

## M/C Journal, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2008) - 'vote / citizen'

### 'Moderate Islam': Defining the Good Citizen

<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/28>

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On 23 August 2005, John Howard, then Prime Minister, called together Muslim 'representatives' from around the nation for a Muslim Summit in response to the London bombings in July of that year. One of the outcomes of the two hour summit was a Statement of Principles committing Muslim communities in Australia to resist radicalisation and pursue a 'moderate' Islam. Since then the ill-defined term 'moderate Muslim' has been used in both the political and media discourse to refer to a preferred form of Islamic practice that does not challenge the hegemony of the nation state and that is coherent with the principles of secularism. Akbarzadeh and Smith conclude that the terms 'moderate' and 'mainstream' are used to describe Muslims whom Australians should not fear in contrast to 'extremists'. Ironically, the policy direction towards regulating the practice of Islam in Australia in favour of a state defined 'moderate' Islam signals an attempt by the state to mediate the practice of religion, undermining the ethos of secularism as it is expressed in the Australian Constitution. It also – arguably – impacts upon the citizenship rights of Australian Muslims in so far as citizenship presents not just as a formal set of rights accorded to an individual but also to democratic participation: the ability of citizens to enjoy those rights at a substantive level. Based on the findings of research into how Australian Muslims and members of the broader community are responding to the political and media discourses on terrorism, this article examines the impact of these discourses on how Muslims are practicing citizenship and re-defining an Australian Muslim identity.

### Free Speech

Free speech has been a hallmark of liberal democracies ever since its defence became part of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. The Australian Constitution does not expressly contain a provision for free speech. The right to free speech in Australia is implied in Australia's ratification of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), article 19 of which affirms:

*Article 19.* Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

The ultimate recent endorsement of free speech rights, arguably associated with the radical free speech 'open platform' movement of the 1960s at the University of California Berkeley, constructs free speech as essential to human and civil liberties. Its approach has been expressed in terms such as: "I reject and detest XYZ views but will defend to the utmost a person's right to express them". An active defence of free speech is based on the observation that, unless held to account, "[Authorities] would grant free speech to those with whom they agree,

but not to minorities whom they consider unorthodox or threatening" ("Online Archives of California"). Such minorities, differing from the majority view, do so as a right accorded to citizens.

In very challenging circumstances – such as opposing the Cold War operations of the US Senate Anti-American Activities Committee – the free speech movement has been celebrated as holding fast (or embodying a 'return') to the true meaning of the American First Amendment. It was in public statements of unpopular and minority views, which opposed those of the majority, that the right to free speech could most non-controvertibly be demonstrated. Some have argued that such rights should be balanced by anti-vilification legislation, by prohibitions upon incitement to violence, and by considerations as to whether the organisation defended by the speaker was banned. In the latter case, there can be problems with excluding the defence of banned organisations from legitimate debate. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, Sinn Fein was denounced in the UK as the 'political wing of the IRA' (the IRA being a banned organisation) and denied a speaking position in many forums, yet has proved to be an important party in the eventual reconciliation of the Northern Ireland divide. In effect, the banning of an organisation is a political act and such acts should best be interrogated through free speech and democratic debate. Arguably, such disputation is a responsibility of an involved citizenry. In general, liberal democracies such as Australia do not hesitate to claim that citizens have a right to free speech and that this is a right worth defending. There is a legitimate expectation by Australians of their rights as citizens to freedom of expression.

For some Australian Muslims, however, the appeal to free speech seems a hollow one. Muslim citizens run the risk of being constructed as 'un-Australian' when they articulate their concerns or opinions. Calls by some Muslim leaders not to reprint the Danish cartoons depicting images of the Prophet Mohammed for example, met with a broader community backlash and drew responses that, typically, constructed Muslims as a threat to Australian cultural values of freedom and liberty. These kinds of responses to expressions by Australian Muslims of their deeply held convictions are rarely, if ever, interpreted as attempts to curtail Australian Muslims' rights to free speech.

