
Split allegiances: Cultural Muslims and the tension between religious and national identity in multicultural societies

Abstract

Second generation Australians from a Muslim background have appeared on the political radar recently as a group at risk of disengagement due to their potentially split allegiances. For these young Australians, the traditional tension over diasporic allegiances between the homeland and the country in which they live is further complicated by religious identity. This paper offers two case studies of the second generation in two mainly Islamic, but otherwise very different ethnonational communities, Turkish and Iranian, in Australia, and examines the responses of these groups to the rising essentialisation and ethnicisation of Islam, at the expense of ethnic and sociocultural difference. In particular, the paper focuses on the way secular practice and religious identity converge into what we call 'cultural Islam'. We use the term cultural Islam as a way of describing those, particularly of the second and third generations in Australia, who proudly claim their Islamic heritage while choosing not to participate actively in religious life.

Introduction

Adherence to religious belief and practice in any religion falls along a spectrum from devout to apathetic, intersecting along the way with a spectrum of intensity from fundamentalist belief to more moderate and even heterodox praxis. Until fairly recently in the secularised West, religious belief and practice has followed a trajectory of increasing personalisation and individualisation, whereby the collective nature of worship and inclusive belonging to a community of believers has lost ground to a more privatised, and individualistic conception of religion as an expression of personal choice. Yet in recent years the pendulum has begun to swing back the other way, and religious identity is once more becoming a visible and contested boundary marker for inclusion and exclusion in heterogenous societies.

Feminist and poststructuralist critiques of identity have produced rich and nuanced accounts of social categories that problematise monolithic and essentialised forms of communal identity. Despite this, religion and religious identities have remained somewhat distinct from other modes of communal belonging, being treated more often than not in popular and academic accounts as a coherent and self-evident communal grouping. This essential nature of religious identity needs to be problematised, particularly in the face of essentialising public discourse around impending civilisational clash between Islam and The West. As in any religious tradition, the diversity encompassed by the followers of Islam is vast and includes differences in praxis, interpretation of texts, levels of devoutness and adherence to particular religious leaders or traditions. When religious practice is also deeply entwined with cultural, linguistic and ethnic traditions, diversity intensifies. Understanding the nature of individuals' allegiance and identification with their co-religionists is critical if we are to progress from the essentialising construction of globalising, fundamentalist Islam. Recent research with second generation migrants of both Turkish and Iranian descent provides clear evidence of the way in which some members of contemporary diasporic populations choose to maintain an ethnic identity which includes nationality, language, culture and religion without allowing any one of those elements absolute primacy over any other.

Currently, public policy and programs in Australia adhere to a predominant focus on the fear of a de-ethnicisation of Islam: that is, a tendency amongst the second generation to fall back on 'globalised Islam' because they do not have the cultural referents to contextualise a national/ethnic Islam. Following the London terrorist bombings of 2005 and the coining of the term 'home grown terrorism', the children of migrants from a Muslim background have appeared on the political radar of the Australian government as a group at risk due to their potentially split allegiances. For these young...
Australians, the traditional tension over diasporic allegiances between the homeland and the country in which they live (see Cohen, 1997) is thus further complicated by religious identity. In Australia there has been a tendency to promote national ethnicities over other forms of communal identification in official or national multiculturalism (McAuliffe, 2005). Yet beyond this discourse, in the media and amongst the public, the tendency is towards promoting the essentialisation and ethnicisation of Islam, at the expense of ethnic and sociocultural difference. This results in the mobilisation of monolithic religionational constructs that subsume diversity within ethnernational and religionational groups. Thus second generation migrants find themselves living in a society where they are increasingly expected to explain their identity relative to dominant national and emergent religious communal affiliations.

Within this context of contested identities, this paper seeks to explore the limitations of essentialised constructions of national and religious communal identities for those of the second generation from a Muslim background who may not recognise, or self-consciously present, themselves as practicing Muslims. To what extent do these individuals maintain their identity as ‘cultural Muslims’ even when they are not aligned or only slightly aligned with formal religious practice? Our research with comparatively secular Muslims of the second generation illustrates ways cultural Muslims resist the strategy of essentialisation, partially through the maintenance of ethnic and national tradition, rather than submitting to a globalised politics of Islamic identity, all the while set against the sometimes competing demands of their dual national identities.

**Multiculturalism**

The modern Australian nation state is a country of immigrants. The indigenous inhabitants of the land now make up less than 2.5% of the population, the rest having arrived or descended from those who have arrived during the last 220 years. Whilst the vast majority of these new arrivals were from Britain for the bulk of that period, the second half of the twentieth century saw a major change in the national and ethnic origins of new settlers in Australia. Beginning with the resettlement of displaced persons from Europe in the wake of the Second World War, and followed by a series of waves of migrants from various countries in order to meet labour needs and fulfil various international obligations, the cultural and geographical distance from England of the new arrivals has continued to grow. While the cultural, political and economic institutions of the country have been and continue to be dominated by British models, the population is now characterised by significant numbers of citizens and residents of non-British background.

