CHAPTER 4

Young Muslims in Brisbane: Negotiating Cultural Identity and Alienation

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines, broadly, the religious, cultural and national identities, and self-perceptions of young Muslims in Brisbane and the social, economic, and political context in which these are being configured. While Australia’s migrant intake has been racially diverse since the 1970s with the arrival of the Lebanese, Turks, and Vietnamese, followed in the 1980s and 1990s by migrants from places like Fiji, India, Taiwan, China, and Sri Lanka, and a substantial number of humanitarian migrants from Africa from around the year 2000, the Labor government under John Howard (1996-2007) adopted a hostile attitude towards refugees in response to growing anti-Asian sentiment in the 1990s (Jupp, 2007). The September 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York, Bali bombings in 2002 which targeted Australians, the arrest of alleged Muslim terrorists in Sydney and Melbourne during November 2005, riots in Cronulla during December 2005, and the more general “War on Terror” heightened debates about multiculturalism in Australia and raised questions in many minds about Muslim citizenship and belonging, and how best to accommodate religious identity.

These questions were raised regularly and publicly by some of the country’s most prominent leaders, including the then Prime Minister John Howard, Treasurer Peter Costello, Labor leader Kim Beasley, and the popular Premier of New South Wales, Morris Iemma, as well as conservative columnists in widely read newspapers like the Courier-Mail and The Daily Telegraph which play an important role in shaping public opinion. Muslims, whether immigrant or indigenous, Sunni or Shi’ite, conservative or liberal, are treated as a homogenous grouping by outsiders, and increasingly subjected to intense pressure to defend themselves for the actions of others, demonstrate their loyalty to “the nation,” and reaffirm their acceptance of “Australian values”. It is not surprising therefore that among many refugees and migrants, especially those of Middle Eastern appearance, there are “pockets of niche” employment in the secondary labor market, low income levels, lack of opportunity, and perceptions of discrimination (Fozdar and Torezani, 2008: 31). These issues are not peculiar to Australia but a concern for many Western countries, and must be seen in the broader context of the increasingly important role played by belief and religion in the post-Cold War world.

METHODOLOGY

This study draws on quantitative and qualitative data, as well as newspaper reports and websites of relevant organizations to examine whether young Muslims experience discrimination, and if so, how this is impacting on their identities and what policies can be implemented to alleviate the situation. The qualitative aspect involved in-depth interviews with a small, but important, number of community leaders and others involved with young Muslims, whose profiles are included at the end of this paper, while the quantitative aspect is based on 63 questionnaires filled out by a randomly selected but representative sample of young Muslims. This study seeks especially to present the voices Muslims themselves. It begins by profiling Muslims, and then explores some of the issues affecting young Muslims, such as the challenges they face in relation to mainstream Australian society, generational relationships between parents and young Muslims; the affiliation between young Muslims across ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and national backgrounds, pressures to assimilate, language and other problems at school, socio-economic pressures, and contested authority among Muslims. The findings of this study are important, both for young Muslims themselves, as they seek to chart a path to adulthood, which is already beset by many pitfalls, as well as for policy makers who, one would assume, want to make optimum use of human capital and achieve social cohesion (Fozdar and Torezani, 2008: 58).

Though Muslims have been in the national spotlight in recent years because of international
geo-political tensions, they constitute less than two percent of the Australian population, numbering 340,390 in 2006 (Saeed, 2006). They are diverse in terms of ethnicity, national origins, language, culture, and class. While they come from over a hundred countries, the majority are of Lebanese and Turkish background and most (82.9%) are concentrated in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria. Queensland is home to 20,481 (6%) of Australia’s Muslim population. Of these, 14,584 live in Brisbane. This is a relatively young population, with 5,401 (37%) aged nineteen or under. A further 3104 (21.28%) are aged between 20 and 29. All told, almost 60% of Muslims are under the age of 30. There are marginally more males than females in this age category, 4382 to 4123. Muslims, who are concentrated in southeast Queensland suburbs like Mansfield, Mount Gravatt, Kuraby, Rochedale, Runcorn, and Eight Miles Plain, comprise just 0.2 percent of Brisbane’s population of almost a million.

Of those who identified themselves as Muslim in Queensland in 2006, 28.75% were born in Australia, 6% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 5.29% in Fiji, and 4.91% in Indonesia. Other significant countries of origin were Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, South Africa, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Bangladesh. Only 9.5% of mothers and 6.3% of fathers were born in Australia. Of the 8064 Muslims in Queensland who were in the workforce, 53% held full-time jobs; the rest were either working part-time or unemployed. In terms of income, 60% of those who declared their income earned less that $599 per week, which falls on the lower end of the income scale. While this paper makes certain generalizations about Muslims, it should be noted that they are diverse in terms of class, nationality, and ethnicity, and whether they came as skilled migrants or as refugees with little or few skills to offer. Their adjustment and needs and experiences are consequently very different.

**9/11 AND THE EMERGING IDENTITY CRISIS**

Islam is not a new religion in Australia. The Macassarese visited the north coast on fishing expeditions as early as the seventeenth century (MacKnight, 1976). Afghan Muslim camel riders arrived from the mid-nineteenth century to carry supplies into the interior to keep remote settlements alive (Kabir, 1998: 57-137). The railways and immigration restrictions from 1901 destroyed their trade, and this embryonic Muslim community gradually disappeared. A permanent Muslim population established itself after World War Two when Australia’s need for labour resulted in the White Australia policy being modified in 1956 and the basis of immigration shifting from race to occupational skills (Kivisto 2002). Small numbers of ‘White’ Muslims arrived from Cyprus, Bosnia, Albania, Bulgaria, and Russia, then 10,000 Turks between 1967 and 1971, and 17,000 Lebanese from 1975 to 1985. While Muslims are an integral part of the Australian social landscape, their relationship with the mainstream has been problematic, with acute tension during watershed national and international incidents such as the controversy over Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Verses in 1989; the Gulf War in 1991, the attack on peacekeeping forces in Somalia in 1993, the bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen in 2000, attack on the World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001 and the subsequent protracted ‘War on Terror’ (see Deen, 2003 and Mubarak, 1996).

Muslim communities in Australia, like their counterparts in other Western countries, have faced increased verbal and physical harassment, which intensified when Australians became direct victims of terrorism in Bali on 12 October 2002. Eighty Australians died when two night clubs were bombed (see Deen, 2003; Kabir and Moore, 2003; and Saeed 2003). In the perception of many Muslims, 9/11 was a watershed event in terms of their relationship with mainstream Australian society. According to A.A.:

“One of the issues [facing youth] would include marginalization from mainstream Australians after 9/11. There has been a strong sense of “us” and “them”. The Muslim youth are very aware of the fact that they are seen as different in every aspect of life, from primary school to secondary school, and tertiary institutions. Prior to that I would say I generally felt comfortable within mainstream Australia, if I may use that terminology for the broader community. However, after September 11, I think that the media played a significant role, also our parliamentarians and people in influential positions had a significant role in creating a biased opinion towards Muslims as Islam was linked to terrorism and terrorist acts and violence.”

A.J., who migrated to Australia in 1988, also identified 9/11 as a key moment:
“Pre-9/11, my neighbour didn’t even know I was a Muslim. We as Muslims kept our religion to ourselves. We kept it in our pocket. We did not share our Islamic values with our neighbours. Suddenly 9/11 happened and then my neighbour would say “Hey, his name is .................., he’s a Muslim.” And then suddenly there was this awakening. That, yes, I have got a Muslim neighbour! How many Muslims are in Queensland? How many are in Australia? So the whole thing just opened up overnight. To give you an example, in the days after 9/11 the public libraries were crying out for copies of the Quran. Whatever they had were all gone overnight. People suddenly wanted to know, “What is this Muslim thing about? What is Islam about? What is jihad all about?” and this is when we woke up and started to do something about it. If we had started when I migrated, and the other brothers and sisters migrated, I think a lot of this misconception would have been avoided.”