There is a poor fit between what many Australian Muslims believe and what they feel the current climate in Australia allows them to say in the public domain. Positioned as the potential 'enemy within' in the evolving media and political discourse post September 11, they have been allocated restricted speaking positions on many subjects from the role and training of their Imams to the right to request Sharia courts (which could operate in parallel with Australian courts in the same way that Catholic divorce/annulment courts do). These social and political restrictions lead them to question whether Muslims enjoy citizenship rights on an equal footing with Australians from the broader community. The following comment from an Australian woman, an Iraqi refugee, made in a research interview demonstrates this:

The media say that if you are Australian it means that you enjoy freedom, you enjoy the rights of citizenship. That is the idea of what it means to be Australian, that you do those things. But if you are a Muslim, you are not Australian. You are a people who are dangerous, a people who are suspicious, a people who do

not want democracy—all the characteristics that make up terrorists. So yes, there is a difference, a big difference. And it is a feeling all Muslims have, not just me, whether you are at school, at work, and especially if you wear the *hijab*. (Translated from Arabic by Anne Aly)

At the same time, Australian Muslims observe some members of the broader community making strong assertions about Muslims (often based on misunderstanding or misinformation) with very little in the way of censure or rebuke. For example, again in 2005, Liberal backbenchers Sophie Panopoulos and Bronwyn Bishop made an emotive plea for the banning of headscarves in public schools, drawing explicitly on the historically inherited image of Islam as a violent, backward and oppressive ideology that has no place in Western liberal democracy:

I fear a frightening Islamic class emerging, supported by a perverse interpretation of the Koran where disenchantment breeds disengagement, where powerful and subversive orthodoxies are inculcated into passionate and impressionable young Muslims, where the Islamic mosque becomes the breeding ground for violence and rejection of Australian law and ideals, where extremists hijack the Islamic faith with their own prescriptive and unbending version of the Koran and where extremist views are given currency and validity ... . Why should one section of the community be stuck in the Dark Ages of compliance cloaked under a veil of some distorted form of religious freedom? (Panopoulos)

Several studies attest to the fact that, since the terrorist attacks in the United States in September 2001, Islam, and by association Australian Muslims, have been positioned as other in the political and media discourse (see for example Aly). The construct of Muslims as 'out of place' (Saniotis) denies them entry and representation in the public sphere: a key requisite for democratic participation according to Habermas (cited in Haas). This notion of a lack of a context for Muslim citizenship in Australian public spheres arises out of the popular construction of 'Muslim' and 'Australian' as mutually exclusive modes of being.

Denied access to public spaces to partake in democratic dialogue as political citizens, Australian Muslims must pursue alternative communicative spaces. Some respond by limiting their expressions to closed spheres of communication – a kind of enforced silence. Others respond by pursuing alternative media discourses that challenge the dominant stereotypes of Muslims in Western media and reinforce majority-world cultural views.

## **Enforced Silence**

In closed spheres of discussion, Australian Muslims can openly share their perceptions about terrorism, the government and media. Speaking openly in public however, is not common practice and results in forced silence for fear of reprisal or being branded a terrorist: "if we jump up and go 'oh how dare you say this, rah, rah', he'll be like 'oh he's going to go off, he'll blow something up'". One research participant recalled that when his work colleagues were discussing the September 11 attacks he decided not to partake in the conversation because it "might be taken against me". The participant made this decision despite the

fact that his colleagues were expressing the opinion that United States foreign policy was the likely cause for the attacks—an opinion with which he agreed.

