

**Rachel Woodlock**

## ***Introduction***

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE OF the *La Trobe Journal* focuses on Muslims in Australia. Islam is the world's second largest religion with an estimated 1.6 billion adherents spread across the globe, Muslims are thus incredibly diverse: culturally, linguistically and religiously. Although Islam is often presented as an Arab religion, the majority of believers (62%) are found in the Asia-Pacific region and it is Indonesia to Australia's north that is the world's largest Muslim country.

In Australia, itself, there are over 340,000 Muslims from a wide array of ancestries, cultures, classes, language-groups, sects, political orientations, and with many different life stories.

Islam was established by the prophet Muhammad in Mecca, in what is now Saudi Arabia, six centuries after the birth of Christ. Muhammad had what he believed to be a visitation from the archangel Gabriel bringing revelation from the same God that had inspired Abraham, Moses and Jesus. The Arabian prophet began preaching a message of monotheism and social justice that, within 150 years toppled the Byzantine and Sassanid empires, initiated a massive drive for education and technological advancement, and expanded across most of what was then considered the civilised world.

Despite intense scrutiny of Muslims in the wake of various global crisis events, Islam is still poorly understood in many parts of the Western world, including Australia. In order to provide readers of this issue with background information about Islam so that the subsequent articles may be placed in better context, David Drennan has written an introduction covering the history of Muhammad and the establishment of Islam; the primary sources of Islamic belief and practice, the Qur'an and *sunna* 'Prophetic example'; the five core practices known as the 'pillars' of Islam; the six main creedal beliefs; the role and place of Islamic sacred law – *shari'a*; and Islamic spirituality known to the West as Sufism. After Drennan's introduction we move to two broader-picture articles on the settlement of Muslims in Australia.

The first of these is Anisa Buckley's 'The First Islamic Museum of Australia: challenging negative assumptions of Muslims in Australia through art, heritage and discovery'. The IMA was founded in May 2010 and has a proposed opening of late 2013/early 2014 aiming to become a 'leading cultural and educational institution' showcasing the art, architecture, shared values, common heritage and contributions of Muslims in Australia. Buckley sits on the board of the IMA and, although her article is not written on behalf of the board, she is well placed to provide a definitive account of its establishment. The IMA has a majority-female board, reflective of the increase in leadership roles taken up by Muslim women in Australia.

Buckley places the IMA in the context of the 'cultural gap' that exists between the



Men at the Carlton Mosque, 1999.  
Photo by Emmanuel Santos, H2000.210/4.

reality of Muslims' lived experiences, and the media and political stereotyping that influences others' perceptions. She surveys the founding of the IMA, its choice of location, external design and proposed use of internal space, after which she looks at the museum's motto: 'Art-Heritage-Discovery' as a project for bridging the cultural gap. The IMA has received a noteworthy level of support from both Australian Muslims and the wider community.

As previously mentioned, Islam spawned a great educational project to translate, transmit and build on the wealth of knowledge from older civilisations including those of the Greeks, Persians and Indians. The Muslims celebrated a tradition attributed to the Prophet Muhammad to 'seek knowledge even unto China'. However, the entrance of modernity in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries created a rupture between traditional ways of transmitting knowledge – which some scholars controversially argue had become imitative rather than innovative – and the rapid take up of new Western pedagogies in emerging nation states.

Muslims who emigrated to Western countries faced another challenge: how could

they pass on their valuable cultural, linguistic and religious traditions to their children in overwhelmingly non-Muslim environments? This problem resulted in an urgent interest in establishing Islamic schools wherever Muslims settled, as Peter Jones examines in his article 'Islamic Schools in Australia'. His interview-based research looks at the state of Islamic education in contemporary Australia since the founding of the first two schools in 1983. In particular he focuses on two questions. For Muslims: what constitutes an Islamic education for their children?, and for non-Muslims: are Islamic schools isolating Muslim children and promoting threatening values?

Although there is not consensus among Muslims as to what they want from Islamic schools, commonly there is an expectation that they will provide an appropriate environment that respects and reinforces Islamic values. Jones finds that despite strong demand from Muslims, there have been practical problems in establishing Islamic schools. This includes dealing with tensions from ethnic diversity; lack of resources; countering local non-Muslim opposition; high turn-over of principals; and the lack of appropriately qualified Muslim teachers and imams to staff the schools. On the nature of Islamic schooling, Jones describes how schools have been caught up in a wider debate about Australian values and finds that despite fears, most Islamic schools have extensive outreach and dialogue programs to facilitate contact with the wider community.