CONCEPTUALISING YOUTH IDENTITY

Many young Muslims are expected to maintain the cultural and religious customs of their parents. They are challenged when they attend state schools and have non-Muslim friends with different practices. This may produce confusion within individuals, and tension between them and their families as they try to balance pleasing their peers with upsetting their parents (Richards, 1994: 312). U.B. explained the dilemma:

“As a young Muslim, they would question themselves as to where they sit in society: Shall they accept the norms of society or should they stick with their beliefs which may be contrary to the majority way of life, such as socializing in pubs, in clubs, and in drugs and parties, and so on? So, as they grow and go through their teens there is definitely peer pressure in high school. So they do have this struggle to accept what society is giving or to stick to their beliefs and practices.”

A.A. viewed the ‘identity crisis’ as a major problem for young Muslims: ‘[They] are a bit confused as to where their roots belong. They come from ethnic backgrounds to Australia. They are unaware of exactly where they stand because of this focus on being Australian, and having Australian values which are unclear. Mainstream pressure to conform denies young Muslims the time and space to work out their identities. One is reminded here of Asad’s point that while Westerners often ask whether Muslims can adjust to new conditions, ‘the question is rarely raised as to whether the institutions and ideologies of the West can adjust to a modern world of which culturally diverse immigrants are in integral part’ (Asad, 1997: 194).

This challenge comes at a time, as G.S. observes, when young Muslims, like youth of all backgrounds, ‘are really trying to search for their identity. They have the additional problem of two cultures. The family is trying to continue applying their culture at home and the conflict happens when kids have to be Indian, Arab, Albanian, Bosnian at home, and outside be Australian. It is a very dramatic change.’ In such circumstances, young Muslims speak one language at home and English when they go out. They are additionally discriminated against because of their accent. Even those who attempt to integrate, according to A.E., quickly realize that becoming “Australian” does not necessarily lead to acceptance:

“Many saw themselves as Australian from an ethnic background but [after] September 11, all of a sudden they found the Australian general public was telling them to go back to their country. So they thought “Hey, I am in my country. I am Australian.” You know what I mean, you might be born in Australia but you are no Australian. So he thinks to himself “Where do I belong?” When he goes back to his country of origin [on holiday] he is told that because of his language difficulty, he does not belong there. He does not know where he fits in. That’s where problems start brewing.”

G.S. supported this when she stated that the reaction of some mainstream Australians made Muslims ‘...second class. They don’t know any other place than Australia as home but sometimes other people won’t consider them that way just because they are of a different colour and have different ways of dressing or belong to a different religion.’ This questioning of their identity has planted doubts in the minds of young Muslims:

“The issue has always been there. However, after 9/11, Australians have questioned Muslims’ loyalty, whether they are loyal to Australia and when this is raised it is quite disastrous. Religion is religion. The place where you live, and your citizenship, is something else. They are different issues. However, this question of whether you are either an Australian or a Muslim and where
your loyalty lies will put a question in the minds of Muslim youth. Which one should we choose? Am I a Muslim or am I Australian? You can be both at the same time. Muslim youth question whether they are really Australian when they are asked where they are from" [U.B.].

While socio-emotional problems are universally higher among immigrant and minority children than mainstream children because of the conflict associated with straddling between cultures (Bhatnagar, 1981: 26), it is exacerbated in the case of Muslim youth by the extra pressure placed on them by international tensions, as I.G. so clearly articulated:

“It is really frustrating for them because we teach them the true things about Islam but then the non-Muslims are not getting their information from the right channels. They learn about Islam from the media when there is an association between Islam and terror, or Islam and violence, or Islam and oppression of women. It just creates ignorance and the challenge is bigger for Muslims. The youth have to defend themselves all the time. So the more incidents like this take place, the bigger the pressure is on our youth to defend their religion and their identity and prove to people that they are not like this because people, whenever they look at Muslim youth, think that he is going to be a terrorist or bomb us or something. It creates a lot of pressure.”

The results of the questionnaire involving 63 young Muslims revealed that 93.7% were ‘proud to be a Muslim’ all the time and another 6.3% most of the time, while 61.9% were ‘proud to be an Australian’ all the time and 27% most of the time. 34.9% felt part of an Australian community all the time, 48.4% most of the time, and 11.1% rarely or never. So while young Muslims see themselves as both Muslim and Australian, they don’t always feel part of an Australian community.

Women and Islamophobia

Young Muslim women perceive themselves to be discriminated against because of a raft of factors. This includes, according to G.S., ‘especially the young women who wear their hijab. This is additional to the colour of their skin, their dress, and the accent they have.’ The dilemma, she points out, is that young women ‘want to continue in their own religion and they want to enjoy their youth.’ Islam remains a central part of their lives. The response to the questionnaire indicated that 87.3% could read the Quran; 98.4% regarded their family’s way of life as being guided by the Quran; 95.1% stated that their own lives were guided by the Quran; 92% said that studying the Quran assisted their spiritual development; 98.4% participated in Muslim celebrations and traditions; and 98.4% considered it important to go to Makkah at least once in their lifetime. That Islam remains central to the lives of most young women is reflected in the large numbers attending the two Islamic schools on Brisbane, weekly religious instruction in state schools, and madrassah classes at various mosques after school. Most pray daily, don’t date, and tend to go out with friends of the same sex, according to respondents.

Many Muslim girls / women also cover their hair with a head scarf (hijab). This, as G.S. points out, has caused many problems, especially after 9/11 when the hijab became highly politicized because it was ‘perceived as a de facto tool of proselytizing or at the very least as a symbolic colonization of the public space, which is supposed to be free of religion.’ Dress is increasingly viewed by policymakers in Western countries as a visual sign of non-integration and non-acceptance of a country’s values. Clothing, in this perspective, is not a private matter but part of the broader social policy (Salvatore, 2004: 1017). The Sunday Telegraph reported on 14 October 2007 that Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews was consulting with airport security staff about banning headscarves as part of the government’s plan to improve airport safety. This was the latest in a long line of calls by politicians for head scarves to be banned. Many women believe that they are harassed by fellow Australians because of rising Islamophobia.

One interviewee related her experience at a local supermarket. She was wearing a snazzy designer t-shirt with the words ‘Have Faith’ on the front. She took it to mean that one should have confidence in one’s ability, and was taken aback when a middle-aged white woman yelled in an agitated tone: ‘What faith? You bloody Muslims think you will convert us! Who would ever accept such a stupid religion?’ The respondent, who was wearing the hijab, was too stunned to reply. Such incidents have yielded a mixed response from young women. According to G.S., after September 11 ‘lots of young people decided to take off their hijab because there was
concern, but others strongly said, “even if I have to stay home, I am not going to give up my hijab.”

There are gender differences in the way young men and women experience Islamophobia. U.B., in his capacity as president of the Australian Muslim Students Association, had to deal with many instances of women being subjected to negative remarks because they wore the hijab. ‘They are quite exposed to being known as Muslim rather than a male who does not have to wear any particular clothes to identify him as a Muslim.’ Women, it emerged, are constantly forced to explain that the hijab is not enforced upon them by men but is worn out of choice. The situation is compounded by racial discrimination. Historically, the Aborigines were subjected to racist discrimination; with the ending of White Australia Policy, this prejudice was extended to Asians in the 1980s and 1990s; in the contemporary period it is directed largely against African refugees and Muslims.