This suggests some support for the theory that the fear of social isolation may make Australian Muslims especially anxious or fearful of expressing opinions about terrorism in public discussions (Noelle-Neumann). However, it also suggests that the fear of social isolation for Muslims is not solely related to the expression of minority opinion, as theorised in Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence . Given that many members of the wider community shared the theory that the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre in 2001 may have been a response to American foreign policy, this may well not be a minority view. Nonetheless, Australian Muslims hesitated to embrace it. Saniotis draws attention to the pressure on Australian Muslims to publicly distance themselves from the terrorist attacks of September 11 and to openly denounce the actions of terrorists. The extent to which Muslims were positioned as a threatening other was contingent on their ability to demonstrate that they too participated in the distal responses to the terrorist attacks—initial pity for the sufferer and eventual marginalisation and rejection of the perceived aggressor. Australian Muslims were obliged to declare their loyalty and commitment to Australia's ally and, in this way, partake in the nationalistic responses to the threat of terrorism. At the same time however, Australian Muslims were positioned as an imagined enemy and a threat to national identity. Australian Muslims were therefore placed in a paradoxical bind- as Australians they were expected to respond as the victims of fear; as Muslims they were positioned as the objects of fear. Even in discussions where their opinions are congruent with the dominant opinion being expressed, Australian Muslims describe themselves as feeling apprehensive or anxious about expressing their opinions because of how these "might be taken".

### **Pursuing alternative discourses**

The overriding message from the research project's Muslim participants was that the media, as a powerful purveyor of public opinion, had inculcated a perception of Muslims as a risk to Australia and Australians: an 'enemy within'; the potential 'home grown terrorist'. The daily experience of visibly-different Australian Muslims, however, is that they are more fearing than fear-inspiring. The Aly and Balnaves fear scale indicates that Australian Muslims have twice as many fear indicators as non-Muslims Australians.

Disengagement from Western media and media that is seen to be influenced or controlled by the West is widespread among Australian Muslims who increasingly argue that the media institutions are motivated by an agenda that includes profit and the perpetuation of a negative stereotype of Muslims both in Australia and around the globe, particularly in relation to Middle Eastern affairs. The negative stereotypes of Muslims in the Australian media have inculcated a sense of victimhood which Muslims in Australia have used as the basis for a reconstruction of their identity and the creation of alternative narratives of belonging (Aly). Central to the notion of identity among Australian Muslims is a sense of having their citizenship rights curtailed by virtue of their faith: of being included in a general Western dismissal of Muslims' rights and experiences. As one interviewee said:

If you look at the Channel Al Jazeera for example, it's a channel but they aren't making up stories, they are taping videos in Iraqi, Palestine and other Muslim countries, and they just show it to people, that's all they do. And then George Bush, you know, we hear on the news that George Bush was discussing with Tony Blair that he was thinking to bomb Al Jazeera so why would these people have their right to freedom and we don't? So that's why I think the people who are in power, they have the control over the media, and it's a big political game. Because if it wasn't then George Bush, he's the symbol of politics, why would he want to bomb Al Jazeera for example?

Amidst leaks and rumours (Timms) that the 2003 US bombing of Al Jazeera was a deliberate attack upon one of the few elements of the public sphere in which some Western-nationality Muslims have confidence, many elements of the mainstream Western media rose to Al Jazeera's defence. For example, using an appeal to the right of citizens to engage in and consume free speech, the editors of influential US paper *The Nation* commented that:

If the classified memo detailing President Bush's alleged proposal to bomb the headquarters of Al Jazeera is provided to *The Nation*, we will publish the relevant sections. Why is it so vital that this information be made available to the American people? Because if a President who claims to be using the US military to liberate countries in order to spread freedom then conspires to destroy media that fail to echo his sentiments, he does not merely disgrace his office and soil the reputation of his country. He attacks a fundamental principle, freedom of the press—particularly a dissenting and disagreeable press—upon which that country was founded. (cited in Scahill)

For other Australian Muslims, it is the fact that some media organisations have been listed as banned by the US that gives them their ultimate credibility. This is the case with Al Manar, for example. Feeling that they are denied access to public spaces to partake in democratic dialogue as equal political citizens, Australian Muslims are pursuing alternative communicative spaces that support and reinforce their own cultural worldviews. The act of engaging with marginalised and alternative communicative spaces constitutes what Clifford terms 'collective practices of displaced dwelling'. It is through these practices of displaced dwelling that Australian Muslims essentialise their diasporic identity and negotiate new identities based on common perceptions of injustice against Muslims.