Australia, unlike many European countries, has in some ways managed to avoid the kinds of ethnic tension experienced in former colonising countries where post colonial immigration from former colonies has created large underclasses of particular ethnic minorities. As well, recent legislative changes have outlawed racial vilification and racial harassment at the federal level, as well as religious discrimination in some (but not all) states (Jupp 2003: 9). Attempts to incorporate difference in Australian society in the past utilising assimilationist integration strategies have proved unsuccessful. The engagement with difference fostered under pluralist multicultural ideals, in the form of an explicit policy of multiculturalism, has been in force for the last quarter century, rejecting the idea of cultural assimilation and stressing the importance of recognising changing cultural diversity within an existing political framework (Verkuyten and Martinovic 2006: 2). This ostensibly allows for ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic minorities to retain social characteristics and social cohesion within which collective identities may be formed and maintained alongside Australian national citizenship or residency. However, as Davis et al. point out: ‘ethnic and racial identities are complex. They are employed for a myriad of reasons in a complex world by those who are members of that cultural group and by others who are not, in ways that are not always balanced’ (Davis et al. 2000: 536). Moreover, ‘multiculturalism is essentially a liberal democratic creed, based on tolerance of diversity within the principles and practices of Australian public life’ (Jupp 2002: 101; also see Hage 1998 on tolerance). How this can be achieved whilst maintaining the competing rights of individuals and social groups is an ongoing conundrum of political and civic life.

Explicit government policies stressing multiculturalism and the necessity of acknowledging and making accommodation for differences between groups, whilst successful on the whole, have become the focus of the anxiety over diversity in some segments of the host group. Rather than stressing empathy and shared values, this has led to the persistence of intolerance (Forrest and Dunn, 2006) and in some cases led to open hostility between groups. Developments over recent years which have fuelled the rise of ethnic tensions and a reduction in support for the concept of multiculturalism
include: the sudden arrival of large numbers of people who are visibly different; poverty and
disadvantage among particular groups; the arrival of people whose culture or religion is seen to be
threatening to established norms; and political capital being made of (predominantly Muslim) asylum
seekers and refugees by depicting them as ‘illegal aliens’ and ‘queue jumpers’ (Jupp 2003). These
conditions are not exclusive to nations that adhere to multicultural principles, but can be viewed as a
partially inevitable product of the globalisation of people, economies and ideas. The presence of
ongoing tensions and anxieties related to migrant diversity in Australia combined with the undermining
of the policy of multiculturalism at the hands of the conservative Howard government (1996-2007) has
produced an environment of profound uncertainty over the ability of multiculturalism to deal effectively
with the diversity of 21st century Australia. Somewhat in contrast to scholarly critiques of
multiculturalism (see Uitermark, Rossi and van Houtem, 2005) in multicultural nations, such as
Australia and Britain, there has been an increasing tendency to blame multiculturalism, claiming,
problematically, that it is the cause of ethnic tensions. The rise of Islamaphobia alongside a
resurgence of anti-immigration and xenophobic rhetoric (exemplified in Australia by the rise of the
One Nation political party and the conservative government’s attempt to inflame anti-Islamic
sentiment for party political ends) has forced a re-examination of what it means to be Australian in the
multicultural context (Dunn et al, 2007). The recent debate about what actually constitute ‘Australian
values’ is striking result of this shift.

**Muslims in Australia**

Despite a long history of Muslims being in Australia in tiny numbers (Kabir 2004: ch. 2), it was not until
the late 1960s that the immigration of large numbers of Muslims really occurred. In 1967 Australia and
Turkey signed a migration agreement which led to the arrival of Turks in Australia in significant
numbers. Prior to 1954 there were less than 1000 people in Australia who had been born in Turkey. In
fact the number of Turks in Australia dropped in the late 1930s and early 1940s as entry to Australia
was denied to ‘enemy aliens’ (Germans, Italians and Turks) (Jupp and York, 1995: 76). Between the
censuses of 1966 and 1971 the number of Turks in Australia more than quadrupled, from 2500 in
1966 to more than 11,000 in 1971. By 2001 the population of people of Turkish descent (Turkish
migrants and their children and grandchildren) rose to almost 100,000. More than half of these settled
in Victoria, mostly in the northern and western suburbs of Melbourne (Fontaine and Kaymakci 1996:
3). The next biggest group settled in Sydney and while small numbers settled elsewhere in the
country (Jupp and York 1995: 76).

After the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 Lebanese Muslims began to arrive in large
numbers. The Lebanese are now the largest and most visible Islamic group in Australia and much of
the rhetoric concerning Islam conflates Muslims with the Arab Lebanese (Poynting and Noble, 2004).
More recent Islamic arrivals have come through the civil wars in the former Yugoslavia, Iran, Iraq and
the countries in the horn of Africa. The 1978/79 Iranian revolution marked the beginning of the
migration of Iranians to Australia, both as migrants and refugees. By 2001 there were 18 840 Iranian
migrants living in Australia, with more than half of the Iranian born (10 030) living in Sydney (ABS,
2003). Importantly, Iranian migrants are a diverse group in ethnoreligious, linguistic, and
socioeconomic terms. In 2000-2001, Iranians also figure prominently in skilled and business immigration programs. Significantly for
this paper, Muslims make up around half of the Iranian born population, with religious minorities
subject to repression by the theocratic state, making up the remainder.

Despite the growth in the size of the Muslim populations in Australia over the last 30 years, it must be
remembered, that in relative terms, the Muslim population is extremely small. In the census of 2001,
only 1.5% of the national population identified as being affiliated with Islam, with approximately one
third of these being born in Australia and two thirds being born overseas, notably in Lebanon (11%)
and Turkey (9%) (ABS, 2003). Australian Islam spans over 65 countries of birth, 55 languages and
includes over 500 Aboriginal converts (Dunn 2004: 346).