Discrimination against Muslims is not specifically or even primarily because of skin colour. The black-white dichotomy is one of many dimensions of Muslim identity that ostracizes them. Culture is becoming a key difference in Western societies, with the “common-sense” view that cultural (including religious) distinctions are unchanging and natural markers of difference. The antipathy of host societies against the traditions, practices, and beliefs of Muslims is seen as a natural response by those who feel threatened and therefore act to protect the “Australian way” (Modood, 2005).

Education

The problems of young Muslims are compounded when they lack proper educational qualifications. As several respondents pointed out, too many have no education, no job, and therefore little chance of economic independence or social advancement. For many, the problems begin at school where they perform poorly for a number of reasons. Some, according to A.E., feel ostracized: ‘I think a lot of them go through hard times in school and especially recently with all the discussion against Muslims. So some of them drop out or do not pay a lot of attention.’ A.A. attended Mt. Gravatt High before 9/11. His experience with teachers and fellow students ‘was fantastic in regards to multiculturalism. There was a strong representation of ethnic, mixed students, from different parts of the world. Of course the majority was Anglo-Australians [but] there wasn’t discrimination in any significant way.’ This changed after 9/11. A.A. receives a ‘lot of feedback from the youth that they feel that there is a magnifying glass being put upon them and they are being watched for what they do. The majority say “hold on, look, we feel there’s a difference here, that there is a change in attitudes towards us.”’

Several respondents pointed out that teachers were trying to help but were either insufficiently trained (see Birman, 2001) or not given support by a system already under strain because of cuts in education funding. Teachers, under these circumstances, developed negative perceptions and lower expectations of Muslim students, leading to lower achievement (Bhatnagar, 1981:56). While some Muslim students may believe that schools are not addressing their needs and therefore lose confidence in teachers or be reluctant to confide in them because of the cultural gap, respondents generally spoke positively about the efforts made by schools. A.J., for example, pointed out that the government appointed Muslim Reference Group (MRG), on which he had served, had a sub-group that dealt with the Education Department over issues such as religious education, prayer, fasting, and Muslim festivals, and most were cooperative.

Communication is critical, respondents believed. Parents ‘sometimes get upset about the way kids are being discriminated,’ according to G.S. Lacking resources, they visit organizations like the Islamic Women’s Association of Queensland [IWAQ] for help. ‘We go to the school. We explain the incident that happened to the young people and they [schools] take the right action. We help to get over the incident.’ Regarding prayer, she observed that ‘public schools supported young people to go to the mosque on Friday, giving them time-off especially if the mosque is in a catchment area.’ In her experience, schools were addressing discrimination by ‘acting quickly and organizing some workshops and seminars. Members of the community visit the schools and talk to young people and organize education training for young people to respect and accept others. So I think this is positive.’

Muslims should reciprocate, G.S. opined. ‘We should do something from our side also to continue showing them, the mainstream commu-
nity, that we are interested to live in harmony with people. So when people put their hand out, we have to put our hand back.’ I.G. also touched on this when he pointed out that Muslim children were taught that non-Muslims were ‘infidels, and they are going to the hell fire, stuff like that. It really creates a barrier between you and the other person. But if they really know that the other person in front of them is a brother in humanity and they share many things together, it they focus on the similarities rather than the differences, then they will be able to reach out and have normal relations.’

Some schools visited the Islamic Council of Queensland [ICQ] on an ad hoc basis for information, A.J. pointed out. For example, a school from the north of Brisbane visited because the [white Christian] students decided to do Islamic Studies. He felt that it should have been the other way around. ‘We should write to school and say “look, we are prepared to come in and talk to you people, which I have done in some schools. And I was amazed at the questions they ask.’ The two Islamic schools in Brisbane are attempting to break barriers by visiting predominantly non-Muslim state or Christian and Jewish schools, and participating in sport and inter-faith discussions. A.J. pointed to a 2006 study that showed that one in six Australians had a ‘reasonable understanding’ of Islam, while one in three were ‘completely ignorant’. Perhaps it is this ignorance that breed prejudice against Muslims. In the quantitative survey of 63 young Muslims for this paper, 68.3% responded as ‘mostly true’ that some people said ‘bad words’ to them because they were Muslim; 66.1% indicated that people had said ‘bad words’ to their family members merely for being Muslim; and 56.5% indicated that their family had experienced ‘bad treatment’ merely for being Muslim.

Young Muslims in Australian schools often associate with other Muslims. A.J. noticed that ‘interaction is not as wide as it should be. The Muslim children would be one side and similarly with the White Australians. There is this little barrier that you can’t see but it exists and somehow or other that barrier has to be broken.’ 73.1% of students in the survey indicated that more than half of their close, personal friends were Muslim, while 74.6% preferred having more Muslims as personal friends. 91.7% felt that in their relationships with friends they were more like Muslims in Australia and 87% saw their family relationships as more like that of other Muslims in Australia. Muslim children rarely received invitations to the homes of [non-Muslim] classmates or invited others to their homes. Some Muslim parents were reluctant to send their children to non-Muslim homes out of fear that they may develop their “ways” or because of dietary concerns.

Unlike other groups of Muslim migrants, such as the Somali Muslims in Melbourne for example (Omar, 2004), language is not a critical issue. English was the first language that 50.8% of respondents learnt to speak as children. It was also the main language spoken at 63.5% of homes. 79% described themselves as having an ‘excellent’ understanding of spoken English and 77.4% of written English. In a third of homes where English was not the main language, children may well be disadvantaged in school. When young Muslims dropped out of school, their plight was magnified because they lacked other skills. Many Muslim parents are reluctant to let their children, especially girls, work during vacations which resulted, according to A.E., in them not having skills or work experience when they dropped out of school. We should not homogenize. Muslim parents from places like South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Fiji are comfortable with secular education in English. This differed from, for example, Afghan refugees whose education may have been disrupted and for whom language was a major handicap. The paucity of positive role models whose success and aspirations can be emulated, may also influence educational outcomes.

Employment

The ostracization of many young Muslims continues through to employment. A. A. has entertained many complaints from young Muslims who feel that ‘when they apply for professional jobs or white collar, they get a tone of discrimination, maybe because they have a Muslim name or appear to be Muslim. They are not given the same opportunity as non-Muslim Australians.’ G.S. came across similar experiences from young women wearing the hijab. ‘At the moment we implore them to continue if they want to, but they know that they will be discriminated against to find a job.’ IWAQ actively seeks to create opportunities for young women ‘who wear hijab … but it cannot cater for all young women who want to continue wearing the hijab and find employment.’ For A.J.:
The biggest problem we face here is the lack of job opportunities for Muslims. To give you an example, one of our young girls saw an advert in the papers. It was one of the government departments and through the phone she applied. Her resume was accepted and she was asked to come for a final interview. And when she arrived with her hijab, suddenly the whole thing changed. And she was told “sorry, we have made some mistakes here. Someone else has already been taken for the job.” Whilst one can’t prove she has been a victim of the religious issue it was quite apparent to us that that was the reason. A lot of cases that I have known, for example, people with a beard, when they go to work, they are asked to shave their beard.

