

Presentation for the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria

“A Progressive Muslim Voice in Australia : Reflections, Experiences and Challenges”

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I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land and pay my respects to its elders, past and present. I greet you all with the universal Muslim greeting of peace, Asalam Alaikum- peace be upon you all.

Some people think that the term ‘Progressive Muslim’ may be an incongruous term. As if to infer that the Muslim state of being is a static entity – when in fact it’s as organic and prone to change as any human being can be, accounting for influences of degree of faith, culture, socio economic status and even the political environment in which we reside. These variables fuse together, strongly impacting then end product of who we are, and for Muslims in Australia, it couldn’t be more true.

In briefly examining the history of Muslims in this country, many of you may be surprised to learn scholarship shows that Muslims have been visiting Australian shores since the 1600’s. Maccassan fishermen and pearl divers are documented as being the first Muslims to arrive in NW Australia, many of whom settled here and married into indigenous communities. Fast forward to 2012, and we now have a diverse community of over 70 ethnicities and 120 linguistic groups alone. And that’s just in Victoria. Over 30% of Muslims in Australia are born here, and over 50% are under 25 years old. The fact that the Muslim community is increasingly being led and defined by Australian-born Muslims means a localised approach to Islam is promoting a critical engagement within society, espousing dialogue, vitality and a firm commitment to justice.

This continued Muslim presence in Australia since before white settlement, as well as during and after is a part of Australian history largely unknown to many, which I believe increases the belief of the Muslim as ‘the Other’ in Australia.

At this point it is perhaps salient to mention of my own example in illustrating my association, or history, with Australia.

My family, who have Indian ancestry, but are of four generations East African born, my father's family from Zanzibar, my Mother's from Dar es Salaam in Tanzania - arrived from Nairobi, where I was born, in the 70s to central Australia. My father was initially offered a posting as a Flying Doctor, servicing the rural communities of NT. After almost a year there, he was offered another appointment under the Commonwealth government to work as the chief Pathologist for a hospital in central Victoria. So with wife and 3 daughters in tow, he made the move to Bendigo where we remained for many years. If you can imagine at the time the experience my parents must have had, to arrive in a new country, coming themselves from a relatively conservative background no less, though themselves both educated in the UK, now with 3 young daughters – I'm guessing that the move to a quiet country town would have been very strategic.

Needless to say, though we arrived in this so called 'Western country' from a more conservative, or, eastern tradition, my parents never once raised us to believe that our occupational or life goals could in any way be impeded by our religion. Rather, this was used as a source of courage at times of hardship, especially when distance from overseas family, friends and familiar networks would have otherwise rendered us defeated.

I can say confidently, that I was raised to be an Australian Muslim, integrating well into my school, neighbourhood and wider community – never once feeling that Islam restricted me in achieving my potential. I attended the local state school, and Anglican grammar school, went on school camps, bush danced, barracked for Geelong and never missed an episode of Countdown. My being Muslim was always there, as it is now, defining a part of me, but not all of me.

My mother worked as a community health nurse for more than 40 years, and my father too, although officially retired continues to dabble in various exploits including

lecturing and tutoring – thoroughly enjoying his ability to divulge the skills he has honed over half a century, for the benefit of others.

And this ultimately is the litmus test for the Australian Muslim. For those who have achieved so much because of the generosity of their society, to then in turn give back. This is their duty as an Australian, and their obligation as a Muslim. And in my personal experience, this is the trademark for the overwhelming majority of the Muslims in this country. As history has shown, Muslims here have enjoyed and continue to enjoy a rich tradition of successful integration in this country. Mine is but one of thousands of success stories. And yet the sad reality is, that for every success story, there is an anecdote of discrimination, or Islamophobia, that I could relay as part of the more recent evolution of how Islam is at times seen in this country.

I work part time for a Federal MP. Work anecdotes – clients, Jerry, and perceptions of ethnics, customer rudeness, prejudices, etc.

