This is the published version:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30057402

Every reasonable effort has been made to ensure that permission has been obtained for items included in Deakin Research Online. If you believe that your rights have been infringed by this repository, please contact drosupport@deakin.edu.au

Copyright : 2014, David Lovell Publishing
Islam is the third largest religion in Australia after the Christian denominations and Buddhism, and the Muslim community is one of the fastest growing, having nearly doubled in size between 1996 to 2001. Many are school students, and of these many are at Islamic schools.

Muslim schools in Australia are newcomers on the national scene, most having been in existence only for the last 15 years. In Victoria alone they employ about 400 teachers, serve 5000 students, and obtain $32 million a year from state and federal governments. Donohoue Clyne (2001) found that although the schools may promote a moral outlook, cultural identity, retention of the mother tongue, and religious practice, many parents were concerned that Muslim schools might not be the best alternative to secular education.

The Melbourne Age (3 July 2005) reported that education departments have little knowledge of the curriculum content in Muslim schools for junior grades, the quality of education on offer or religious views propagated ...

... there are concerns among former teachers and members of Melbourne's Islamic community about the overall quality of education the 600-plus students receive ... Muslim extremists were posing a problem for 'vulnerable and impressionable youth' ... [A prominent Muslim leader says that] the proliferation of Islamic schools is causing concern in the Muslim community ... They are accountable to nobody but themselves.

The survey described in this chapter aims to assist policy-makers and curriculum designers to foster inter-communal understanding and cooperation. A recent survey entitled 'The Great Divide: How Westerners and
Muslims View Each Other', by the Pew Research Centre (2006), reported that opinions held by the two communities varied markedly by country of origin. Muslims were more positive than the general public in their adopted country about their future, but many worried about the future of Muslims in their country of origin. Their greatest concern was unemployment. Islamic extremism emerged as the number two concern. The majority did not regard most non-Muslims as hostile towards Muslims.

Clearly, even on this preliminary comparison, there is much commonality in our respective findings, and much common ground on which to build. We know from previous work with non-Muslim students that there is goodwill but much ignorance towards Muslims. At the same time, we know little about the opinions of Muslim students. For consistency, policy should be informed by the viewpoints of both groups.

**Companion study of non-Muslim students**

This current study follows a previous study, which was a national survey entitled ‘How Australian Students see Islam and Muslims’ — and hereafter referred to as the companion study in another chapter of this publication. The aim of that previous study was to ‘identify, analyse and interpret the knowledge, perception and attitudes of Year 11 students with respect to Islam and the Muslim communities’. The two studies are largely complementary in the sense that both explore how one community perceives the other.

Because the companion study drew its survey sample from non-denominational and Christian denominational schools, it included few if any Muslims: it can therefore fairly be said to represent how the non-Muslim student community views Islam and the Muslim. Conversely, because the current study drew its survey sample from Muslim denominational schools, it included few if any non-Muslims; it can therefore fairly be said to represent how the overwhelmingly Muslim student community views mainstream Australian society.

It should be noted that the survey samples of the two studies differ not according to the religion (or non-religion) of the students but according to the denomination (or non-denomination) of the schools they attend. This was
done both for sampling convenience (it would have been difficult to sample in any other way) and because we felt it would have been invidious to select students on religious grounds within a school setting. Nevertheless, since nearly all students at non-Muslim schools are themselves not Muslims, and since those at Muslim schools are nearly all Muslim, in practice one can interpret the surveys as reciprocal viewpoints.

Aside from *Issues Deliberation Australia* (2007), it is almost certain that there is little published work on the implementation of a successful strategy toward the reduction of prejudice against Muslims. Pederson (2009) cites a forum to achieve such an outcome but its relevancy was limited. Pederson, however, believes that although educational interventions on their own are not sufficient, they can yield positive outcomes as the community becomes directed to a different ways of thinking, remote from the influences of the media.

