



Centre **for** Dialogue
— A Centre of La Trobe University —



Australia's Muslims: Experiences and Expectations after September 11

Yusuf Sheikh Omar

Not for citation or reproduction without the permission of the author



Supported by
the Victorian
Government 

Discussion Papers 2007, no. 3

Australia's Muslims: Experiences and Expectations after September 11

Yusuf Sheikh Omar
PhD candidate
Refugee Health Research Centre
La Trobe University



**Centre for Dialogue Discussion Paper 3
2007**

About the Author

Yusuf Sheikh Omar was born in Somalia. He received his B.A. from the International University of Africa, in Sudan (1994), and his Masters of Human Science (Arabic as a Second Language) from International Islamic University of Malaysia (1999). He received his second Masters of Educational (Leadership and Management) from La Trobe University, Australia (2004). Yusuf is currently undertaking his PhD at the Refugee Health Research Centre at La Trobe University. His thesis explores young Diaspora Muslims' perceptions of cultural negotiations, integration and their experiences in coping with diversity.

He has worked as an Arabic teacher in various Islamic schools, and as a multicultural aide at government schools in Melbourne. He was the founder and first president of Australian Somali Youth Association, and has published in Australian and international newspapers. He espouses the philosophy of multiculturalism, and actively contributes to the dialogue among civilizations, particularly between Islam and Western civilizations.

Contents

Introducing the Discussion Papers.....	v
A note from the editor.....	vii
Acknowledgements.....	viii
Abstract.....	ix
Introduction.....	10
1. The Recent Muslim Experience.....	12
2. Factors Making for Suspicion and Hostility.....	18
3. Perceptions of Cultural Adaptation.....	20
4. The Impact of 'Politics'.....	28
5. The Role of Media.....	31
6. Muslim Communities and Leadership Crises.....	33
7. Victimhood and Self-Appraisal.....	37
8. What does the Future Hold?	40
Findings.....	42
Muslim Attitudes to Integration.....	42
Muslim Perceptions of Mainstream Australian Attitudes.....	43
On being Conspicuously Muslim, and the Role of Gender.....	44
Recommendations.....	46
For Policy Makers, Media, Service Providers and Employers.....	46
For Muslim Communities.....	48
Appendix: Note on Research Method.....	50
References.....	51

Introducing the Discussion Papers

Australia is, by virtue of its history and its geography, a multi-ethnic, multi-faith society. Many Australian residents were not born in Australia and many more have parents who were born overseas. Our own Muslim population is now well in excess of 300,000. In addition, all of Australia's nearest neighbours are societies whose cultures and religions are strikingly different from the Anglo-Celtic mainstream of Australian society. Our two nearest Asian neighbours, Indonesia and Malaysia, have large Muslim majorities. Many Indonesians and Malaysians now live in Australia, and we host large numbers of students from these and other Southeast Asian countries. Finally, an increasing number of Australian citizens visit these countries, whether for study, business or pleasure. Australians have therefore no option but to learn to live harmoniously and co-operatively across the cultural and religious divide.

In recent years, and particularly since September 11, Australian multiculturalism has been severely tested. In Australia, as in many other parts of the Western world, sharp tensions have arisen with the Muslim world – not just with Muslim governments and political movements but with our own Muslim minority. Since September 11 there has been a noticeable increase in reported instances of harassment and culturally offensive behaviour and language aimed at Muslims generally. The difficulties and tensions that have arisen in our treatment of refugees and asylum seekers are in part related to widely held perceptions of and attitudes to Islam.

We face, then, a critical need for informed public discussion. The aims of this dialogue are: to ask how tensions have arisen, to identify the factors which are contributing to mistrust and suspicion, and to establish the necessary conditions for trust, mutual respect, dialogue and co-operation. We have come to appreciate the need for such informed discussion through a combination of factors and sources:

- The research that we have been doing at La Trobe University over the last six years;
- The experiences of Muslim communities in Australia over the last few years – as reported to a number of Muslim organisations (several of which are partners with the Centre for Dialogue);
- Reports produced by such bodies as the Equal Opportunity Commission of Victoria;
- Changes in public rhetoric and media comment, which have deeply troubled community organisations striving for a harmonious and creative multi-ethnic and multi-faith society;

- The findings of the one-year pilot project, 'Promoting Inter-Cultural Dialogue in Victoria: A Pilot Project', jointly funded by the La Trobe University Collaborative Grant, the Uniting Church, the Reichstein Foundation and Niwano Peace Foundation (a report of this project is available on request).

As a contribution to public debate, the Centre for Dialogue at La Trobe University (officially launched in August 2006) is publishing three interrelated discussion papers that form part of a larger project that explores Australian government, media and community reaction to tensions between Islam and the West since September 11. The Centre for Dialogue warmly acknowledges the support extended to this project by the Scanlon Foundation and by the Victorian Government through the provision of a Victorian Community Support Grant from the Community Support Fund.

The three papers address several key questions: How has the Australian government responded to international conflict? How has international conflict impacted on Australia's relations with its Muslim neighbours, on its immigration and refugee policies, and on community relations within Australia? How have the media handled community relations, and in particular the tensions which have arisen during these difficult times? How have Australia's Muslim communities, especially in Victoria, responded to these events and to government policies? What are the possibilities for more effective consultation and dialogue involving governments at Federal and State level, Muslim and other religious and ethnic communities, the media and the wider community?

These three papers, including this paper authored by Dr George Myconos, address some if not all of these questions. They offer a necessarily selective overview of a complex and contentious set of issues. While not endorsing the particular views of any of the authors, the Centre is pleased to publish these papers in the hope that the analysis they contain as well as their key finding and recommendations will stimulate informed and constructive dialogue.

Joseph A. Camilleri
Professor of International Relations
Director, Centre for Dialogue
La Trobe University

A note from the editor

There is no shortage in Australia of research and commentary focusing on the changing ethnic and religious composition of our society, particularly in the wake of recent events in Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq and, of course, the New York of 2001. Of particular interest to media commentators, researchers, politicians, welfare agency advocates and community leaders in general has been Australia's capacity to accommodate large numbers of Muslims. Seldom, however, are the voices and perspectives of Muslim communities given the prominence they deserve. To help redress this imbalance, the Centre for Dialogue has welcomed the chance to present an 'insider's' view of how Muslim communities are engaging with contemporary Australia. This discussion paper, by the Somali Educationalist and writer, Yusuf Sheikh Omar, provides unique and important insights from the perspective of new and often marginalized Muslim communities. His research is mainly based on interviews with a relatively small, yet we think representative, sample of young Muslim men and women. It represents a modest, but important, contribution to our understanding of the interaction between culturally diverse communities, and to ways of fostering effective and durable dialogue.

George Myconos
Research Fellow
Centre for Dialogue

Acknowledgements

This study would not have been conducted without the great help from many people. While it is not possible to acknowledge everyone who contributed to this study, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the Centre for Dialogue for its support: particularly to Professor Joseph Camilleri, the Director of the Centre, Dr Michális S. Michael, Ms Rita Camilleri and Dr George Myconos, for their encouragement throughout the research phase, their professional guidance, editorial advice and other contributions needed to develop this study. I also extend my profound thanks Professor Sandy Gifford, the Director of the Refugee Health Research Centre, and Ms Madeleine Tempany, for their endless encouragement, and uplifting and inspiring advice. Their suggestions are my main resource for inspiration and strength throughout my educational journey. I owe lot of favours and deference to my fellow Muslim friends who supported and participated in this research, without whom it would not have taken place. Finally I extend a big thank you to everyone who directly or indirectly contributed to this study.

Yusuf Sheikh Omar
PhD candidate
Refugee Health Research Centre
La Trobe University

Abstract

Australia Muslims, particularly those who are more conspicuous in appearance, believe that their living conditions in the West, and particularly in Australia, have changed profoundly for the worse since September 11 2001. According to the accounts gleaned from participants in this study, 'obvious' Muslims in Australia are often unfairly treated, harassed, stigmatized and discriminated against. Misunderstanding and ignorance of Islam, unconstructive comments about Muslims by some politicians and negative media coverage seem to be fuelling and perpetuating discrimination against Muslims. The data also shows that participants believe they are being targeted by the recent anti-terrorist and migration legislation. Participants' perceptions of cultural adaptation indicates that there remains a great deal of resistance to the concept of assimilation within Islamic community. Conversely, the concept of multiculturalism is strongly endorsed as an inclusive framework and as a common aspiration for all Australians. Participants in this study mentioned many aspects of the mainstream culture that Muslims would be willing to adopt, as well as those which remain unacceptable. Internally, problems relating to community leadership remain unsolved, and a certain pessimism, or 'victim mentality', continue to haunt Muslim communities. On the other hand, many hold out great hope for the future, and believe strongly that understanding between Muslims and the mainstream will eventually improve. Ultimately, the author is optimistic and believes that the common sense values of Australian Muslims and the Australian mainstream will ensure an ongoing dialogue among Abrahamic faiths, and between civilizations in general.

