ritual slaughter of animals for meat) were being gradually incorporated into British society13 without discussion or the possibility of objection. As Connor puts it, ‘the way them chuck their laws on us’ fosters anger and resistance. The narratives of respondents are replete with examples of everyday encounters of the infringement into ‘our life’ that this engenders. Rather than summarise or seek to generalise from these examples, two are selected, from the narratives of Jordan and Michelle, to explore how, at the individual level, the formation of Islamophobic sentiments takes place through the process of experiencing the self as ‘othered’.

Jordan is the only respondent in this study to accept that he was Islamophobic. It was when he moved from ‘a white primary school’ to a secondary school where there were ‘so many different colours’ that he became conscious of the fact that he ‘had a thing with Muslims’. The move is articulated as a major turning point in his life; a ‘shock’ that he can ‘never forget’ (Jordan). The trauma is experienced in a highly corporeal way. Conscious of an unfamiliar minority status – he says around a third of his class were ‘English’14 – Jordan becomes acutely aware of his white body and what it felt like to ‘sit with people in class’ and ‘have breaks with them’. His self-consciousness and sense of exclusion is communicatively as well as physically experienced:

… they’d speak in their own language and you’d know … if it was about you kind of thing because they don’t make it discreet, they are staring at ya, they are pointing and it was just like at the end of the day, yeah speak however you want outside of school in your own houses but when you are in a community school you should all speak the same. … There’d be a lot of fights over language issues.
(Jordan)

These language issues were intensified when, subsequently, school policy on language options meant that Jordan was obliged ‘to learn like a Muslim language or an Arabic language’ as a second foreign language alongside French. While, logically, this might have overcome the communicative barrier that had developed between him and other pupils, Jordan experienced this rule as a further infringement of his rights and refused to study one of the prescribed languages. As a result he was suspended from school although was later reinstated following an appeal by his mum to the local council. Winning this battle did not alleviate the sense of isolation; although he was allowed to return he felt that the school ‘didn’t want me there’ and that he was ‘always singled out’. The outcome was that Jordan ‘hated school’ and, by the time he left, was fully convinced that he was the discriminated minority. In his mind, it was to his body that the label of ‘other’ was attached.
The turning point for Michelle is recounted as a single incident rather than a life-changing move but articulates a similar resentment at what is perceived to be the imposition of ‘others’ norms and values. Michelle recounts the following incident having triggered her decision to join the EDL:

I got dressed up ready to go to the England–Germany game in the town, got my flag and my face painted and I got on the bus and you know put my money in the machine and of course there was a Muslim guy behind the steering wheel and I put my money in and he says, ‘Sorry you can’t get on the bus.’ I says, ‘Why?’ He says, ‘cause your flag offends me’. And then of course I saw red and thought, you know what, oh I’m not having that, you know, if you are gonna be here like it or lump it, it’s the World Cup. So of course I went to sit down and he refused to move and I said, ‘You’ve got a few options really, you carry on driving or you get off and walk cause I ain’t going nowhere, I’ve got a football match to get to.’ … And I sat there and eventually he kind of just drove off on his way but I got a bit of a cheer from the crowd in the back. (Michelle)

Michelle experiences the bus driver’s comment about her flag as an attempt to impose ‘other’ rules on territory that is as much hers as anybody else’s. At one level, therefore, her story ‘others’ Muslims as aggressive and imperialistic (see above). In the context of her whole life, however, it tells a tale of the displaced self as much as the hostile ‘other’.

Michelle had been physically and emotionally displaced when she moved, at the age of 21, from a small town in a neighbouring county to the city where she now lived. On arrival she had been housed in a women’s refuge and had broken all ties with her family. Her move from what she describes as the ‘white countryside’ to the city was experienced as ‘a complete smack in the face’. Like Jordan, she felt acutely aware of her physical ‘otherness’ in an urban space where, she said, ‘90 per cent of the chip shops in the area are probably Halal’ and, on the street, ‘all you see is Somalians and Asian women, burqas, left right and centre’.