In line with this, and contrary to the often essentialised media commentary , the ‘Muslim community’ in
Australia resists easy categorisation. The yawning chasms in language, culture, migration experience
and settlement in Australia between diverse elements of the Muslim communities cannot easily be
bridged by any shared religious experience, if indeed such shared experience even exists. Nor can the differences within Islam simply be overlooked. Sunni and Shi’ite traditions are both represented in Australian Islam, as well as Alevite, Alawy Ahmadi and Druze communities which may not form part of the mainstream of Islam (Dunn 2004: 346) but which can look Islamic to outsiders. The recent political infighting over the role, direction and governance of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (the peak body for Islamic groups in this country), demonstrates only too clearly that Islam is no more above sectarian politics than any collective entity in the not-for-profit sector (Kerbaj 2006a; 2006b; 2006c).

The associational life of Muslims in Australia has changed over time in line with the emerging mechanisms of communal support and in response to the politics surrounding migrants incorporation. Prior to the emergence of the politics of recognition embodied in multiculturalism, it was common for Muslims to join together despite their differences in a form of community ‘fusion’ (Vertovec 2000; cf Bowen 1987). When the first groups of Muslim migrants began arriving in the 1960s, the associations and organisations which were developed to meet their needs tended to be ‘Muslim’ in their focus simply because the numbers belonging to separate ethnicities and cultures of origin were too small to support separate arrangements. The predisposition of multicultural programs during the 1970s, 80s and 90s to recognise and fund national ethnic groups rather than religious groups further entrenched communal divisions. Under these conditions, until very recently, cultural, ethnic or nation of origin identities have predominated within the Muslim community, even if that community has appeared largely undifferentiated to the casual outside observer. It is only comparatively recently, in the light of events external to the communities themselves that there has been a push for associations to re-unite as ‘Muslim’ rather than national/ethnic bodies.

**The current context: global events, local conditions**

Research has shown that the ‘Islamic presence produced by immigration continues to be viewed as ‘other’, something which is essentially culturally incompatible, immutable and resistant to becoming part of national societies in the West.’ (Humphrey 2001: 33). Australia, often cited as a paragon of contemporary multicultural success, is not immune to these common processes of Islamic othering (Saniotis, 2004). As Deen notes,

> Three terrible events took place in 2001; they were of different magnitude but one followed on the heels of another and all of them were to affect the lives of Australian Muslims: the Sydney gang rapes in August 2000 which became public knowledge a year later, the September 11 terrorist attacks which rocked the world and the ‘Tampa incident’ just before the 2001 November federal election. Australian Muslims were under siege and saw themselves lumped together as ‘the enemy’.

Deen, 2003: 272

Incidents between 1998 and 2002 which contributed to increasing discrimination against Muslims in Australia include: the gang rapes of young white women in Sydney by Lebanese men; the Tampa incident in which a Norwegian ship rescued Middle Eastern asylum seekers and refugees from a sinking boat and was subsequently denied landing rights in Australia; the suicide attacks of September 11 in the United States; bombings of nightclubs, restaurants and bars in Bali frequented by foreigners, especially Australians. Internationally there has also been a series of events that have reinforced constructions of Muslims as a community working in opposition to the broader interests of the West: the fatwa placed on Salman Rushdie following the publication of the Satanic Verses; the attack on peace keeping forces in Somalia in 1993; the suicide bombing of USS Cole in Yemen; as well as attacks on foreign embassies, hotels and businesses carried out by various Islamic extremist groups. As Kabir and Moore (2003) state, ‘Although Western conflicts and Islamic militancy are complex issues, the question of national security has made Islamic militants the “new enemy of the West”. By extension, this has come to cover all Muslims in the popular imagination, exacerbated by attempts such as the Howard government’s (1996-2007) use of the Tampa issue as a political weapon in the lead up to the November 2001 elections to stir up fear of Muslims and other ‘illegals’. 
The rise of Islamaphobia (especially in the media) over recent years has perhaps sped up the process of Islamic ethnicisation at the expense or alongside the retention of ethnic and national collective identities (Bloul 2003: 13; see also Parekh 2000).

As Bloul has neatly put it:

scholars have .....generally found that discrimination against Muslims, in the wake of the Gulf War led to a strengthening of bonds within the Australian Muslim community and a corresponding predominance of the religious factor in their group consciousness. In other words, Australian Muslims are pushed to identify more as the ‘Muslim Others’ of the Australian majority.

Bloul 2003: 2

And yet recent research has shown that '[c]ultural diversity has become mainstream for younger Australians, particularly second- and third-generation Australians, in a way that differs radically from the experiences of their parents’ or grandparents.’ (Ang et al. 2006: 67). Easy identification with one ethnic, cultural, language or religious group is no longer possible for many young people whose backgrounds are characterised by a mix of such identities. For many young Australians, particularly those of second and third generation descent from migrants who came to Australia in the 1950s, 60s and into the 70s, cultural and ethnic hybridity have become mainstream. Such Australians relate to an array of identities and balance overlapping social allegiances in a complex and sophisticated way (Ang et al. 2006: 67). As Kabir found in her research with Muslim high school students, young people may describe their identity in a variety of different ways, with some foregrounding the national identity of the parents’ homeland, some preferring to identify as Australian, some with a hybrid or hyphenated label, whilst some chose a religious identifier (Kabir, 2007; see also Dwyer 1999a). Individuals may thus define themselves in myriad different ways depending on affiliation to community and the given context. Moreover these communal dispositions may be competing, indifferent toward each other or mutually supporting (Peters 2003: 27).

