

Culture and Religion

Information Sheet

In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

المجلس الإسلامي لأستراليا الغربية
THE ISLAMIC COUNCIL OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Islam

October 2009

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Introduction

Western Australia is a multi ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural society. Religious freedom and mutual respect for different religions is an important underlying principle of multiculturalism and democracy.

Service providers who recognise, value and promote cultural and religious diversity can address more fully the needs of their clients. Respecting the roles of religion in various cultures is part of courteous, ethical and professional behaviour, which promotes a just and equitable society.

This Information Sheet aims to raise awareness and understanding of Islamic religious and cultural practices to assist service providers in the government and non profit community sectors in improving service delivery.

In the early 16th century, Australia's first Muslims, fishermen from Makassar (Indonesia), lived and died among the Aboriginal people of the north coast of Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland. The discovery of gold in W.A. in 1880 boosted the need for Afghan led camel trains. During the gold mining boom, camel drivers coming from various parts of Afghanistan and present Pakistan, worked at Coolgardie, Kalgoorlie and coastal port towns such as Albany, Fremantle, Geraldton, and Port Hedland. They lived in "Ghan" camps or towns following the Islamic faith. These Muslims started planning the project of Perth Mosque in William Street, Northbridge, in 1895. Its foundation stone was laid in 1905 and the mosque was opened in 1906.

After World War II, particularly in the 1960s and the 1970s, more Muslims started migrating to Australia. They comprised different ethnic groups, mainly Malays, Arabs, Turks, Yugoslavs, Indians, Pakistanis, Afghans, South Africans, Burmese and Bosnians. And in 1975/76 the Perth Muslim Association (PMA) and the Islamic Council of Western Australia (ICWA) were formed to coordinate the Islamic activities in Perth and the State. This was followed by the formation of more local Islamic associations/societies, which are generally affiliated with the ICWA. Each State has an Islamic Council which jointly forms the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC) as the national Islamic body based in Sydney, NSW. Currently there are four full time Islamic Primary Schools and one Islamic High School. In the Perth metropolitan area there are eight mosques, and in country towns there are three mosques, one in Port Hedland, one in Geraldton, and one in Katanning.

Background and Origins

Muslims follow the teachings of the Qur'an and their last Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), who was born in 570 AC in Makkah (Mecca) in Arabia. He came of a noble Arab family, the Quraysh, the descendants of Abraham through his first son, Ishmael. He received the first revelation at the age of forty. As soon as he started preaching Islam, he and his followers were persecuted and had faced severe hardships. He was therefore commanded by God to migrate to Madinah (Medina), a city north of Makkah. During a short span of 23 years, he completed his prophethood and died at the age of 63. He was put to rest in the city of Madinah, leaving no wealth or property. Muslims believe that he led a perfect life and set an example for all human beings. His biography illustrates in real life, the meaning and implications of the Qur'anic teachings.

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Key Beliefs

1. Belief in the Oneness of God: Islam enjoins faith in the oneness and sovereignty of God, which makes people aware of the meaningfulness of the universe and of their place in it.
2. Belief in the Angels: Muslims believe in the angels of God. They are purely spiritual and splendid beings whose nature requires no food and drink or sleep.
3. Belief in Books of Allah: Allah revealed His books to various Prophets for guidance of their nations. The four main books that were revealed were Taurah (the major part of the Old Testament), Zaboor (Psalms), Injeel (the Gospel or New Testament) and the Holy Qur'an.
4. Belief in Prophets: Prophethood is not unknown to other religions, such as Judaism and Christianity. According to Islam, God Almighty created us for a noble purpose: to worship Him and to lead a virtuous life based on His Guidance.
5. Last Day (Life after Death): The world, according to Islam, is a place of trial and people are being put to test in it. At the end of the world, the dead will rise to stand for their final and fair trial. People with good records will be generously rewarded and warmly welcomed to the Heaven of God, and those with bad records will be punished and cast to Hell.
6. Divine Decree and Destiny: The true Muslim believes in the timeless knowledge of God and in His power to plan and execute His plans.