Perceptions of a comparatively higher unemployment rate among Muslims are authenticated by recent census statistics. At the time of the 2001 Census, the Muslim unemployment rate in south-east Brisbane was 21%, which was significantly higher than the non-Muslim unemployment rate of 7.9%. The proportion of the Muslim population aged between 15 and 64 either in a job or looking for a job (participating in the labour force) was 53.3%, significantly lower than the non-Muslim participation rate of 73.6%. A.E. resigned from his position as a sales representative to address Muslim unemployment because, he believes, it has the potential to create ‘huge problems.’ His investigation showed that barriers to employment included the lack of skills and qualifications, the opportunity to pray, especially on Fridays, dress codes, hijab, and racism. His task of making young Muslims ‘more employable’ is a difficult one, he confessed:

It is not just the employers, it is also the colleagues at work. A person might get employment but once he starts work he might face some racism which makes him decide that he does not want to go back and the frustration grows ever more. There are incidences. I have had one boy who had been in trouble with the law and he wanted to end his life. I got him a job but when he went to work, he realized that “they see me as a Muslim”. The problems started coming out. So he left that work because he did not want to be incarcerated again. He decided it was better for him to stay at home.

Failure to address unemployment will have serious repercussions, A.E. explained:

A kid goes through high school. He might have a few minor hiccups here and there, but the time comes when he needs to be employed, to make money whether it is to support himself or the family. When he cannot get a job, a sustainable job, the frustration starts coming in. I do see that happening at the moment. If a person is not employed, he is not making money, he hasn’t got anything that is occupying his time from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. What he ends up doing is that he goes out with his friends and they get up to no good. Plus, because they have got the network among Muslim friends, each one speaks their mind and if someone says something against the day-to-day culture in Australia, it becomes the mainstream opinion after a while. So it is very important to occupy their time with work and not “nothingness”.

The “Generation Gap”

Muslim parents’ lack of understanding of the issues facing the youth lies at the heart of their relationship with their children, according to most respondents. A.A. observed that the ‘so-called generation gap’ depended to a large extent on migrants’ country of origin, their economic status, level of education of parents, ages of parents, length of stay in Australia, and relationship between parents and their children. The problem, he felt, was less serious among ‘some Southern African [and Fijian] communities who were more “western”. They are more accustomed to Australian values whereas those from the Middle Eastern countries or maybe the Asian ones are slightly different. They find it more difficult to understand the way everyday non-Muslim Australians participate in national life.’

As a result of their economic status, many Muslim families are associated with poor economic and social status and find it difficult to provide education and other resources to assist their children in adjusting to life in Australia. This compounds the already severe disadvantages of being culturally and psychologically dislocated from the mainstream (Richards, 1994), as well as racial and religious discrimination. While the family is potentially an important source of support for young Muslims, parents themselves are often struggling to adjust to their new life because of economic factors, language barriers or cultural conflict. This is compounded for men from patriarchal societies whose loss of power and social status may lead domestic violence.
A.A. came to Australia as a little boy twenty years ago. While his cultural-religious background is very different to the mainstream, he felt that because he was raised in Australia, he understood Australian values and was able to integrate. ‘I do not assimilate, I integrate.’ He ‘worked within mainstream Australia. I study everyday with non-Muslims. I catch public transport with them. We pull together. That is integrating.’ But he did not assimilate in the sense of being like young (non-Muslim) Australians where ‘things contradict my religious beliefs or even my moral beliefs, such as drinking alcohol, going to the nightclubs. I will not assimilate in that sense but I will integrate with everyday life.’

Respondents did not advocate isolation from the mainstream. According to G.S., ‘there are lots of people who say that they are integrating. For them, integration means respecting others. The more we mix with other people the more we give them a better understanding of our religion. So they too respect the way we are and take us as we are.’ Many parents find this difficult to accept because of their own uncertainties.

A.J. had no doubt that ‘there is a gap. And I will go further and say they have been caught in the “culture war” – if I may use the term – the two cultures - the ethnic or religious culture and the Western culture, and they suddenly find they haven’t got any identity and they want to find out where they stand.’ Muslim elders were to blame:

“They don’t make much contribution. They spend all their energy around the mosque. Build the mosque, control the mosque, run the mosque. But we have not gone beyond that. And I have said at many a meeting “get out of the Black hole that you are in … this is not where the problem is.” The problem is beyond that. How many widows have we got? How many of our children are in problems? How many of our children are in foster homes? Nobody seems to be bothered. They do not want to know about it. If they want to know, it is individually but not as a collective community.

Many parents are at a loss about how to cope. According to A.E., parents either have no idea of what their children are up to or ignore so as not to create another problem for them. They are ‘more than glad to blame it on other people’s children and they think they have got their children under control, but it is far from the truth.’ He felt that the longer parents had been in Australia, the ‘more open-minded they were. Obviously they hate the fact that their children go out, those are things that they are not meant to be doing but, I think, the kids can talk to them. Kids are afraid in some senses as well, not afraid but ashamed possibly. They do not want their parents to know “okay, this is what I get up to”.

U.B. also referred to the different ways in which parents reacted. Some were ‘quite understanding of their children but there are parents who are also quite forceful. Those who have just recently immigrated to Australia, a lot of them do not know the things that their children are facing. And I guess there is a reason why that happens, a lack of communication between parents and children, so it is important that parents understand that there is an issue, and it can only be resolved once that happens.’ One suggestion was that parents should be educated in parenting in Australia. A.E. advocated seminars with parents to ‘tell them “okay, this is what’s happening to youth. Open your eyes. These are problems you need to address now and if the parents really accept this is what is happening, have another step where parents and kids can join in together and address some of the problems.’

U.B. also felt that parents did not ‘necessarily have the tools because the environment they have come from is totally different to the environment they are in at the moment.’ A.A. observed that some parents ‘from strong cultural backgrounds … keep their strong mentality. Their kids that grow up in Australia don’t have that background. There is a gap in understanding between the two.’ A.J. too felt that stakeholders should convene a forum for parents and children where all the issues were ‘put on the table, categorised and then addressed. Here, what I have found is that it is so difficult to get together because only a handful of people that are concerned.’ Given their own uncertainties, according to A.E., some parents react in an authoritarian manner when their children are seen to embrace aspects of mainstream Australian culture. They stop them from going out with friends or on school excursions or participate in co-educational sporting activities at school.

Marriage across religious lines is also a source of conflict. According to G.S., ‘this is really hurting the family, especially where it is hidden from the family until the guy needs to marry. Some of the family will insist she convert and sometimes she is not ready for that. This is where most of the conflict happens. It is not common with young
women as much as young men because women are still too much under the control of the family or men. There is a double standard in some Muslim families. They allow young men to do things which they don’t allow young women to do. However, one case currently before the courts involves Bangladeshi teenager Kaimana Tahseen Hussain who is being tried for murdering her mother Shaheda in October 2006. Her defence is that her father Muhammad actually killed Shaheda and tried to kill her before turning the knife on himself when he learnt that she had a Christian boyfriend and was intending to convert to Christianity (Courier-Mail, 15 January 2008).

A.E. cited another kind of “intermarriage” that created conflict, marriage across national lines: ‘you know, if I’m South African and told my father I wanted to marry an Egyptian girl, for example, there will be a problem there. It is not just that “Oh no, she is Australian.” It is also “she’s not Indian, or she’s not Egyptian, she’s not Lebanese.” That problem is there. It doesn’t matter what religion you are.’ He called for parents to be educated by community leaders that it is permissible to ‘marry Muslims from different cultures or nationalities. The main thing is Islam. That will make it easier for everyone to get married.’ Sometimes parents attempt to take their children back “home” to get married. This creates problems of adjustment and reduces the “stock” of potential Muslim marriage partners for young Muslims in Australia.

G.S. pointed to the anomaly of segregating males and females, yet expecting the children to find marriage partners. ‘The Muslim community is ignoring the right for young people to mix. They are forced to meet illicitly because they don’t want people to identify them.’ She wonders how Muslims are expected to meet marriage partners ‘if we continue separating youth in our functions…. They want to meet their partner and family want young people to marry from their own culture, but they are not giving them the option to look for someone [who] in future will be their partner. And then when they marry someone from a different culture it gives trauma in the family.’