It's important to clarify here that despite common perception, Islam is not a culture in and of itself. To be a Muslim does not mean to be an Arab, or to have a Sub continental lifestyle. Islam is in fact a supra-culture, which means it fits over all cultures, allowing the organic culture to remain. The only cultural manifestations that shouldn't be retained for Muslims are those that contravene clear Islamic imperatives. For example, it is relatively commonplace in Australia for people to drink alcohol. As alcohol is prohibited in Islam, generally, Muslims won't take part in that. Yet I do not believe that makes us any less Australian for doing so. In fact, I believe my family and I manage to weave our Muslim-ness and our Australian-ness quite successfully; we believe we have a distinctly Australian Islamic confluence, which incorporates an appreciation of mainstream perspectives AND an understanding of our spiritual needs; achieving a parallel coexistence without obstacle. I guess you might call that progressive. I call it reality. For example, when I was working F/T some years ago, it was not uncommon for me to perform one of the five daily prayers for Muslims at the office. As a family we picnic along the Yarra, enjoy the Australia Day fireworks, cringe with delight as we find disturbing similarities between us and Kath and Kim, we barrack for any Victorian team, as long as it's Geelong at the Grand Final, help out at the working bee for Kindy – and all that other normal stuff. And we are not unusual

Muslims in that sense - as all our Muslim friends readily identify as Australian and lead similarly normal lives.

Core Islamic values of justice, humanity, egalitarianism, respect and freedom are obviously completely in line with the Australian ethos. There is also the Islamic law that you must follow the law of the country you are living in, so I do not feel that I have any conflict in loyalty to either Islam or my country - Islamic law dictates an allegiance to the law of the land in which you find yourself. Unfortunately however, the challenge of cultural or a gendered interpretation of Islam that privileges men's entitlements over equality, can occur and when it does, agencies and individuals within the Muslim community are charged with attending to these matters as a human rights concern. Though typically, these responses are frequently contingent upon state funding which is inadequate.

It is useful to add that the Judeo-Christian laws of governance on which this country's constitution is founded, are inherently not in conflict with Islamic jurisprudence. For example, Islam fully concurs with all aspects of the 10 commandments, and biblical law. The ethic of democracy underpins this same law. Therefore democratic countries and their laws do not impede Islamic practice, but actually facilitate this under the provision of free speech and religious persuasion. And this understanding of Islam's fluidity is not heretical, but endemic to its essence of coexistence. But you never hear this side of the story.

I attended a Melbourne Writers Festival event on Friday, relating the challenges of telling African stories that counter the stereotype. Consideration was weighed about why we like to lump Africa together as one entity without accounting for incredible linguistic and cultural diversity in that nation. Apparently it's because we want to be fascinated with something dark, troubled, struggling and undermined – so we can step in and feel better about ourselves. This begs the question of how does diminishing the reality of a nation's people as a collective whole benefit anyone? How does this do justice to their lived experience of rich histories, traditions, and pioneering contributions to certain technology like mpesa mobile money transfer systems, or their prolific gains in sports and artistic endeavours?

I make this analogy because it is in this continuum of mindset that that Muslim community tends to be so readily brushed with; as a monolithic and non-negotiable identity. Such overwhelming generalisations do little to stem the tide of gross public bias. This sets into overdrive the need for the broader community to engage with 'progressives' due to a skewed understanding and apprehension amount Islam and Muslims.

The real tragedy of Progressive Muslims in relentlessly investing so much energy and resource into reactive efforts means that substantive gains in proactive community educating initiatives are then compromised.

In May this year, I read a newspaper article by a prominent lawyer and activist Kerry Murphy, who mentioned that the term 'human rights' did not appear anywhere in Tony Abbott's 3000 word address to the Institute of Public Affairs on Friday entitled "The Coalition's Plan for more secure borders'. The word 'Illegal' appeared 11 times and 'asylum' once. This failure to even acknowledge that human rights was relevant is disturbing, though not surprising, given that the asylum seekers' plight is conventionally summarized in three words 'stop the boats'. And it is precisely this level of discourse in the political realm that typifies the Muslim community's challenge to progress from one of 'us and them'.