But you look at Al Jazeera they talk in the same tongue as the Western media in our language. And then you look again at something like Al Manar who talks of their own tongue. They do not use the other media's ideas. They have been attacked by the Australians, been attacked by the Israelis and they have their own opinion.

This statement came from an Australian Muslim of Jordanian background in her late forties. It reflects a growing trend towards engaging with media messages that coincide with and reinforce a sense of injustice. The Al Manar television station to which this participant refers is a Lebanese based station run by the militant Hezbollah movement and accessible to Australians via satellite. Much like Al Jazeera, Al Manar broadcasts images of Iraqi and Palestinian suffering

and, in the recent war between Israel and Hezbollah, graphic images of Lebanese casualties of Israeli air strikes. Unlike the Al Jazeera broadcasts, these images are formatted into video clips accompanied by music and lyrics such as “we do not fear America”.

Despite political pressure including a decision by the US to list Al Manar as a terrorist organisation in December 2004, just one week after a French ban on the station because its programming had “a militant perspective with anti-Semitic connotations” (Jorisch), Al Manar continued to broadcast videos depicting the US as the “mother of terrorism”. In one particularly graphic sequence, the Statue of Liberty rises from the depths of the sea, wielding a knife in place of the torch and dripping in blood, her face altered to resemble a skull. As she rises out of the sea accompanied by music resembling a funeral march the following words in Arabic are emblazoned across the screen:

On the dead bodies of millions of native Americans  
And through the enslavement of tens of millions Africans  
The US rose  
It pried into the affairs of most countries in the world

After an extensive list of countries impacted by US foreign policy including China, Japan, Congo, Vietnam, Peru, Laos, Libya and Guatemala, the video comes to a gruelling halt with the words ‘America owes blood to all of humanity’. Another video juxtaposes images of Bush with Hitler with the caption ‘History repeats itself’. One website run by the [Coalition against Media Terrorism](#) refers to Al Manar as ‘the beacon of hatred’ and applauds the decisions by the French and US governments to ban the station. Al Manar defended itself against the bans stating on its website that they are attempts “to terrorise and silence thoughts that are not in line with the US and Israeli policies.” [The station claims](#) that it continues on its mission “to carry the message of defending our peoples’ rights, holy places and just causes...within internationally agreed professional laws and standards”. The particular brand of propaganda employed by Al Manar is gaining popularity among some Muslims in Australia largely because it affirms their own views and opinions and offers them opportunities to engage in an alternative public space in which Muslims are positioned as the victims and not the aggressors.

## Renegotiating an ‘Othered’ Identity

The negative portrayal of Muslims as ‘other’ in the Australian media and in political discourse has resulted in Australian Muslims constructing alternative identities based on a common perception of injustice. Particularly since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in September 2001 and the ensuing “war on terror”, the ethnic divisions within the Muslim diaspora are becoming less significant as Australian Muslims reconstruct their identity based on a notion of supporting each other in the face of a global alliance against Islam. Religious identity is increasingly becoming the identity of choice for Muslims in Australia. This causes problems, however, since religious identity has no place in the liberal democratic model, which espouses secularism. This is particularly the case where that religion is sometimes constructed as being at odds with the



principles and values of liberal democracy; namely tolerance and adherence to the rule of law.

This problematic creates a context in which Muslim Australians are not only denied their heterogeneity in the media and political discourse but are dealt with through an understanding of Islam that is constructed on the basis of a cultural and ideological clash between Islam and the West. Religion has become the sole and only characteristic by which Muslims are recognised, denying them political citizenship and access to the public spaces of citizenship. Such 'essentialising practices' as eliding considerable diversity into a single descriptor serves to reinforce and consolidate diasporic identity among Muslims in Australia, but does little to promote and assist participatory citizenship or to equip Muslims with the tools necessary to access the public sphere as political citizens of the secular state. In such circumstances, the moderate Muslim may be not so much a 'preferred' citizen as one whose rights has been constrained.

## Acknowledgment

This paper is based on the findings of an Australian Research Council Discovery Project, 2005-7, involving 10 focus groups and 60 in-depth interviews. The authors wish to acknowledge the participation and contributions of WA community members.

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