

# **Interfaith dialogue in Australia: A brief overview of the contributions of Muslim Australians**

Interfaith dialogue is not a modern phenomenon. All major religious traditions have a history of encounter and engagement, and this is no less true of Islam. From the earliest years of Islam, Muslims have interacted with and sought to engage other religious individuals and communities in a spirit of mutual respect and tolerance.

Indeed, there is a long tradition of engagement between Muslim Australians and others that reflects, at its heart, both Islam's long tradition of interfaith engagement and the pluralistic values shared by all Australians.

## **Interfaith dialogue in Islam**

Interfaith dialogue refers to the exchange of 'ideas, thoughts and information between people from different religious backgrounds', to use the words of Dr. S. Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana. It attempts to explore commonalities and differences between traditions in a spirit of understanding, without judgement. In doing so it contributes to establishing tolerant and respectful relationships between members of different religious communities.

From the Prophetic period, Muslims have sought to engage other religious individuals and communities in this manner. The Quran explicitly exhorts Muslims not to dispute with the 'People of the Book' (Christians, Jews and others) except in 'a way that is best' (Q. 29:46) and it encourages them to 'invite all to the Way of your Lord with wisdom and kind advice' (Q 16:125). The Constitution of Medina, the document which establishes the normative foundations of the Prophet's community in Medina, also safeguards the religious freedom of the Jewish communities living there, allaying any fear that he would require religious minorities to convert to the religion of the majority.[1] In later Islamic periods these values are still evident. The encounter between Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi (d. 785 CE) and the Christian Patriarch Timothy I in 782 CE at the caliphal court in Baghdad is one well cited example of interfaith dialogue. The dialogue, as reported, shows the two religious and political figures wrestling intellectually with the theological divergence between their two traditions, not downplaying the differences but acknowledging them in a spirit of

engagement and respect. Other historical sources record discussions between Muslims and Buddhists in places such as Iran and along the Silk Road; inter-civilisational interactions in medieval Spain between Muslims, Christians and Jews; and other encounters between Muslims and other faith or cultural traditions in Cairo, Jerusalem, Baghdad and Delhi. Encounter, for the purpose of dialogue and understanding, has a long history in Islamic tradition.

## **Interfaith engagement in the early years of Australian history**

Interfaith engagement between Muslims and religious ‘others’ has taken place in Australia since the earliest years Muslims ventured to Australian shores. Historical records reveal that relationships existed between the Macassan Muslim fishermen who travelled to Australia from Indonesia and the Yolngu indigenous peoples in north-eastern Arnhem land from the 1700s. While elements of this dialogue were no doubt cultural in nature, it appears there were religious elements to the conversations as well, as Islamic influences from Macassar have been found in indigenous rituals and ceremonies in northern Australia. Indeed, scholars of intercultural studies Desmond Cahill and Dr Peta Stephenson describe this interfaith engagement as the very first ‘interfaith contact in Australia’. Although we have little detail of the conversations that took place, they appear to have been constructive, with ‘mutual respect offered from both sides’.

In the century to come, the informal nature of interfaith engagement between Muslims in Australia and the broader non-Muslim population continued. Dialogue between many of the Afghan cameleers, who arrived in Australia in the 1800s to facilitate exploration of the outback, and other Australians was hampered by the lack of common language. Yet, those who had English language skills ‘helped pave the way for future ‘real’ dialogue’. At the same time, interreligious marriage between Muslims and the local population helped facilitate similar ‘micro level dialogue’ (dialogue between individuals) and conversations. The establishment of mosques in many capital cities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century also allowed Australians greater access to Islam. As institutions central to Islamic life, these places of worship opened their doors to the ‘curious and interested, allowing non-Muslims access to ‘education and information about Islam’, facilitating ‘meso’ or community-based interactions.

Converts to Islam were another source of early interfaith engagement. David

Sneddon, for instance, describes the influence of Winifred Stegar, perhaps the first Australian woman to perform the ritual hajj, an account of which was written up by the *Adelaide Review* in 1927. Her writings on Islam provide a 'unique perspective' on early Islam in Australia and further evidence of interfaith engagement between Muslims and the broader Australian population at this time. In this early period there were very few Muslim organisations dedicated to interfaith engagement; it tended to happen more informally and organically—typically at the micro and meso levels (using Sneddon's typology).

