MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN AUSTRALIA

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SEARCHING FOR IDENTITY: MUSLIMS IN AUSTRALIA

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For at least two centuries, Muslims have visited and worked in Australia. Malay fishers and divers were followed by Afghan camel drivers. However, large-scale Muslim settlement in Australia only began after World War II as a wave of people left behind conditions of economic hardship in search of a better life. The sheer distance between their home-countries and Australia convinced many of them that migration to this far-off land promised a fresh start. Later events in the Middle East and Europe and the onset of political crises such as the civil war in Lebanon, the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Bosnian ethnic war, created new waves of settlers. As a result, Australian Muslims come from diverse social, political, economic and ethnic backgrounds.

In the post-war period, the Muslim population in Australia grew markedly. At the last Australian Census held in 1996, there were 200,885 Muslims in Australia representing a 161 per cent increase over a period of 15 years. The Australian population as a whole increased by only 21.7 per cent during the same period. While the Muslim population enjoyed a remarkable growth rate, according to the 1996 Census they still comprised a mere 1.1 per cent of the total population, on a par with Buddhists. The demographic growth of the Muslim population is the result of immigration and natural increase. In 1996, nearly 36 per cent of Australian Muslims were born in Australia, 13.5 per cent in Lebanon, 11.1 per cent in Turkey, 3.5 per cent in Indonesia, 3.3 per cent in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 2.6 per cent in Iran and 2.2 per cent in Fiji. The rest were born in Albania, Sudan, Egypt, Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Indian subcontinent and many other countries in Asia and the Pacific.
The way Muslim settlers have related to their new home is a reflection of this diversity. Some communities have found it easier to adapt to life in Australia than others, once the language barrier is surpassed. Despite notional attachment to an ideal community of Islam (umma), practical cooperation between Muslim settlers is somewhat constrained by their social and ethnic diversity. In view of this diversity and in the absence of a concrete expression of common purpose, it has to be asked whether Australia is home to a single Muslim community. Mainstream public opinion in Australia, the media and policy makers have tended to answer this question in the affirmative. Misconceived assumptions about the social and ethnic background of Muslims have often led to a neglect of their diverse social and ethnic heritage. This, in turn, has reinforced the idea that there is a single Muslim community with uniform needs and aspirations.

A cursory, historical survey of Muslims and their association with the idealised community of faith serves to bring this idea into perspective. Islam had its origin in the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century CE, later spreading to neighbouring regions. Islam was eventually introduced into East Asia and became the dominant religion among Malays now living in Indonesia and Malaysia. The Muslim-Arab equation was thus overturned very early in the history of Islam. Turks, Kurds, Persians, Pakistanis and Malays have as much claim on Islam as Arabs.

It is somewhat of a cliché to call Islam a way of life. Nevertheless, Islamic beliefs, practices and rituals influence every aspect of private, as well as social life for Arab, Turkic, Persian and other Muslims. Hadith (records of the Prophet Muhammad’s sayings and deeds) serve as proper codes of conduct and provide the faithful with a model to emulate. A large number of hadith concern social behaviour. Islamic practices, or what are generally thought to be Islamic practices, have therefore come to influence all aspects of social life in Muslim societies. The celebration of birth, wedding ceremonies and funeral processions, three critical moments punctuating life, have been invariably conducted in accordance with Islamic traditions. Important occasions (for example, Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Ad ha) serve to reaffirm the Islamic identity of the participants and cement the community. The Muslim community is, therefore, constantly rejuvenated with every such social occasion.

The prominence of Islamic practices points to a process that has withstood the test of time, i.e. the Islamisation of culture. This process entailed the replacement of pre-Islamic customs with Islamic practices or their reformation in line with Islamic beliefs. It is important, however, not to focus exclusively on the process of Islamisation, but to also recognise the reverse trend: ‘naturalisation’. In spite of its pervasiveness, Islam was not the only source of identity for Muslims as other
forms of community persisted in the Muslim world. Concurrent with the Islamisation of culture and tradition, some aspects of Islam itself were 'naturalised' to a certain extent to conform to local peculiarities. For example, the history of the Shi'a-Sunni divide and variations among Sunni societies highlight how 'naturalisation' influenced the diversity of Islam.