As a consequence, it is not necessarily the case that claiming a ‘Muslim’ identity must come at the expense of other collective identities and allegiances. In Australia, ‘Muslims, especially second and third generation Muslims, are adding a new layer to their identity. They are developing a certain bond with Australia, which, in most cases, is not at the expense of their Islamic and ethnic heritage.’ (Saeed and Akbazadeh 2001: 5, emphasis added). Such a layering, or overlapping of identities, however, may not be widely recognised by a mainstream public and a mainstream media more used to monolithic constructions of group identity. Despite the reality of cultural complexity that surrounds Muslim identities, there is contemporary anxiety among some sectors of the non-Muslim Australian population over the ‘allegiances and loyalties’ of Muslims (Dunn et al. 2004: 414; Forrest and Dunn, 2007; Noble and Poynting, 2007). Muslim networks and organisations now find themselves subject to official state and wider public examination. Recent comments by prominent business and political leaders reinforce the idea that the Australian state requires absolute loyalty and that dual citizenship, or the holding of alternative religious or cultural ideals is somehow a cause for concern (Costello 2006).

The idea that individuals may retain and embrace an Islamic identity as a set of practices and performances which may have little to do directly with religious piety is what we are here describing as “cultural Islam”. We use this term as a way of describing those, particularly of the second and third generations in Australia, who proudly claim their Islamic heritage while choosing not to participate actively in religious life. This concept goes beyond Leila Ahmed’s (1992) ‘lay Islam’, being rather more a secular ascription to Islamic identity. However, it is not purely a-religious in its connotation. It is an ethnicised attachment that de-emphasises religious belief, insofar as this attachment may be abstract in form, loosely defined as a set of moral and ethical guidelines; not wholly secularised, but also not equivalent to traditional notions of religious belief and practice. For cultural Muslims religion operates as an ‘ethnic-like’ identity marker operating primarily as a group boundary marker (Eid 2003: 31).

Eid claims that in a world "largely desubstantialised as a result of mass-culture and exacerbated individualism" the symbolic connection to religion allows individuals to rework traditional structured religious belief to fit with the contemporary western tendency to relegate religion to the private sphere, allowing individuals to be “free to recompose their own religious frame of belief so as to better meet their personalised spiritual needs” (2003: 37). Our concept of cultural Muslim identity extends on Eid to claim that symbolic religious attachment, whilst not necessarily wholly secularised, is far less a
manifestation of a modern, deinstitutionalised religious form. Cultural Muslim identity does not centre on a reworking of religion to meet ‘personalised spiritual needs’, but is more about the conflation of religion and ethnicity; a secularising, if not wholly secular force.

Using the phrase “cultural Muslim” in this way by no means implies that religious Muslims are any less culturally adept or practised than their more secular siblings. Nor is it meant to imply that there is a hierarchical opposition or distinction between religious believers and those who are non-practising. We certainly do not wish to claim that all Turks and Iranians in Australia are non-practising or non-believers. That is patently absurd, but this paper is primarily concerned with those of Turkish and Iranian heritage who do not actively practice their religion, yet who continue to find salience in adhering to a “Muslim” identity. This seems particularly pertinent in the face of increasing mainstream hostility to Islam, in response to which it might seem that a downplaying of the religious identity would be a safer option. This paper, therefore, is an attempt to explore why some relatively secular actors are choosing to retain and cherish their Islamic identity and heritage.

**Cultural Muslims and national communities**

The processes pushing towards the wider ethnicisation of Islam as a monolithic religious Other are being resisted by some groups who are instead involved in more specific processes of ethnicisation that align with (secular) national ethnic categorisations. Recent research with Australia's Iranian and Turkish communities provides a fascinating insight into the processes of identity formation and group allegiance amongst non-Arab migrants from Muslim majority countries. Not all of those of Turkish and Iranian heritage in Australia are followers of Islam, with migrant communities overrepresented by followers of minority faiths from the homeland who migrated to avoid political and religious persecution at home. Such groups include the Turkish Alevis and Iranian Baha'i. But amongst the Muslim majority migrants from both countries, whether Turkish Sunnis or Iranian Shi'ites, a distinct trend of secularising the religion is evident, a trend which is particularly noticeable through the effects of generational change. In contrast to the pressures to unify under an identity of shared Muslim experience, it is also important to recognise that within the various migrant communities that are historically affiliated with Islam there are cohorts of individuals who either no longer subscribe to Islam, or, more interestingly, have a secular cultural affiliation with Islam. This second group of cultural Muslims are those who come from a Muslim background, and who recognise themselves as Muslims, but do not regularly attend a mosque, or identify with the institutional forms of the religion. Nor do cultural Muslims adhere to many of the prescribed social expectations and individual performative acts that often serve to differentiate Muslims from non-Muslims in diverse societies. They are not wholly secularised and alienated from their religious identity, but instead operate within a secular realm imbued with the ethical and moral underpinnings of their ethnoreligious traditions. Their Muslim identity may be individualised, but it is also often tied to their ethnic or ethnonational community, as a symbolic religious communal identity, (Gans 1994) “harnessed to the production of ethnic boundaries” (Eid 2003: 38).

Although the term cultural Muslim may seem problematic, we think it neatly captures the inherently performative nature of balancing ethnic, religious and cultural practices as a minority group in a multicultural society. In contrast, practicing Muslims can be thought of as those who identify with a Muslim community as a principle form of identification where this identity is more than constitutive of the self, but is fundamental to self-understanding and external self-representation. We certainly do not wish to claim that such individuals do not also perform a culturally coherent religious praxis, or that they are somehow not ‘cultural’, but rather that the faith based element of the praxis predominates over the secular, howsoever that might be described.