Discussion about the “generation gap” got some respondents to reflect on whether the Imams were providing appropriate guidance for young Muslims:

They need religious leaders who can accommodate them and listen to them without judging them. They need “guides”, if you want to call them that, people who can understand the circumstances of this society and not the circumstances of a different society, … not judge them because of what they do but just give them the right direction to do the practical things and reasonable in their guidance and their approach with the youth. Unfortunately, it is not happening in many places. With all due respect to the Imams, if you come from a country where you do not have diversity at all you are used to having one opinion. You just cannot implement this in Australia. We really have to change our mentality. We have to try to accommodate everyone and focus on the essence of the religion itself rather than getting into technicalities and legalism, like black and white. We have to really look at our situation and be practical about religion. If this does not happen that gap we are talking about will keep growing bigger and bigger. I think that unless we have a younger generation, not necessarily younger with age but with their thinking and their ability to accommodate and cater for everyone, I think we will not be able to get the youth back into the wider community. We don’t want a generation that feels marginalized or isolated or alienated.

Youth Centre: Integration or Isolation?

While young Muslims face many problems, there is no quick-fix because the different constituencies have different requirements, as A.E. points out:

I strongly believe that they [community leaders] might speak about the youth but they are speaking about a specific group which may be their kids, but there are different groups among the youth. You have one that goes to the mosque; one that is good to parents; one that has parents, one that does not have parents; one that hides things; one that does not care. There are a whole variety of youth and each one needs to be addressed. The main ones we have to target are the ones at risk. There is no use doing things for the one who is good and stays at home. It is the ones that are outside the net, they are the one’s we want to get.

An issue that was raised by several respondents was a Youth Centre for young Muslims who were ‘geographically very dispersed and the Centre would be very good to bring people together’ (A.A.). A.J. too felt that while Muslims from Fiji or South Africa who were fourth or even fifth generation and had experienced living in a predominantly non-Muslim society found it
‘easier to integrate with the wider community, others are pretty much aloof from the mainstream. They move around in their language-based groups. We have got to address this. If we have a Recreational House of our own, at least we can get them all together under one roof, break this before we take the next step of going into the wider community.’ S.S., however, is skeptical about Muslims isolating themselves from the mainstream:

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\text{It would be a grave mistake by Muslims, particularly the youth, to become self-marginalised. Because of the media it is very easy for Muslims to get into their own institutions. While I do not necessarily critique the establishment of Muslim institutions, to set up Youth Centres exclusively for Muslims will be a serious mistake. It could have the potential of a backlash down the future. My view would be that ‘Yes, Muslims can organize themselves, youth and others, build facilities, but not for the exclusive use of Muslims. Share this with the wider community.}
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A.A dismissed such criticism. He is adamant that it will ‘make nobody separate from mainstream society. It will be very good because it would allow the Muslim youth of Queensland to claim that they have built something in the community, and to be able to refer back to it. There is something there for them. We think that if it is supported by the government, this [would be] a very positive step towards creating social harmony and mutual respect, between Australian Muslims and non-Muslims.’

Young Muslims are already participating in separate sporting activities. For example, an Islamic Outdoor Soccer League was launched in early 2003 to promote ‘brotherhood and foster the spirit of friendship amongst the Muslim youth and general community.’ Teams like Bosnia, Iraq, Bafana Bafana, Dynamos, Indonesia, Yathrib Horsemen, and Brotherhood reflected national identities. Refugees from Iraq, Afghans, students from universities, the Turkish from Capalaba, Somalis from Holland Park, Fijians from Darra, Bosnians from Rochedale, and some teams which do not have an affiliation to a particular ethnic group, participate regularly.\(^7\) An Islamic Rugby League was started in January 2007 with the first game between Deen Machine and Brisbane Islamic Brothers.\(^8\) Muslim respondents believed that the racism of the wider society left them with no option but to participate in all-Muslim activities. According to I.G:

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\text{Many of the youth think that they will not be accepted because of their identity as Muslims. Another barrier is that parents think that such clubs will not be the right thing for their children because they will be mixing with the “wrong company”. They say that there are many temptations in the society, like drugs and alcohol. So unless they are really sure about the people whom their children are mixing with, they are not prepared to send them.}
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U.B., an organizer of the Islamic Soccer League, also described it in positive terms:

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\text{Recreation is an important aspect for young Muslims. Sometimes youth feel that there is nothing out there for them to do and as such they may come into mischievous events. So it is a way of bringing people together, having a good time, getting them to know each other, getting them to feel confident about themselves, feeling part of the community so that in future, if they do have issues they may be able to fall back upon Muslims in Brisbane here. They have the opportunity to be part of any club in Brisbane. However, it is not only about participating in sports. Individuals like to be among their friends and they would like to be accepted in a particular group. For instance, in a rugby club, after someone plays rugby they may socialize in certain types of activities, which may not be in accordance with Islamic teachings. Muslims may feel left out and if they do not participate, other team members may look at them in a different way. This is not the only reason however. Individuals in general would like to be amongst other people who have similar thoughts, similar understandings of life and, as a consequence of that, there is a logical progression. They would like to be in a team with other people who have similar interests as well. They will be able to train together, socialize, even after soccer matches, without needing to break their Islamic teachings. That is one of the reasons that I have come across. The initial objective was not necessarily the bridging between Muslims and non-Muslims. It is a service towards Muslim youth. It is not the aim to bridge the gap although that may be an ancillary objective. Now that we have had this competition running and it has been successful we have looked at opportunities that can be taken out of this competition. When we participated in an ethnically diverse competition called the Ethnic Communities of Queensland [ECOQ] Cup, individuals from}
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various [Muslim] teams were brought together to participate in that particular competition.

In response to whether this may be construed by non-Muslims as creating barriers, A.A. responded:

They are not barriers in the sense that it creates divisions. Someone who sees this as barriers, well, they have to see the wider picture and the wider picture is that this is not the issue. If you want to look at the issues that create barriers in the community, between Australian Muslim and non-Muslims, we firstly have to look at the grassroots level and when I say grassroots level I mean from primary through to high school level. You have to look at it that there is a six hundred year gap in the history of civilization that we are unaware of in Australia, of Islam’s contribution to modern-day science. That six hundred year gap was the dark ages in European civilization. If you want to look at what causes division let’s start there. The curriculum should include ancient history, Chinese civilization, Greek civilization, but also Muslim civilization, which was the longest spanning civilization. This is the grassroots level. When they start to understand what Muslims have contributed to society they will gain respect for the Muslim community. Let us look at these soccer games or little rugby league games. These are just minor issues. Christian organizations have their own tournaments and their own cups; the police have their own tournaments and their own cups, the schools have their own tournaments, everybody has their own little organizations. If we are going to pick on every little organization, we are not going to finish here, are we?

A.J. was a strong proponent of a place ‘where the Muslim youth can gather together … have some exercise or play indoor basketball or cricket or things like that.’ He has been negotiating with the Brisbane City Council since 2006 for land to build a Youth Centre. He believes that the existing soccer and rugby leagues isolated Muslims. The Centre would provide young Muslims with ‘a home. When I say home, I mean a place where they can meet and then we can invite other youth from within the locality to come and join us. There has to be a starting point.’ Young Muslims would not integrate on their own: ‘If we are going to leave it to the youth to find an organization that will take them, I do not think it will happen. I have not seen this happen for the last ten years because, firstly, there is hesitation among individuals. They do not feel that much confidence that they can go and ask for membership.’

