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Muslim Participation in Multifaith Initiatives in Victoria

FOLLOWING THE SEPTEMBER 11 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, Muslims in Western societies, including Australia, experienced an increase in discrimination and attacks against them and their places of worship. A culture of fear, perpetuated by discourses of exclusion that emanated from the Prime Minister John Howard's government, also contributed to rising Islamophobia, migrantophobia and critiques of multiculturalism during this period. However, Muslim communities, particularly in Victoria, were pro-active in response to the negative impacts of these events, initiating multifaith and educational activities to dispel negative stereotypes and attitudes propagated by the media and political figures. The State Government of Victoria and the Victoria Police also supported multifaith and multi-actor peace building initiatives and prioritised engagement with Muslim leaders and communities as part of their social inclusion and community building strategies.¹ Indeed, the Victorian Government placed multiculturalism and a commitment to working in partnership with culturally and religiously diverse communities at the heart of its aim of countering violent extremism.²

This article examines the post September 11 rise of Muslim participation in multifaith activities in Victoria. While there was a significant increase in Muslim engagement in multifaith initiatives following the events of September 11, this needs to be contextualised within a broader history of the multifaith movement, and particularly the rise of Muslim engagement in multifaith activities in the 1990s, which prepared the ground for the multifaith response to September 11. This article draws on existing literature and on semi-structured interviews with leading Victorian multifaith practitioners conducted in 2008.³ Respondents' remarks are tagged including the participant's surname and the year they were interviewed, eg, [Aly, 2008].⁴

A Brief History of Muslim Participation in the Global Multifaith Movement

Multifaith initiatives well predate the events of September 11, 2001. The first Parliament of the World's Religions (PWR),⁵ held in Chicago in 1893, is commonly described as the beginning of the multifaith movement, and the second PWR,⁶ held in Chicago 100 years later, as signifying the movement's 'coming of age'. The international gathering of the 1893 PWR was made possible by increased opportunities for travel and communication, which continued to escalate throughout the 20th century, thus further enabling the global expansion of the multifaith movement. A number of Jewish leaders participated in the 1893 PWR and this established a tradition of ecumenical relations

among Catholics, Protestants and Jews in America.⁷ In addition, due to the spread of the British Empire throughout Asia, a fascination with Eastern philosophy was prevalent in Western societies in the late 19th century.⁸ While Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and the Theosophical Society had all been influential in introducing Americans to Hindu and Buddhist thought, the 1893 PWR provided the first opportunity for Americans to have direct contact with Hindu and Buddhist teachers from India, Sri Lanka and Japan.⁹ These teachers, in addition to providing first-hand explanations of their religious and philosophical traditions, utilised the PWR as a platform to challenge Christian Dominionism (and exclusivity) propagated by British and American missionaries.¹⁰

Although invited, the caliph of Turkey refused to send Muslim representatives to the first PWR. The only Muslim participant was American Mohammed Russell Alexander Webb who had converted to Islam while posted as America's Consul-General in the Philippines. Webb publicly acknowledged the negative stereotypes associated with Islam in America yet also articulated his confidence that once Americans had a true understanding of Islam they would learn to appreciate it.¹¹ Webb's singular Muslim presence at the 1893 PWR clearly illustrates that the first bridges to be built in global multifaith engagement were largely among Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and Christians. Moreover, Indigenous people were excluded from the main assembly of the 1893 PWR¹² and it was not until a century later that Indigenous and Muslim participants began to play a prominent role in the multifaith movement in Western societies.

While the multifaith movement continued to expand globally throughout the 20th century, particularly in response to crisis events such as the Holocaust, the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and in response to the global risk of climate change, it wasn't until the 1990s that Muslim communities began to play a central role in global multifaith initiatives. Indeed, global multifaith engagement, particularly multifaith engagement in the USA, rose significantly in the 1990s well before September 11. This was evidenced by the 1993 PWR and the formation of a number of major multifaith organisations.¹³ In 1988, the leading global multifaith organisations formed the International Interfaith Organisations' Coordinating Committee to begin planning the 1993 centenary of the 1893 PWR.¹⁴ In 1993 over 7,000 people from diverse faith traditions including Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Taoists, Wiccans, Baha'is and Indigenous peoples from all over the world assembled in Chicago to participate in the PWR.¹⁵ It is also important to note that a new emphasis on youth engagement developed within the multifaith movement in the 1990s, evident in a rise of youth programs within the major multifaith organisations and the creation of the specifically youth-oriented multifaith organization, the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), founded in 1999 by the young American Muslim leader Eboo Patel.¹⁶