Introduction

The Australian Muslim population, recently estimated at 360,000, is an ethnically diverse community. Its number is growing, but, in many ways Muslims are marginalized (Roose 2006; Kessler 2006). Whilst most settle in the big cities, notably Sydney and Melbourne, many live in regional areas. Historically, they – as a minority – have lived in relative harmony within Australian society (Roose 2006). However, this harmony has been disturbed by the terrorist attacks of September 11. Since then, the Muslim community and the Islamic faith have featured prominently in Australian politics, media and public discourse more generally. Questions on the position of Australian Muslims and their relationship to the wider community are constantly raised (Grewal 2006). Dunn (2006) argues that as a result of September 11, anti-Islamic sentiment has dramatically influenced public debates about national identity, citizenship and belonging. Others have pointed to the strong correlation between media coverage of Muslims and Islam and Australian government pronouncements on this issue.

The Muslim community in Australia has experienced, and is still experiencing, many pressures. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has found that the month following September 11 saw a 300 per cent increase over the previous month in the number of assaults, and 93 per cent of Muslims felt that there had been an increase in racism directed against their community. On the other side of the ledger, Muslims are widely believed to be a threat to Australian society, its values and the very idea of multiculturalism (Grewal 2006; Roose 2006). Prominent social commentator and La Trobe University political scientist Robert Manne has argued that 'Islamophobia now represents the most serious threat to the idea of Multiculturalism, and even to the idea of religious and ethnic toleration that Australia has witnessed for many years' (Dunn 2006, p. 4).

Clearly, the relationship between the Muslim communities and the Australian 'mainstream' merits careful consideration. More information is needed if we are to understand, and then deal effectively with, the emerging tensions. Most reports and studies on the experiences of Muslims since September 11 have been prepared by non-Muslims. Though these studies offer valuable information, they are no substitute for the unique insights that Muslim voices can provide. This study seeks to do just that. It focuses on the experiences of those Muslims whose appearance clearly distinguishes them from the Australian mainstream, and examines the discomfort and distress that they have felt in their daily lives. It also explores their hopes and expectations for the future.

Apart from examining the relationship between Muslims and middle Australia, this discussion paper also directs attention to the way Muslims have perceived policy makers and their attitudes to Islam. Reference is also made to the current Muslim leadership and its standing within the Muslim community. Of particular interest here are Muslim perspectives on the question of cultural integration. Consideration will be given to the way Muslims perceive their place in western societies, their values, sense of identity and belonging in a culturally and linguistically diverse society, and last but not least their hopes and aspirations. The study concludes with a number of proposals and recommendations.

1 The Recent Muslim Experience

Many Australian Muslims, in particular those whose appearance marks them as obviously Muslim, feel strongly that they have become the object of discrimination. They generally attribute the prejudice they encounter to the visible aspects of their religion and culture. This is not altogether surprising. The growth of anti-Muslim sentiment in Britain tells much the same story, with the result that Non-Muslim Asians have been abused or harassed simply because their physical appearance is equated with 'Muslimness'. Christian Arabs have been subjected to racism and prejudice both in Australia and elsewhere for exactly the same reason. This leads Dunn to conclude that Muslims 'who visibly display such markers of Muslim-ness as dress or [have] a beard are more likely to suffer discrimination and be denied access to employment than those who do not display their "Muslim-ness' (Dunn, 2006).

Here we observe a difference, at least of degree, between male and female perceptions, a theme to which we shall return more than once. Several of the men interviewed for this study were of the view that public attitudes towards Muslims had changed but little after September 11. As one of them put it, 'Really, I have noticed nothing that at least hurts me. There was a bit of teasing but nothing serious'. A number of males were of the view that, if anything, discrimination diminished after September 11 – but female interviewees did not share these sentiments. The available evidence clearly points to women experiencing the adverse impact of September 11 much more intensely than men, largely because of religious

visibility and to a lesser extent skin colour. One interviewee's experience is worth recounting:

I have had people calling me terrorist and pulling my scarf . . . experienced a lot of people who hated Muslims, and when I am walking in the street they call me Muslim terrorist. I feel like everyone is looking at me [female interviewee].

Equally revealing was an SBS Radio programme for the Somali community which focused on the challenges that African Muslim women face in Australia. One woman eloquently elaborated on the confusion and controversy that surround the dress code of Muslim women:

In the last few years, specifically post September 11, the media has focused on Muslim women's dress code describing the 'Hijab' (veil) as a problem. There is discrimination when it comes to the dress code. Even Muslim men have to cover a certain part of their body (known as 'Awra'). They also have to avoid wearing certain kinds of dress for religious reasons but the media doesn't refer to this at all. There are in any case dress codes required by other religions but the media only speak about Muslim women [and the] Hijab. This is discrimination aimed at Muslim women. When women wear the Hijab it does not mean that they have less ability, intellect or knowledge than non-Muslim women, Nor does it mean that Muslim women are forced to use the Hijab by their husbands, male relatives or other Muslim men; it is [worn] by . . . choice. For example, when I came to Australia I did not use the Hijab, even though I was Muslim and a mother. I started wearing the Hijab in Australia only recently. Many Australians think that we are forced to wear the Hijab by our husbands or our male relatives and that is wrong. They think that males choose for us the type of Hijab we wear. I have been asked this many times: why does your husband decide on your Hijab? As Muslim women, we have to explain to non-Muslims that wearing the Hijab is not influenced by men but it is a religious obligation based on conscience and moral responsibilities. It is a very important part of our religion. It is done in fulfilment and acceptance of Allah's message and out of recognition that religion is not . . . man-made. We have to explain that we are like other women. We choose, like them, decide like them, think like them and act like them. We have to tell people who we are [SBS Radio-Somali program, 15 November 2006].

The views of several other interviewees help to reinforce the argument, although their experiences are strikingly different. An unveiled female participant in our study

explained that she did not experience any problems because she did not wear the Hijab: 'I haven't faced any religious discrimination because I am not an obvious Muslim . . . and people don't associate black with Islam'. Another female interviewed on television recounted her story before and after being veiled. She did not wear the Hijab until she the age of fifteen, and did not experience any negative responses. But once she started wearing the Hijab, she soon became the object of discrimination:

I was pessimistic but now I am very optimistic. I tell you a week ago I was extremely pessimistic. I was just walking down the street and this old lady of Anglo background – judging by her appearance – smiled and said "g'day" to me. . . just one lady smiling changed my whole life and rubbed out all the negatives from past weeks [Channel Nine, Sunday Story, 19 November 2006].

The above reflection is indicative of the Muslim woman's profound yearning for empathy in a society where it seems to be in short supply.

To summarise, veiled Muslim women have found that in the post September 11 period their main challenge has been to practise their religion openly without provoking confrontation. The challenge has been doubly difficult because their religion requires them to base their attitudes, lifestyle and behaviour on Islam – Islam is seen as a complete way of life. The dress code for women is integral to Islamic practice. As one female interviewee put it, 'Practising Muslim women have to dress according to Islamic teachings [and] not according [to] our desires'. They cannot dress in what is locally available to them simply in order to conform to their new environment. In other words, to westernise is tantamount to a rejection of their faith. As one female participant in the study explained, '. . . our religion is the main factor that slows down our integration process into the Australian mainstream culture'.

Tactless public comment, especially on the part of prominent politicians, has compounded the predicament of Muslim women. A case in point was Bronwyn Bishop's call for the banning of the 'Hijab' in public schools. Her comments were greeted with outrage by those concerned

with the rights of school aged Muslim girls to practise their religion and choose their identity (Roose 2006). The timing of such public interventions is itself highly instructive. For many Muslim women discrimination has been a relatively new phenomenon. Though we can interpret the expression of post-September 11 anti-Muslim sentiment as another manifestation of longstanding racism, this conclusion must be treated with care. First, veiled women have not always been subjected to the same degree of abuse. Secondly, the incidence of discrimination may be less pervasive than is sometimes suggested. Several Muslim women interviewed claimed that they knew of others who had suffered discrimination, but they themselves had not experienced it. None of this is to question the reality of discrimination against Muslims but simply to caution against oversimplification.

