

Mosques and Muslim Settlement in Australia

Bouma, Gary D. Mosques and Muslim Settlement in Australia, Canberra, Bureau of Immigration and Population Research/Australian Government Publishing Service, 1994, pp 87 and 90-97.

Chapter 9 - The future of Islam in Australia

Islam is going to play a significant role in Australia's future. It has been a factor in the settlement of Muslim immigrants to Australia. The size of the Muslim population certainly guarantees that a Muslim presence is here to stay and its youth implies that it will grow.

Mosques and Islamic societies are emerging as important social mechanisms in the adaptation of many new Muslim immigrants to Australia and for the expression of Islamic interests in this society. For example, a study of the Preston mosque in Melbourne depicts a growing community offering an increasing array of services to those who participate (Ayan 1990). Mosques are providing important links between Muslim individuals and families and other structures of Australian society. Mosques and Islamic societies have helped to interpret Australian events and policies to Australian Muslims and to interpret Islamic events and policies occurring both here and overseas to departments and agencies of Australian governments. The role of the mosques in interpreting the events surrounding the Gulf War to both Australian Muslims and to the Australian Government is a case in point.

Several implications arise from the fact that Islam in Australia is represented by relatively recently arrived immigrant communities. While most of the Muslims now in Australia are of the Sunni branch of Islam, there is no one Muslim community. Communities have emerged in those places where large enough concentrations

of people from Islamic backgrounds have settled. These communities have grown up around different languages, different national backgrounds and different communities of origin. This is not something unique to Muslims; similar patterns can be seen among other immigrant groups. Thus there is great diversity within Islam, including many of the national and theological variations of worldwide Islam. This provides a rich ground for the growth of an indigenous Australian expression of Islam. While being part of worldwide Islam, Australian Muslims are cooperating to construct an expression of Islam which is grounded in Australia. According to Ali Roude, many mosques include both Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims who work together to shape programs and policies for the local situation.

In order to interpret what has been discovered about the role of Islam in settlement it is appropriate to discuss the larger social context within which this process is taking place and which is being influenced by the new presence of Islam in Australia. While Australia is described as a pluralistic, multicultural society, the processes of negotiation involved in accommodating Islam within Australia's religious mosaic provide an opportunity to see how well multiculturalism is working in Australia...

Conflict between the claims and needs of various religious groups has been a feature of Australian history from the start (Hogan 1987; Breward 1993). Under an umbrella of common law and British Protestant tradition, Australia has developed notions of fair play, equal worth of human dignity and live and let live. Within this framework many different cultural, national, religious and lifestyle groups have and are negotiating their way in this society. This is not done with a complete lack of conflict even where there is the best will. In the process of

negotiating a proper place and role within Australian society, both the larger society and the particular religious, cultural or lifestyle group will grow and change. This fluid process of inter-group negotiation within a particular national structure is the prevalent mode of multicultural pluralism in western industrial societies.

Australia has made major strides toward this multicultural ideal. Not only are State governments and the Federal Government committed to this ideal, but most religious and other groups, including Islamic organisations, work towards it. There are laws against harassment and discrimination on various bases, although no constitutionally enshrined 'bill of rights'. There is some anti-vilification legislation and many organisations, institutions and government departments have issued directives against prejudice, discrimination and harassment. That there is more to be learned and more progress to be made is unquestioned, but equally unquestioned is the fact that much progress has already been made.

Learning to be multicultural has many advantages for Australia. No longer is it adequate to be competently British or American. Australia is in Asia. Australia's nearest neighbour, Indonesia, is the largest Muslim country in the world. Overseas trade requires intercultural sensitivity, including religious awareness and sensitivity. Secularity, that is the denial that religion is important, is not an adequate response in an environment both local and international in which religion is important. This approach has for too long characterised the responses of Federal Government bureaucrats, legislators and policy-makers. Mere even-handedness, while better than uneven-handedness, lacks the particular sensitivity and understanding required to work successfully with the different societies with which Australia is trying to develop mutually beneficial and profitable relations. A knowledge of and respect for a variety of religious orientations, beliefs and practices is essential, not simply an aesthetic nicety.