The Five Pillars of Islam

The above beliefs or articles of faith are considered the foundation of Islam, the structure of which is supported by the following pillars:

1. The Declaration of Faith, which is the testimony 'I bear witness that there is none worthy of worship except Allah (God the Creator), and that Muhammad is His servant and Messenger.'
2. Five Daily Prayers, which are prescribed five times a day as a duty towards God. They are: (1) Subuh or Fajr Prayer (between dawn break and sunrise); (2) Zuhur Prayer (Midday or early afternoon); (3) Asar Prayer (during late afternoon before Sunset); (4) Magrib Prayer (at Sunset before the evening twilight disappears); (5) 'Isha' Prayer (after the twilight has disappeared until late at night).
3. Zakaat (the poor due), which is an annual payment of 2.5% of one's net savings as a purifying sum to be spent on the poor and needy. Zakaat implies that everything people possess belongs to God and therefore anyone in need has a share in it.
4. Fasting, which is observed once each year during the month of Ramadan (the 9th month of the Muslim Lunar Calendar). Fasting means abstention from food, drink and sensual pleasures from dawn to sunset, and also from all evil intentions and desires.
5. Pilgrimage (Hajj) to Makkah, which is obligatory only once in a lifetime, provided one has the means to do so.

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Demographics

There are approximately 1.3 – 1.8 billion adherents to the Islamic faith world wide. In Australia between the 2001 and 2006 censuses, the number of people who identified themselves as Muslim increased by 58,823 or 21% to 340,401. According to the 2006 Census there were 24,187 people affiliated with Islam in Western Australia, an increase of 4,728 persons or 24% compared to the previous census.

Greeting

The following sensitivities need to be observed on greeting or introduction:

- Devout Muslims do not shake hands with the member of the opposite sex.
- Muslims do not expect any non Muslim to greet them with the Islamic greeting “assalamu ‘alaikum” meaning “Peace be upon you”, with the response “wa ‘alaikumus salam” meaning “ and upon you be peace.” So it is not necessary for a non Muslim to learn the Islamic way of greeting, since it is acceptable to greet Muslims with normal English greetings such as ‘good morning’ or ‘good evening’.

Names and Titles

There is no uniformity in Muslim naming systems as Muslims come from different cultural backgrounds. There are however, three naming systems by which Muslim names can be categorised:

1. Muslims who have a surname or family name.

In general Muslims coming from Turkey, India, Pakistan, South Africa and Arab countries have surnames or family names. Certain Muslim ethnic groups coming from Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, especially those of Arab descent and Indonesian Batak or Mandailing (from Sumatra) and some influential families from Java have family names.

2. Muslims whose fathers’ names or second names are treated as surnames.

The Malay people coming from Malaysia, Singapore, Christmas Island, Cocos Island, some African countries and some from Indonesia have their fathers’ name as their surname. Most Malaysian and Singaporean Malays normally have, before their fathers’ names, the word “Bin” or “Binti (Bte)” respectively meaning “the son of” or “daughter of”. For example, Osman bin Ali is ‘Osman, son of Ali’. He would probably be called Mr Osman, not Mr Ali as Mr Ali would be Osman’s father.¹

3. Muslims who have only single names.

This applies to Muslims from Indonesia only. In Indonesia the first given names are important, while the father’s name is unimportant. As a result many Indonesians have only a single name, such as Suharto, Sudomo, etc. People arriving in Western countries such as Australia, have some difficulties completing government forms that most often require and emphasise a surname or family name.

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Seating

The following sensitivities need to be observed in seating arrangements for interview purposes or hosting official functions:

- Muslim clerics prefer not to be seated next to women.
- Muslim men and women prefer to sit in two separate groups to avoid mixing with one another, men on one side and women on the other.

Dress and Appearance

The following dress codes apply:

- The Islamic dress code for males and females is prescribed to be modest.
- Muslims can wear any national or chosen dress code if it loosely covers certain parts of the body, consisting of the area from the navel to knee for the male, and the whole body with the exception of the face and hands for the female. These areas of the body are referred to as Awrah.
- The wearing of the Niqab or Purdah (face cover) by Muslim women is not considered essential by most Muslims.

Body Language and Behaviour

Non verbal communication has a powerful effect on relationships and effective service provision. Non verbal signals acceptable in one culture may be completely unacceptable or even offensive in another. Some of these sensitivities to be understood in this area include:

- Beckoning 'come here' with the palm upwards or pointing to a person or object with your index finger, hand or foot is offensive to certain Muslim ethnic groups.
- For certain Muslim ethnic groups, especially the Malays, the head is sacred, so never touch someone's head, as that act is considered humiliating. However, this does not apply to Muslims coming from the Middle East for whom rubbing the head is considered a sign of love and respect.

Food, Drink and Fasting

Recognising appropriate foods and beverages is essential in responding to the needs of religious communities. When hosting people from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, as a matter of good practice, always serve a selection of vegetarian and meat foods on separate trays. A variety of non alcoholic drinks should also be available at any official function. The following issues relating to food, drink and fasting should also be understood:

- If possible, organise all food to be Halal. This is easy to arrange and ensures everyone can eat.
- Islamic tradition does not allow the consumption of alcohol.
- During Ramadan, the name of the ninth and holiest month of the Muslim calendar, Muslims do not eat or drink from dawn break to sunset.