Nor is it true to argue that Muslim males have been entirely spared. They too have experienced a deep sense of hostility and suspicion. The depth of feeling was clearly conveyed on a Channel Nine program which staged a debate on 'Islam in Australia', involving participants from all sections of the community, including men and women, young and old, intellectuals, professionals and others. One of the male participants spoke for many when he explained that Muslims felt rejected and marginalised by mainstream society: 'If you call us Australians and if you give us the tag of being Australians accept as such' (Channel Nine, *Sunday Story*, 19 November 2006). He proceeded to call on all Australians to open their arms to Muslims and accept them regardless of their appearance. Failure to do this, he concluded, would exacerbate the already troubled relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The need for empathy and support at a time of emotional stress has become apparent in diverse contexts. Female students at Islamic schools, for example, indicated that they were better placed than those in public schools, and felt that the reason for this was that Islamic schools provided them with a safer environment, since the entire student population was Muslim. One gave the following account of her experience:

I am aware that there is verbal abuse and racial scorn of Muslims, especially Arabs. However, I personally didn't face any challenges because I attended an Islamic school.

A rather different picture emerges when it comes to the role of Australia's mainstream media. Interviewees, particularly women, could not but notice the much greater public attention now devoted to Muslims and Islam in the post-September 11 environment. They generally regarded the news and analysis carried by Australia's mainstream media to have repeatedly cast Islam in a negative light. The following comments made in separate interviews are highly instructive:

Personally, I like provocation in learning, you know. I like a lot of people to come to me and ask me, what is your religion about? Because all they know is what they see on television – like terrorist, terrorist, terrorist! When they ask me, I answer that Islam is the religion of peace and I tell them it is a good religion and it is just the media that get it terribly wrong [female interviewee].

People ask me about Muslims and Islam and what you need to do, and how you have to act [female interviewee].

Internationally, there are a lot of questions about Islam, and its relation to violence and terrorism. There is also a huge demand to understand it better. It is very important for us to explain and clarify these matters [male interviewee].

This suggests that not all Australians have closed minds, and that many are eager to find out more.

A number of interviewees in fact associated racism with ignorance and even with drug or alcohol abuse. They suggested that educated or 'normal' people were much less likely to be influenced by unflattering portrayals in the media:

Yes, there is bit of racism, but that depends where I am. Some people don't mean it, but others do. Sometimes, when I catch the tram, some comment and say "terrorist" or whatever, and they think I can't hear them. They don't say much about my colour but they say things about what I am wearing. I think they just look at the *hijab* and not the colour of the person. They talk about Islam as a terrorist religion, and I feel they are just ignorant. People who say such things look ignorant, addicted to alcohol, and they dress badly. People rely on media and just judge

you on what they have heard or seen in the media; but people who are not ignorant just come and ask you because they want to know the truth [female interviewee].

As already suggested, veiled women were far more likely to be questioned by those wishing to know more about Islam. The Hijab seemed to attract particular attention, thus making it all the more important for Muslim women to be able to articulate a reasoned, coherent and attractive brand of Islam, and to help others to do likewise.

Recent studies have shown that 'just one in six Australians surveyed had a reasonable understanding of Islam, [and] one in three were completely ignorant' of Islam (Roose 2006). At a recent series of public lectures on Islam delivered at the University of Melbourne, I met with a number of Australian Christians who expressed surprise at how the negative aspects and images of Islam that they had hitherto taken for granted were seriously challenged by these lectures. At the end of a friendly conversation we agreed that the sources on which their knowledge of Islam was based were biased and misleading.

2

Factors for Making Suspicion and Hostility

Interviewees were asked to reflect on the mainstream treatment of Muslims and in particular to distinguish between those who were recognisably Muslim and those who were not. They were also asked whether there was any clear relationship between skin colour and discriminatory behaviour. They readily acknowledged the importance of religious visibility, but were doubtful that skin colour was a major consideration. They argued that most practising Muslims, particularly women, have faced and are still facing difficulties since September 11 precisely because they are religiously conspicuous.

Seven out of the 16 interviewees agreed that religiously visible and non visible Muslims were treated differently. This raises the question: why is it that discrimination is more a function of religion than race? No doubt part of the answer has to do with the fact that religious conflicts in different parts of the world have greatly influenced perceptions and attitudes. Some conflicts (as in Indonesia) are primarily local in character, while others have assumed global dimensions, notably the terrorist attacks on the United States and its allies and the 'war on terror'. Media coverage of these events, and the focus placed on extremist elements have impacted on Australian Muslims and the Australian community in largely negative ways, thereby widening the gap in mutual understanding.

Interviewees in this study were generally of the view that practising Muslims, particularly women and bearded men, were more likely to face unfair treatment than those who did not openly practise Islam. Given the polarising role of

religion, and in particular the way Islam has been publicly portrayed, this conclusion is hardly surprising. Many have observed that in the aftermath of September 11 'Hijab' wearing women were much more likely to be the subject of verbal or physical attacks than inconspicuous Muslims (Dunn 2006). Physical appearance was widely thought to be the critical factor:

Yes, there is different treatment of these two groups because practising Muslims can be easily recognised, while others cannot [female interviewee].

. . . there are many differences in the way Australians treat women who wear the veil on the one hand and those who do not on the other [female interviewee].

Unveiled women reported that Australians are usually pleasant and polite towards them, and are often taken aback when they learn of the women's identification with Islam. Several young interviewees noted that Australians, regardless of their background, respect and like black Americans because of their skills and achievements and talents, and as a result they also like other black people. As one young woman put it: 'Most white people would die to have our colour anyway' (cited in Omar 2004). Other interviewees differentiated between old and young Australians, arguing that the younger generation is more multiculturally minded and more empathetically disposed to those of different cultural background.

Research for this paper revealed that young Muslims tend to attribute intergenerational differences in the treatment of Muslims to differences in educational and social background. Young Australians, whether they are Muslims or not, have grown up in a culturally diverse society, in an era of intercultural communication, interdependence and globalisation. On the other hand, the older generation – Muslims and non-Muslims alike – were brought up in what was in a predominantly monocultural society. Generally speaking, older Australians are quite conservative, and tend to be pessimistic about such notions as multiculturalism, interfaith dialogue and diversity. Human beings are invariably the products of their respective environments.

3 Perceptions of Cultural Adaptation

We now turn to the concerns of Muslims whose religious practice makes them publicly conspicuous. This part of the analysis considers the extent to which important aspects of faith might possibly be compromised if integration into the mainstream became the higher priority.

The majority of interviewees were of the view that Muslims should adopt only those lifestyles that are compatible with the spirit of Islam. Some argued that many Muslims do not put into practice Islamic values. This is in contrast to many Australians who are faithful to the values of their culture, in showing particular respect for others and for political and cultural difference, open mindedness, and notions of 'fair go' regardless of cultural backgrounds. A number of interviewees believed that Muslims could usefully learn from western societies the scientific and rational approach to analysis. They also thought it beneficial if Muslims could embrace Australian notions of multiculturalism and learn to respect, and live in harmony with other faiths and cultures.

The idea of embracing Australian multicultural values was strongly endorsed. Multiculturalism was considered likely to help Australia's diverse society acquire common aspirations and a common vision of the future, and to provide a useful antidote to negative and unproductive monoculturalism. This view contrasted with the approach that favoured organised integration and even outright assimilation. As one study put it, 'the focus on a core culture, the emphasis on consensus-

building, and the assumption of a basic patterned sequence of acculturation or adaptation represent central elements of assimilation' (Okai 1995, p. 17). Indicative of this trend are recent political attempts in western societies to create ideal national 'types', for example in France where the accent has been on establishing an 'assimilative hegemony' which subsumes or obscures racial and cultural differences. Many Muslims in Australia fear that this is exactly what Australian political leaders have been promoting. The call to accept Australian values, unless these are carefully defined, can easily become a codeword for assimilation, that is, pressure to accept a particular set of values and lifestyles consistent with Anglo-Celtic culture.

As several commentators have warned, there is a danger inherent in this assimilationist philosophy because the sameness or uniformity that it encourages contributes little or nothing to cultural enrichment in an era of globalisation. Since the 1920s a number of American social critics and scholars have drawn attention to the hazards of 'cultural sameness' and opposed notions of assimilation and 'melting pot' on the grounds that a homogeneous society risks becoming 'undemocratic' and culturally impoverished. In similar vein they have advocated an open door immigration policy and social policies that encourage immigrants to retain important elements of their cultural heritage (Mohamed, 2001). American society, it should be stressed, has benefited greatly from its increasing cultural heterogeneity (Park 1950, pp.204-207).