Australian multiculturalism and Islam

When discussing the future of Islam in multicultural Australia some key facts need to be kept in mind. First, Australia is a Christian country. This claim surprises many, especially those public servants and academics who prefer to think of Australia as secular. Australia is not secular. Each census reveals that the vast majority of Australians identify with some Christian group (Bouma 1993a). Moreover, the majority of those who say they have no religion come from Christian backgrounds (Bouma 1993a; Bouma & Mason 1994). In terms of numbers, general cultural ethos and history since European settlement, Australia is a Christian country. This essential starting point is avoided only at the cost of a quite unrealistic image of the context dominated by already established religious groups within which newcomers compete to gain acceptance and recognition. Australia is not a secular country; it is not a level playing field for religious groups. More recently arrived groups are disadvantaged. There is nothing new about this situation in Australia (Breward 1993, chs 3, 4 & 9). Second, in this Christian context non-Christian religious groups are very small in contrast to the dominant Christian groups. They can hardly be seen to pose a threat to so highly entrenched and well represented a dominant cultural majority, although these groups sometimes react as though they are threatened.

Not only is Australia a Christian country, it is an Anglican and Catholic country. Taken together Catholics and Anglicans have composed over half the population of Australia from the middle of last century. The fact that Anglicans and Catholics share in dominating Australian society has only been the case since the Second World War, as Catholic percentages have gradually increased and Anglican decreased to the point where there are now more Catholics than Anglicans. Whether hegemony will pass from Anglicans to Catholics or be shared by them both is yet to be seen. Some of the republican debate is about this issue. The

rest of the Christian groups are much smaller by comparison. In the 1991 Census 27 per cent of the population responded that they were Catholic and 24 per cent that they were Anglican. The next largest Christian group was the Uniting Church (8 per cent) followed by the Presbyterian and Reformed (4.3 per cent), the Orthodox (2.8 per cent), the Baptists (1.7 per cent) and Lutherans (1.5 per cent). No other Christian group attracted more than 1 per cent. The dominance of Anglicans and Catholics is very clear. Moreover, Australian institutions, policies, law and education were formed in a framework of mainstream Protestantism which still informs their basic ethos.

After the Anglicans and Catholics all other religious groups are very small indeed, none attracting more than a third as many as these groups. In this sense Australian multiculturalism takes place in the context of, or under the cultural hegemony of, Anglicans and Catholics. Historically, Anglicans have been stronger in numbers and cultural legitimacy, but that is no longer the case. The dominant form of Catholicism in Australia is Irish, hence strengthening the dominance of Anglo-Celtic religious culture in Australia.

Australian multiculturalism occurs in the context of a very strong, historically prominent Anglo-Celtic Christian religious community, and several implications arise from this fundamental fact. First, the dominant groups can afford to be welcoming to other groups. Religious plurality in the form of multiculturalism offers no significant threat to their entrenched position. Adding another small group makes no real difference in an already culturally plural situation. It merely increases the variety found among a very small percentage of the population, increasing the rich diversity of Australia's religious mosaic. The addition of another small group only means that another group joins those small groups who divide up what little is left of various resources, from time on the ABC to rights to provide chaplains to prisons, hospitals or the military. These are among the resources which are firmly in the control of established Christian groups and

from which most minority religious groups are equally left out.

Second, this Anglican and Catholic dominance sets the context in which policies of multiculturalism are affirmed and applied in Australia. It sets the context within which each minority religious, cultural or lifestyle community, including Islam, negotiates its place and role in Australian society. While some immigrant groups or minority cultural or lifestyle groups may have preferred a different context, perhaps one in which their views were more dominant, the fact remains that in Australia they must negotiate their way in a social context dominated by particular forms of Christianity. However, some aspects of this dominant culture can be and have been appealed to support pluralistic multiculturalism and can be used by minority groups in the negotiating process.

