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Debunking Myths about Muslims in Australia

Since the events of September 11, 2001, Bali in October 2002 and London in 2005, the religion of Islam has consistently been associated with terrorism. It is a dangerous oversimplification to confuse people of the Muslim faith with terrorism.

Words like *jihad*, names like Osama bin Laden and organisations such as Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiah (JI) have come to overshadow what is actually a religion of many perspectives, whose teachings embrace peace, human rights and tolerance.

Here, we challenge some of the common misconceptions about Muslim Australians and Islam.

Myth 1: Muslims are a security threat.

FACT: Terrorism has been with us in many forms for many years. In 1995 the Okalahoma city bombing killed 168 people and injured many more. This attack was not conducted by a Muslim, but by Timothy McVeigh, a Christian Anglo-American man, disgruntled at his own government's actions. Organisations such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Protestant militant groups in Northern Ireland show that terrorism is not exclusive to Islam but has been used by many groups who feel themselves to be oppressed. These groups are not the product of religious doctrine but use religion as a defence in their struggles. Terrorist organisations are able to recruit those who are victims themselves of oppression, inequality and exploitation.

Following the London bombing the Islamic Council of New South Wales (ICNSW) and the Imams of New South Wales released a joint statement which includes the following points:

Many individual Muslims and their families continue to experience marginalisation and suspicion within their own society as a result of events and declarations beyond their control: as a result of acts of cowardice by others to which they themselves remain utterly opposed...Muslim religious and community leaders were among the first to express condemnation following the recent London attacks...we express again our deepest and sincere sorrow and sympathy for all the families and friends of the victims...we firmly hold the view that these killings and atrocities have absolutely no sanction in Islam, nor is there any justification in our noble religion for taking innocent life...No Australian should ever fear our local Muslim community, which remains today an integral part of our shared Australian society.

Myth Two: Muslims are extremists and preach violence

FACT: This is untrue. *Jihad* is an often misunderstood term. It does not mean "holy war" as believed by some, but refers to "any action by which one makes sincere and conscious effort for a collective benefit" according to Afroz Ali from the al-Ghazzali Centre for Islamic Sciences. In the teachings of the *Qur'an*, *Jihad* is referred to more directly in other aspects of human existence which include the striving "of parents as nurturer of their off-



springs", "against selfish desires", and "to learn and spread beneficial knowledge". The thrust of the teachings are "in complete contrast to the claims of hatred, terrorism and perpetual war" (Afroz Ali, "Jihad in the Australian Context" [2005] see United Muslim Women's Association website, www.mwa.org.au).

Whether the *Qur'an* or the *Bible*, quoting literally from any sacred text is misleading, since passages can be chosen selectively and taken out of context. Interpretations of the *Qur'an* from different factions of Islam, as well as the media response in recent years, have shaped the image that all Muslims are fundamentalists. In fact, the vast majority of Muslims are politically moderate or conservative, rather than radical or fundamental, focusing on family and community. They condemn a fundamentalist interpretation of the *Qur'an* just like many Christians reject a fundamentalist reading of the *Bible*.

Myth Three: Muslims don't integrate into Australian society

FACT: The argument for lack of integration into Australian society is not a new one. It is one that has been raised for many migrant groups including Irish Catholics. The 'White Australia' and assimilation policies have been progressively dismantled since the 1960s as Australia recognised that its immigration program and policy of diversity had produced a vibrant society. The reality of multiculturalism is not a threat to our national identity, but in fact a great asset in terms of cultural diversity, international ties and modern social and economic creativity, where opportunities have nurtured a modern dynamic society.

Multiculturalism affects the dominant culture slowly and marginally, mainly through such cultural expressions as food. It is immigrant culture which is eroded more. Second generation migrants may still 'look' different and be proud of their cultural heritage but they 'sound' Aussie and proudly identify themselves as Australian. Indeed, American (US) culture is probably a greater threat to Australian national identity because of its domination of global media.