Interviewees, on the other hand, did acknowledge the value of cultivating a sense of belonging and attachment to Australia. As one female interviewee put it,

We should share with them a sense of belonging and feel like we are all Australians and not feel that Australia is not our home, because this is our new country.

In the course of the research it emerged that visibly Muslim women were clearer and more forthright when expressing their views than either men or women whose Muslimness was not obvious. This was especially so in relation to the issue of what should or should not be adopted from the new culture. The reason is not difficult to fathom: veiled women had a stronger

sense of 'otherness' not just because of their more conspicuous dress code, but because of the religious convictions which guides their dress code.

This being said, interviewees were generally in agreement that Muslims should not adopt anything that is contrary to the teachings of the Qur'an or of the Prophet Mohamed. Aspects of the mainstream culture that Muslims find unacceptable include uninhibited partying, sexually explicit clothing, alcohol or pork consumption, and sexual relationships prior to marriage. One male interviewee offered the following rather typical account of Muslim prohibitions:

We should not adopt the way they drink alcohol. We do not drink this kind of stuff. They eat different food to us, like pig meat, they eat product meat that is not Halal, but we eat only Halal meat.

The general feeling is that Muslims should not imitate certain dress and consumption habits typical of Anglo-Australian culture. Some of the interviewees favoured more radical forms of differentiation. As one female interviewee put it,

We shouldn't adopt their secularist ideologies . . . or any cultural and behavioural traits that are contrary to our religion.

There was, at least on the part of some, a desire to reject the mainstream community's secularism as well as some aspects of its materialist way of life. Such views were often accompanied by a sense that Muslims should not convert to other religions that is, commit *apostasy*.

To a greater or lesser extent these views reflect the desire on the part of Muslims to preserve their faith. It is this desire which can be considered a source of actual and potential tension, for preservation of faith is based on the retention of attitudes and behaviour which mainstream Australians may see as inconsistent with Australian culture and values. The hostility to Muslim practices is well illustrated by comments made by respondents to the *Attitudes toward Islam Survey*.

One respondent argued that the presence of Muslims had already impacted negatively on Australian society:

Well, they've come here and they are pushing their beliefs on us, can't have Christmas carols in schools, can't have pork in school lunches and it is all because of them. They should come here and fit in with us (cited in Dunn 2006, p. 5).

Another respondent was even more emphatic:

Why is it that Australians always have to accept everyone else's cultural beliefs but they don't accept our ways or our beliefs . . . women to them are second-class [citizens, whereas] women in Australia are educated and have some, if not all, equal rights in employment, etc (cited in Dunn 2006, p. 11).

The question arises: are such tensions the result of lack of knowledge or misunderstanding, or do they indicate deeper cultural incompatibilities?

One telling illustration of this cultural gap centres on the issue of 'Halal (permissible) and 'Haram' (prohibited) food or drink. The research conducted for this paper found that many Muslims feel ostracised because the practice of their religion prevents them from going to specific places and from working and socialising in certain environments, or requires them to eat only Halal food. Here an aside may be helpful. While the commitment to faith that leads Muslims to act in a certain way is readily understandable, it is important for Muslims who live in western societies to approach and comprehend '*Sharia*' (Islamic) law according to their new social context, and not according to the context of their country of origin. They need to cultivate certain realism in the way they deal with non-Muslims in Australia.

In the author's view, many of the challenges that Muslims face stem, at least in part, from their own limited understanding of Islam, rather than from Islam itself. In the case of Halal meat, many Muslims believe that they are obliged not to eat meat from any animal that is not killed by Muslims. This is not a correct interpretation. Muslims are clearly permitted in the Qur'an to eat the meat of animals killed by Christians or Jews. Similarly, they are permitted to intermingle with and marry members of these other two Abrahamic faiths. Such misunderstanding of the requirements of the Muslim faith may

unnecessarily hinder the integration of Muslims into the wider Australian community. This being said, the fact remains that in the eyes of many Muslims, including well educated, thoughtful Muslims, discussion of Islam's place in contemporary Australia has been severely impeded by negative media coverage and by hostile or ill-informed comment on the part of fundamentalist Christians and politicians who ought to know better.

In this context one other issue merits attention. It centres on an important difference between Muslim and non-Muslim migrants and refugees to Australia. Whereas the latter normally benefit from well organised integration programs and facilities made available by large and well resourced churches, the much smaller network of mosques provides at best meagre services for newly arrived Muslim communities. This is the widely shared opinion of the Muslim participants in this study. As is the case with 'outsider' religious communities in Muslim countries, orthodox Muslims are, of course, highly sensitive to the idea of using services provided by Christian churches or other religious organisations. As a result, they have much greater difficulty in culturally adjusting to the new environment than their Christian counterparts.

The scope for cultural adaptation and how it is perceived by Australian Muslims ultimately revolves around the question of identity. Put simply, there is for many Muslims a profound tension between cultural integration and faithfulness to Islam. This perception is strikingly expressed by an American Muslim scholar who has frequently visited Australia and lectured to young audiences. His message strongly resonates with the experience of many Muslims who have settled in Western societies:

Don't forget Allah, so when they forgot about Allah, the implementation of the law of Allah, they lost their own identity. Is this what is happening to Muslims today? We lost our identity, we lost our way. We don't know who we are! Best things we can call ourselves are: Sudanese, Somali, Afghani, Turkish, Palestinian, Pakistani, Hindi, Punjabi . . . We forgot ourselves. This is not our identity. This is the identity the enemy of Islam gave to you. Allah says 'He names you Muslims'. The poison has come to the 'ummah' (Muslim nations) when as Muslims we see ourselves according to a flag, according to a passport, according to ethnicity, according to a language, according to some food (Sheikh Khalid Yasin 2006).

Given this sentiment it is hardly surprising that some Muslims emphasise their identity as Muslims, while placing question marks alongside their identity as Australians. This feeling of not belonging can be attributed to a range of factors. There is a strong sense that some Muslims do not behave like other Australians – do not have the same lifestyles as other Australians – because of cultural and religious differences. Though Australia is a multi-ethnic, multi-faith society, there has developed an unfortunate tendency – not just in Australia but internationally – to divide society into two cultural poles: Muslims and non-Muslims. This polarisation is inevitably internalised by many Muslims, as the following reflections clearly illustrate:

I don't at all feel [that] I am Aussie. I am always with Aussies at work, but I don't feel I am part of them or one of them [male interviewee].

Even though I am attending [an] Australian college, and I am working alongside a lot of Australians at my college . . . I don't feel that I am Australian like them [female interviewee].

This cultural phenomenon is mirrored and reinforced by the mainstream's negative perception of Islam, by media hostility, and by the unhelpful attitudes and observations of politicians. All these factors combine to produce feelings of 'alienation', making it harder to cultivate positive identification with the host country. It is arguable that the pervasive criticism of Islam and of Muslims has led a number of young Muslims to strengthen their sense of 'Muslimness' rather than 'Australian-ness'. In these circumstances, there is an unfortunate tendency for a Muslim identity to be constructed in opposition to the attitudes of mainstream Australia (Roose, 2006). In the words of a prominent Muslim social commentator, the practice of 'defining yourself through opposition to others...is rife in Muslim communities in the west' (Aly, 2007, p.37)

Much the same diagnosis emerged from the Channel Nine program 'Islam in Australia'. Several participants in that discussion made the point that young Australian Muslims do not identify as Australian citizens. Some went so far as to say that they had no sense of belonging to the country at all. Their assessment was that if young Muslims were asked 'do you feel

you are Australian?', they would answer 'no'. The tendency to portray Muslims as actual or potential terrorists deepened the alienation of young Muslims from mainstream society generally and from the political process in particular. One male participant in the program spoke clearly of his frustration:

. . . you work day and night and try to convince these young Muslims to get rid of this negative perception, change their minds, and be proud to be Australian, then one leader from the top such as Peter Costello comes on national TV and says "if they don't like it then get them out – they should be shaped or shipped out.

The research for this paper generally supports this assessment.

The following observation by one of the interviewees is indicative of a widely shared view:

Australian Muslims should adhere to their Islamic values and cultural characteristics, otherwise they will be assimilated and brainwashed as if they have nothing but empty minds. Islamic faith decides our identity and who we are. Therefore, having faith and unchangeable foundational principles are the mainspring of our identity. [By] giving priority to our Islamic principles and basis, Muslims might also acquire some new values and positive characteristics and add them to their identity which make us multi-identity people. [a male interview].