Third, as a result of this clear dominance by two groups, issues of multiculturalism faced by more recently arrived groups will centre on how each is to relate to the core of Australian culture. How is each to maintain essential differences in belief and practice while maintaining some relevance to the core? While each minority group in the process of negotiating a place brings some distinctive element into the larger society, just trying to relate to the central issues in that society will result in some accommodation to the agendas of the dominant groups. The threat to the minority groups is to be swallowed up or crushed by the dominant groups. It also appears that there is little transference of victories from one minority group to the next. Each group has to battle its way into the arena and each usually shows relatively little concern for the difficulties experienced by other groups in similar positions.

Fourth, it is important to remember the religious composition of Australia when making comparisons with other countries or when examining policies or programs developed in other countries. In the United Kingdom one group, the Church of England, attracts the vast majority of religious identification while

Muslims are estimated to be 1.5 million or about 3 per cent (Anwar 1993). The United Kingdom does not include a 'religion' question in its census and so no accurate assessment of the relative size of various religious groups is possible. In Canada, over seven groups have to be added together to get 50 per cent of the population and Muslims are less than 1 per cent (Bibby 1987). In the United States over twenty groups need to be combined to include 50 per cent of the population and Anglicans (Episcopalians) are wealthy, but very small (less than 2 per cent) and Muslims smaller yet (less than 1 per cent). Each of the above has a much smaller Muslim population than France, which is estimated to have 4 million or close to 10 per cent. Before accepting what is said about minority religions and especially about Muslims in any given context, it is critical to know what the religious mosaic of the society looks like.

The first fact about multiculturalism in Australia is that it is not about relationships between 'equals'. Not all the pieces in this mosaic are of equal size or weight. In this pluralistic context they may be officially of equal worth and that is important, but they do not have equal clout. This inequality in a multicultural society is one of size, position and power but not one of moral superiority. Historically, Anglicans rejoiced in a position of self-proclaimed moral superiority, British superiority. That is dead, although not all Anglicans are aware of it.

Islam in multicultural Australia

Multicultural Australia will be challenged, strengthened and extended by the inclusion of Muslim communities. It has been and will be greatly enriched as the particular skills, orientations, knowledge and art of this community are increasingly felt. This process which is already well under way will not be an easy one for either the Islamic communities or the larger society. Both have new things to learn, adjustments to make, and new tolerances and appreciations to develop. No person or group finds change easy, but both Australian society and many of the religious groups within

it, including Muslims, have shown a great willingness to learn and find creative ways to go forward.

Multiculturalism is not new to Islam. There have been a variety of places, such as Spain, Palestine and India, in which Islam has been in a multicultural, pluralistic position for long periods of time. Cultural pluralism was the basic social condition of the Ottoman Empire. However, in most places in the world much of Islam has for most of its history enjoyed the dominant cultural and social position. Islam is now in the process of developing ways of operating as a significant minority within a number of western pluralistic societies in several nations, including Germany, France, England, Canada and Australia, where it now finds itself as a result of the patterns of post-Second World War immigration.

However, multiculturalism in the sense of an assumed equality among various cultures is relatively new to Islam, just as it is to most other religious groups (Bouma 1992b). Forty-three per cent of Muslim immigrants to Australia have come from countries in which Islam is the major religion. Those who have come from countries in which they were minorities have often been seeking refuge from religious and political persecution. (I am indebted to Riaz Hassan for directing my attention to these proportions.) This does not mean that Muslims will not be able to develop a relationship of one among a plurality of equal religious groups. Indeed, it may be more of a challenge to some Christian groups. This does mean that such a relationship with the larger society will be a new thing to many Muslim immigrants to Australia. Indeed some of the problems voiced by interviewees about their reactions to Australian culture centre on precisely this issue. ...data (on arrival experiences, difficulties and benefits)... indicate that after homesickness, Australian culture was the most frequently cited source of difficulties.

Some people are concerned that the task of finding an appropriate multicultural way of operating as Muslims in Australia will be made

difficult by the fact that some voices within Islam view it as the only true religion. The question can be put this way, 'How can the only true religion tolerate the diversity of those who differ or disagree?' This is, of course, also a problem for other religious groups already established in Australia, particularly Christian fundamentalists. Sheikh Fehmi El-Imam provides a clarifying answer: 'All Muslims believe that Islam is the only true religion, but at the same time they are given the right to live with non-Muslims, without prejudice, as long as they are allowed to carry out their religious duties and performances. As long as no one disturbs them, confronts them or attacks them, Muslims are duty bound by Islamic law to live in peace with others'. This pluralist, multicultural position is taken by many within Islam and is expressed by many, though not all, in other religious groups.