G.A. also advocated a Youth Centre that would bring together young Muslims ‘from different cultures’ and could include non-Muslims. Afterall, she added, ‘the youth are getting together outside, in the backstreets and the corner houses where they are not from the same religion. People from India get together, same background but not all Muslim. So we need a club which will bring multi-cultures together, focusing on the need of Muslim and multi-cultural youth. We don’t want to isolate youth.’ A.E. endorsed the idea of a Youth Centre as the first step towards breaking barriers among Muslims:

They are starting to appreciate each other, not just ‘he goes to this mosque or he goes to that mosque or he’s from this country and he’s from that country.’ To play each other in football you are aggressive and then you gain respect for each other from the particular league. I think it is a fantastic idea…. I think we should focus on females as well. I think that it is an important thing that people are looking for a venue, a place where they can calm their nerves which they sort of work up and have nothing to vent it on.

A.E. spoke from experience. A few years ago he was involved with the Brisbane City Council in organizing projects for Muslim youth who were becoming a “problem” at the local mall, the Garden City Shopping Centre.

We worked on a strategy to contain the whole situation and try to get the kids to do something else instead of hanging out in the shopping centres. They [were] kids in year 11 and 12 and [were] going through racism. So when they go to a shopping centre, all they see is people that are giving them a hard time, so they vent their frustration. If they went out shopping they would feel that people were looking at them and if someone said something about them or their Muslim identity they would get into a heavy brawl where the police would get involved and some would end up in jail and some in hospitals. The problem was fresh so we thought we would attack it early. Brisbane City Council wanted to do skateboard rings. I did not think that our youth would attend these things. If anything, it would be more of a problem.

A.E. rented a house near the Holland Park mosque where he organized barbecues, soccer, and go-karting on weekends for the youth to ‘enjoy their own company instead of going out’.
He targeted ‘people who are outside’ the mosque. Mosque attendance was not part of the program. His strategy was to be near the mosque and when it was time for prayer, he would tell them, ‘you guys wait here, we’ll pray and come back.’ Youngsters gradually started to attend the mosque with him. The plan began unraveling when the Imam’s and other parents ‘came in and put their own input. The youth saw that and ran away.’ A.E. welcomed the Youth Centre and felt that it should ‘start off just for Muslims so that out youth can adjust and things like that.’ Like A.J. he advocated structured programs to involve youth from other religious backgrounds: ‘Church groups for example, or different organizations which don’t belong to a church group and help the integration process through that way.’

Discussion about the Youth Centre raised interesting questions about who would control it. For A.A., nobody ‘in particular should be controlling it. There is a strong diversity of ethnic backgrounds under the banner of Islam in Queensland. Whoever is willing to be a member or to help out in any way should be a part of it, as long as the youth have strong involvement. If the ICQ want to take full ownership of it, that will not be very productive in the sense that the youth will have nothing to contribute towards, [and feel] that there is no self-ownership or nothing that they have really done.’ A.E. was clear on this point:

*The youth need to be given the opportunity to run their community. The elder generation does not understand what the youth need today. The older generation has to step back. It does not matter how highly educated they are. There are people out there in AFIC or ICQ … truly, I’m not afraid of saying it, who have been there for 20 years, 30 years, and they are not in touch with what is happening with the youth. They need to let the youth feel they have got a say in the society they are living in. They feel alienated from the mainstream so if they have the capacity, let them into Muslim organizations. Let them build their own foundations now, because if our foundation was good and strong, we would not be here today.*

During March and April 2007 meetings were held at the Logan mosque to discuss the Youth Centre. Older respondents, on the other hand, pointed out that that some of the “youth” at these meetings were in their forties and may well “hijack” the project. Aside from these differences, little progress has been made because of the difficulty of sourcing government funding for an exclusive Muslim Youth Centre at a time when multiculturalism is on the retreat in Western countries and when the message from government sources seems to be “integrate or go home”?

**“Homegrown Terror”**

Many Muslims, non-Muslims, and government officials are wondering about the impact of international politics on Muslim identities. Will Australia witness homegrown terrorism? Several high-profile cases have captured the public imagination in recent years. David Hicks was arrested in Afghanistan and released in 2007 after spending several years in Guantanamo Bay; thirteen Muslim men were arrested in 2005 in predawn raids in Melbourne and Sydney following a two-year operation which police said had prevented a terror attack targeting a nuclear reactor in southern Sydney; Faheem Khalid Lodhi was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment in New South Wales for seeking prices for chemicals capable of making explosives; Joseph “Jihad Jack” Terrence Thomas was convicted for receiving funds from Al-Qaeda. His case was overturned on appeal but he was retried and became the first Australian to be placed under a control order under new anti-terrorism laws.

Respondents observed that international events impacted on local Muslim attitudes. I.G. pointed out that when something happened in London, they [media/politicians] put our younger people in fear that they will be under the microscope. If that person decides to go to the mosque they will, maybe, be under investigation. It might drive them [young people] to be more isolated. So we have to deal with young people in a very sensitive way; otherwise we can lose them, either to extremists or in that direction.” A.A. also felt that government had to re-examine its foreign policy, which was perceived to be biased against Muslim countries: ‘we must understand that to try to … deter the idea of extremism, government should look at their foreign policy and their attitude towards Islam. The statements that they make, the ill-minded statements affect the majority of the majority of the mainstream Australian community.’ Barbara Franz makes a similar point with regard to Europe. The ‘War on Terror,’ she believes, ‘radicalized more of Europe’s Muslim and non-Muslim population against the
US-British coalition. Arguably this has strengthened terrorist recruitment efforts among many alienated Muslims who view the war on terror as a war on Islam and claim common cause with their suffering brethren in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories, Iraq, Chechnya, Lebanon, and elsewhere (Franz 2007: 91-92).

Inflammatory anti-Muslim utterances and policies also affect Young Muslims’ attitudes, most interviewees felt. A.J., for example, questioned the wisdom of the 2005 anti-Terror laws. ‘We are told it is made for everyone. But you and I know what it is made for.’ He also referred to the tightening of citizenship laws, including an English test. ‘My answer to that is “Right, you pick up a group of Australians born here, third generation, and give them the test and give us the test. We will send a dozen people and we’ll see who passes and who fails.’ The period of citizenship is also a thorny issue. ‘Currently after having stayed here for two years you can apply for citizenship. Now it has been extended to four years. Right, the answer of the government would be that they are being extended across the board. Fair enough but we all know where it is coming from.’ U.B. too felt that government was culpable.

The problem with the government at the moment is that they see Muslims as “the Other”, as a fringe group and say that terrorism is a problem of the Muslims. Every time they say that, Muslims feel that they are not part of Australia and see that they may be a problem. They also refer to the tightening of citizenship laws, including an English test. ‘My answer to that is “Right, you pick up a group of Australians born here, third generation, and give them the test and give us the test. We will send a dozen people and we’ll see who passes and who fails.’ The period of citizenship is also a thorny issue. ‘Currently after having stayed here for two years you can apply for citizenship. Now it has been extended to four years. Right, the answer of the government would be that they are being extended across the board. Fair enough but we all know where it is coming from.’