Muslim communities were frequently at the centre of crisis events in the late 1980s and 1990s, such as the '*The Satanic Verses Controversy*' in the UK, and the First Gulf War. As a result a rise of Islamophobia, fermented by divisive discourses emanating from state

actors and the media, spread throughout Western societies during this period.¹⁷ As a result, Muslim communities became proactive in countering negative stereotypes, often through multifaith activities, and new multifaith alliances were formed especially among Christians, Muslims and Jews.¹⁸

While Diana L. Eck¹⁹ described initial fears that September 11 would provide a ‘cataclysmic setback’ to multifaith relations, it had the opposite effect of becoming a stimulus for the multifaith movement, particularly in Western societies.²⁰ Since September 11, Muslim communities and state actors in Western societies, such as Australia and the UK, have increasingly initiated and supported multifaith activities with a focus on social inclusion and countering radicalisation.²¹

The multifaith movement had been described as a ‘quiet revolution’²² of ‘mostly unrecognised efforts’²³ by diverse religious communities to create a more peaceful world. However, the events of September 11 ‘put religion front and centre on the world stage’, transforming multifaith engagement from ‘merely an academic exercise, or a spiritual luxury’ into ‘a global imperative, and a global necessity’.²⁴ Therefore, religious peace building efforts in Western societies including the USA, the UK and Australia have, according to Cynthia Sampson’s prediction,²⁵ become ‘increasingly intentional and systematic’ in response to this crisis event. Although September 11 and the need to counter religiously motivated terrorism created ‘a new sense of urgency’ for multifaith engagement, it is critical to recognise that this momentum was building in the multifaith movement well before 2001, particularly during the 1990s, as described above.²⁶

Muslim Participation in Multifaith Engagement in Victoria

Australia, like other Western multifaith societies, also has a long history of multifaith engagement. The first formal attempts at multifaith dialogue occurred in Melbourne in the 1960s. Anglican Archbishop Frank Woods began inviting diverse faith leaders to meet for a meal and discussion at his home, Bishops court. These gatherings enabled a greater level of understanding to be developed between faith traditions and for religious leaders of these traditions to start forming friendships. In the mid-1980s, the Council of Christians and Jews was established in Australia. Gradually a wider interest in multifaith engagement occurred, particularly in Victoria where the Office of Multicultural Affairs assisted in the establishment of a Multi-faith Resource Centre, which functioned as an unofficial interreligious council. However, only a few years later the Centre dissolved as a result of division and conflict. In 1987, the decision was made to hold the fifth World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP) World Assembly in Melbourne at Monash University in 1989. From 1987 onward, the WCRP began to play an influential role in Australia. The event was a great success, with over 700 delegates, half of whom were international, and the Australian WCRP national office was established in Melbourne where it has remained active to this day.²⁷

The 1990s was also a time of increased multifaith engagement in Australia at the national, state and local council levels. The Uniting Church set up working groups with

both Jewish and Muslim communities; the Council of Christians and Jews expanded throughout Australia; the Australian Council of Churches established a Commission for Dialogue with Living Faith and Community Relations, and also a Working Group on Religious Liberty. Multifaith organisations were also formed in Adelaide, Perth, Brisbane and New South Wales during this period. In Melbourne, Monash University conducted several research and community engagement projects and the Springvale City Council formed a multifaith network (now the Interfaith Network of the Greater City of Dandenong) that still organises tours to a variety of places of worship in their area. In addition, faith leaders joined together in 1993 to support Aboriginal land rights and to raise concerns over the decrease of social services in Victoria. Christian and Jewish groups also reached out to assist Muslim communities during and after the Gulf War.²⁸

Sherene Hassan [2008, AUS], Interfaith Officer of the Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV), described how, while there was a rise of anti-Muslim sentiments in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s (around the time of the First Gulf War and the Salman Rushdie *fatwa*), ‘there were a number of [Muslim] people who took it upon themselves to actually try and start this whole process of interreligious understanding’ in response to international events. As a result of these events, Muslim communities in Victoria became more active in dialogues with Christians and Jews in the 1990s [Dupuche 2008, AUS, Postma 2008, AUS]. Similarities between the three Abrahamic faiths were said to aid this process, yet histories of conflict also intensified the need for bridge-building among these communities [Dupuche 2008, AUS]. It is also important to note that many of these activities were conducted as bilateral interfaith dialogues between Jews and Muslims or Muslims and Christians rather than multifaith initiatives. For example, the Victorian Council of Churches began a dialogue with the Islamic Council of Victoria in the 1990s [Postma 2008, AUS].