Congregational worship is not essential in Islam, but it has become more important in the context of Muslim communities living in non-Islamic countries (Humphrey 1988: 680), particularly in the face of general indifference and even antipathy to Muslims’ needs for time and space to pray five times a day, along with the associated facilities for washing and finding the direction of Mecca. The ascendancy of the mosques as political actors also brought about the expansion of mosque based social, educational and welfare activities. In line, therefore, with the increasingly congregational forms of Islam proliferating in western immigrant nations, practicing Muslims may also explicitly belong to a Muslim community signified by a degree of practice often associated, although not necessarily, with a
mosque. This view of cultural Muslim identity is particularly relevant for second and subsequent generations from Muslim backgrounds living in western secularised nations such as Australia. Research has shown that there tends to be a dilution of religiosity in the children of migrants, often paralleling wider secularisation amongst young people in the west (Vertovec 2000). Yet the continuation of essentialist stereotypes of Muslim identity tends to represent these cultural Muslims as religious actors. Whilst these two terms are obviously limited in their applicability, and are not mutually exclusive categories, it is important to recognise these differences within our understanding of Muslim identities. Much debate, funding and research focuses on the lives of practicing Muslims. The point of our article is that some Muslims maintain religious identity without being a part of a ‘community of practice’. Whilst groups of Muslims may recognise and adhere to a Muslim community, this can’t be seen as inclusive of all ‘Muslims’.

The research methodology

This paper reports on the findings of two recently conducted research projects, carried out by the authors, one with Iranians in Sydney, conducted by McAuliffe and one with Turks in Melbourne, carried out by Hopkins. While the projects were separately designed, funded and conducted, interesting and significant parallels emerged from the results, prompting this current report. Full reports of the fieldwork studies including detailed methodologies can be found elsewhere (eg: McAuliffe, 2007a, Hopkins, 2008, Hopkins, 2009), but for the current paper, findings are taken from a range of first person research strategies carried out by the researchers. In the case of the Turkish project, a series of case studies was undertaken with different groups of persons of Turkish heritage, living in Melbourne. These include a series of four focus groups with young people, aged between 18 and 24, studying at various universities; focus groups involving 27 female respondents associated with an Alevi Community Centre in Melbourne’s inner north; a survey of 135 subscribers to Turkish satellite television; and a series of interviews with producers of Turkish language media in Melbourne. While the majority of respondents were of Sunni Muslim background, there was also a significant minority of Alevi respondents. The research with the children of Iranian migrants involved participant observation and interviews in Sydney, as part of a wider project conducted with approximately 60 children of Muslim and Baha’i religious backgrounds of Iranian heritage in Sydney, London and Vancouver. This project mainly focused on the tensions between religious and national identities in the Iranian diasporic context. Respondents from a Muslim background in the Sydney cohort were aged between 18 and 24. All were Shia Muslims, in line with the dominant form of Islam practiced in Iran, and took part in in-depth interviews as a part of the project. Approximately half of the respondents were also involved in a second ethnographic photodocumentary phase with an associated interview. The responses presented and qualitatively analysed in this paper are from those participants who self-identified as Muslim, whether practicing or not. The material which we have gathered was derived from a wide range of questions from both projects regarding identity, ethnicity, nationalism and religious belief and practice.

Turks in Australia

While some Turkish Cypriots who held British passports began arriving in Australia after World War 2 the bulk of Turkish immigration to Australia began with the special agreement of 1967. This ongoing migration program saw the establishment of a large diasporic community, settled mainly in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. The sizeable Turkish populations in these areas has resulted in the development of community infra-structure and services relevant to the needs and wants of the Turkish community. A recent survey found over 100 social and community groups representing the diverse interests and needs of the Turkish community in Melbourne. Turkish speakers are now well represented in the ranks of professionals as well as small local businesses, allowing for the Turkish community to meet the majority of its own needs from within the community. Turkish speakers provide services ranging from selling imported foodstuffs and cultural artifacts to medical and professional services, aged care, media outlets and religious and cultural opportunities. Ironically these services are expanding at the same time as the need for them decreases through increasing acculturation of the second and third generations.
For Australians of Turkish descent, adhering to an Islamic cultural identity in the midst of a secular polity is nothing new. Young Turkish-Australians who participated in this research project variously described their own identities as Australian, Turkish, Turkish – Australian, even while acknowledging their own Muslim heritage. At the same time they are comfortable in applying the label to other, notably Arab, Australian Muslim communities and clearly distinguish themselves from those other communities, as these comments from two different focus group show:

'Turkey is a bit different to the Arab communities. We’re not … actually practicing Muslims…I mean, very few people would follow the five pillars of the religion, like they might do some, like they might fast, but they won’t pray five times a day.’

Female Muslim, Melbourne

I don’t think they (non-Muslims) know how to differentiate between us, like just because you’re Muslim it does not mean that you have to be part of the Arabic rule.

Female Muslim, Melbourne

Politically, the more secular parts of the Victorian Turkish community have attempted to distance themselves from the fundamentalist, Sydney based cleric, Taj el-Din al-Hilali, who until recently was the figure publicly recognised as the Mufti of Australian Muslims. As one Melbourne based research respondent noted:

he’s not a big man, you know, as a Turkish we don’t accept him as our mufti. He’s nothing to do with the Turkish Muslim. But … they talk about him: ‘mufti say this, mufti say that.’ We totally feel bad about it. He doesn’t represent [Turkish people].