A note of qualification needs to be introduced into the discussion here. While these sentiments are widespread, it does not follow that they are experienced uniformly or universally.

When asked to rate their relationship with other Australians, the interviewees' responses were divided. While most practising male Muslims tended to rate their integration into the mainstream as good or very good, the experience of Muslim women varied greatly: two out of eight rated their integration experience as very good, one as good, two as fair, and three as poor. In line with our earlier analysis, Muslim women tend to feel more alienated than their male counterparts. When asked the question: 'As a visible Muslim, do you feel at home in Australia since September 11?', most men answered 'yes', whereas all but two of the women answered 'no'.

The following statement by a female interviewee is representative:

Even though life is luxurious here in Australia, I don't feel I am at home. When I get out from my house with the Hijab, I think that everyone is looking at me and maybe some wants to hurt me . . . The hardest time is when I go by public transport! I now rarely use public transport because I am not comfortable.

For their part, men who felt at home acknowledged that they dressed like 'Aussie' men, while also benefiting from their resemblance to black Americans. Respondents were more likely to feel at ease to the extent that they were part of a strong Muslim community that they lived in a multicultural environment respectful of cultural and religious difference. By contrast, the interviewees who did not feel at home thought that mainstream Australians have negative impressions of Muslims and treat them accordingly. While some tended to think that tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims were an integral part of life in Australia, others detected signs of improvement, and possibilities of greater mutual understanding.

The diversity of responses encountered in the survey is supported by evidence from other sources. While several participants in Channel Nine's program, *Sunday Story*, had positive experiences of the Muslim-mainstream relationship, others described their experience in largely negative terms. In the words of one participant, 'when the rest of the society is against Muslims, keep pushing the person into the corner, sooner or later they're gonna rebel. Sooner or later they're gonna react.' A number of analysts of the Australian context have in fact discerned a deteriorating relationship since September 11, largely as a result of political factors to which we now turn our attention.

4

The Impact of ‘Politics’

Since September 11, most societies have undergone a period of transition, not to say transformation. Change has occurred at all levels, locally, nationally, regionally and globally. The rising tension between Islam and the West is perhaps the single most important feature of this transition. Strains in the relationship between Australia’s Muslim communities and the wider society are part of this change. From an Australian Muslim perspective, the nation’s leaders and politicians more generally have not handled these strains with the necessary vision or skill. The net effect has been to hinder the efforts of Muslim communities to develop a harmonious relationship with the rest of society. As one male participant argued in the Channel Nine program:

Innovation and change are good and will happen when the political leaders show gestures of confidence and say ‘hi community leaders, we trust you. Go ahead and do your job well’. But innovation will not happen under mistrust, suspicion, under scrutiny and under a microscope.

There is reason to suggest that instead of encouraging and helping well informed Muslims to contribute their unique skills and talents to the development of a more cohesive and mutually enriching multiculturalism, politicians, along with the media, have undermined such efforts.

Political and media comment in relation to Islam has generally occurred in the context of military and/or cultural threats. The discussion about Islam has been dominated by references to terrorism, September 11, and the Bali and London bombings. The subtext of many interventions has been that Muslims constitute a threat to mainstream culture. By placing the spotlight on the comments of Sheikh Taj Al-Din Al-Hilali in Australia or extremist figures in other countries, politicians and the media have, wittingly or otherwise, fuelled fears in some

quarters of an aggressive Muslim movement intent on undermining western culture and society. The fear of cultural takeover has been given legitimacy by some politicians who have publicly pointed to the higher fertility rate of Australian Muslims, and the danger that Australia might eventually become an Islamic country (Dunn 2006). Use of inflammatory language has not been limited to politicians. Former Treasury Secretary John Stone is reported to have said:

We are at war with international Islamist terrorism, and [that] therefore our Muslim community, collectively considered, now regrettably constitutes a potential threat that renders a citizenship test not only appropriate but essential – we cannot be hopeful of the outcome even on this limited issue” (cited in Bubalo, 2006, p.1).

Such ill-advised public comments inevitably encourage hostility to Muslims and Islamic values. This widely held perception in the Muslim community was well expressed by one of the participants in Channel Nine’s *Sunday Story*:

We see politicians use tactics to create a culture of fear [and] that itself can be a factor in radicalizing and marginalizing some youth among Muslim communities.

The emotional appeal to fear and insecurity is especially regrettable as it undermines the efforts of other highly respected community voices, including most church leaders, who have repeatedly warned against political stridency and advocated instead constructive dialogue and collaboration.

When asked to evaluate the treatment of the Muslim community by Australian politicians in the post September 11 period, this survey found a generally negative response, although male interviewees, in line with their answers to previous questions, were a little less negative than female interviewees. Even though the question did not specifically invite the interviewees to distinguish between different levels of government (local, state and federal), the answers did suggest that councillors and officials in local government were held in higher regard, and their role seen as constructive. As one female interviewee observed, ‘local councils are supportive and open minded in their dealings with us.’ Otherwise, interviewees felt unfairly treated by many politicians, arguing that Australia’s

'fair go' value is not often practised in relations with the Muslim community. The following statement was typical:

I would like to see a fair go for all communities particularly our community [because] it is being dealt [with] unreasonably by both state and federal governments.

The majority of interviewees sensed that political parties, especially at the national level, did not respect Australia's Muslim communities. Many thought that politicians and the media were complicit in insulting and denigrating the Muslim community. A number argued for greater understanding of the Muslim community and its needs. In the words of one interviewee, 'the media and government are the main factors that damage our reputation and treat us badly.' This appraisal is supported by a number of independent observers. Roose has concluded that federal politicians have cynically manipulated community fears for political advantage. Though politicians have claimed in their public rhetoric to be looking for ways to allay the fears of the Muslim community – through what might be termed 'pseudo' or autocratic engagement – in practice they have continued to implement a political agenda designed to gain votes (Roose 2006).

The unreasoned attacks on, and distortions of, Islam have exerted a profoundly negative influence on both Muslim communities and the wider society. They have widened the gap between them. They are continuing to hinder harmony, social cohesion and mutual respect. Some political initiatives have considerable potential, but they risk falling short of expectations. The formation of a Muslim advisory group by the Australian federal government was at first positively received. It opened up a new channel of communication, which might help to bridge the gap between government and Muslims communities. However, many Muslims soon came to the conclusion that many of the advisory members were out of touch with the grassroots of their communities. More capable and qualified members of the community would need to be appointed if community-government relations were to improve. As shall be argued later, however, a more constructive dialogue also placed considerable responsibility on the Muslim communities and their leaders.

5 The Role of Media

Muslims almost unanimously point to the unreasonable and defamatory character of media portrayals of Islam (Dunn, 2006). The following statement is representative of this view:

Media can lie to the public. It contains very bad things about our religion. Media always talks about Muslims as terrorists, and Al-Qaeda? I don't think the media likes Muslims. The media upsets me a lot.

Melbourne's most widely read daily newspaper recently cited a marginal Muslim cleric's controversial views on the environment in an article entitled 'Big dry blamed on faithless Aussies' (*Herald Sun* 11 March 2007). The clear inference was that the cleric's views were widely accepted by Muslims. The article is representative of an approach to writing that instils mistrust and animosity, and encourages Australians to see Muslims as their enemies rather than making them feel at home in their adopted country.

A number of interviewees perceive the media as a powerful tool that has the potential to create problems or, alternatively, to promote peace, harmony and tolerance. However, many feel that Australians are generally exposed to media reports that are inclined towards the former. In the view of one female interviewee, Australians

. . . are extremely influenced by the media. What they listen to or watch at night from the media, they apply in the morning. If the media give them good information they act in a good way and vice versa. The following happened to one of my female relatives who was once the last person in a queue. An Aussie woman who apparently did not like Muslims came to the queue and pushed in front of this Muslim woman. Another Australian lady who was in the queue came to support the Muslim woman and began to push back the Aussie woman. The two Aussies got into dispute and quarrelled. The Aussie who pushed argued to

the other Aussie lady: 'why do you support this terrorist Muslim lady against me?' Then the Aussie who supported the Muslim lady answered: 'Don't you know that what the media said [about Muslims] is rubbish?'

Biased media coverage misleads the mainstream community about the reality of Australia's Muslim community, exacerbates the problem faced by Muslims, and creates a collective moral panic. Federal Police commissioner Mick Keelty recently offered the following reflection on the negative impact of the media: 'if we are not careful, [of what we are saying to the media] I think we risk raising a generation of Australians who will have a bias against Islam' (cited in Roose 2006, p. 9).