Australian Muslims come from many countries in the world such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Lebanon, Bangladesh, and many countries in the Middle East and Africa. The argument that Muslim Australians fail to integrate is particularly ironic since it was Afghan migrants who played a vital role in developing Australia's infrastructure in the interior in the 19th century, including the building of our railroad network and some major hospitals. The 'Ghan' train was named in homage to the exploits of the Afghan cameleers. The Snowy River Mountain Scheme also saw an influx of migrants, many of whom were Muslim, who helped build one of the most complex water and electricity utilities in the world.

Muslims from all over the world have a long history of making significant contributions to Australian society, indeed to Western civilization, particularly in the fields of science, mathematics and medicine.

Myth Four: Islam does not respect human rights especially with regard to the treatment of women.

FACT: Many Islamic scholars argue that it was Islam that 1400 years ago liberated women, bestowing rights such as the right to own property, when women elsewhere were still seen as chattels with no rights of their own. Like all religions, interpretations are diverse with great difference for example between Turkey and Saudi Arabia. There have been several prominent female Presidents of Muslim countries such as Megawati Sukarnoputri in Indonesia and Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan.

One of the most culturally visible signs of Australian Muslims is the *hijab*, or the headscarf worn by many Muslim women. Such attire has repeatedly come under fire as being an infringement on women's rights and oppressive to women.

One of the main interpretations of the *Qur'an's* guidance on dress is modesty for both men and women. Many Muslim women wear the *hijab* by choice and in accordance with their beliefs and customs. The United Muslim Women's Association refers to wearing the hijab as a matter of personal preference, an affirmation of their liberty and not a sign of subjugation. Many younger Muslim women are proud to wear the *hijab* as a testimony to their faith.

Muslim women wear the *hijab* for modesty, for respect and to fulfil their way of life, Islam. The *hijab* allows women to be judged on their intellect rather than their appearance...The *hijab* also limits the way men treat women as 'sex objects' and allows them to be treated as equals (*special feature in www.reflections.org.au*).

Women in the west are also subject to many pressures to conform to body images determined by the fashion and advertising industries.

Many nations have a poor record of human rights and some of these have a majority Muslim population. Significantly, many Muslim Australian women also condemn the mistreatment of women in Islamic countries such as Iran, Nigeria or Saudi Arabia, arguing that discrimination of women is not part of the teachings of the *Qur'an*. Human Rights is seriously

breached in many western countries, the latest being Australia in its mistreatment of refugees. This is evidence that the failure to uphold fundamental human rights is a global problem, not a uniquely Muslim one.

Myth Five: Islam is opposed to the Western world and modernity

FACT: Islam is not opposed to the western world and modernity. Many prominent Muslims model a progressive modern Islam. World champion boxer Muhammad Ali, Hakeem Abdul Olajuwon, champion basketball player, Malaysian academic Chandra Muzaffar, US academic Dr Zakir Naik and American rapper Tupac Shakoor are but a few.

Malaysian academic Chandra Muzaffar argues that it is the reformist parties in Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia that have the most support among the masses. These parties are associated with progress, development and reformist ideas. Despite the control and authority that has been imposed by some narrow minded elements of Islam, the Islam of the masses is based upon a more universal approach where women and minorities are regarded as equal (*Muzaffar, http://pbs.org.frontline*).

The challenge for many Muslim communities concern western cultural values such as individualism and the marketable images of popular culture. Consumerism has become the new religion for many in a secular West where the individual is increasingly at the centre of society, as a consumer of goods, in a world that is divided into 'winners' and 'losers', according to the goods we have accumulated and our place on the ladder of "success". In the midst of globalisation many Muslims in western countries like Australia are trying to reassert the "essence of Islam" while also adapting to global change (*Muzaffar, http://pbs.org.frontline*).

Such critical reflection of Australian society and all societies is legitimate and healthy. There will always be differences of view in ideology in the modern world, particularly between individual liberties and the greater good of a community, or between traditions and modernity. Through accepting and respecting cultural, religious and social difference, the opportunity exists for a more cohesive society.

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