Male Muslim, Melbourne

Interestingly, in 2007 Hilali was forced out of his position as Mufti of Australia, replaced by a more moderate Mufti (Sheikh Fehmi). There has been speculation that it was the vote of the Turkish Imams on the Australian National Imams’ Council which led to this decision (Yusuf 2007).

For young people of the first and second generation growing up in Australia, a sense of belonging and identity is formed through a complex mix of widely dispersed family and friends, locally based dense social groups of ethnically diverse peers, and an Australian community of Turkish migrants who keep in close touch with the older generation and who stand in for the extended family left behind in Turkey. They are also enmeshed in a global web of information and communication technologies which allow them to communicate across national borders as well as within and between diversely defined social groups. For these second generation Turkish migrants, cultural or ethnic identity is much stronger than religious identity. As one clearly stated: ‘I say, “I’m a Muslim”, but I don’t practice.’ Another added: ‘I just think that everything we do is cultural, rather than religious’ while a third noted: ‘There are heaps of Muslims who aren’t religious, who aren’t practising, but [who] will say that they are just for the sake of saying it. I don’t practise, but I know, which makes me worse.’

In fact several respondents revealed a very pragmatic relationship with their religion. For one respondent, religion is fitted into her daily life, not the other way around. She explains:

I know that I should practise it on a daily basis, but I don’t. I’ve got other priorities. I think being a Muslim above all, even though you are meant to pray and you’re meant to do this and you’re meant to do that you know, its also about being a good person …. I think I am a Muslim everyday but hey I am not practising exactly the way that I should be by praying. What else am I not doing…we shouldn’t be drinking, the way we are, wearing revealing clothing all that jazz.

Female Muslim, Melbourne

These young people spoke articulately about preserving their heritage and language and the traditions which they would follow when getting married, but these were seen to be firmly Turkish traditions, with cultural rather than religious significance. One respondent described it: ‘That’s still continued, the henna night, the night before …the girl gets married. The traditions are kept but not necessarily in a religious way. Just for the sake of doing it.’ Not upsetting the parents was also a factor for one respondent who would not consider marriage outside the Turkish community: ‘It’s our culture… if we’re comfortable with our culture why go and adapt to some other culture? It just makes it harder for the rest of the family.’
Perhaps in part because of Turkey’s historic commitment to national secularism since the founding of the Turkish republic, research respondents had no difficulty in separating religious beliefs and practices from Turkish cultural traditions and in seeing the traditions that they valued as being Turkish rather than Islamic. It was quite clear that these young people, whilst acknowledging and identifying with their Muslim heritage as part of being Turkish, had no interest in or allegiance to a political Islam beyond their ethnic enclave. Yet within that ethnic group there is pressure on young people to hold onto their religious identity. One young woman who described herself as agnostic, noted: ‘It’s a very taboo topic in our community. You cannot openly say “I am anti-religion”…They’ll say “You can’t say that. Don’t say that.” You know? Because in Turkey you don’t really have a choice’.

Thus it seems that freedom of choice in religious practice is a highly valued feature of Australian life. None of the Turkish respondents in this research chooses to cover her head, and more than one noted that this relative invisibility was a protective mechanism for avoiding racism and discrimination. One female respondent noted that: “I have a covered mum and a covered sister and they are constantly – I think people are looking at them.” But she went on to say: “The only racism I’ve ever come across that was directed at me was I was told to go back to my own country because I was in a Vietnamese area, mind you I’m Turkish- Muslim and these people were bagging me because I’m not Asian.” For another respondent, racism was not an issue: “I think Australians have accepted the fact that there are different cultures living on their land and they have no choice but to tolerate it”

It seems however, that there is a general pessimism about intercultural relations in Australia, and a belief that the situation for Muslims is getting worse, not better. Some respondents thought that Muslims were less visible, or less known about before September 11, but that the media reporting of Islam since then had created an image in the mind of the general public which was damaging to Muslims. “Yeah they were just like ignorant to it before and now they’ve just been taught something via the media and they believe it and I don’t blame them either because look at the representatives we have like you know Saddam and Osama the idiot.” Female Muslim, Melbourne

Iranians in Australia

Many who emigrated from Iran in the period immediately following the Iranian revolution in 1978/79 to Sydney and other cities of the Iranian diaspora were from the educated mobile middle classes, who had formerly been taking part in an increasingly affluent and secular urban lifestyle in Tehran. Their children, the second generation, grew up in a diasporic environment that attempted to emulate the pre-revolutionary middle-class Iran, replete with ‘progressive’ attitudes to religion and education. The first wave of post-revolutionary Iranian immigrants was dominated by two main groups of predominantly cultural Muslims and religious minorities. What these groups had in common was a fear of persecution by the newly invigorated religious state, and the wealth to buy their way out of the situation. In contrast to the statistics for other Muslim migrant groups, Iranian Muslims are generally wealthier and better educated. Whilst they are diasporic exiles (see Naficy 1993), they are also a relatively mobile transnational sector of the population, often connected by family and peer relations with other significant nodes in the Iranian diaspora, such as Los Angeles, Toronto, Vancouver, London and Stockholm (Bozorgmehr 1992; Bozorgmehr et al. 1993; Feher 1998; Mirfakraie 1999; Darvishpour 1999; McAuliffe 2005; 2007a).