The majority opinion among Muslim scholars is that cultural, national and linguistic differences among Muslims are unavoidable, even necessary. Studies of relations among Muslim nations have provided a sufficient wealth of material for James Piscatori to conclude in his seminal work that Islam is a definition of social conduct, rather than a doctrine of behaviour. From this point of view, Islam is varied, flexible and evolutionary. This Islam is a reflection of existing social characteristics and idealised forms of behaviour rooted in cultural traditions, which would, by necessity differ from region to region and state to state.

Alongside the congruence of Islam and cultural traditions in Muslim societies is a counter-trend aimed at shedding culturally specific practices in favour of a scripture-based Islam. This dichotomy has led Ernest Gellner to characterise Islam as 'high' and 'low'. In contrast to the folkloric nature of 'low Islam', 'high Islam' relies on the scripture, the holy Qur'an and hadith. This interpretation of Islam as timeless and eternal is, by definition, puritan and unaffected by temporality. It therefore transcends ethno-national divisions and provides the foundation for the community of belief.

It may be argued that these two types of Islam reflect two distinct social settings. High Islam flourishes mainly in the urban environment where there is access to literacy and religious literature and where the ulama (Islamic scholars) have emerged to safeguard scriptural legacies. This class enjoys the privilege of interpreting Islam in response to the issues of the day, with reference to the Qur'an and hadith. Low Islam, on the other hand, thrives largely among rural Muslims whose access to religious education may be limited by the nature of their lifestyle and who are unlikely to have the resources required to support a permanent class of religious scholars. In the absence of such a class, rural Muslims tend to rely on community elders and wandering 'saints' to meet their spiritual needs and conduct religious and traditional festivals and rites.

The distinction between high and low Islam has important implications. As far as folkloric Islam is concerned, wonder-workers and saints regenerate existing social relations and practices, while high Islam has a prescriptive quality determining how Muslims (individually and collectively) should conduct themselves to meet Qur'anic goals. Based on this view of Islam, it may be argued that the urban setting is best suited to the ideal of umma. In Australia, for example, Muslims have concentrated in urban centres and have favoured the formation of
Islamic schools. In light of this, has the Australian experience, facilitated high Islam and the formation of an Islamic umma? While contributors to this volume discuss various aspects of this question, it is important to point out that high Islam and low Islam are sociological ideal types. In reality, the dividing line between the two is porous and subtle. This makes the task of assigning Muslim individuals or groups to one or the other category fraught with complications.

The ideal of a national community in the Muslim world and its demarcation in the late 19th and 20th centuries by colonial powers have further complicated the concept of Islamic identity. New rulers often turned to Islam to gain popular legitimacy and support, hence strengthening the connection between the ideal of a national state, nominally representing the hopes and aspirations of ethnic nations, and Islam. The growth of nationalism and the ideal of national community in the Muslim world did not replace Islam. Unlike the European experience, in which religious affiliations were overshadowed by secular nationalism, the experience of ethno-nationalism in the Muslim world was complemented by Islam. This may be related to the earlier process of ‘naturalisation’ which had made Islam in some respects a reflection of local and regional features. In the 20th century, the naturalisation of Islam has manifested as its nationalisation.

The combination of Islamic and national culture, however, has been challenged from two opposite quarters: secularists and Islamic activists. In attempting to steer their States along the path of modernisation, some early secular leaders in the Muslim world regarded Islamic traditions and practices as irreconcilable with their vision of progress. Kemal Atatürk of Turkey was one such leader. Ironically, the view that Islam and the modern nation state are incompatible was shared by many Islamic activists who rejected the construct of the national state as illegitimate. The modern state system and national boundaries, according to Maulana Maududi and Sayyid Qutb, were an affront to the principle of Muslim unity and the supremacy of Islam. ‘Islam is the only identity worthy of man. ... Any other group identity ... is a jabali identity of the type humanity has known during its period of spiritual decadence.’4 However, developments in the Muslim world in the second half of the 20th century have led to the fading of the line that separated Islam and the nation state. The blurring of this demarcation line is gaining greater recognition from hitherto opposite camps.