The next three articles of this issue are historical in approach, beginning with Regina Ganter's 'Remembering Muslim Histories of Australia'. Muslims are often perceived to be a new addition to the Australian cultural and religious landscape, however their story of contact with the sunburnt country begins before European settlement, making them the oldest non-Indigenous mob to set foot on Australian soil. Although the great majority of Australian Muslims today are migrants or their children, their story begins with eighteenth-century Macassan fishermen who sailed the north-eastern waters in search of trepang, a sea-cucumber also known as *bêche-de-mer*. Ganter outlines how the Muslim trepangers forged relationships with Indigenous peoples that were interrupted by British colonisation. Although the Yolŋu people were not converted to Islam, they incorporated elements into their belief systems. 'There is a remnant vocabulary in Yolŋu rituals that is derived from Muslim prayer, and it has long been observed that their most important religious ceremonies are strongly inflected with Macassan influences.'

After outlining the evolution in writing Australian Muslim history, Ganter discusses incorporation of the Yolŋu-Macassan relationship in the national story. One effect has been to challenge the idea of Islam and Muslims as foreign. The story has become one of contrasting the peaceful trading relations between the Yolŋu and Macassan peoples with the violence of British colonisation, although there is evidence that the older relationship was more complex and was not always peaceable.

Ganter also touches on the history of Muslim cameleers, however this topic is taken up in greater depth by Hanifa Deen in 'Excavating the Past: Australian Muslims'. Her research is based on analysis of material from the National Archives of Australia, covering the arrival of the cameleers in the nineteenth-century up to the end of the White



Women praying at Preston Mosque during Eid al-Fitr, 1994.  
Photo by Viva Gibb, H98.161/14.

Australia policy in the 1970s. She discusses various patterns of settlement, not only of the cameleers but also Indian hawkers, ‘Malay’ pearl-divers, the Colombo Plan students, and Albanian, Turkish and Lebanese immigrants. It is a story of a seismic shift in attitudes and policies – of Australia opening up after a period in which non-white immigration was severely restricted through racist policies such as the Dictation Test. However, there are still echoes of White Australia in the debate about Muslim refugees and asylum seekers today.

At the same time that Muslims in Australia were struggling with institutionalised racism despite playing a vital role in opening up Australia’s interior and in various farming and labouring industries, the heritage of Islamic architectural design in various cultural expressions was being incorporated in Australian buildings. Nigel Lewis examines such influences on historical Melburnian buildings in his article ‘Persian and Islamic Architecture in Melbourne: a personal search’. He weaves a deep knowledge of design provenance with an ability to spot not only obvious but more subtle signs of Oriental inspiration in local landmarks and heritage buildings. These include the use of bright, patterned tilework; intricate carved verandah eaves; use of horseshoe arches; geometric friezes; crystalline brickwork decoration; axial designed gardens; ribbed domed ceilings, and stylised minarets. Perhaps the best-known example of Islamicate influence on Melbourne’s architecture is the former State Theatre (Forum Cinema), on the corner of Flinders and Russell Streets.

Having shifted to a specifically Victorian focus, the next piece is a series of biographical vignettes on seven Muslim community leaders who have each made invaluable contributions to the successful settlement of Islam and Muslims in Victoria. It seems appropriate to briefly relate a personal story related to the first gentleman interviewed: Dr Kazi. My mother's family, a Catholic-Protestant mix when that was still scandalous, was rather unusual. Among the cast of colourful characters that filled her stories was an exotic couple who were, I venture to guess, Caulfield's first Muslim homeowners. This was back in the early 1960s when the old White Australia policy was ending and Muslim immigration was only just starting to grow again. My brothers and I never thought to inquire after the neighbours' names and it was not until I had converted to Islam and been a Muslim for many years that my mother mentioned in passing that the husband in the couple had worked at the University of Melbourne in Islamic Studies. Having studied at Melbourne University, I asked if his name might be Kazi. She replied, 'Yes, that's it,' and in what made Melbourne seem like a very small place indeed, it turned out quite by chance I knew my mother's former neighbour. I organised for a reunion between the Kazis and my mother in which there was much tea and many happy memories shared.

Ammar Sachak provides vignettes of key Victorian Muslim community builders and leaders, covering a spectrum of experiences. Although there is only one female community leader profiled here – Ms Sherene Hassan – this is not because women have not played an important role in establishing the community, as can be seen in other women's stories represented in two subsequent articles in this special issue.

The interviewees tell of breaking ground in establishing basic services needed by the Muslim community, such as building mosques and schools; leading group worship services; helping other new migrants and refugees to settle; running English language classes; shepherding the younger generation; starting up community newspapers and magazines; engaging with the media; speaking to various non-Muslim community groups; and establishing the national umbrella organisation, the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils. As such, Victorians have played an indispensable role in the story of Australian Islam.