Inter-faith forums are regarded as important to build bridges. A.J. does not believe that attacks on Muslims will escalate to physical attacks. ‘I can speak about Queensland. I do not think that it is going to happen because we are slowly making inroads towards inter-faith dialogue and a lot of people, through these forums, are being educated and without any reservation we can tell them that, “Look, Muslims are here to stay. If you have any reservations be open and discuss them with us”. The aim of such forums, and the key to a more tolerant future, according to I.G., was to get ‘different stakeholders, for example, government, parents, teachers, to say what policies they would like to see implemented, to assist young people integrate into society?’ Government, business and others have an important role to play. It is crucial, according to G.S., for mainstream society to see ‘people from different backgrounds, especially young women who cover their head, working at different levels. We are encouraging business people and other people to employ young women and young people from the Muslim community.’ By employing women, hijab would come to be accepted as normal rather than be seen as an aberration.
Critical, respondents felt, was the media, which was instrumental in shaping how Muslims were perceived. For G.S., ‘young people are victimized by the media. Media should start to just show more sense; otherwise, it will drive young people to the extreme.’ A.J. was also concerned about the media. ‘Media has always been very much involved in negative reporting. I’ll give you an example. Some Muslim youth were involved in a brawl and the next day the paper goes “Muslim youth in brawl.” At the same time if there was a general group of youth of a different background involved in a brawl there would be “Youth in a fight”. The media has always been that way. And that is one reason why the Muslim youth have been very concerned that they are being branded for no reason.’ To cite a recent instance, in the family murder involving Kaiana Tahseen Hussain, the Gold Coast Bulletin reported the story on 11 October 2006 as a ‘Ritual Muslim killing.’ Dr. Shahjahan Khan, vice-president of the ICQ, wrote to the paper on 15 October:

The heading was not only inappropriate but also factually incorrect. There is no such thing called “ritual or honour” killing in the religion of Islam…. Referring to the brutal murder, your reporter quotes “It is the Islamic way” although Islam is absolutely against the killing of any innocent person. A killer is a killer, regardless of his or her religion. The particular report in your daily has nothing to do with the teachings of Islam. In fact, the act of the alleged man is totally opposite to what Islam teaches. Ironically, your reporter totally missed this fact, and chose an incorrect, but provocative, heading for the news that has hurt the entire Muslim community. Attaching religion with criminal news is unfair and a reflection of ill motive. This is more so in the current global situation and ongoing persistent attempts of a section of anti-Muslim leaders to unfairly link acts of evil with Islam. We would request you to publish this view of our community in your daily, and to show more sense of respect for the religion of about a quarter of the world’s population as well as avoid inappropriately linking criminal acts with the religion of Islam.

Government funding is urgently needed, according to I.G.: ‘If we can get the government to fund organizations to support the family, especially as the extended family is not here to support them. So they need more support through counseling.’ She believes that 9/11 had some positive spin-offs. ‘The government start to acknowledge there is need to look at the needs of Muslims and Federal, State and local government … they start to offer funds to organize.’ In September 2005 a Muslim Reference Group (MRG) was appointed by the Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs, John Cobb, following the Prime Minister’s Summit with Muslim community leaders. The MRG worked with the Australian Government and Muslim communities to ‘create communication and support networks that will promote understanding between the Muslim community and the wider Australian community.’ Government did take certain initiatives following the Group’s report. This included the appointment of two youth workers, Access Services employed two unemployment officers, funds were made available for a symposium and Harmony Day, which I.G. saw as ‘very important for the mainstream community to understand Islam and Muslims, and our needs.’

Young Muslims are beginning to organise themselves. Younger women from IWAQ started the An-Nisa Youth Group Inc.; there are Muslim Students Associations at universities; some female teenagers started the Islamic Female Association (IFA). Al-Nisa comprises of young Muslim women across cultures and nationalities who aim ‘to promote a positive image of Islam and unite young Muslim women and provide them with support and an environment in which they are free to express themselves.’ IFA attempts to involve Muslim youth in charitable, social and Islamic events in the Muslim and broader Australian community. Representatives from these organizations are part of MY UNITY (‘Muslim Youth Unity’), a coordinating body to unite different Muslim youth groups in Brisbane and work for a common purpose. The Federation of Australian Muslim Students (FAMSY) QLD is part of a national student and youth organisation with branches throughout Australia. It was originally formed in 1968. The theme of its national 2007 conference ‘Islam: My Way, My Purpose (Community participation, Political awareness and leadership),’ captured its concern to contribute meaningfully in the current situation.

According to A.E., while these initiatives were welcome, ‘with a lot of youth I do not think they come across too strongly and I think that everyone has got their own preferences here.’ While A.E. expressed doubts about the quality of leadership and deep divisions, the seeds have arguably
been sown for something significant. These groups are empowering young women in particular, and also involving them in things like trivia and sports nights to provide meaningful entertainment. The Islamic Awareness Week at universities and other such events are used to showcase Islam to the wider community. There is a rider to this. Most young Muslims involved in these organizations are educated and relatively more affluent. It is poorer Muslims, those whose parents are unemployed or underemployed, whose parents do not speak English, who live in depressed areas, or whose parents survive on welfare, who remain most “at risk”. As A.E. points out, ‘We have got a lot of youth organizations. They are working. Most are university students and they are not a threat. What they are doing is great [but] I keep stressing that the people who really need help are the ones being left behind…. We are still at the early stages. The government can do something but they need to address the right people, not the people that they want there, but the people that need to be there.’

Despite Muslim frustration at some policies, community leaders did not believe that young Muslims would become radicalized. A.E., for example, felt strongly that this was ‘not the case.’

Growing up in Brisbane, I know most of the people. Obviously I am also looking at people who have not lived in Brisbane all their lives. For them, I cannot speak for everyone, but from the people I know, I do not think that it is coming remotely close to the attitude of the youth but anything can happen.

A.J. felt that the small numbers of Muslims in Queensland and absence of a dominant national group like the Lebanese in Sydney of Turks in Melbourne made the scenario different. ‘I do not know of Muslim youth here who have attended rallies as such, other than those to do with issues like “Fair-Go” Palestine. But not in the same strength as you would see in the southern states.’

U.B. also commented on the ethnic make-up of the population in the different states in Australia: ‘In Brisbane, here in Queensland the constitution of the Muslim youth is different to that in Sydney where Muslims are mainly from a Middle Eastern background. In Brisbane here, the majority come from the Indian sub-continent, Fiji, Europe, and Southern Africa.’ The fact that Muslims do not live in ethnic enclaves, they constitute a tiny percentage of the population, and are diverse in terms of nationalism, language, ethnicity, and practices, reduces the likelihood of militancy, respondents felt.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper has underscored the many problems facing young Muslims in Brisbane. This includes youth questioning their identities, employment opportunities, adjustment at school, and questions about their beliefs and practices. Many feel trapped between cultures as their parents often come from a different environment and expect them to conduct themselves in ways similar to how they may have behaved. This is compounded by marginalization or perceived marginalization in the workforce or racism at schools and sporting clubs. And they are frustrated by the stereotyping and Islamophobia when they try to express their Islamic identities in public spaces. Young Muslims have responded in different ways to these challenges. While some have been open to ‘outside’ cultures, others have resisted integration. This may be because of the huge gulf in language, culture, values, and lifestyle between themselves and their mainstream counterparts. Or they may be torn between loyalty to family and the desire to integrate into the mainstream. Some young Muslims have resisted assimilation by associating primarily with other Muslims, especially those from the same country of origin.