The strongly held view of most Muslims interviewed is that journalists and broadcasters need to take into consideration the effects of what they are saying and the way that Islam is depicted. They would very much like to see Muslims accurately and fairly represented in the media. They yearn for more balanced media coverage that provides insights into the positive as well as negative aspects of life among Muslim communities. They stress that Islam is not the backward religion so often portrayed in the media. Rather they consider Islam to be a religion that develops, nurtures and inspires its followers to improve themselves through learning and positive thinking.

Some media have recently moved in a more positive direction, and have started to give Muslims the opportunity to express their views and opinions. This more open approach has taken many forms: roundtable debates have been organised between Muslims and non-Muslims, or among Muslims themselves, sometimes on television; newspapers have invited talented Muslims, for example Waleed Aly, to write articles and opinion pieces. But there is still a long way to go if the media are to become a site of dialogue where different views can be aired, anxieties allayed, and greater trust established. If this potential is to be realised, those working in the media have to take special care in the performance of their duties, particularly when they are dealing with vulnerable communities. As for Muslims, there is an increasing realisation that they and the wider community should exercise a healthy scepticism towards the media and take every opportunity to voice their concerns through various media outlets.

6 Muslim Communities and Leadership Crises

Enough has already been said to indicate that Muslims do not constitute a monolithic community. There are considerable differences in experience and perspective based on gender, ethnicity and age. Many of those interviewed felt that Islamic communities are experiencing a crisis of leadership. The unequal representation of men and women, young and old, and diverse ethnic communities is a source of considerable dissatisfaction. The following comment is indicative of widespread unease:

Negative action, harmful comments and undemocratic attitudes of Muslim community leaders such as Sheikh Taj Din Al-Hilal are not helpful for our future prosperity. These kinds of leaders create nothing but negative perceptions in public Australian minds.

Kara Ali – the youth representative on the Prime Minister's Muslim community reference group – argues that 'many (Muslims) see the Sheikh Taj Din Al-Hilali's fall as a collapse of the rigid mentality of the old migrant generation' (cited in Roose 2006, p.12). This older generation is thought to be unrepresentative of the majority of Muslims, lacking in local knowledge, local skills, leadership skills, and language competence. As a consequence they find it difficult to articulate the concerns of the Muslim community generally, and are especially out of touch with young Muslims and their needs.

Until recently, males with migrant backgrounds have tended to monopolise community leadership. In the main they subscribe

to a philosophy that has been sharply criticised by noted Muslim intellectual Tariq Ramadan. The thinking of these 'Muslims in the West' may be not unreasonably represented as follows: 'We are Muslims in Australia but we are not Australian Muslims'. The core of this approach entails working hard in Australia – be it as employees or students – and so secure the resources to return to the country of origin in order to build homes, establish businesses and resume past connections. This conception of the Muslim migrant's future is, however, wholly unrealistic. Most Muslims do not return to their country of origin. To adhere to such a conception of life in Australia is to deprive Muslims of the capacity to play a full and active life in their adopted country.

In the last few years Australian born young Muslims, both males and females, have been trying to offer an alternative leadership that represents their communities' interests at all levels of society and politics. They are inspired by the 'Australian Muslims' philosophy, which may be expressed thus: 'We are Australians and we want to benefit from and contribute to Australian culture and its values and not retain some exclusive relationship to the cultures of Muslim or other countries'.

Such young leaders are growing in both quality and number, but they are faced with numerous challenges. First, they have to understand and culturally unite a very diverse Muslim community. Secondly, they have to find ways of improving communication with the alienated sections of Muslim communities, as well as with the wider Australian community, the media and government. Thirdly, they have to negotiate with traditional migrant leaders who are very much rooted in an older Muslim tradition and are still influential in their respective communities. Most importantly, they need to represent the Muslim community's ethos and aspirations. The fact is that Australian Muslims are deeply polarized between 'migrant minded' groups and 'Australian minded' groups. It is fair to say that 'migrant minded' groups will retain the upper hand within the community, at least in the short term, and this for three reasons. First, a large proportion of the Muslim community comprises first or second generation migrants who are strongly influenced by their parents. Secondly, there is a tendency on

the part of some young Muslims who were born in Australia or who converted to Islam – particularly the very strict groups – to equate the culture of the country of origin with Islamic faith, even though the former does not necessarily represent the essence of Islam. Thirdly, the prevailing mood in most western societies – Australia is no exception – is hostile to Islam. It is no surprise, then, that Muslim leaders who speak against Western values and civilisation are often regarded within their communities as heroes and defenders of Islam. In contrast, leaders who co-operate with the mainstream are suspected of succumbing to Westernisation and assimilation.

Several interviewees in this study considered the lack of skilled leadership to be the main reason for the relative isolation of the Muslim community, and a major obstacle to positive and successful social integration. To overcome this leadership crisis, many believe intellectuals and scholars, well educated Muslims of both genders, and the younger generation, should assume leadership and steer their communities in a more promising direction. In addition, community leaders are expected to desist from internal squabbling and lead in collaborative fashion. The appeal of a female participant in Channel Nine's *Sunday Story* should be understood in this light:

We have to have a range of leaders who have Islamic scholarship . . . plus an understanding of the issues and reality we live in; plus solutions for our problems and the ability to implement them that will give us the confidence to break the cycle.

Some young Muslims believe that that they should now be given a chance to lead their communities. The time has come for communities to look for new faces drawn from a younger generation to replace those who have been in leadership positions for the last twenty or thirty years, and who are still in charge. Appearing in Channel Nine's *Sunday Story*, Iktim al Haji argued that the old leaders had achieved a great deal and built the foundations, but now was the time for a more youthful leadership to take charge because they are the ones who can more effectively work with their counterparts in mainstream Australia. They are the ones who have been educated alongside their Australian classmates and who have a better understanding of the fabric of Australian society. Sherene

Hassan, a leading critic of the patriarchal attitudes of the older leadership style, has argued in similar vein,

. . . our main concern is how we can be part of a more mainstream Australia. Where the first generation was concerned with establishing schools and mosques, for us it's how Muslims participate as politicians, in the courts, in journalism" (cited in Roose 2006, p. 12)

A female participant in the Channel Nine program offered a highly insightful observation:

Change is always painful. And what we going through at the moment is generational, ideological... and it is painful and it is messy. But it is positive because without that painful transition, just like birth, you don't have a new life. You don't have a new beginning and that is what we are going through at the moment. We have to be patient with each other, but we have to be positive because this is a part of the process of having all these young people here who are perhaps in conflict in some ways, they are speaking and they are people who are listening, and I think that is very positive.

Intergenerational and cultural differences on leadership issues are likely to persist for some time to come. From these debates and tensions positive innovation can arise, but the response of the wider community will be critical to successful adaptation.

7 Victimhood and Self-Appraisal

Leadership faces another important hurdle, namely a 'victim mentality'. As one contributor to the *Sunday Story* program commented, 'at the moment, we do have a lot of stigmas associated for us and a lot of stereotypes.' Several interviewees pointed to this as one of the most disturbing effects of September 11. Over the last few years, exposed to a barrage of hostile comment, many Muslims have chosen isolation and withdrawal from public life. Not surprisingly, several interviewees hoped that Muslims would in future overcome the victim mentality, and face up to the new challenges by acquiring new skills and overcoming current problems.

The growing sense of victimhood among Muslims has been particularly destructive of self-esteem. It has greatly weakened pride in past individual or collective achievements and dimmed aspirations for the future. It should not be thought, however, that all Muslims in Australia are preoccupied by what others think of them. There are many who do not see themselves as victims – a view strikingly expressed by one of the participants in the Channel Nine program:

We are not victims; Muslims should free themselves from this killer attitude. I don't care what others are saying to me. I am an Australian Muslim. I am living here. I thank God that I am lucky living in Australia. They give freedom which other Muslims do not have in Europe.

This, then, is a period of transition for Muslims in Australia, at least as much as it is for the society at large. How Muslims

negotiate this transition will depend on how they see themselves even more than on how others see them.

For Muslims as for others, the aftermath of September 11 presents a unique opportunity for stocktaking. This may well be one of its more positive results. As one female interviewee put it,

Muslims have started to review themselves and reflect on what is going on around them; ask who they are; what their position is in Australian society, in western countries and in the world in general; what is their religion's view on what is happening; and what is good or bad for Muslims.

