

Muslim Identities

Followers of Islam are called Muslims. Muslim staff and students form a substantial part of the La Trobe community. Acknowledging and respecting Muslim identities at La Trobe therefore requires, in part, a better understanding of what Islam and being a Muslim is about.

Muslims in Australia

- The history of Muslims in Australia begins well before European contact with the mainland. As far back as the 17th century, a harmonious relationship existed between Muslim fisher folk from Southeast Asia and Indigenous people from northern Australia.
- Many people from the islands and territories under the dominion of the British Empire were used as slaves and navigators by early Australian settlers. Many of these people were Muslims.
- In the 1860s, a large number of Muslim Afghan camel drivers arrived in Australia to work the camel trains. Instrumental in guiding the 'great explorers' through the interior of the continent, many Muslim Afghans eventually settled in Alice Springs and the Northern Territory.

- The first mosque in Australia was built in South Australia in 1885 by the descendants of the cameleers.
- Muslims have fought for Australia in both world wars.
- Since World War Two, Muslim migrants, along with migrants of many other religions, have helped build the Australian economy and society.
- In the late 1960s there were a significant number of Muslim migrations from Turkey and Lebanon.
- During the 1990s, a significant number of Muslim refugees and migrants settled in Australia from Africa, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Bosnia Herzegovina, Albania, Indonesia and Malaysia.
- Many Muslims in Australia today (over 36%) were born in Australia.
- According to the 2001 Census, Australia has approximately 300,000 Muslims making up about 1.5% of the Australian population. In the 2006 Census, 1.7% of the total population identified as Muslim.

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About Islam

Islam is both a religion and a way of life. The Qur'an is a record of the exact words revealed by Allah to the Prophet Muhammad and is the major source of faith and practice for Muslims. Other sources include the Sunnah traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. Derived from both the Qur'an and Sunnah, Sharia refers to the comprehensive Muslim law covering every aspect of individual and collective living.

Muslims believe:

- there is one unique incomparable God, referred to as Allah;
- the angels were created by Allah;
- the prophets bring Allah's revelations to mankind;

- there will be a day of judgement, where there will be individual accountability for one's actions;
- God has supreme authority over human destiny;
- life exists after death.

Islam originated in the Arabian Peninsula around 610 CE (AD), covering a period of over 1400 years to date. Consequently, differences have developed between groups. Islam can be divided into the following principle groups:

- **Sunni** – mainstream Muslims who rely exclusively on the Qur'an for guidance;
- **Shi'ite** – followers of Ali, a successor of Muhammad who combined Islam with some Christian practices;
- **Sufi** – the mystical branch of Islam;
- **Druze** – the followers of Darazi.



The Five Pillars of Islam

The framework of Muslim life is comprised of faith, prayer, charity, fasting and the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Shahadah (Declaration of Faith)

Shahadah is the declaration of the faithful that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger and servant of Allah.

Salah (Prayer)

There are five prescribed prayers which act as a direct link between worshipper and God. Prayers are performed at dawn, noon, mid afternoon, after sunset and before retiring. Before praying, Muslims go through a routine ritual washing called wudu. Verses in Arabic are quoted from the Qur'an. Prayers are only led by an imam (religious teacher) during communal prayers, otherwise prayers are performed individually. All Muslims turn towards the city of Mecca when they pray.

Zakah (Charity Tax)

Islam prescribes that 2.5% of a person's wealth is used to help the poor and needy. This tax is paid annually on the wealth accumulated in the previous year. Payment is compulsory for every individual who has wealth beyond their daily needs.

Ramadan (Fasting)

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar during which Muslims must abstain from food, drink and sexual relations from dawn to sunset. Fasting is regarded primarily as a method of self-purification and understanding the suffering of the poor.

"By cutting oneself off from the worldly comforts, even for a short time, a fasting person increases one's spiritual status and gains true sympathy with those who go hungry".

(Australian Federation of Islamic Councils)

Ramadan is the month that the first verses of the Qur'an were revealed, making it one of the holiest months of the Islamic calendar.

Hajj (Pilgrimage) to Makkah (Mecca)

The pilgrimage to Mecca is undertaken at least once in a lifetime for those who are physically and financially able to do so. Pilgrims wear simple garments, eliminating distinctions of class and culture, so that all stand equal before Allah. Considered the 'journey of the heart and soul', the Hajj is the biggest and most important journey in a Muslim's life.

Islamic Religious Observance

Place and style of worship

The Islamic place of worship is the mosque. However, a Muslim may pray almost anywhere e.g. home, office, factory, university. The main part of a mosque is the prayer room which has mats and carpets for use when praying. There are no seats or pews. Before entering the mosque, shoes must be removed and a ritual ablution performed before prayers commence. Men and women pray separately. While there are five prescribed prayers each day, midday on Fridays is the most important time for communal prayers usually performed at the mosque.

Religious teachers and leaders of prayer are called imams.