Michelle’s ‘self’ was, in any case, tenuously secured. She describes herself as somebody who does not ‘mix very well with people’ and is nervous of attending meetings and events where she does not know people. She eschews friendship with other women in the local divisions of the EDL and states categorically that ‘I wouldn’t class myself as an EDL Angel in any way shape or form.’ Michelle had had almost 50 Facebook accounts and jokes that her record for the shortest time an account lasted was 15 minutes. She attributes this to accounts being disabled by Facebook but it is evident that she feels more comfortable with multiple identities and she takes pleasure from creating contentious or sexualised names for her virtual persona.

In this context, the ‘cheer from the crowd in the back’, whether real or imagined for narrative effect, is a central element in Michelle’s rendition of her encounter with the bus driver. It constructs the incident as an act of defiance – the assertion of her right to display support for her national football team – and a symbolic reclamation of space. It is illustrative of many everyday incidents recounted by
respondents in which they experience what it is like to be ‘other’ and her response to it compensates, although does not overcome, what she experiences as the devaluing of a gendered, classed and racialised self. In the following chapter how this sense of being ‘othered’ develops at the collective level into the claiming of victim status is discussed.

‘If they had respect, there wouldn’t be an EDL’

The second trope in respondents’ narratives of Islam in which they present themselves as ‘othered’ centres on the feeling that they, as ‘infidels’, are looked down on, lied to and not respected by Muslims. At the individual level, respondents most frequently complain that ‘as a Muslim you are allowed to lie to an infidel but you cannot lie to another Muslim’ (Mike). For Tina this undermined trust and confidence in personal relationships and interactions with members of the Muslim community. She illustrates this with a story she tells about having ‘made friends’ with a young Muslim woman on her course at university who, the following week, ‘just acted like I didn’t exist, like she’d never met me’ (Tina). Her greatest concern, however, is what she believes to be a policy among ‘extremist preachers’ who are ‘telling Muslim men to marry the infidel women … make them have your kid and then leave them’ (Tina). To substantiate her argument she uses the example of a young female neighbour who had converted to Islam when she had married a Muslim man but had been subsequently ‘dumped’. This perception of Muslim men’s exploitation of non-Muslim women clearly draws on other associations of Islam with the oppression and sexual exploitation of women and children discussed above. In contrast, Tim (citing a BBC 3 documentary Inside Britain’s Mosques) argues that Islamic doctrine tells Muslims to ‘stay away from non-Muslims as they are a serpent or a snake’. He contrasts his perception of Islam as a religion that seeks not to contaminate itself with ‘others’, to religions such as Sikhism and Christianity, which reach out to others.

Islamic doctrine is perceived by EDL grassroots activists to underpin a superior attitude towards ‘others’ among the Muslim community, which is described most frequently as manifesting itself in a ‘lack of respect’ towards others and for society, and its norms, in general. A meta-analysis of public opinion surveys on attitudes to Islam suggests that a third of the British population share this view that Islam ‘lacked respect for other cultures’ (Field, 2012: 149). A Sikh member of the division, when invited to talk about ‘the differences between Sikhs and Muslims’ at a divisional meeting, also chose to forefront the issue of ‘respect’. He says England is a tolerant country; if you come and treat it with respect, then you are respected also. The problem, he says, is that Muslim communities do not respect others and this has to be addressed (field diary, 19 October 2012).

Respect is found lacking among the Muslim community for things held dear in British memory, especially those associated with sacrifices made in war by army personnel and symbolised by the poppy. The burning of the poppy as a protest against British interventions abroad is denounced as ‘so disrespectful’ (Rachel). Incidents in which poppies have been burned are recounted often prior to wider
discussions of the lack of respect shown by (some) parts of the Muslim community to ‘our law’ (Chris), the British armed forces (Chris, Ryan, Jordan, Kane, Matt), ‘elders’ (who fought in the war) (Connor, Carlie, Tina), ‘the community’ (Chris), ‘us as people’ (Lisa), ‘our homeland’ (Lisa) and ‘the heritage of this country’ (Tina). It is of course the objection to the demonstration of ‘disrespect’ for returning British forces that was the original impulse for the founding of the EDL (see Chapter 2) and thus Chris says, ‘If they had respect, there wouldn’t be an EDL.’