Many interviewees saw the tendency by western Muslims, particularly women, to become more religious as a positive outcome. Partly because of the immense pressure placed on Muslims since September 11, wearing the Hijab has become more common among Muslim women in western countries, not least in Australia, particularly among students and well educated women engaged in various professions. For many the Hijab is now a matter of identity, even a sign of maturity and a good education. Many women who did not wear the Hijab before September 11 are now doing so. In the words of one Muslim woman, '[we] want to say hi we are Muslims, and whether you accept us or not, this is our identity, values and heritage' (SBS Radio-Somali Program, 2006).

Compared to the pre-September 11 period, young Australian Muslims are at present learning more about Islam and are becoming more devout. They are turning to mosques and Islamic institutions in direct response to the impact and changes produced by September 11. Yet, we also observe an opposite tendency. A number of newly arrived or less educated Muslims are afraid to practise their faith. They carefully avoid displaying anything, the Hijab included, for fear of exposing their Muslimness, which they perceive as an obstacle to finding employment or gaining social status. Some have even started to change their names, believing that names such as Ahmed, Mohamed or Aisha are viewed negatively by employers.

As one female professional put it:

Because I work in the public service sector, I met many of those people who changed their names. It is very difficult to understand their cultural backgrounds or whether they are Muslims or not [SBS Radio-Somali program, 15 November 2006].

While 'Muslimness' may be a factor in unemployment, other factors are likely to be more significant, in particular low levels of education, inadequate job skills, and lack of local experience. As one male interviewee observed:

They have to be realistic and concentrate on developing their education, and gain work experience and upgrade their skills. Ignorance is the biggest enemy that prevents them from having a job.

Practising Muslims generally believe that those who abandon the Hijab, change their names, or cease to openly observe their faith do so because they think that these measures will gain them greater acceptance by the mainstream. A few interviewees went further, arguing that those who are confident in themselves, aware of what is happening around them, receive a sound education, and have a good grasp of their faith, are likely to feel stronger, benefit more from their faith, perform their job better, and gain the respect of their fellow Australians.

8

What does the Future Hold?

In answer to the question: 'What do you expect will happen in future to those who are visibly Muslim?' interviewees offered varied responses. Some offered an optimistic view of the future, pointing to possibilities for better understanding between Muslims and the mainstream. Through dialogue negative views about Islam could change. As one female interviewee remarked, 'People do change their opinions and attitudes, if they get a chance to talk and to listen face to face.'

For others better treatment of Muslims by mainstream society and a more welcoming environment in Australia constitute more a hope than a reality: 'I hope that Muslims will feel welcomed and will call Australia home' [male interviewee]. The optimists among those interviewed looked forward to a time of greater unity among all Australians, regardless of race, ethnicity or religion. For some the rapid growth of Australia's Muslim population is itself a source of optimism. In the words of one female interviewee, 'I think the Muslim population will get bigger and it will be okay.' For others, optimism lies in the fact that large numbers around the world – including many Australians – are actively campaigning for equality, justice, tolerance and harmony, especially in relations across religious or racial boundaries.

On the whole, however, the answers tended to be more pessimistic. Many expected Muslims to face more tension and more attacks, whether verbally or physically, until or unless they were prepared to give up their values and yield to the

dominant ethos of society. As one female interviewee put it, 'we will have to succumb to their ways . . . and abandon our faith or get deported or oppressed.'

The pessimists also predict that the government will introduce many laws against Muslims, and they argue that current oppressive policies and government attitudes foreshadow a bleak future for their communities. As one remarked,

Laws will be laid down that will eventually want us to choose sides that reject our faith and our uniqueness and be like them or get out of the country. Present actions indicate future ones; e.g. new immigration laws on sitting an English and Australian culture test.

The greatest concern of the pessimists was that government attitudes and actions – as well as the overall negative political environment – will harm their social relations with the wider Australian population. As one interviewee stated:

I am pessimistic in terms of political atmosphere that will eventually affect social atmosphere. I hope that things will not be as bad as I know it will get, but it is coming for us.

During the research for this paper it was observed that some devout Muslims stress that they no longer want to be surrounded by people whom they assume do not welcome them. A third group – those who are more ambivalent – believe that only 'Allah' 'God' knows what will happen in the future.

Findings

Muslim Attitudes to Integration

- New non-Muslim migrants/refugees benefit from well-funded and well-organised church services and integration programs, while new Muslim migrants/refugees – particularly conspicuous veiled women or bearded men – experience difficulty accessing these services. This is partly because they are afraid of being assimilated and forced to change their religion.
- The services and benefits provided by often disorganised and poor Mosques and Muslim organisations hindered their constituents' integration because the limited programs on offer often encouraged an inward looking Muslim community.
- Muslim schools are highly valued safe environments for young Muslims, particularly for veiled females.
- Muslims would like to adopt from the mainstream culture aspects that are compatible with the Islamic spirit and values, including such things as: respect, open mindedness, harmony and friendliness, a rational way of analysis, the idea of multiculturalism, and a sense of belonging to Australia.
- Muslims reject aspects of the mainstream culture which are contrary to Islamic values and objectives. These include: sexually explicit clothing, drinking alcohol, inappropriate boyfriend-girlfriend relationships, and eating pork.
- Muslims believe that certain core Australian values are also central to the Islamic faith. Indeed, they consider these to be universal values, even though the way they are interpreted or applied may be different from culture to culture.

- Australian Muslims are eager to participate in what they see as a constructive dialogue on issues relating to tensions and integration.
- Many Muslims are ambivalent about their sense of belonging in Australia. Islam represents the key to their identity, and the more it is criticized, the more Muslims strengthen their commitment to their 'separate' identity.
- Muslims believe that politicians often hinder efforts to integrate positively into mainstream Australia, and, *via* their comments and actions, widen the gap between Muslims and the mainstream community. However, male Muslims were more positive than females when it came to politicians.
- Muslims believe that the media often misleads the mainstream community about Muslim attitudes. They would like to see more balanced media coverage of issues/perspectives relating to Islam and Muslims.
- Lack of effective leadership is seen as an important challenge for Muslim communities. It is believed that well educated and dedicated young Muslims who understand Australian culture should now take on leadership positions.
- Instead of gaining new skills to overcome post-September 11 challenges, some Muslims have developed a victim mentality. However, September 11 also served as a wake up call for many others, one that prompted greater reflection and awareness of the challenges ahead.
- Expectations for the future are mixed, with a slight majority tending towards pessimism.

Muslim Perceptions of Mainstream Australian Attitudes

- Before September 11, Australians saw Islam as they would other religions. The events of September 11 2001, however, changed the attitudes of mainstream Australians, and since that time they began to regard Islam as a militant, even violent religion.

- The Australian mainstream community is generally friendly to inconspicuous Muslims, but is taken aback when the latter identify themselves as Muslims.
- Discrimination by the mainstream community is primarily based on religious visibility or skin colour, particularly in relation to those who are Arabic in appearance. A strong correlation emerged between Islamic/Arabic features and discrimination, whereas discrimination based on black skin colour was not found to be a major problem. In fact, blackness is often regarded as a source of respect because Australians are attracted to the appearance of black Americans – thus, non-American black people seem to benefit from that attraction.
- Since September 11, mainstream Australians have shown an unprecedented interest in Muslims and Islam, and are now more willing to approach Muslims to inquire about Islam.
- What some Muslims consider to be behaviour that helps preserve their cultural and religious values, others may see as threatening to the mainstream culture.
- Islamophobia takes different forms, in particular: a) fear of Islam as a threat to security (dominated by reference to September 11, the Bali and London bombings); and b) fear of Islam as a cultural threat (dominated by the fear of a Muslim takeover of Australia and the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam).
- Young Australians are more progressive, multicultural and understanding of Muslims and other cultural groups than are older Australians.

On being Conspicuously Muslim, and the Role of Gender

- Veiled Muslim women are subjected to greater discrimination in comparison to people of other religious groups who display religious markers, such as the Sikh turban, Buddhist robes, or the Jewish *Kippah*.
- Such Australian values as 'a fair go' and 'freedom' are not always extended to veiled Muslim women. This is because

the right of Muslim women to dress as they choose is not always respected by the media and some politicians. This is in contrast to the approach taken to non-Muslim Australian women who are encouraged to dress in a liberal way and to wear what they choose.

- Since September 11 those who displayed markers of their Muslim-ness – particularly veiled women and bearded men – have faced more prejudice and harassment than other Muslim men or unveiled Muslim women. For example, it is a strongly held view within Muslim communities that conspicuous Muslims have been denied access to employment and equality because of their religious commitment.
- The majority of female Muslims prefer to live in Muslim countries (in the long term) while the majority of males are eager to live in Western countries, including Australia.
- Most males believe that religious visibility does not impede integration, while most females believe it does. Similarly, the majority of males feel at home while the majority of females do not.