In spite of the opposition to mixing Islamic and national identities, the everyday experience of Muslims is an affirmation of the merger of the two. It is also important to note that images of self are not static. Identity is relative and circumstantial, constantly shifting and adapting to evolving social environments. However, while it can swing from one extreme to another, one’s identity is generally a combination of loyalties and responsibilities. Muslims, therefore, carry layers of identity:
familial, tribal, provincial, national and Islamic.

Any one of these layers can gain prominence over commitment to other affiliations. This is an everyday occurrence. For example, many Muslim spectators at the Olympic games in Sydney cheered for their national team, even if the opposing team was from another Islamic society. They allowed nationalist passion to overshadow sub-national differences and supra-national affiliations. If this was a group of practising Muslims they would be likely to attend the Friday prayer, perhaps along with supporters of the opposing team, representing a united community of faith. Group identity can change in diverse social settings, hence the importance of understanding the complex identity of Muslims in Australia.

In the Australian context, Muslims, especially second and third-generation Muslims, are adding a new layer to their identity. They are developing a certain bond with Australia, which, in most cases, is not at the expense of their Islamic and ethnic heritage. Their Australianess complements and puts into perspective their Muslim identity and their ethnic traditions. The result may be a hybrid Islamic identity based on commitment to the secular norms of Australian society and Islamic/ethnic traditions. However, it may be premature to talk of an Australian Muslim identity as the exact contours of this identity are still evolving. The ethnic diversity of Muslims is a detracting factor in terms of the development of a unified Islamic grouping (Australian or otherwise). Differences in the social background of Muslims, whose ideas of Islam can diverge markedly, is a further complicating factor. Gellner's ideal types of high and low Islam may have some relevance in this regard. For example, Muslim migrants from rural backgrounds who were likely to gravitate towards 'low Islam', are now urban residents, attending mosques and socialising with those from diametrically different social backgrounds.

The dynamics of identity formation and the nature of Islam in Australia are not preordained. It is clear, however, that this process can be aided or hindered by the larger Australian society. Multiculturalism offers a valuable opportunity for Muslim communities and can assist in the development and consolidation of Islam in Australia. Multiculturalism is more than the introduction of Indian and Turkish take-away shops. It is a policy of social inclusion, transforming people from diverse backgrounds into a cohesive social unit. It is a mechanism for giving people from a variety of different cultural backgrounds and loyalties a stake in the vibrancy of the Australian society.

The sense of ownership and social responsibility among Muslim Australians is tied to the extent of their inclusion and participation in the multicultural project. That project is, by definition, a two-way process. Appreciation of the cultural and religious needs of Muslim communities by the mainstream of Australian society needs to be reci-
procated by Muslims’ commitment to the legal and political framework of the Commonwealth of Australia. In this environment the shifting nature of group loyalties is not evidence of un-Australianness but an affirmation of this country’s diverse cultural heritage.

So who is a Muslim? If Islamic identity can be overshadowed by other types of group loyalty, is it a useful unit of analysis? In this volume, all people who have at least some form of cultural affiliation with Islam are considered to be Muslim. They may or may not be practising Muslims, but insofar as they see Islam as contributing to their culture and they notionally accept the basic tenets of Islam (even if interpreted differently), they are Muslim. This identity is therefore, by definition, all-inclusive: it extends to those who do not actively follow the teachings of the Qur’an and hadith, as well as those who do. A non-practising Muslim still identifies with Islam as a component of his or her cultural heritage, even if proportionally less than other aspects. This common thread, however tenuous, makes the Muslim identity a useful basis for investigating the needs and issues of nearly 300 000 residents of Australia.