While Buddhist and Hindu actors had played a prominent role in the multifaith movement during the 1980s and 1990s, following September 11 the focus of multifaith engagement in Victoria, as in other Western societies, largely shifted toward dialogue among the monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Academics and state actors began to initiate multifaith activities, increasingly incorporating social inclusion and CVE (countering violent extremism) agendas.²⁹ Indeed, following September 11, issues of national security were imposed on multicultural, multifaith organisations and Muslim communities, who were well positioned to promote harmony³⁰ by challenging cultures of violence and promoting cultures of peace in their stead.

According to Maureen Postma [2008, AUS], General Secretary of the Victorian Council of Churches, public displays of solidarity among faith leaders condemning violence immediately following September 11 increased the visibility of the multifaith movement in Victoria. The events of September 11 also lent more urgency to multifaith engagement [Dellal 2008, AUS]. In addition, while September 11 was no doubt a terrible tragedy, it was also paradoxically an opportunity to bring diverse religious communities closer together to condemn acts of violence, to renew hope and promote non-violent

responses to terrorism [Landau 2008, AUS]. While there had already been a substantial rise of multifaith engagement in the late 20th century, the events of September 11 led to a further dramatic increase in multifaith initiatives in and beyond Victoria.

In particular, a significant rise in educational activities promoting awareness and understanding of Muslim culture and of multifaith engagement occurred in Victoria after September 11, and following the Bali and London bombings.³¹ Muslim communities became more active in addressing the negative effects of divisive and ill-informed media reporting through positive engagement with the media,³² and Muslim public intellectuals countered negative stereotypes and sought to promote understanding of their communities through commercial and independent media.³³

In Victoria, these community-led initiatives, such as mosque open days, multifaith educational programs, symposia and festivals, received state government support in the form of funding.³⁴ Muslim organisations were inundated with an unprecedented number of requests for information about Islam and Muslim communities [Hassan 2008, AUS]. September 11 was thereby seen as a notable turning point for Muslim multifaith engagement in that Muslim communities became more proactive in initiating dialogue and educational activities to dispel misconceptions and to promote the peace building aspects of Islam [Hassan 2008, AUS, Woodlock 2008, AUS].

These developments are well illustrated by comments made by Bulent (Hass) Dellal's [2008, AUS], Executive Director, Australian Multicultural Foundation:

... we can see what the Muslim community has had to endure over this, but in some of the Muslim communities [they] have also developed strength out of some of this as well and it's then an opportunity ... to have more dialogue with other communities and explain Islam to other communities ... so people don't ... have to necessarily live in ignorance, and fear. [Dellal 2008, AUS].

Rachel Woodlock [2008, AUS], a researcher and PhD candidate at the Centre for Islam and the Modern World at Monash University also explained how increased participation in multifaith events began to raise the legitimacy of multifaith engagement within Muslim communities, thus replacing initial fears and skepticism:

... and then of course once people started to do it they weren't scared by it as much and once one mosque had an open day, other mosques had open days, and they could see that there were genuine fruits to come out of this exchange and that kind of led as well ... [to a realisation that] we need to do this for our own PR. I think there was a sense that that was a watershed moment and allowed us to then spread, those of us who think that it's important activity, we sort of had some proof against the nay-sayers, saying oh you need to do this, this is important. [Woodlock 2008, AUS].