Recommendations

For Policy Makers, Media, Service Providers and Employers

1. Political leaders should be seen to fairly represent all Australian communities, regardless of their background or beliefs. The professed Australian values such as the 'fair go', freedom, harmony, and acceptance should be applied to all Australians regardless of their religion, race, or cultural background. Currently, the communities of Australian Muslims feel that they do not enjoy these values.
2. Rather than undermine Muslims in their efforts to transform and adapt their communities so that they can more easily integrate into Australian society, the country's political and community leaders are urged to provide more assistance and support to Muslim communities. One important step in this regard would be the provision of free English language tuition for senior Muslim community leaders.
3. To promote social cohesion and harmony, politicians and media broadcasters should express their views in a responsible manner, and consider the implications of airing controversial opinions. They should not single out or ostracize the Muslim community for condemnation where this is not warranted.
4. Because discrimination and prejudice are primarily based on religious visibility – featuring here is the 'Hijab' (scarf) – it is very important for politicians and those in the media not to single out Islam for condemnation. They must be even handed and bear in mind the existence of a range of sacred religious markers, such as the Christian cross, the Sikh turban, the Buddhist robes, and the Jewish *Kippah*. Muslims should not be considered as threatening to

the mainstream simply because they choose to display such markers.

5. It is recommended that aged care centres in Australia organise for their clients programs on multiculturalism that promote diversity, harmony, acceptance, and integration.
6. Employers are urged to employ people on their merits and not discriminate against applicants on the basis of conspicuous religious markers.
7. It is recommended that government, service providers, and prominent members of the wider Australian community emphasise the commonly shared values that exist in all cultural traditions. They should encourage people to appreciate the universal nature of many Islamic and western values.
8. Policy makers, those working in the media, community leaders – including those of Muslim communities – and educators should stress and speak positively about diversity. They should be supportive of multiculturalism and avoid demeaning one another or undermining the idea of cultural diversity.
9. Given that discrimination based on skin colour and physical characteristics appears to be decreasing in Australia, those in the media, government institutions, and Australian communities in general should take steps to resist new waves of anti-Arab hostility that are usually based appearance.
10. Finally, the tragedy of September 11 should also be understood as an opportunity to acquire the skills and understanding needed to resolve tensions that persist between mainstream Australia and its Muslim communities.

For Muslim Communities

1. Prominent Muslims – particularly those from moderate organisations and Islamic scholars in general – are urged to explain Islam to their community members by placing it in the Australian context. They should do so using all means available to them, in particular the media, schools, mosques, churches, educational institutions, and neighbourhood centres.
2. The role of the Imams is pivotal in Muslim communities. Unfortunately, some of them speak little English, and as a result may not be qualified for this very important task. Therefore, they should undertake to study the English language and to achieve high standards of literacy in English.
3. Imams should relate their teachings – particularly in their weekly Friday *Khudba* – to the Australian context. This would make their teachings more relevant and appropriate. Mosque services and programs need to be upgraded, reformed and transformed in a way that can help Muslims to engage positively with other cultures.
4. Muslim community leaders, intellectuals, emerging young leaders, Imams, organisations, and individuals are urged to work together, to consult with each other, and discuss how best to resolve their leadership crisis.
5. Members of Muslim communities should be encouraged to join different political parties and participate in everyday political interaction. This will allow Muslim voices and needs to be heard by decision makers.
6. All Muslims, but particularly members of women's groups, should take every opportunity to explain that the dress code – and the Hijab in particular – is not imposed on women by males.
7. Muslims are urged to avoid taking on a victim mentality: females in particular should take every opportunity to develop a sense of belonging and identity as Australians, and not as outsiders.

Note on Research Method

A. Research Questions

The main questions in this survey were as follows:

- What have been the experiences of conspicuous Muslims since September 11 in Australia?
- Are there differences between more and less conspicuous Muslims when it comes to dealing with the Australian mainstream?
- What are aspects of Australian culture that Muslims should or should not adopt?
- Do conspicuous Muslims feel at home in Australia since September 11?
- How do Muslims regard media coverage and Australian politicians' treatment of the Muslim community after September 11?
- How do Muslims regard their future prospects in Australia?

B. Limitations

In terms of population, the study targeted primarily coloured or religiously conspicuous Muslims. Those who came to Australia after September 11, 2001 were excluded as the study required respondents to be able to reflect on and compare their experiences before and after September 11. In terms of location, the interviews took place in Melbourne, Victoria. The reason for choosing Melbourne was the large and growing Muslim population, and the generally more balanced discussion of the issues involved.

C. Methodology

The research used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to draw information from conspicuous Muslim groups and from other relevant sources. Primary data was collected from Horn of Africa Muslims in Melbourne through group discussion at Muslim community institutions. Individuals were also approached on a formal and an informal basis using surveys, unstructured and semi-structured interviews, informal discussions and personal observations. The public broadcaster, SBS, and its Radio-Somali segment, as well as other public lectures by Islamic personalities also provided useful insights. Some of the data was in the Arabic and Somali languages, which the researcher translated into English. Moreover, the researcher attended many Islamic lectures to learn more about Muslim perceptions of the Australian mainstream community. The author consulted a total of 16 respondents: 8 males and 8 females. They were all from the Horn of Africa and aged between 25 and 35 years old. Participants were randomly approached in Mosques, through community networks and public Islamic lectures. The objectives of the study were explained to the participants and their verbal consent was obtained by the researcher. Relevant literature was also reviewed and previous findings were utilized to design the necessary methodology. The study was conducted over 5 months from December 2006 to April 2007.

It is important to acknowledge that the findings of this study cannot be readily generalized to other Muslim communities in other western countries, or even to other parts of Australia. However, the findings can be used as a foundation for further exploration and understanding of the experiences of conspicuous Muslim communities in Australia, and western societies more generally.

References

- Aly, W (2007), *People Like Us, How Arrogance is Dividing Islam and the West*, Sydney: Picador by Pan Macmillan.
- Bubalo, A (2006), 'Is Islamism Possible in Australia? a Paper Presented at International Colloquium: Muslims in the West: Integration or Exclusion?', 22-23 November, Centre for the Study of Contemporary Islam, Melbourne University.
- Channel Nine, (11/2006) 'Islam in Australia', Sunday Story, [Online: Video], www.ninemsn.com.au/Sunday.
- Channel Nine, (11/3/2007), 'The Ticking Time Bomb of Domestic Terror- It can be Stopped', Sunday Story, [Online: Video], www.ninemsn.com.au/Sunday
- Dunn, K (2006), 'Contemporary Racism and Islamophobia in Australia: Racializing Religion', International Colloquium: 'Muslims in the West: Integration or Exclusion?', 22-23 November, Centre for the Study of Contemporary Islam, Melbourne University.
- Grewal, K (2006), 'The Young Muslims in Australian Public Discourse', International Colloquium: 'Muslims in the West: Integration or Exclusion?', 22-23 November, Centre for the Study of Contemporary Islam, Melbourne University.
- Houlihan, L (11/3/2007), *Big Dry blamed on Faithless Aussies*, *Herald Sun*.
- Kessler, C (2006), *Diasporic Muslims, Minoritarian Islam and Modern Democratic Citizenship: Negotiating Accommodation and Integration*, International Colloquium: Muslims in the West: Integration or Exclusion? 22-23 November, Centre for the Study of Contemporary Islam, Melbourne University.
- Mohamed, H (2001) 'Socio-Cultural Adaptation of Somali Refugees in Toronto: an exploration of their integration experiences', University of Massachusetts Amherst.
- Okai, B (1995), 'The Role of Ethnic Community Organizations in Promoting Social Integration of African Immigrants in Australia', University of Melbourne, Australian.
- Omar, Y (2005), 'Young Somalis in Australia: an Educational Approach to Challenges and Recommended Solutions', *Migration Action*, Vol. XXXII, No. 1, pp.6-18.
- Park, R (1950), *Race and Culture*, New York: Free Press.
- Ramadan, T (2004), *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rose, J (2006), *the Construction and Expression of Political Identity in Australian Born Muslim Youth Aged, 18-29 in Melbourne*, a Paper Presented at CSCI Islamic Studies postgraduate Conference, 20-22 November, Centre for the Study of Contemporary Islam, Melbourne University, Melbourne, Australia
- SBS Radio-Somali Program (15/11/06), '*African Women in Australia*', Melbourne.
- Yasin, K (2006), *Racism: Youth issues* [DVD], One Islam Productions, Melbourne.