Educational priorities, dietary requirements and the need for sensitivity to the cultural peculiarities of Muslims are the main areas of contention that have mobilised activists of Muslim background. However, caution must be exercised when discussing the needs and aspirations of Muslims in Australia. Muslim settlers come from diverse social settings and they reflect that diversity in their attitudes to their new home. Social status, degree of piety, affiliation with the Shi‘a or the Sunni branch of Islam and national traditions all have an influence on their priorities and needs.

This volume addresses the cultural and religious character of Muslim residents in Australia.5 The contributors explore the challenges that settlement in Australia has thrown up for Muslims and how these challenges are being met. They address various areas of need: some are short-term and require urgent attention, for example, services provided to refugees; other needs require attention over a longer term to ensure the inclusion of people of Muslim background in Australia’s multicultural project. For example, an appreciation of the basic teachings of Islam and its value system by the mainstream media and the education system are important components of multicultural inclusiveness.

This volume opens with a historical survey of contacts between Muslims and Australia dating back to the 17th century. Bilal Cleland points out that Muslim contacts with Australia before World War II were transitory and fleeting. The earliest contacts were made by Malay fishers who used the northern shores of Australia as a temporary place of residence in summer. The establishment of the British penal colonies brought other Muslims to Australia. However, these were isolated
individuals whose Muslim identity was eroded by assimilation.

The arrival of Afghan camel drivers in the 19th century introduced a more permanent quality to the Muslim presence. However, these camel drivers were bachelors, or if married, travelled without their families and did not consider Australia as their permanent home. While they were reluctant to make permanent links with the land, nonetheless, such links developed over time as some married Indigenous women and others eventually brought their families to Australia.

The first symbols of permanency were mosques, built by Afghan communities who realised that their stay in Australia was becoming more extended than they originally planned. However, Muslim population numbers remained insignificant in Australia until the end of World War II and the subsequent lifting of the White Australia policy restrictions on immigration. Cleland concludes his historical survey by looking at formal Muslim institutions which emerged in the 1960s to represent, and lobby for, the needs of all Australian Muslims.

The consolidation of a unified Muslim identity in Australia provides the focus of discussion for contributors to this volume. Michael Humphrey describes Muslim settlement in Australia as an overwhelmingly urban process characterised by the marginal status of the new arrivals. In his view, this experience strengthened familial ties and local reciprocal social contracts aimed at preserving the welfare of Muslim families. These local networks of mutual support were often the precursors of more formal Muslim associations based on national links.

The continued operation of ethnically-based Islamic associations, which are often in competition with each other for State or Commonwealth funding, serves as a reminder of the elusive nature of a unified Islamic identity. Nonetheless, government agencies have tended to overlook differences among Muslims and to view Muslim communities as a single unit — in Humphrey's words, 'essentialising' Islam. This tendency might reflect an operational bias as government agencies find it easier to deal with a single umbrella organisation, like the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC), rather than a multitude of ethnically-based associations. But this broad-sweep approach reinforces the widely held misconception of Islam as a monolithic entity and continues the neglect of the many different opinions and needs among different Muslim communities.

How does this official bias in favour of multi-ethnic Muslim bodies, like AFIC, affect the self-identity of Muslims? Gary Bouma, Joan Daw and Rifat Munawar focus on internal diversity within Australia's Muslim population and explore the ways in which different Muslim schools and ethnic groups relate to each other. Dealing with diversity is a critical issue for the regeneration of group identity, be it ethnic or supra-national and religious.

Bouma et al argue that the experience of multiculturalism in
Austmli~ has provided Muslim communities with a model for a multi-
cultural Muslim identity. The network of multi-ethnic mosques and
Islamic weekend schools has provided an environment which is con-
ducive to 'managing diversity'. Settlement in Australia has thus given
Muslims an opportunity to learn more about other Muslim practices
and experiences, and appreciate the diversity of Islam. This raises a per-
tinent question. Are Muslims in Australia likely to be living closer to
the ideal of Muslim unity (umma) than their co-religionists in their
countries of origin?