The political expediency of this 'us and them' dichotomy feeds also into Media, and the tabloid media in particular. Their dogged capacity to highlight a minority issue in the Muslim community, who comprise less than 2% of our population, and yet whose exposure in the media is clearly in excess of 2% of 'front page news' items in any given quarter. Numerous media outlets are replete with Muslim stereotypes we've come to know and loathe; loaded words, Islamic person, Islamic Militant, Islamic Insurgent, Islamic terrorist.

It is interesting that in Norway this past week, Anders Behring Breivik, the man responsible for gunning down 71 people, was NOT at any point labelled a terrorist despite repeatedly attesting to his political manifesto underscoring his actions. His faith and political beliefs were not manipulated by the media or government to in any way to justify his actions, even while he claimed they were his motivation. I have to

wonder what would have been the headlines and his fate were his name Ahmed Hussain Breivik.

Muslims here are forging an uphill battle against the odds to be integrated. And for the most part, until the recent global polarization locating Muslim as the 'other', many enjoyed success. However, the constant barrage of Islamophobic hype in the past decade, has been relentless.

It's interesting to consider a cursory review of the way some minorities in our society are being commanded to 'learn English' or bugger off. Blend in, or butt out. To stop being confronting but also stop retreating. To come forward, but only so far. By perpetually redefining parameters of what constitutes appropriate assimilation levels for the OTHER the discourse has morphed into a farce. But what's not so farcical is when your 8 year old child, for example, confides in you that she is proud to be an Australian and a Muslim, but too embarrassed to tell her friends at school about the 'Muslim' part, in case no-one likes her. And that's a sad indictment on the claim to a 'fair go' this Nation prides itself on, presenting a truly regressive reality at times.

For Muslims, the diatribe is swift and merciless. Assuredly, you will rarely if at all hear about the Muslim postie, lawyer or writer or Poet – even though they are all out there, and they ARE. Look closer and you'll see we do have success stories. Think back to Mos and Mo from the Amazing Race in 2011, or more recently Amina Shafei, a MasterChef contender this past season. In the UK there was Mo Farah, the sprinting Olympian champion, in the US, Mohammed Ali a class act boxer – for them, their faith did not define their contribution to our public sphere nor did it limit their engagement. In these cases, society has lauded these individuals on their merit – which is all any of us deserves. When we cease to appropriate labels upon persons, or indeed a community, it is a mark of their seamless coexistence with ours.

It's exhausting, but the battle to redress these imbalances continues. Not surprisingly, the presence of the progressive Muslim voice is being increasingly found in activism. And this is a voice not defined by its faith, but in spite of it. Accepting this as the status quo, becomes the challenge not so much for the progressive Muslim cohort, but now for mainstream Australia.

Forums that invite the confident voices of many in our community, previously stifled – or lacking a self-belief in their own agency - can increasingly be found in universities, NGOs, the arts sector and certainly in the community welfare industry.

As far as a progressive approach is concerned, gross oversights in compassion and foresight practically command activism into being. New modalities have entered the public sphere in which increasingly Muslims are finding traction to voice their concerns. These include feature and Short film, social media, music, the internet, poetry and comedy – to name but a few mediums. Knowing an injustice and seeking to fight it are no longer impossible. Our globalised world has made the accountability of governments and corporations more transparent and this scrutinizing has been the undoing of many a dictator, fallen leader and media magnate. You could even posit that Big Brother has in some cases, imploded. This is global progress, impacting on us all, including Muslims.

While our multicultural identities vary, activism is an apt reminder that our humanity levels us equally irrespective of our race, religion or creed before the rule of law. And surely, this is a progressive mindset shared across faith and spiritual traditions. To this end symbolic gestures of shared cultural spaces and inclusiveness at celebrations and commemorations bode well for us as a nation in acknowledging our varied traditions. Particularly considering how in the public domain, notions of ‘them’ and ‘us’ have bred an often troubling perception of some communities’ standing in the mainstream. The hyperbole associated with ‘otherness’, only entrenches stereotypes.