Disrespect is experienced as personal infringement by some respondents as a perceived lack of respect for the country and is mapped onto ‘immigrant’ bodies that are understood as taking resources from, or undermining, individual respondents themselves. Rob, for example, complains,

I mean you got them all that come here and when they come here all they do is diss the place and we are the people that are putting them up probably saving them from death and then, you know, they are putting banners up ‘Behead those who insult Islam … Islam will take over the world.’ Hang on we just give you a place to live. We’ve given you security, we’ve given you money, we’ve given you houses. … That really gets up my nose because me as a person I’ve got nothing, my family have got nothing, and these people have got more than I will ever have and that really, really winds me up. … [V]ery disrespectful. (Rob)

For Lisa, who refers to her experience of working alongside migrants from eastern European countries, the fact that ‘they have no respect for us’ is a characteristic of eastern European migrants – who ‘don’t want to talk to you’ – as well as Muslims. The way these feelings of not being respected at a personal level are collectively experienced as ‘second-class citizenship’ is explored in the following chapter.

‘Islamophobic and proud’: racist or rationalist?

Finally, it should be noted that there is a minority position in which the Islamophobia label is appropriated and individuals declare themselves ‘Islamophobic and proud’. At the Dewsbury national demonstration, Tony Curtis referred to himself as an ‘Islamophobe’ in that, although he had nothing against the religion per se, he did have issues with elements of it, including Sharia law (field diary, 30 June 2012). Within this study, only one respondent – Jordan, whose story is discussed above – accepted that he was Islamophobic after I challenged his generalised hostility towards Muslims:

INT: I mean does that worry you, would it bother you that someone said to you that you were an Islamophobe, you hated all Muslims?
JORDAN: No, because I do.
INT: You do?
JORDAN: I do and it’s, I’ll never change. They can be the nicest person in the world, but I just won’t like them. You can be anything else, any Sikhs, Jamaicans …
However, images declaring pride in being Islamophobic were displayed on respondents’ Facebook pages (see Figure 5.2), suggesting this position attracts broader sympathy. The logic of this position is often that Islamophobia is not an irrational fear of Islam but a ‘common sense’ understanding of a real threat. This is most clearly articulated in the oft-repeated phrase which Jack attributes to former BNP leader Nick Griffin: ‘something that Nick Griffin said once always stuck in my head and he said and I quote “It’s not all Muslims who are suicide bombers but all suicide bombers happen to be Muslim”’ (Jack). Indeed, as Allen (2010: 171) points out, the rise in fear towards, and mistrust of, Muslims following 9/11 might be ‘entirely logical, rational and justifiable by those who feel increasingly fearful or at risk’ even though the ideological content of the rationale for this fear ‘might be inappropriate, inaccurate and without empirical justification’. A representative of the Sikh Awareness Society, invited to speak at a regional ‘meet and greet’ event, provides a variant of this rationale when he notes that ‘no other religion has a “phobia” attached to it. Making the point that nobody talks about Sikhophobia, for example, he implies, simultaneously, that there is no smoke without fire and that Muslims are given special protection (field diary, 4 October 2010). This illustrates Meer and Modood’s (2009: 338) argument that while Muslims are increasingly the subject of hostility and discrimination, as well as governmental racial profiling and surveillance, paradoxically, complaints about anti-Muslim racism...
and Islamophobia have not highlighted and alleviated anti-Muslim discrimination but frequently invited criticism of Muslims themselves.

In this respect, we might ask whether anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiments expressed by EDL respondents in this study are qualitatively different from those found across a growing proportion of the wider British public? Population surveys in the UK suggest that up to a fifth of the adult population are strongly Islamophobic, and up to a half think Muslims need to do more to integrate, perceive the face-veil as a barrier to integration, see Muslim immigration as a threat to British identity and think that Muslims have too much political power (Field, 2012: 158). Up to three-quarters oppose the subordinate status of Muslim women and press for tougher action against Muslim extremists (2012: 158). Most notoriously, Polly Toynbee, writing in The Independent in 1997, declared, ‘I am an Islamophobe and proud of it!’ (cited in Meer and Modood, 2009: 345) and later defended her right to challenge the legitimacy of the idea of Islamophobia as well as calls to make criticism of a religion a crime akin to racism (Toynbee, 2004) on the grounds that this was the ‘rationalist’ position. In such examples, according to Helbling (2012: 5), Islamophobia is employed to articulate ‘a critical and reflexive position toward Islam’ and distrust of Islam as a doctrine rather than hostility towards Muslims.