In Sydney, the Iranian community is better thought of as multiple communities broken down along religious, ethnolinguistic and class lines. Iran is a country of immense ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity, a feature reproduced to an even greater degree among the approximately 10,000 Iranian-born living in Sydney, where Baha’is, Armenian and Assyrian Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Azeris and Kurds can be found in addition to the majority Persian Shi’a Muslim population. For many of the cultural Muslims that arrived in the first cohort of migrants after the revolution, distinction is also made between themselves and newer arrivals, who are sometimes referred to negatively as being ‘too religious’, based on the assumption that they have been living in acceptance of the theocracy up until their emigration. The second generation from a Muslim background in Sydney echoed comments made by the second generation from a Muslim background in London and Vancouver, that they were often warned against associating with new Iranian migrants because they were ‘low class’ and ‘religious’: “My parents think they (new arrivals) are too religious, but I don’t know” Male Muslim, Sydney.
The diversity present among Muslim Iranian migrants is also a major factor in the lack of formalised institutional representation for the Iranian community as a whole. National representative institutions for the Muslim migrants from Iran are uncommon, both in Sydney and in other cities of the diaspora. In Sydney, one Shi’a Muslim religious institution catering exclusively to Iranian migrants is the Imam Hussein Mosque in the inner western suburb of Earlwood. The congregation is relatively small and draws in Iranians and their children from the whole of Sydney to listen to the sermons conducted in Farsi, Arabic and English. In discussion with the second generation, the most often cited reason for the paucity of institutional representation was that different political views often led to the failure of any emergent institutions. As one Sydney respondent noted when referring to his efforts to start a Persian club at university, he wanted, “... to bring them together. That’s the problem. I think here, especially in Sydney, they’re very stubborn, you know. There’s not a really good ... strong ... force, like idea, to bring them together” Male Muslim, Sydney. Another reason cited was the desire to remain less visible to the wider community at a time when the construction of negative stereotypes of Iranians in the press could lead to undue attention and misrepresentation of the diaspora.

There is no uniform ascription to a cultural Islam amongst Iranians of Muslim background. In fact, the notion of a cultural Muslim identity was not explicitly stated by the respondents. Rather, their positionality was rendered distinct through contrast with other children of Iranian migrants who were more (or less) ‘Muslim’. According to the second generation respondents, some children of Iranian migrants have wholly secularised their lives, successfully alienating their Iranian identity from its Islamic base. In contrast, others are recognised as ‘practicing Muslims’, with views ranging from a more conservative religious view of how society should be organised, through to more progressive religious engagement through a ‘modern’ Islam embodied through liberal religious interpretation. The overwhelming majority of respondents in Sydney (as in London and Vancouver) saw themselves as existing somewhere between these divergent positionalities of ‘secular’ and ‘religious’. These children of Iranian migrants with a Muslim heritage conformed with our designation of cultural Muslim identity being individuals who are not involved in the everyday practice of their religion, but nevertheless recognise themselves as Muslim. This cultural attachment to Islam manifests in many social contexts across a spectrum from a benign Islamism to a secular denial of Islamic religious action.

In a similar manner to the Turkish case, for the children of Iranian migrants from a Muslim heritage cultural traditions are often most easily understood as Persian rather than Muslim, even when there is some syncretic overlap. For example, the celebration of Iranian New Year (Norooz) is often associated with a traditional table setting called the haft seen (lit. seven s’ – indicating seven items starting with ‘s’). New Year occurs at the beginning of the northern Spring, and in recognition of this the haft seen includes a number of items associated with growth and renewal, including eggs, wheat grass and sumak, a Persian spice. In Muslim households, and in many publicly displayed haft seen, the Quran is included in the table setting. In contrast, when the same ‘Persian tradition’ is performed in Baha’i households the Quran is typically absent. Despite the religious connotations signified by the presence of the Quran in the Muslim case, the cultural Muslims of the second generation invariably described the haft seen as a ‘Persian cultural tradition’, resisting an overtly religious interpretation. Of more everyday importance to cultural Muslims from an Iranian background are the informal communal gatherings such as mehmuni (reciprocal family visits). These loosely formalised reciprocating family visits usually involve 5 or 6 families and centre on ‘the gift’ of hospitality, involving Persian food and, often, Persian music and dance. Hospitality towards guests is important in Muslim traditions. However, none of the respondents, in Sydney or in the other cities of this research, saw mehmuni as a Muslim religious tradition, or a practice important to the reproduction of religious identity. In the diaspora, mehmuni is interpreted by the second generation as cultural (Persian), as opposed to religious (Muslim), traditions, and is seen by many first generation migrants as an important part of the reproduction of Persian cultural identity to their children – a fact which many of the second generation noted. Even where these modes of cultural transmission, at New Year or through mehmuni, clearly involved a syncretic mix of Persian and Muslim ‘tradition’, the second generation of a Muslim Iranian heritage discussed them as Persian, resisting a Muslim (and religious) interpretation.

