

WE ARE AUSTRALIAN – WITH OR WITHOUT RELIGION – AN  
EXPLORATION OF OUR AUSTRALIAN VALUES

The topic of this symposium acknowledges that we are all Australian, regardless of religion. The topic does require us to explore Australian values past and present. I intend also to trace the history of Muslims in Australia.

Firstly, I will address Australian and Islamic values and laws. This is very complex because Australian values and laws evolve and change over time. In the early 1950's, government policy dictated that a married woman was forbidden to work. Women were obliged to resign and adopt home duties on their wedding day.(1) This has never been the case in Islam. Muslim women have never been denied the right to work, whether married or unmarried under Islamic law.

Also, the White Australia Policy was formulated to keep Australia as English and white as possible.(2) Muslims have always regarded the children of Adam as equal - it is only piety and good deeds that separate us.

Australian laws and values in 2006 are quite different to the 1950's. But are Australian laws and values really being practiced by the masses? Gambling, alcohol and drug abuse have destroyed many family units. Racism has been ALLOWED to creep back into Australian society. Every night on the six o'clock news we hear horrible stories of murder, theft, rape, road rage and drunken brawls. Mostly, these are committed by non-Muslims. And yet Muslims are being asked to uphold Australian values and laws or leave the country.(3)

As well, attitudes to each other change over time. I am pleased to say that last year the government entered into dialogue with a Muslim reference group. As Muslims, we are bound by the Qur'an to speak with wisdom and graciousness (S.16:A.125). So Muslims entered into these talks, in good faith, hoping that we may go from the darkness of ignorance, to the light of knowledge, so that we may live peacefully with respect and charity between faiths. Then, Muslims were very surprised and dismayed when Mr. Peter

Costello MP said, "If a person wants to live under Islamic law or *Shari'ah* then they should leave".(4)

So, I thought it appropriate to examine the issue of Islamic law and its compatibility, within the Australian context. Australia has a wonderful philosophy generally of equity and justice. It is not commonly known among Australians that Islam follows this same philosophy.

To explain this, Islamic law has been interpreted from the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* (practice of the Prophet Muhammad) by jurists. To illustrate the complexities of Islamic law, Kecia Ali, PhD, a senior research analyst on Islamic law concerning women,(5) prefers to specify in which century the text was written and whether the view is a majority view or a minority one held by jurists.(6) This distinction is interesting because, for example, the Muslims who are causing unrest and terror in our lovely world, follow the writings of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal from the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD, Ibn Taymiyya from the 14<sup>th</sup> century AD, Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab from the 18<sup>th</sup> century AD and Sayyid Qutb from the 20<sup>th</sup> century AD. These writings are of a minority view, and each writer has taken from the one before.

For Muslims, the most important message in the *Qur'an* is to believe in God and do good deeds. These go hand in hand. Then, the unquestionable basic doctrines of Islamic law are:

1. *al-Shura* meaning mutual consultation
2. *al-Musawat* meaning equality
3. *al-Hurriyya* meaning freedom
4. *al-'adl* meaning justice (7)

Muslims are also bound by the first source of Islamic law the *Qur'an*, to "enjoin the right and forbid the wrong" (S.22: A.41).

Muslims also use *ijma'* meaning consensus of opinion, *ijtihad* meaning independent reasoning, *Qiyas* meaning

analogy and other means to arrive at what is good and just according to circumstances of time and place. These are familiar to Muslims as democracy is to the Christian West. It is worth reflecting on the idea that the Islamic process of consultation and consensus leads to a similar result as the Western process of democracy.

Like Australian law, Islamic law does not impose faith or religion. Islamic law is a code of conduct on external issues. Al-Ghazali, who lived 500 years after the *hijrah*, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD, explained that the "objective of *Shari'ah* is to promote the welfare of the people which lies in safe-guarding their faith, their life, their intellect, their prosterity and their property" ... what safeguards and serves public interest. The prime objective of *Shari'ah* is to relieve hardship.(8)

Secondly, I will address the history of Muslims in Australia. Many do not know that Muslims have enjoyed a very long history of living in Australia. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD Arab explorers mapped Cape York Peninsular, the Gulf of Carpentaria and Arnhem Land. Islam was brought to S. E. Asia by Arab traders and Sufi's and was well established by 1350 AD.(9) Well before the Europeans.

Interestingly, Northern Australia was in the realm of the Islamic Macassan Kingdom. The Muslim Malays would sail down from Macassar to the Northern Territory to trade, some went on 'walk about' with the Aborigines and some married Aboriginal women and trade and life carried on peacefully. Aboriginal culture was not disrupted by contact with Muslims.(10) When white man arrived their peaceful existence came to an end. By 1907 Macassan trade had ceased.(11)

The next Muslims arrived on the first fleets.(12) 18<sup>th</sup> century Australia is scattered with Muslim names arriving on the fleets. By the 1800's Muslims from Afghanistan and India were bringing their camels and were instrumental in opening up inland Australia. The first Mosque built by the cameleers was in Broken Hill, western N.S.W. Cameleers built the Adelaide Mosque in 1890. Early statistics show that in 1898 in Coolgardie (near Kalgoorlie) in W.A. there were five Mosques with sitting space for 300.(13) The

first Mosque in Brisbane was built in 1910. Muslims were continually being killed because of racial and religious hatred. I should say here, that Christians and Jews, Churches and Synagogues are protected under Islamic Law in an Islamic State.