A variation of above question is asked by Samina Yasmeeen whose
contribution begins the empirical section of this volume. Her starting
point is to emphasise the diversity of Muslim communities and their
needs. She then applies her argument to settlement issues facing
Muslim women in Western Australia. Yasmeeen argues that social needs
are influenced by gender. Apart from common issues related to halal
dietary requirements and freedom of religion, Muslim women diverge
from their menfolk with regard to their everyday needs.

This divergence calls for a gender-specific social agenda to replace
the inefficient 'blanket' policy on (Muslim) migrants. This specialised
approach would need to take into consideration a number of needs
corresponding to a number of identity layers: Muslim identity/needs,
Muslim-national identity/needs, Muslim-women identity/needs and,
in some cases, Muslim-women-national identity/needs. Yasmeeen con-
cludes that a multi-layered approach is urgently needed for the sake of
those at the receiving end and also for the wellbeing of the larger
Australian society. Insensitivity towards the social needs of Muslim
women can alienate them from the larger community and work against
their inclusion as responsible citizens.

Zahra Kamalkhani's research findings support Yasmeeen's conclu-
sions. Kamalkhani has found increasing evidence of psychological dis-
turbance among Muslim women refugees due to relocation and the
absence of family support networks. Newly arrived Muslim refugee
women find it extremely difficult to cope with the experience of dislo-
cation from the familiar social environment of their home countries,
life in refugee camps in transit countries, detention on arrival in
Australia and settlement in Australia. In addition, the women often feel
isolated and misunderstood because of language and cultural barriers.
Kamalkhani argues that even refugee support agencies in Western
Australia tend to stereotype Muslim women and overlook ethnic and
cultural peculiarities which distinguish Afghan, Iraqi and Somali
Muslim women refugees from one another and influence their needs
and expectations.

A common concern shared by Muslims from various national and
cultural backgrounds relates to their discomfort, even shock, with the
social and sexual permissiveness of mainstream Australian society.
Muslim parents, practising or not, often worry about the moral integrity and spiritual wellbeing of their children. In the view of many Muslims, the mainstream education system in Australia does not instil proper codes of social behaviour in pupils. This is a difficult area for Muslim parents to come to terms with because the socialising aspect of the education system is heavily emphasised in most Muslim societies.

The response of Muslim parents to the challenge of bringing up their children in a predominantly secular system has not been uniform. Irene Donohoue Clyne delineates three main streams in the relationship between Australian Muslims and the education system: segregation, accommodation and assimilation. The establishment of Islamic schools have made it possible to ‘opt-out’ by running a parallel Islamic alternative to the mainstream education system. Parents who send their children to Islamic schools expect them to learn more about their Muslim identity and feel part of an Islamic culture in Australia.

The extent to which this project has been successful, however, is in doubt. As Donohoue Clyne points out, Islamic schools continue to face difficulties in producing a uniform curriculum. Moreover, Islamic schools are not completely free of ethnic association, challenging the assumed link between Islamic schooling and a unified (but multicultural) Islamic identity. In fact, it may sometimes be difficult to distinguish between national/ethnic and Islamic schools. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to see how ethnic identity can accommodate an Islamic ingredient since, as explored in earlier chapters of this volume, there is a close affinity between the two.

Christine Asmar focuses on the role of the Muslim Student Association (MSA) as a venue for Islamic affirmation. The MSA is an example of how cultural and ethnic gaps are bridged by Islam to create an experience of umma. As a multi-ethnic body, the only thing members have in common is their Islamic belief. Asmar reminds us that this transcendence from the national to a supra-national level is based on Muslim students’ questioning of their parents’ beliefs, and distinguishing between cultural and scriptural Islam. This has been made possible by the use of the English language as the medium of communication for Muslim students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Asmar argues that the umma identity is strengthened and regenerated by contacts between MSA members and similar associations and communities outside the tertiary education sector. The constant flow of international students from Muslim societies to Australian universities helps to maintain the vibrancy of MSAs which provide a familiar setting for newly arrived international Muslim students. They feel at ease in an environment in which ethnic and cultural differences are downplayed and points in common are emphasised. In addition, the MSAs provide them with a useful social network. It is not surprising,
therefore, that many student members of MSAs leave university with a more profound commitment to the ideal of umma.