As well as building their own communities, Muslims are involved in the broader Australian religious landscape as Anna Halafoff discusses in 'Muslim Participation in Multifaith Initiatives in Victoria'. She provides readers with an outline of the history of multifaith activity in the West, both globally – beginning with the first Parliament of the World's Religions held in Chicago in 1893 – and locally. Halafoff interviewed a variety of people involved in Victorian multifaith activities finding that there have been tangible benefits to Australian society in promoting inclusion and genuine social cohesion and security. For the Muslim community specifically, it has given them an opportunity to counter Islamophobia and promote peace-building efforts. As Halafoff says, 'While September 11 was no doubt a terrible tragedy, it was also paradoxically an opportunity to bring diverse religious communities closer together to condemn acts of violence, to

renew hope and promote non-violent responses to terrorism?.

The final three articles deal with contemporary Muslim topics. Oishee Alam's "Islam is a Blackfella Religion, Whatchya Trying to Prove?": race in the lives of white Muslim converts in Australia' deals with the issue of race boundaries. In Australia, Islam is seen as a 'brown man's religion', thus white converts confuse racial boundaries and lose privilege upon converting. The stigma associated with Muslim identity is part of a 'new racism' that stratifies groups based on perceptions of cultural difference. Her research is based upon interviews with twelve white converts, chosen for their ability to provide bridging insights. Taking on a racialised identity permitted interviewees to reflect on the inhabited privilege of whiteness. Some described experiences that positioned them as race traitors, and for the women, gender traitors. This is due to misogyny being coded as inherently Islamic in negative discourse about Muslims. Fellow believers can also express confusion over the white converts' race boundary violations, and this is at times expressed through ambivalence towards accepting white converts as genuine Muslims. There is a blurring of cultural and religious identities that can exclude white converts who do not possess appropriately 'Islamic' cultural origins.

The depiction of Muslim women as victims of misogyny is also discussed by Susan Carland in 'Silenced: Muslim women commentators in the Australian media'. Carland looks at how Muslim women involved in Australian media are received by fellow Muslims as well as the wider Australian public, and the motivations for Muslim women to take up media engagements, despite the often significant personal costs they incur. Carland's article is based on her own experience as a prominent Muslim media personality, and interviews with five other Muslim spokeswomen who regularly appear in a variety of media formats, including television, radio, print and online.

Carland finds problematic responses to Muslim women's voices in their being ignored or rendered invisible; being criticised for their appearance in order to delegitimise their views; women suffering condescension from audiences, and only being permitted to speak on stereotypical topics. As she points out: 'This technique of bemoaning the lack of Muslim women speaking out in the media, and then ignoring them when they do serves the double purpose of silencing women in a very absolute way (it is literally as if they are not there), while still giving the impression that the audience is eager and open to hearing from them if they should ever wish to speak.' Yet the women related a desire to participate in the media as a form of agency. This became a way to challenge stereotypes about Muslims and counter others presuming to speak on their behalf.

Lastly, the issue finishes on a more optimistic note with Joshua M. Roose's 'Young Muslims of Australia: anatomy of a multicultural success story'. Despite its relatively small size, YMA influence is over-represented in the generation of Muslim male and female community leaders and spokespeople who succeeded the generation of migrants that laid the foundations of the emerging Australian Muslim community. Roose looks at the YMA group as having produced a cadre of successful Muslim individuals productively engaged in both the Muslim and wider communities, including those behind the hip-

hop group The Brothahood, and the successful television show Salam Café.

Roose places his article in the context of international and local questioning of multiculturalism, and heightened social exclusion of Muslims in the West. Roose then examines YMA graduates developing their own unique brand of Australian Islamic culture. As with Carland's article, which found Muslim women keen to challenge negative stereotypes, so too Roose found a similar phenomenon amongst Muslim men who rejected being cast only in negative and potentially-violent roles. Of particular interest is Roose's highlighting of the spiritual emphasis of YMA, through the Sufi teachings of religious teacher Mahmud Kürkcü. This approach has infused YMA participants with positive Islamic spirituality that has inspired them to walk paths of service.

This issue concludes with two appendices: 'Victorian Muslims: a profile' and a 'Select Bibliography on Islam and about Muslims in Australia'.

### **Editor's Note**

This special issue of the *La Trobe Journal* would not have been possible without the work and commitment of Rachel Woodlock. She commissioned all bar one of the articles, took responsibility for their refereeing and chose most of the illustrations.



The Preston Mosque.  
Photo by Rachel Woodlock, 2002.