I am saddened to say that the West knows very little about Islam and then it's mainly misconceptions. We all learn about the Egyptian, Greek and Roman civilizations but not the Islamic civilization.

It is understandable that so many misconceptions abound because there is not one ideal Islamic community or state in the world today.(14) If we look at history we realize that civilizations have their turn at being the most advanced. During Christian Europe's Dark Ages, the Islamic world was the jewel in the crown, now the West is in its zenith, so I humbly ask that you give us time to reach enlightenment again. Countries in which Muslims live are at their lowest ebb because of brutal western colonization, the divide and rule policy and a lack of proper Islamic education denied by their colonial masters allowing literalist and unphilosophical interpretations to flourish.(15)

Even so, in Australia, there is an abundance of male and female Muslim lawyers, doctors, academics, intellectuals and business people etc. who contribute to Australian society. Muslims are law abiding citizens who love Australia. We work hard, we love nice houses like anyone else, we endeavour to educate our children to the highest level possible, on Saturday mornings we take our kids to sporting activities, enjoy a BBQ and many have swimming pools in their back yard. The only outward difference is in our modest dress.

Janette Hashemi  
March, 2006

END NOTES

(1) One of Australia's most brilliant physicists/ radio astronomers, Ruby Payne-Scott d. 1981, kept her marriage secret for six years but when her employer the CSIRO discovered she was married she immediately lost her job.

(2) In August 2005 Brenden Nelson MP called on Islamic Schools to teach Australian values exemplified by 'Simpson and his Donkey'. In January 2006 Philip Ruddock MP stood in Lakemba Mosque, Sydney and addressed the Muslims saying "you have a responsibility to uphold the laws of this country". In February 2006 Peter Costello MP said Muslims must follow Australian laws and values or get out, and if Muslims want to follow *Shari'ah* or Islamic law then they should leave. John Howard PM agreed.

(3) The White Australia Policy's origins were against the Chinese in the 1850's. Then against South Sea Islands of the Pacific people. In 1919 PM Hughes hailed it as the "greatest thing we have achieved". This policy was finally removed by the Whitlam labor government in 1973.

(4) Peter Costello MP probably means to say *fiqh* meaning Islamic jurisprudence (law). The jurists interpret God's law - *Shari'ah* - to arrive at - *fiqh* - jurisprudence.

(5) Kecia Ali, PhD, was a Research Associate in the Women's Studies in Religion Program at Harvard Divinity School during 2003 to 2004. She is currently a Mellon post-doctorial fellow in Islamic Studies at Brandeis University, USA.

(6) Kecia Ali, *Progressive Muslims and Islamic Jurisprudence*, in *Progressive Muslims*, ed. Omid Safi, (One World, Oxford, 2003) p.166.

(7) Ahmad S. Moussalli, *Islamic Democracy and Pluralism*, in *Progressive Muslims*, ed. Omid Safi, (One World, Oxford, 2003) p.287

(8) Muhammad Umar Chapra, *Objectives of the Islamic Economic Order*, in *Islam - its Meaning and Message*, ed. Khurshid Ahmad, (The Islamic Foundation, London, 1980) P.176.

(9) Bilal Cleland, *The Muslims in Australia - a brief History*, (Islamic Council of Victoria, 2002) p.4. Also, the little known Chinese Muslims from the Ming Dynasty became extensive navigators and

explorers in the early 1400's reaching Timor and Darwin p.4.

(10) Bilal Cleland p.9

(11) Bilal Cleland p.8. Also, it is little known that the Sultanate of Gowa, in southern Sulawesi, the old Macassan Kingdom, included the coast of northern Australia within its realm. Arnhem Land Aborigines performed an opera about the historical links between the Yolnu people and Macassar at the foundation day anniversary of the city of Gowa in 1997.

(12) Bilal Cleland found his ancestors came to Australia on the first and third fleets. His ancestors neighbour on the Norfolk Island Settlement in 1796 was a Muslim.

(13) Bilal Cleland p.23

(14) The closest ideal examples may be the United Arab Emirates and Malaysia, which are governed largely following Islamic principles of protecting minority religions and allowing them to practice their religion and justice and equity.

(15) Referring to Wahhabi/Salafi doctrines.

Suggested reading:

The Qur'an translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali or  
Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall or  
Muhammad Asad

Jamila Hussain, *Islam - Its law and society*, The Federation Press, Sydney, 2004.

*Islam - Its meaning and message* edited by Khurshid Ahmad, The Islamic Foundation, London, 1980.

Also, writings from Khaled Abou El Fadl

<http://www.scholarofthehouse.org>,

Tariq Ramadan <http://www.tariqramadan.com>, and

Karen Armstrong whose books can be purchased at ABC Bookstores.

I would like to leave you with Sufi sayings from Hadith qudsi:

*I was a hidden treasure, and I wished to be known, so I created the world.*

*My Heaven cannot contain Me, nor can My earth, but the heart of My believing servant can contain Me.*