**Conclusion**

Islamophobia is, for many, the most powerful new form of racism. Islamophobia is seen as operating as a form of racialisation (Vakil, 2010: 276; Klug, 2012: 675) enacted through ideas and practices that amalgamate all Muslims into one group and treat characteristics associated with Muslims (violence, misogyny, political allegiance/disloyalty, incompatibility with Western values, etc.) as if they are innate (Garner and Selod, 2015: 13). Islamophobia is dangerous because it provides a common ideological basis and programmatic platform for right-wing populist parties in Europe (Hafez, 2014; Skenderovic, Späti and Wildmann, 2014: 439) and the EDL is widely considered to be such an Islamophobic movement (Copsey, 2010: 5; Allen, 2011: 293).

This study suggests that, in contrast to a genuine aspiration to non-racism among grassroots activists in the EDL, they openly single out Islam as a ‘problem’ not associated with other aspects of multicultural society. In order to sustain claims to non-racism, therefore, a strategic distinction between Islam and Muslims is drawn; the object of hostility is (some) Islamic doctrine or teachings, not its followers as individuals or racialised groups. By analysing data on associations with Islam and associations with Muslims separately, this chapter has attempted to show how, in practice, these distinctions are made by grassroots EDL activists. It has found, first, that differentiation between Islam and Muslims is common among grassroots activists as well as in official EDL statements, although such distinctions are not consistently made within respondent narratives. It revealed, second, that EDL activists’ talk about Islam is distinct from Islamophobic associations found among the general UK population (for whom Islam is associated...
primarily with ‘extremism’, ‘terrorism’ and ‘violence’\textsuperscript{15} in its use of strongly political motifs (Islam is associated with oppression, intolerance and non-progressiveness). This is encapsulated in the understanding of Islam as an ‘ideology’ rather than a religion and appears to support the position that the movement is anti-Islamist not Islamophobic. While viewing Islam as an ideology is itself, according to the Runnymede Trust (1997), characteristic of an Islamophobic outlook, for most respondents in this study, the use of the term ‘ideology’ is not intended to demonise Islam per se but highlight the dangers of allowing religion to be appropriated for radical and violent political ends.

But how far is such a distinction possible? Since neither Islam nor Muslims can exist without the other, the insistence on their separation is hard to sustain (Klug, 2012: 676). Moreover, in practice, being anti-Islam does not exclude being anti-Muslim also. This chapter has demonstrated, drawing on observational evidence as well as interviews, that among grassroots activists there is considerable slippage in distinctions between Islam and Muslims as the object of hostility as well as, especially in the context of demonstrations, the use of generalised terms of abuse towards Muslims. These expressions take the form of both generalised demonisations (in chants such as ‘Muslim paedos off our streets’) as well as more localised references to everyday ‘intimidating’ behaviour, threats or violent actions perpetrated by ‘Muslims’. This suggests that alongside the critique of Islam as an ideology there is a racialised anti-Muslim sentiment that is expressed through more everyday encounters and community relations and in which Muslims are seen as particularly problematic and unwelcome immigrants and in which Islam is a contributing factor.

If we accept that hostility to Islam and to Muslims are intertwined, what purpose does it serve to see them as independent variables that are related rather than expressions of the same underlying process of racialisation (Klug, 2012: 677)? Indeed, for those on the receiving end of hostility, the differentiation is immaterial; the message received is the same (Allen, 2011: 292). In contrast, there are important advantages in seeing Islamophobia as another form of racialisation not least in exposing that it is more than religious intolerance and invokes discourses and practices that are, in effect, ‘racist’ (Klug, 2012: 677). Notwithstanding this, the evidence from this study points to the value of a definition of Islamophobia that recognises its multidimensionality and includes both Islam as a religious doctrine and/or Muslims (Bleich, 2011: 1587). The argument for this is that in some cases, it may be possible to identify differences between anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim attitudes or emotions (which can aid our understanding of both) and their analytic separation is the first step in understanding how they are related.