Promoting open understanding between groups, each of whom see themselves as having the only answer to the ultimate questions of human life and the only correct ethical view is, and has been, a major challenge to community relations as well as local and national politics in much of Australia's history (Hogan 1987; Breward 1993). It is not a problem that has been brought about by the inclusion of Muslims, since Australia was well on its way to being ethically plural before Muslims arrived in numbers. This is a challenge to all of Australia and Muslims will be involved in shaping the answers.

What kind of relationship will the Muslim communities develop with the larger society? The evidence is clear. Muslims have formed significant communities in Australian cities. Muslims are involved in all sections of the work force and institutions of education. Muslims have established a wide range of organisations and associations including mosques, through which they relate to the issues facing the larger society of which they have become a part. These organisations and institutions also provide a context within which a genuinely Australian expression of Islam is developing. Muslim communities are very much in interaction with the larger society and are fostering their own

uniqueness within it.

How fares Australian multiculturalism?

Each new national, cultural, religious, or lifestyle group stretches the fabric of multiculturalism and adds to the diversity of a culture. Each new group is usually subject for a while to harassment, to legal limitation or to scrutiny by those who are suspicious of its activities. Minority Christian groups are often called sects, or cults, and wild claims are made about the practices they engage in (see Richardson 1988, 1991). It is useful to remember that early Christians were accused of cannibalism, because their description of the Eucharist involved 'eating the body of Christ'. Jehovah's Witnesses are at times forced to do things they consider ethically and morally reprehensible, for example consent to, or submit to, blood transfusions. What are some of the challenges and opportunities Islam brings to Australia?

How will Australia cope with another set of holy days? Probably as badly as it has with the special days of other religious minorities whose calendars do not agree with the western Christian calendar. Jews do not have legal recognition for their holy days. University, bank, and governmental calendars do not take them into account. Seventh Day Adventists can take advantage of Saturday, but the Orthodox are not given recognition for their celebration of Easter or Christmas. I do not expect that Muslims will get Friday off. It is very doubtful that the full range of non-Christian and Christian holy days will be recognised as public holidays. However, recent changes in the economy, labour market and industrial relations scene mean that work is becoming more flexibly organised over all the days of the year with various types of leave and rostering. This, at least for some, will make it more possible to find time for religious practice.

Some organisations are beginning to make provision for the daily prayer requirements of Muslims. For example, over ten years ago the religious centre at Monash University was 're-

plumbed' in order to facilitate pre-prayer ablutions. Some university seminars are scheduled so as not to clash with prayer times. The Waverley Council is investigating giving non-Christian staff unpaid leave to fulfil religious obligations. Waverley is the eleventh most multicultural council in New South Wales and voted by 11 to 1 in favour of this action (*The Arab World*, Friday 24 September 1993). Will more employers recognise the religious needs of some of their workers to have a few minutes at certain times of the day in order to pray? Gradually more jurisdictions in Australia include religion among their grounds for complaints about discrimination. Already most include race discrimination. By including community and employer education as part of the process of handling complaints, it is possible to negotiate employer accommodation of religious practice, except where it would cause employers unjustifiable hardship. The law is gradually changing here, as are employer practices (I am indebted to Dr J. Sheen of the New South Wales Anti-discrimination Board for this information).

As Muslim communities grow and seek to build mosques or to use buildings for worship, educational and social activities, they experience opposition from some quarters. Humphrey has documented some of these conflicts (1988b, 1989a, 1989b), as has the Victorian Office of Ethnic Affairs (1992). Some communities seem reluctant to have mosques built in them. Would they make similar objections to an Anglican or Orthodox church building? The answer is, in general, yes, although in approving the spire for a Coptic church one councillor is reputed to have commented, 'At least it is not a mosque'. Moreover, in some areas, development applications from non-Christian religious groups have encountered more antagonism than comparable applications from mainstream groups (private communication from Dr J. Sheen, who cites the case of Campbelltown, New South Wales). There have also been cases brought against long-established Christian churches to stop or limit bell ringing or broadcasting music. In general, the proximity of religious organisations is not seen to enhance

property values and they are seen to produce traffic and parking problems.