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- Muslims are not allowed to eat pork and any meat which has not been slaughtered by Muslims. Similarly, Muslims do not eat any food that contains animal fat or animal by-product, unless it is derived from animals slaughtered by Muslims.

Religious Festivals and Days of Significance

The following key religious festivals and significant cultural and religious days are celebrated:

- Eidul Fitr, that is the festival to mark the end of Ramadan (the fasting month), which is celebrated on the 1st of Shawal (the 10th month in Muslim lunar calendar).
- Eidul Adha (festival of sacrifice), that is the festival to commemorate Abraham's sacrifice of his son Ishmael, which is celebrated on the 10th of Zul Hijjah (the 12th month in Muslim lunar Calendar).
- Some Muslims celebrate the Prophet Muhammad's birthday and some other Islamic historical events, but this type of celebration is only a customary practice, which is not required by Islam.
- Some Muslims celebrate individual birthdays but this is not based on Islamic teachings.

Language and Communication

Language and communication issues include:

- It is Western Australian Government policy to provide competent interpreting and translating services to clients who are unable to communicate effectively in spoken or written English.² Government agency staff can contact the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on telephone 131450.
- The arrangement should be made according to the sex of the concerned person: male interpreter for a man and female for a woman, if available. As far as a woman is concerned, the interpretation can also be done by a male interpreter in the presence of her male relative.

Family and Marriage

The differing family characteristics of different religious groups should be appreciated. These include:

- In Islam, 'family' does not denote merely the nuclear family, but includes, in addition to husband, wife and children, other close relatives as well.
- In Islam, the strong bond between parents and children is always maintained. Muslim children are not expected to leave the parents to live on their own until they are married.

Medical

- Where possible, female doctors should be made available for consultation and treatment of Muslim women, and male doctors for Muslim men.
- When a Muslim woman is in labour, she or her husband will always try to have a female doctor or at least a mid wife available to deliver the baby.
- Muslims will normally take the placenta home, to be buried properly, as it is considered part of the body, although it is not compulsory to do so.

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Death and Related Issues

Death and the grieving process are particularly significant and important for all religious communities. Some sensitivities include:

- A terminally ill Muslim patient should always have at least one of his or her relatives or Muslims by his or her side, to pray for him or her and remind him or her of the Islamic faith.
- When a Muslim patient has died, the family or Muslim community should be immediately informed, to enable them to make arrangements and necessary preparations for the burial, which should take place on the same day or as soon as possible, unless there is an impediment to it.
- Either while in hospital or elsewhere, the body of the deceased must not be left naked or uncovered.
- It is a collective duty of the Muslims that before burial, the body has to be ritually washed, wrapped in white cloth according to Islamic rites, and then a prayer will be offered over it.

Counselling/interviews

- For interviews involving Muslim women, service providers should attempt to allocate a female interviewer or at least have a female staff member present during the interview. Muslim women will often request the presence of a family member with them during any interview and this should be accommodated.
- Should advice on Islamic legal issues be needed during counselling/interview, an Imam or Muslim cleric should be contacted.

Other Sensitivities

Other cultural and religious sensitivities that need to be acknowledged and respected are as follows:

- Islam teaches the functional division between the right hand and the left hand. Each hand has different functions. The functions of the right are to give and take, to eat and drink, to shake hands and wave. Using the left hand for these purposes is offensive. The functions of the left hand are to remove dirt and filth or to remove dirty or filthy things and to wash and wipe the private parts after going to the toilet. Using the right hand for these purposes is offensive.
- Muslim women will often not make direct eye contact with members of the opposite sex.
- Gambling is strictly against the precepts of the Muslim faith and practising Muslims abstain from alcohol. Any venue used to host a function involving representatives from these communities should avoid being held at licensed clubs, hotels and casinos.
- Taking of photographs of adherents to Islam, particularly Muslim women, can be sensitive. Prior permission to take photographs and video footage should be obtained.

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Further Enquiries

This information sheet has been produced by the Islamic Council of Western Australia with the support of the Office of Multicultural Interests. For further information please contact:

- Imam Abdul Jalil Ahmad (for religious practice) or Ismail Fredericks (specifically for issues related to burial) on 9362 2210 (ph/fax-office).

- Correspondence can be forwarded to:

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1. Information from "Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands", T Morrison, W.Conoway and G.Borden, 1994, Adams Media Corporation.

2. The Western Australian Language Services Policy, 2008, Office of Multicultural Interests, Western Australian Government