The example of the Muslim women’s experience is salient because it reflects a lived reality that is so often misrepresented. Findings from the AMWCHR (Australian Muslim Women’s Centre for Human Rights) reveal that in the West, and Australia in particular, a significant amount of Muslim women's time "on air" has been used to either explain the hijab and burqa or to advocate women's right to wear it, depending on how slow a news week it’s been. The oppressiveness of the Hijab has become a national obsession, preventing Muslim women as actors in society from being regarded as anything more than defenders of their headwear. It’s getting boring. There are many consequences of this, but two urgent issues emerge which are: that women with scarves are apparently incapable of addressing any other issue bar their

headgear, and secondly, that in restricting ourselves to this topic, an opportunity has been created for Muslim men to monopolise and define the experience of being Muslim.

In reality, Muslim women have a notable and proud tradition of activism. Why is it, then, that we hear so little of it? Perhaps the concern for the oppression of Muslim women is more correctly identified as a concern about the intrusion of Muslim women into the Australian landscape. In fact, Joumanah ElMattraah the Director of AMWCHR, says it perfectly with:

‘Instead of being understood, Muslim women have been relegated to being saved. The historical discourse on Muslim women's emancipation might be crudely summarised as follows: colonising nations were to save us from Islam's misogyny, then the socialist/nationalist movements were to save us from our imperial masters, then the Islamists were to save us from nationalist heresy and the evils of the West, and now the human rights movement offers itself as our saviour. Pardon us if we don't faint in anticipation!’

LANDMINE JOKE: Afghan women still walk 3 paces behind their men folk, despite advances in equality – due to landmines...

At the end of the day, as we fastforward to 2012, we have Australian Muslim men and women who are tired of being located, placated and dissected. Through engagement, activism and acknowledgment of their contributions, they have forged a progressive voice. And while challenges in locating a space for this voice occur, the resilience is intractable. I would posit that their tenacity is akin to the Aussie Muslim battler.

To conclude with I would like to end with an excerpt of Randa Abdel Fattah's recent poem "Not Negotiable". Randa is an Australian Muslim award winning author, activist, and lawyer. To give some context to her poem, it was penned after a solid week of anti-Muslim, anti-burqa, anti-migrant news stories flooded the media waves. And it flips the non-negotiable stereotype on its head, by proclaiming its own voice. It articulates the frustration and challenges mounted against the progressive mindset of Australian Muslims. I should preface this with a disclaimer that it is without apology, confronting, and challenging of stereotypes, in a way that celebrates identity:

I Am Not Negotiable

When you exist in the centre of a debate
As a topic, a hypothesis,
Otherised and stigmatised,
You become the prop in a proposition,
The opposition in somebody else's culture wars.

Cast into a reality TV program
You awake every morning
To learn who has voted you off
And who will allow you another night in citizenship limbo.

In the name of my democracy
I am discussed.
In the name of my freedom
I am controlled.
In the name of 'breaking down stereotypes'
I am served on a platter to the media-
To an editorial, an op ed, a talk back show, a panel-
To be tasted, chewed over, and spat out.
Leaving me with indigestion,
While you pat yourself on the back
For your magnanimous efforts
To understand 'the other'.

Understand this: I don't want you to understand me
If by understanding me you will insist on misunderstanding me first.

Because the soundbite bites
And I am weary of your tabloids
Which reduce civilisations
of diverse voices, intellects and experiences,
Into a Ctrl-V headline.

Listen:

I would prefer it you did not reduce me to a suffix.

Just because you see me as a mere ism-

Extremism, fundamentalism, terrorism, radicalism.

I tell you I am bored

By your laziness.

And I am bored by your obsession with undressing me

For how will I fight those who see my body as their property in the name of my religion,

when you see my body as your property in the name of my democracy?

I will not be a negotiable citizen

In my own country.

You will not tolerate me

Or decide if I have a place

In my own home.

I am not a noun for you to define.

I am weary of living in resistance.

I am no-one's victim.

Or pawn.

I will not be negotiated

In the bazaars of identity

The marketplace that peddles fear and belonging.

Listen to me clearly:

I am not negotiable.

Thank you