For information about prayer rooms at La Trobe University, visit the Chaplaincy website at <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/chaplaincy>

Islamic symbols

Islam does not have any specific religious symbols.

Religious text

The religious text of Islam is Al-Qur'an (also known as the Quran or Koran). According to Islamic learning, this document records God's words sent to Muhammad by divine revelation through the angel Gabriel, just as Moses and Jesus received divine revelation before him. The Quran is not the saying and acts of the Prophet Muhammad, rather it is what God said to him and to humanity.

Islamic dress code

Islam requires Muslims to dress in an overall modest and dignified manner. This includes covering certain parts of the body (awrah) when in public. For males, the awrah is from the navel to the knee and for females, every part of the body except the face and hands.

Both males and females must wear clothing that is thick enough and loose enough so as not to reveal the person's skin colour or body shape. Colours and style of clothing must be plain enough not to draw attention to oneself.

Hijab

For females, loose clothing together with the headscarf covering the hair, neck and upper chest is known as the hijab and is the most common form of Islamic dress for women.

Burqa

This type of dress covers the face, head and body of the women. The wearing of the burqa is not essential and is not common in Australia.

For Muslim women, modesty in clothing is an expression of their faith and has nothing to do with women's submission to men. Furthermore, being appreciated for one's intellect and personality as opposed to body shape or fashion sense is, for some Muslim women, a liberating experience.

Dietary requirements and restrictions

The term 'halal' refers to food considered lawful according to the Qur'an. Foods and drinks considered unlawful are sometimes called 'haram'. See the table below for examples of halal and haram foods.

Halal	Haram
milk	pork or pork products
honey	meat of animals who died before being slaughtered
fish	carnivorous animals (because they eat dead animals)
plants which are not intoxicant	blood
fresh or naturally frozen vegetables	intoxicants such as alcohol or illicit drugs
fresh or dried fruits	
legumes and nuts	
grains such as wheat, rice, rye, barley and oats	
non-carnivorous animals such as cows, sheep, goats and ducks, provided they have been slaughtered according to Islamic rites	

For further information on Islamic dietary requirements, visit the Australian Federation of Islamic Council's website at <http://www.afic.com.au/Halal.htm>



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Significant Islamic Festivals and Celebrations

For dates of significant Islamic festivals and celebrations, visit the Cultural Diversity calendar at <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/cdip>

The two major religious observances for Muslims are Ramadan and Hajj and their corresponding celebrations are Eid al Fitr and Eid al-Adha respectively.

The Muslim calendar is based on lunar months and is therefore ten or eleven days shorter than the Western (Gregorian) calendar. This means that significant Islamic religious and cultural dates differ each year. For specific dates, see the Cultural Diversity calendar at <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/cdip>

Eid al Fitr/Festival of Breaking the Fast

This is a feast date commemorating the end of the fast of the month of Ramadan. At Eid al Fitr, people dress in either their best clothes or, if they can afford it, wear new clothes symbolising inner renewal after the fast. Parents, children and friends ask forgiveness of each other and thank Allah for his blessing. Traditional dishes are prepared and many give each other presents. Strangers and friends are welcomed to share and enjoy food together.

Eid al-Adha/Festival of the Sacrifice

After the pilgrimage to Mecca, Muslims worldwide celebrate Eid al-Adha. The festival is celebrated by sacrificing a lamb or other animals and distributing the meat to relatives, friends and the poor. The sacrifice symbolises obedience to Allah, and the distribution to others is an expression of generosity, one of the five pillars of Islam.

Other points for reflection

- Islam teaches that there are different functions for the right and left hands. The right hand is used to give and take, eat and drink, shake hands and wave. Using the left hand for these functions is considered offensive.
- The left hand is used for removing dirt, washing and wiping private parts after going to the toilet. Using the right hand for these functions is considered offensive.
- Shaking hands or touching members of the opposite sex who are not family is not permitted.
- Muslims do not celebrate Christmas or Easter. Therefore, greeting them with expressions such as 'Merry Christmas' or 'Happy Easter' is not appropriate.
- Not all people who identify as Muslim practise Islam.

Some common misconceptions about Muslims

- Not all Arabs are Muslim (many are Christian). Not all Muslims are Arab (most Muslims are not Arab).

Further Reading

ABC Religion and Ethics: Islam:

<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/stories/s790151.htm>

Athar, Dr Shahid: Twenty Five Questions

Asked about Islam:

<http://www.islamfortoday.com/athar02.htm>

Australian Federation of Islamic Councils:

<http://www.afic.com.au/apislam.htm>

Islamic Council of Victoria: <http://www.icv.org.au/>

Is'harc, Istafi ah. (1997) Islam and its Festivals.

Ta-Ha Publishers: London. Understanding Islam:

<http://www.understanding-islam.com/>

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Muslim Students' Association: About Islam:

<http://www.umich.edu/~muslims/islam.htm>

University of Western Sydney Counselling service (2004). *Working Together with Muslim Clients*.