## **Towards formal interfaith engagement**

The growing involvement of Muslims in formal interfaith encounters can be observed in Australia from the 1960s, with engagements particularly focusing on Jewish-Christian relations. In the state of Victoria, interfaith activities were initiated between Jewish, Christian and Muslims at the Jewish Centre in the Melbourne suburb of Toorak, with the aim of building bridges between representatives of the faith communities. In the years to follow, interfaith events took place in various educational institutions, including conversations and lectures at Victorian secondary schools, such as Geelong Grammar and Scotch College. One of these resulted in a conversation between Nuim Khaiyath, a Muslim originally from Indonesia, and an Anglican minister, which resulted in a discussion about the similarities between their traditions. They also took place in university contexts less formally, usually in the guise of cooperation and networking between academics of different faith traditions. At this time, subjects on comparative religion offered by, for example, the University of Melbourne, provided a more formal opportunity to learn about Islam alongside other monotheistic faiths. Evidentially, both Muslim academics and their Jewish and Christian counterparts presented this subject matter with a view to promoting interfaith dialogue. At the same time, international students from Malaya, Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan and India also helped break down barriers among the student cohort by attending barbecues and dances (although avoiding alcohol) and participating in local sports teams. Mosque open-to-the-public days and multi-faith Eid encounters started to take place in Australia during the 1970s, and local interfaith networks with Muslims' involvement started to emerge in the 1980s. One notable example was the Interfaith Network of the City of Greater Dandenong in Melbourne, established under the auspices of the municipality to foster peace and harmony within the local area. It still operates today. Interfaith activity during this period centred around friendship, sharing and practical support.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, however, interfaith activities began to take on a different focus. In the wake of the Iranian Revolution, conflict in Lebanon and Afghanistan and the Gulf War, Muslims felt the need to engage in interfaith activity to counter growing negative perceptions of Islam and stereotypes of Muslims. Often in response to invitations posed by Christian groups, Muslims took part in interfaith activities with a view to exploring the potential for 'common understanding(s)'. But it was the attacks on the US on September 11, 2001, that saw a substantial rise in the number of formal interfaith encounters and dialogues occurring in Australia. As Islam became the 'enemy of the West', interfaith initiatives involving Muslims became more visible and urgent. Motivated in part by the prevailing 'culture of fear', Muslim Australians were quick to initiate activities to reach out to non-Muslims, with the aim of 'challenging stereotypes about Islam, and undermining distrust', distinguishing themselves from terrorists and demonstrating their adherence to peaceful co-existence. Activities aiming to build bridges with the Australian public or with other religious communities proliferated at this time, including mosque open days, participation in interfaith forums, and excursions to other religious communities' places of worship. Indeed, representatives of many Muslim community organisations were forced to take on more visible roles as 'ambassadors' of an Australian Islam that was committed to tolerance and peacebuilding.

The Bali bombings in 2002 and London bombings in 2005 added further momentum to the perceived need for Muslims' involvement in interfaith gatherings. State governments quickly identified interfaith initiatives as a key strategy for countering security risks and promoting social cohesion and Muslims took up the opportunities for involvement. The NSW state government, for instance, initiated a gathering of the leaders of major religious traditions in 2003 for the purpose of condemning terrorism and supporting 'Australia's cultural diversity' (Australian Human Rights Commission 2004: 100). A study by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission records more than 100 projects involving interfaith activity in this era, including the establishment of community relations commissions/councils or community harmony reference groups involving Muslims in most Australian mainland states (Australian Human Rights Commission 2004: 101-102).

Interfaith engagement was also promoted by the federal government as a strategy to combat religious extremism and to promote social harmony and cohesion facilitating a greater emphasis on macro-level (national) initiatives. For instance, the Australian Multicultural Foundation was commissioned in 2002, in partnership with the World Conference on Religion and Peace, RMIT and Monash University, to find out the

extent of interfaith dialogue and cooperation in Australia in the context of an investigation into how religious communities create social capital. Funding for interfaith activity was provided by various federal government departments or through funding schemes such as the National Action Plan to Build Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security (NAP) in 2005, aiming to promote 'understanding and dialogue among Australians'. In the post London-bombing era (2005-2008), more than 50 grants were provided to fund Muslim organisations or projects through this scheme, including the establishment of the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies, a consortium of three universities, based at the University of Melbourne. In 2010 alone, the federal government allocated 2.8 million dollars just to facilitate interfaith activity.