One area of potential clash between Muslim communities and some aspects of the larger society is in the area of family relationships and gender roles. In many Islamic societies family matters are considered the domain of religion and disputes are settled by seeking the advice of the *imam* or other mosque-based advice in the first instance. Only as a matter of last recourse do these issues enter the domain of the state and its legal system. Humphrey has done a great deal of work on these critical issues (1981, 1982, 1984a, 1984b, 1989a). Other groups may have things to learn from certain Islamic practices in the area of family and marriage. Mosques offer considerable support to families, a well-developed expertise at negotiating pre-nuptial contracts (a practice only now beginning to be recognised in Australian family law), and provide strong cultural legitimations for family life.

Gender relations have been a point upon which Muslims have received some criticism from some sections of Australian society. Some non-Muslims consider the demands of Islamic law with respect to the position, legal status, and rights of women to be in conflict with the rights legally accorded women in Australia. How is Islam to deal with the perception that some in the larger community hold of Muslim women? In part those elements should be called on to lay aside their own prejudices about what it means to be fully and freely female and listen to what Muslim women have to say about what being fully and freely female means to them. Ultimately, only Muslim women can answer this question. In a multicultural pluralistic society there is likely to be a plurality of views of what it means to be female, as well as a diversity of views on other subjects. Those who judge others from the outside are engaging in a form of cultural superiority which is not supposed to be a characteristic of the society they often advocate. Multicultural plurality cuts several ways. There is a wide plurality of family ideologies and of gender ideologies in Australia. Some forms of ideological feminism threaten

the freedoms Australian pluralism affords as much as do some forms of Christian fundamentalism. In multicultural Australia there are more ways than one of being an authentic woman.

Islamic dress presents a challenge to some people in Australia. What happens when the dress code of a Muslim community is at variance with that of a State school? The existing race discrimination laws of most Australian States already apply to cases like this, as it could be argued that the *hijab* is a characteristic generally appertaining to Muslim women, thus it would be discriminatory to ask them to remove it. The enforcement of school uniform policy inflexibly applied to all pupils could be indirectly racially discriminatory if it had an adverse impact on most Muslim girls and was unreasonable in all the circumstances.

Finally, a multicultural society like Australia possesses a great deal of expertise which may be useful to corporations and government agencies that deal with nations represented in Australia. Australian Muslims may be able to help those who are involved in shaping Australia's trading and diplomatic relations with Islamic countries and corporations in Asia as they have in the Middle East. Australian Muslims have many contacts in the Islamic nations of the world. A wise multicultural society makes use of its cultural diversity to provide advice and to interpret what may at first be confusing to those unfamiliar with the ways and customs of other societies.

With these challenges come new opportunities. Muslims bring to Australia long experience with some different forms of social contract in such areas as pre-nuptial agreements, Islamic banking and other agreements. These may provide models for other Australians. Islam will provide a new spiritual outlook for Australians. It will also provide an opportunity for others to review their own religious commitment and understanding. Not only have some Muslims learned about their faith as a result of inter-faith contact, some non-Muslim Australians may be prompted to learn new ways to express their

faith through such contacts. A new appreciation of the importance of religion in society may become clearer to Australians as a result of the presence of Muslims and Islamic organisations. Multiculturalism and religious pluralism do not equate to secularism, but rather to a society making provision for the expression and involvement of several religious faiths and a diversity of religious belief and practice.

In these and other ways Muslim communities will experience patterns of growth and interaction with the larger society which are very like those experienced by other minority religious groups. As Muslim immigrants become increasingly settled in Australian society, the issues of settlement will turn to those related to the ways in which Australian society changes as it accommodates Muslims, Islamic culture and practices and Islamic holy days and seasons. Perhaps more than any other group, the Muslims are showing that settlement in a multicultural society is two-way.