Media representations play a role in structuring a religio-national identity for the children of Iranian migrants. Media representations of Iran in the Western press conflate Iran and Islam, eliding religious diversity and constructing what Sardar calls a neo-Orientalist construction of a homogenously Islamic Iran (in Poole 2002: 32). Despite the widespread reporting of cosmopolitan secularising Iran prior to the revolution, throughout the 1980s images of Iran in the Australian press merged with images of Islam in general (Braasted 2001). This perpetuation of a ubiquitous Muslim Iranian stereotype has...
continued into the present post-‘9/11’ environment of the ‘War on Terror’ and the so-called ‘Axis of Evil’ (McAuliffe, 2007b). The popular conflation of Iran with radical Islam and the simplistic association with the proliferation of terror are points of tension, particularly among cultural Muslims from an Iranian background. A further influential factor in the long-distance imagining of Iran by the second generation in the Iranian diaspora is the perpetuation of a popular national fantasy of a homogenous Shi’a Persian state by the Iranian theocracy. The construction of a conflated Muslim Iran in the western media combined with the popular national narrative emanating from Iran construct a religious-national amalgam that is difficult to untangle for many from the second generation. As a result, many of the children of Iranian migrants from a Muslim background embody a secular existence whilst maintaining an implicit connection to Islam through their ongoing ties to their Iranian identity.

The conflation of Iranian and Muslim identity has implications for the way the second generation respond to the rise in Islamaphobia. Much contemporary research points to the increased burden of racism experienced by Muslims in ‘post-9/11’ Australia (Poynting and Noble 2004). The degree to which the second generation of Muslim Iranian heritage feel burdened by an increased Islamaphobia is instructive in understanding the nature of their cultural Muslim subjectivities. When asked about their own experiences of racism, particularly following the World Trade Centre attacks, the second generation expressed an awareness of people who had suffered racist incidents, from slurs to assaults. However, what was most interesting was that most of these individuals did not see themselves as subject to the rise in anti-Islamic sentiments.

I haven’t (experienced racism), no. Simply because of the way I look, I think. Because a lot of people when they go ‘Where are you from?’, they never guess Iran. ... They usually go ‘Italian, Spanish’ ... And I’m like, ‘try Middle Eastern’. And I don’t wear a scarf either, so people don’t know that I’m Muslim. And so I haven’t no. But I know people who have.

Female Muslim, Sydney.

For practising Muslims, the increase in racist incidents had a different implication. Here the popular conflation of Iranian with Muslim does find its concrete footing. This was particularly the case for practising Muslims that were female. For these individuals their visibility as Muslims, through the signifier of the ‘veil’, and, by extension, their association with the veil’s iconic visibility in the media, marked them as open for public attack (see Dwyer 1999b; 2000). Again in a similar way to the Turkish case, the relative invisibility of some women marked them as legitimately ‘non-Muslim’, saving them from being targeted by racists.

There is no simplistic relationship between the degree of religious practice and the wearing of the veil. For young women of Iranian heritage, just as is in the Turkish case, the veil remains a potent visible signifier of overt Muslim identity. Racism for the second generation thus differed greatly along lines of both self recognised religious affiliation, as well as the implied religiosity that visible markers afford those who perform racist acts. In this study the form of racist acts, and the sense of involvement in these acts related directly to the construction of a conflated Muslim Iranian in the media and to the centrality of visible signifiers such as the hijab.
Despite increasing racism against Muslims, second generation cultural Muslims remain predominantly secularised. At the same time the everyday secular and cosmopolitan social actions of the cultural Muslims of the second generation remain imbued with ‘Muslim values’ through the tight association of Iranian identity with Islam. For these predominantly secular actors, to deny their Muslim identity is to also, at least partially, deny their Iranian heritage, something that these young men and women are generally loath to do. The degree of autonomy from institutional and communal forms of religion expressed by the second generation from a Muslim background suggests that most would continue to consider themselves as Muslims without needing to associate with a ‘Muslim community’, either configured around Iranian Shi’a identity, or around any sense of an Australian, or global, ‘umma.

**Conclusion**

The place of religious identity within the hierarchy of ethnic, social, political and economic affiliations and allegiances which all Australian citizens hold is contested. Although Australia has avoided some of the issues which have arisen in Europe, as an immigrant nation we still have to face complex issues of (often unstated) racism, and established cultural norms, including the dominance of European Christianity as a religious framework for much of our legal, political and social infrastructure. While we believe that cultural practice encompasses all these elements, we also believe that a case can and should be made for a problematisation of the increasing tendency of mainstream Australian media and public discourse to reify a singular Australian ‘Muslim’ identity. Ethnic, cultural, national, linguistic, political, economic and social differences and divisions abound within Australia’s Muslim communities. There are also deep differences apparent between different religious traditions within Islam, as well as between levels of piety, practice and engagement with the religious tradition. We have tried here to make it clear that for some members of the Islamic diasporas, a Muslim identity can be maintained without a strong commitment to the faith based elements of religious life. To call such individuals ‘cultural Muslims’ is to celebrate the practices within which such people find meaning and community. It is not to suggest that religiously active Muslims are less culturally competent than their more secular peers, nor does it imply that there is any such thing as a singular ‘Islamic culture’.

The importance of place in the construction of identity remains strong, even among diasporas whose physical connection with their homeland has been weakened or even severed. Whilst religion has been and continues to be an important part of cultural identity for many, it is not true to say that religious affiliation always overrides national, ethnic, linguistic and other cultural signifiers. Especially for those migrants who have left Islamic homelands and settled in a multicultural country such as Australia, membership in an international or even Australian based ‘umma or community of believers is often of less significance than the personal ties which are established and maintained within an ethnically and linguistically united community. This appears to hold true for both Turkish and Iranian Muslims in Australia, despite political and media rhetoric in the mainstream of Australian cultural life attempting to convince us that the opposite is in fact the case.
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