At an institutional level, regular meetings were established between key Islamic organisations and their counterparts in other faith traditions. For instance, formal dialogue was initiated in 2002 (and continues) at a national level between the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, the National Council of Churches (NCC) of Australia and the Executive Council of Australian Jewry. At a state level, the Islamic Council of Victoria meets regularly with the Victorian Council of Churches. At a community level, Muslim organisations focused on interfaith dialogue were established, such as Affinity Intercultural Foundation, which aims to 'meet the needs of the Muslim community in interacting with the greater society.' Along with the New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies, the Sydney Synod of the Uniting Church and other Catholic groups, it organises an annual interfaith conference, bringing together Muslims, Christians and Jews to listen to notable international speakers. The Muslim-run Australian Intercultural Society established the annual federal parliamentary iftar dinner in Canberra in 2003, paving the way for other civil and public institutions and corporations to host meals during the holy month of Ramadan. These activities continue to play an important role in the formal interfaith calendar. Since then, a myriad of interfaith activities has continued, both at grassroots and a more formal institutional level, taking a variety of different forms.

The surge in interfaith initiatives from the 2000s involving Muslims is reflected in the scholarly literature, with various studies examining interfaith encounters, their purposes and outcomes. Avril Anne Keely, for instance, described two dialogues that took place in Western Sydney. These attracted large numbers of attendees (more than 500 individuals); essentially 'ordinary people of the respective communities'. The study reports that both the organisers and the participants noted favourable outcomes from the events, including 'very tangible feelings of good will' between the

two religious communities and agreement that both groups shared common values. The Northern Interfaith and Intercultural Network, a regional interfaith network in Melbourne's northern suburbs, was founded on the dialogical principles of 'listening' and 'valuing 'difference' as much as 'commonality''. Australian scholar Michaelis Michael noted that against the backdrop of security fears of Muslims' 'ghettoization' and the radicalisation of young Muslim men, the network aimed to 'demystify Islamic culture and notional perceptions of a 'Muslim threat' to secular liberal settings'.

## **Reasons for interfaith engagement**

What does the literature tell us about the reasons for Muslims' engagement in interfaith activities? Studies suggest Muslim Australians are participating in these activities as 'an intellectual way to dispel misconceptions about Muslims and Islam'. They are using interfaith initiatives to address negative stereotypes and to condemn terrorism or other forms of violent extremism, shifting the earlier focus of interfaith activity from friendship and dialogue to countering fears, stereotypes and exclusivist attitudes. One of the staff members from Auburn Gallipoli Mosque in Sydney involved in hosting mosque tours for the broader community explained the rationale for such activities: 'After September 11, there was an even greater need to voice a true opinion of Islam. ... We want people to know what happens here, to realise we are not a threat, that the mosque is about prayer'. Zubdeda Raihman, treasurer and spokesperson for the Muslim Women's National Network of Australia (MWNNA), also explained the reasoning behind many mosque open days: 'You know they thought the mosque was the place that people do political activities. When they come to the mosque they see it's so spiritual, so peaceful'. Kerim Buday, president of Australian Islamic Social Association (AISA) Youth, stated similarly, saying the group aims to 'let the wider community understand that we are here but we are not against anyone. We are Australian Muslims and what we do is this; there is no harm behind it'.

Through interfaith activities such as these Muslims are seeking to 'demystify the prayer routines, pilgrimage, dietary regulations and core beliefs of Islam'. But these activities are not only tangible expressions of a desire to build bridges with those outside the Muslim community. They are an expression of the 'multicultural and multi-religious values of Australia' that are shared by Muslim Australians. Indeed, through interfaith engagement, Muslim Australians are creating an Islamic ethos that is central to Australia's multi-religious diversity.

**[1] See Article 30: “The Jews of Bani Awf will be treated as one community with the Believers. The Jews have their religion.” Full text available at [Constitution.org](http://Constitution.org).**

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*Image: The Muslim Women’s Association of South Australia hold a special viewing of exhibition, Adelaide, 2013. Credit: Migration Museum/Flickr.*