Jamila Hussain highlights the disparity between Islamic and Australian family law. She argues that this has concerned many Muslim families who cannot reconcile themselves to the secular basis of the Australian legal system. Issues of polygamy, divorce and inheritance are among the points of contention. The sanctity of Islamic law in relation to family is very important to practising Muslims. The family is regarded as the building block of society and faith.

The registration of qualified imams as marriage celebrants has been a significant step in accommodating this concern. However, Hussain reports that Australian Muslims have remained largely aloof from the law-making and law-reforming processes resulting in a divide between the legal system and (practising) Muslims. However, this situation may change, as according to Hussain, submissions have been made to the Australian Law Reform Commission by the Islamic Council of Victoria and the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils on the specific needs of Muslim residents. While these were not successful, in the long term, this kind of community lobbying is likely to draw together diverse ethnic communities because they can see tangible benefits from coordinating their efforts.

Constructing the umma around tangible issues is the focus of Abdullah Saeed’s study of Islamic banking in Australia. The interest-based financial sector in Australia is regarded by some Muslims as socially unjust and problematic in religious terms, as ‘interest’ is considered riba which is prohibited in Islam. Islamic banking provides an alternative for those who find interest-based banking unethical and un-Islamic. The launch of Islamic banking in Melbourne and Sydney has provided a significant opportunity for practising Muslims to conduct their financial affairs in accordance with Islamic teachings. But the benefits of this new institution go beyond their obvious financial parameters. As with lobbying for family law reform, Islamic banking provides an opportunity for community cooperation and consolidation. As a result, it gives credence to the belief in the viability of the umma as an attainable social project in Australia.

Howard Brasted looks at the way events in the Muslim world have been reported and interpreted in the mainstream Australian press over the second half of the 20th century. He confirms the now generally accepted view that Islam has received a very bad press. Based on media images of Muslims at war and under challenge, Islam had come to be associated with a continuing history of conflicts and crises particularly in the Middle East. The result had been a stereotypical representation of Islam as a religion associated with political turmoil, fanatical leaders, and patriarchal social organisation – an association which has been attached to Muslims in Australia and elsewhere. However, Brasted
discerns a more balanced, less prejudicial, image of Muslims in the press over the last few years. This may be an indication of the acceptance of Muslims as permanent members of Australia’s multicultural society. The extent to which this occurs, he argues, is dependent upon Muslim communities’ ability to separate themselves from the kind of disorder they were linked with in the past.

Shahram Akbarzadeh concludes this volume with a call for a greater acknowledgment of the place of Islam in Australia. He notes that currently, many second and third-generation Muslims in Australia tend to express their ethnic/national identity more readily than their Islamic identity in conformity with the secular nature of Australian society. In acknowledging the ethnic and religious diversity of Australian society today, government policies of multiculturalism and social inclusion will assist the formation of an Australian identity among Muslims. Such policies fostering commitment and social responsibility among Muslim residents will not only facilitate the emergence of an Australian Muslim identity, but are important for the wellbeing of Australian society. Government policies are instrumental in advancing or hindering this very novel identity in which the primary point of reference is Australia.

Akbarzadeh explains how diverse linguistic, ethnic and national Muslim communities in Australia have led newly arrived Turkish, Lebanese and Bosnian Muslims to value their national heritage. Acknowledgement by these communities of the place of Islam in shaping that identity also facilitates the expression of Islam as a component of Australian identity, giving rise to a nascent community of Australian Muslims.

NOTES


5 We include in the category of residents: citizens, permanent residents and overseas students who spend at least three years in Australia.