Failure to embrace young Muslims has had disastrous consequences in Europe. Barabara Franz has pointed out that it has made younger Muslims more vulnerable to radicalization, which she defines as ‘the progressive development of an individual from law-abiding citizen/denizen to militant Islamist.’ The many problems that we have referred to lead to a feeling of being ‘disenfranchised in a society that does not fully accept them, and so they turn to Islam as a badge of identity. Individuals of these cohorts are then radicalized by extremist Muslim clerics or fundamentalist youth groups’ (Franz 2007: 91-92). The task for policymakers and community or youth leaders is to systematically address the concerns of young Muslims. Parents can begin by acknowledging the problems instead of sweeping them under the carpet, as some of the respondents suggest they have been doing. Parents are often ill equipped to deal with their children’s problems and organisations and professionals need to step in and provide training seminars to ensure that the
family does not become an impediment to integration. Government can assist by funding this programme and getting involved in other ways as well, such as job creation programs so that young Muslims feel that they have a stake in society and, by being visible in public spaces, Muslims, especially those who wear hijab, may be more readily accepted by the mainstream landscape. Given the shortage of skills it would also make sense for government to make maximum use of the human capital at its disposal. Employment and skills training are important ways to develop the self-confidence and self-respect of young Muslims. This social empowerment may eventually give young Muslims the necessary confidence and security to integrate more readily in the wider society. Government assistance has to be subtle so that Muslims are not marginalized by those who believe that they are receiving too much assistance.

Policymakers can also assist by not discrediting multiculturalism completely but assisting with things like the Youth Centre provided it becomes a stepping stone to interaction between young Muslims and their non-Muslim counterparts. Foreign policy remains a major hurdle. If the government is seen to be even-handed towards Muslim countries, young Muslims will most likely react positively while the Australian mainstream community may likewise gain respect for Muslims. Crucial in this process, respondents felt, was that the invective from officials and conservative media commentators had to change. Discourse that takes place in the framework of a “clash of civilizations” is clearly unhelpful. The positive steps taken by government in consulting with the Muslim Reference Group was undermined by statements by politicians which fuelled anti-Muslim sentiments in the majority population. Public recognition and respect for Muslim cultural values will provide young Muslims with a cultural frame of reference to build a meaningful life.

Despite the many problems, most respondents were optimistic that the problems could be surmounted provided avenues were created for young Muslims to interact with the wider community. This should be addressed urgently because young Muslims are the “yardsticks” for whether broader Muslim integration will succeed or fail. Young Muslim men and women can become agents of change in the transformation of Muslim families and communities, and the relationship of Muslims to mainstream Australian society. The success of security programs may also depend on the ability to deal with Muslim youth. Perhaps the fraught relationship between government and Muslims may change with the election of Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister in November 2007. Young Muslims, for their part, must demonstrate a willingness to live in a multi-racial, multi-ideological, and multi-religious democratic society that can accommodate multiple identities while maintaining social cohesion.

NOTES

1. Research for this paper was carried out while the author was a Research Fellow at the Griffith Islamic Research Unit, Griffith University, Rockhampton. The author would like to thank the Director, Dr Muhammad Abdullah and staff for their unqualified assistance and support.
2. During 2007, Dr Sansnee JIROJWONG, School of Nursing and Health Studies, Faculty of Sciences, Engineering and Health, Central Queensland University, directed a project on ‘Identity and Self-Perception among Young Muslim people in Brisbane, Rockhampton and Mackay, Queensland. The project included both ethnographic methods and a survey. While several hundred surveys were conducted, the results cited here are based on 63 randomly selected but representative questionnaires. The author was involved in the qualitative aspect of the research, which included interviewing stakeholders.
3. The term ‘mainstream’ is used in the literature to refer to the majority Anglo segment of the Australian population whose ideas, actions, and values are widely regarded as the norm.
4. Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Gulf War of January 1991 led to attacks on Muslims and Arabs. In September 1990 in Victoria, attackers attacked a mosque in Coburg and ransacked the Islamic Council of Victoria’s offices; the Al-Taqwa Mosque at Werribee Islamic School was burnt to the ground; graffiti were sprayed on the Preston and Lysterfield mosques in Melbourne; the Lakemba mosque in Sydney received bomb threats on two consecutive Fridays; in January 1991 the Rooty Hill mosque in Sydney was fire bombed. The Australian Federation of Islamic Councils warned Muslims to keep a low profile and suggested that Muslim women only go out when absolutely necessary.
5. Dr. Ameer Ali of the Federation of Islamic Councils called it a racist stunt by the government to boost flagging support. ‘If they say that the Muslim women are trying to hide something... I am asking the same question with the other people that dress up, the turban... the priest, the Christian nuns.’ Ikebal Adam Patel of AFIC issued a circular to Muslims to avoid reacting to what was ‘a discriminatory act to make Muslims angry. Now that the Federal election has been formally announced, this is bait for us to get upset with the government and hence cause us to rise up in protest in the hope that they may win some extra votes by using “anti-Muslim sentiments.... We
believe this is simply a scare tactic by the Federal government who are trying to address a particular voting group and may be aided and abetted by some in the media. http://www.livenews.com.au/Articles/2007/10/14/Airports_to_ban_Islamic_headscarves_and http://www.afic.com.au/Muslims%20Australia Circular%20to%20Muslim%20Community%20 regarding%20Hijab%202007.pdf.

5. Islamophobia, as used in this paper, refers to the fear or hatred of Muslims, or a desire to limit their civil liberties. It corresponds to sexism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia in areas related to gender, race, sexual orientation, and nationality. It is often caused by a person attributing the actions of a few extreme, violent, Fundamentalist Muslim terrorists to the entire population of Muslims. http://www.translationdirectory.com/glossaries/glossary007_i.html

6. From 15 October 2007, the Migration Regulations 1994 were amended to introduce a new requirement that applicants for visas must sign a statement that they would respect Australian laws and will comply with Australian law for the duration of their stay in Australia (a values statement); The Australian Citizenship Amendment (Citizenship Testing) Act 2007 required applicants for Australian citizenship to successfully complete a test which would satisfy the Minister that she possessed a basic knowledge of English, and had an adequate knowledge of Australia and of the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship; the Australian Citizenship Act 2007 increased the residence requirement for citizenship applicants to from two to four years lawful residence.

INTERVIEWS

G.S. 13 March 2007. Islamic Women’s Association of Queensland (IW AQ).

A.A. 3 April 2007. Arrived as a young boy from Palestine. Graduate of Griffith University Represented youth on organizations such as the Muslim Community Reference Group, Qld. Police Service and National Youth Group.

U.B. 26 March 2007. Australian-born university graduate. Past president of the Federation of the Australian Muslim Students (FAMSY); Member of the Muslim Reference Group (Youth Committee); organizer of Brisbane Islamic Soccer League.

A.E. 16 March 2007. Muslim Coordinator, Access Services, Youth worker for fifteen years.

I.G. 13 March 2007. Degree in Islamic Studies and education. Teacher at the Islamic College of Brisbane; Principal, Kuraby madrassah for several years. Youth-camp organizer.


REFERENCES


KEYWORDS Migration; youth; identity; Islamophobia; 9/11

ABSTRACT This paper examines the identities and self-perceptions of young Muslims in Brisbane, Australia, and the social, economic, and political context in which these are configured. Based primarily on qualitative research, this study examines the challenges that young Muslims face in relation to mainstream (majority) Australian society, especially the generational tensions between parents and young Muslims; the relationship of young Muslims across ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and national lines; perceptions of rising Islamophobia, and contested authority among Muslims. This is largely played out in a “clash of civilizations” discourse. While young Muslims are faced with many serious challenges, they themselves as well as community leaders believe that urgent and appropriate intervention by relevant stakeholders will alleviate many of the tensions. This includes educating parents, creating forums for inter-faith meetings, job creation policies, less cavalier treatment of Muslims by government and media, and a re-direction of foreign policy. Many young Muslims and community leaders are positive about the future of Muslims in Australia, provided there is a push from decision-makers. The election of Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister may positively turn the tide in this respect.

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