In this chapter this has been demonstrated through the exploration of the practice and experience of ‘othering’. In this study two tropes of anti-Muslim hostility were identified among grassroots EDL activists that do not reflect back familiar media images or ideological positions but emerge out of emotionally-driven, personal and localised experience: Muslims seek to ‘impose their rules here’; and Muslims ‘have no respect’. Analysis of these tropes reveals that one of the key characteristics attributed to the Muslim ‘other’ by respondents in this study is itself the
practice of ‘othering’ (non-Muslims). Expressions of anti-Muslim sentiment thus include perceptions that the Muslim ‘other’ constitutes a direct infringement of, or sets itself in a superior position to, respondents’ ‘self’. This draws, on the one hand, on associations of Islam as an ideology rooted in intolerance and imperialism while, on the other, it is expressed as feelings of incursion by racialised bodies. Through the analysis of a small number of everyday encounters and how they fit in individual respondents’ stories, it has been suggested that ‘thoughts and feelings about the Self’ are highly implicated in the formation of associations of the ‘other’ (Ezekiel, 2002: 54). It is suggested that these particular tropes emerge out of the ‘affective economy’ (Ahmed, 2004) in which fear resides in neither subjects (themselves seeking shelter from fear in group membership) (Ezekiel, 2002: 54) nor the object that is feared. It is produced, rather, through the circulation of signs of fear (Ahmed, 2004: 127), which, on the one hand become attached to particular bodies, and encoded as profoundly threatening to society but, at the same time, are worked through individual experiences and contexts in a way that is experienced by subjects as threatening to the ‘self’. In shifting the gaze to this ‘self’, it is argued, a mismatch is revealed between the vision of the empowered subject of ‘othering’ found in existing models of Islamophobia and the more complex process of ‘othering’ and being ‘othered’ in which anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim sentiments emerge in individuals’ narratives. What might appear to be the aggressive assertion of a powerful majority subjectivity is exposed as the further destabilising of already insecure selves.

Notes

1 Indeed, the shift in Europe’s dominant concern from the figure of ‘the black’ (and before that ‘the Jew’) to that of ‘the Muslim’, for Goldberg, only confirms the continued significance of ‘race’ and that race extends beyond false views about biology or skin colour (Goldberg, 2006: 349).
2 Rokeach’s Open and Closed Mind (1960) was devised as the basis for a general psychology of totalitarianism (extending beyond that specifically related to fascism) and divided individuals into ‘dogmatic’ and ‘open-minded’ types (Billig, 1978: 50–51).
3 The studies cited by Helbling include: Sniderman and Hagendoorn (2007), Kalkan, Layman and Uslaner (2009), Stolz (2005) and Strabac and Listhaug (2008).
4 See http://englishdefencelleague.org/about-us/mission-statement. Accessed: 26.06.2012. The revised mission statement released in 2016 does not make this distinction but states the EDL’s mission to be one of ‘struggle against global Islamification’. It makes clear that the issues the movement have are with ‘problems deriving from Islam’ not only particular interpretations of it whilst also explicitly denouncing the ‘demonisation of Muslims’ and ‘the unjust assumption that all Muslims are complicit in or somehow responsible for the actions of other Muslims’. See https://www.facebook.com/notes/edl-english-defence-league/edl-mission-statement/1099342593431789
5 See also: www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGiBrZgP018. Accessed: 06.08.2015.
6 The age of Aisha at the time of betrothal and consummation of marriage as well as the implications of taking the marriage out of context remain disputed (see Francois-Cerrah, 2012).
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7 See also: www.youtube.com/watch?v=4naC3dhylIs. Accessed: 06.08.2015.
11 See also www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCiBrZgP018. Accessed: 06.08.2015.
12 See also www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCiBrZgP018. Accessed: 06.08.2015.
13 In fact the Islamic Sharia Council and Muslim Arbitration Tribunal have used the framework of the Sharia to resolve disputes within the British Muslim community since 1982 (Meer and Modood, 2014: 659).
14 In this instance, Jordan clearly uses this term as a metaphor for ‘white’ as he goes on to say that many of the ‘others’ (non-English) had been born in the UK.
15 When asked which words they associated with Islam, those surveyed in a YouGov poll (2010, n=2,152) were most likely to link Islam to extremism (58 per cent), terrorism (50 per cent) and violence (33 per cent) (Field, 2012: 150).