An increase in multifaith activities also occurred at the local council level in Victoria in Dandenong, Moreland, Geelong, Hume and Kingston subsequent to the events of September 11 while the Turkish-based Fethullah Gülen Movement's Australian Intercultural Society in Melbourne and Affinity in Sydney began organising multifaith events and initiatives, often in partnership with Jewish and Christian communities and

academic institutions. Furthermore, the Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Jews and Muslims – including the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry and the National Council of Churches of Australia – became increasingly active following September 11. At a national level, the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) established in April 2005 a special multifaith committee, the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations (APRO), in April 2003 including representatives from Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Baha'i and Sikh communities.³⁵

The State Government of Victoria also assumed a stronger interest in religion and the role of multifaith initiatives in promoting community harmony after September 11 [Aly 2008, AUS, Camilleri 2008, AUS, Dellal 2008, AUS, Dupuche 2008, AUS, Hirst 2008, AUS, Pascoe 2008, AUS, Postma 2008, AUS]. The Victorian Government, Victoria Police and several local councils initiated a plethora of multifaith activities in partnership with faith communities. These included: the Victorian Government's Community Accord; Celebrate our Cultural Diversity Week; the Premier's Multifaith Leaders Forum (now the Multifaith Advisory Group – MAG); the Multifaith Multicultural Youth Network (MMYN), the Australasian Police Multicultural Advisory Bureau (APMAB) and Victoria Police's Multicultural Advisory Unit and Multifaith Council.³⁶ These initiatives have been aimed at fostering an inclusive Victorian community in which religious diversity is welcome; religious traditions and practices are respected as long as they are consistent with the law and human rights. In addition, good relations are developed and maintained between diverse communities and state actors that assist new communities with settlement and in managing tensions should they occur. These initiatives have also contributed to building genuinely secure communities and have also formed a significant part of preventative counter-terrorism strategies. Indeed, culturally, religiously and linguistically diverse (CRALD) communities praised the Victorian Government for their commitment to multiculturalism as a strategy to promote social inclusion³⁷ and Victoria was cited as a leader among Australian states in promoting multifaith relations as part of a broader social inclusion strategy. CRALD Victorians also expressed an overwhelmingly positive view of Victoria Police, notably for their high level of community engagement and willingness to work in partnership with communities to address critical issues.³⁸ Moreover, Victoria Police's community policing approach has been cited as an effective counter-terrorism strategy in Victoria³⁹ and Victoria Police were praised for prioritising engagement and cooperation with Muslim [Hassan 2008, AUS] and Jewish communities [Hirst 2008, AUS].

Conclusion

In summary, Victorian experiences demonstrate the efficacy of multi-actor peace-building networks in countering risks, in this case terrorism, and in advancing common security. Including religious actors in multi-actor peace building networks alongside state actors – such as police, education and media actors – has been a highly effective strategy for promoting social inclusion and thereby genuine security in Victoria. Optimistically, since the decisive defeat of John Howard's federal Liberal Government, the Labor government has adopted similar measures at the national level to promote 'greater inclusiveness and opportunity in Australia'⁴⁰ and to address 'underlying causes of radical extremism'.⁴¹

To celebrate Victoria's success in promoting harmonious multifaith relations, Melbourne was chosen as the site of the 2009 Parliament of the World's Religions, which brought multifaith activists from all over the world together to discuss the PWR's main themes of: healing the earth; reconciliation; overcoming poverty; social cohesion; inner peace; securing food and water; and social justice.⁴² More recently, Victorian faith communities and the Victorian Multicultural Commission have prioritised multifaith youth initiatives and also multifaith activities focused on countering the risk of climate change. This is evident in the formation of two new organisations in Victoria, GreenFaith Australia⁴³ (2009), which has chapters in the USA, and InterAction⁴⁴ (2009), a multifaith youth network that is modeled on the Chicago based Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC). Finally, as a legacy of the Melbourne PWR, the Faith Community Council of Victoria (FCCV) was established in 2010 as Victoria's umbrella multifaith body. The FCCV is the successor to the Leaders of Faith Communities Forum, which was founded in 1995.⁴⁵

This article has demonstrated that multifaith initiatives provided an effective platform for Muslim communities, in partnership with other religious communities and state actors, to counter Islamophobia and to advance peace-building principles within and beyond their faith traditions at the turn of the 21st Century. These developments indicate that ten years on from the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Victoria's commitment to promoting positive multicultural and multifaith relations has strengthened, and that while the focus has shifted somewhat away from countering terrorism, it has moved to new threats, such as climate change and economic crises. This change in focus reflects global developments and demonstrates that faith communities continue to play a critical role in peace building in response to crisis events in partnership with non-religious actors.





Prayers at the Preston Mosque, 1988.
Photo by Emmanuel Santos, H92.250/1079.