There is little published research examining the extent to which false beliefs relate to attitudes of Muslims towards Australia. Much less is reported on what may constitute negatives attitudes towards Australia that could be predict from the scale of our knowledge, fashionable or well worn. It is held that many of the false beliefs play a crucial role in perpetuating negative attitudes, legitimising social distance and justifying blatant and subtle prejudice (Pederson 2005, Eagly,1992). In other words, they link with generalizable attributes and stereotyping, extending portrayal and the like.

In the written discourse, one can refute empirically most of these inaccuracies. But in common daily conversations, they serve as oxygen for quibbles that can overcome reasoned argument. By the same extension, false beliefs may be empirically challenged, though such attitudinal tendencies often elude that. Results from studies on anti-prejudice education showed that participants believed that factual information about out-groups is crucial in challenging negative feelings, and improving positivity towards them (Pedersen, 2005).

Several researchers from Europe and Australia found that low and high-prejudiced people share the same knowledge of cultural and ethnic stereotypes of minority, thus signifying that the level of knowledge and depth of prejudice are independent of one another (Gordijn et al 2001; Augustinos, Ahrens & Innes, 1994; Lepore & Brown, 1997). This could, however, relate
Muslim Students’ Beliefs, Knowledge and Perceptions — 145
to the validity of the test itself. Gordijn (2001:157) argues that the measuring instrument may be insensitive enough to detect finer ‘differences in the knowledge of cultural stereotypes as a function of level of prejudice when the free response method’.

The Edmund Rice Centre (2006) listed several falsehoods held by the mainstream community about Muslims. They contend that such falsehoods have long-term implications in that they foster negative and passionate reactions. For example, words like *jihad* have come to overshadow what is a religion of many perspectives. *Jihad* does not mean ‘holy war’, but refers to ‘any action by which one makes sincere and conscious effort for a collective benefit’. Similarly, wearing a *hijab* is a testimony of faith, not a subjugation. It is pointed out that differences of world view between the two societies and their traditions will continue to exist.

Where might false beliefs about Muslim minorities have originated? It is argued that attitudes are not only formed by the media but can also be formed by other more individual social-psychological variables. Utsey, McCarthy, Eubanks and Adrian (2002) found that people with high self-esteem were more prejudiced. Walker (1994) found the same individuals often have varying prejudiced views depending on the target group whereby Indigenous Australians were at the bottom of the pecking order, followed by Asian Australians. Another variable relates to perceived consensus in the community, that is, how widely people believe that their opinions are shared – a term which Pederson (2004) ascribes as ‘equal opportunity bigots’ (see also Hartley & Pedersen, in press).

Drawing on the findings of the literature, the authors set out to examine if a relationship exists between prejudice and fact-driven knowledge of other groups like Muslims. In other words, are negative attitudes towards Muslims strongly correlated with false beliefs?

Batterham (2001), for example, found that giving accurate information about false beliefs about Indigenous Australians reduced prejudice scores. Like this group, if attitudes toward Muslims are to be modified, relevant false beliefs need to be shown for what they are.

Jones (1997) and Sidanius et al. (2001) believe that legitimising myths such as Muslims are a threat to Western values and the like has practical
consequences in that they create, maintain and increase social inequality and play a role in either the justification of or opposition to social policies.

A study by the Pew Research Centre (2006) showed that those who are more knowledgeable about Muslims express favourable opinions of Muslims and Islam. It was noted that through knowledge, greater levels of awareness come from equal status interaction between the learner and individuals of Muslim background. The study showed that the ability to identify both Allah and the Koran correctly correlates with holding a favourable view of Islam. Being informed about Islam prompts people to think that Islam and their own religion have a lot in common. Similarly, being knowledgeable about Islam makes one more likely to see recent terrorist attacks as part of a conflict.

**Survey method and sample characteristics**

The survey unit was the high-school student. Over 430 completed questionnaires were obtained from students at eight schools (six high schools and two community schools) in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia. South Australia, the Northern Territory, Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania did not take part for logistical reasons. Two schools catered mainly for students of Turkish background.

Schools were requested to survey Year 11 students, these being considered mature enough to give informed answers. The survey was administered to eligible students present on the day of the survey. Even so, four of the schools chose to administer the survey to Years 10 and 12 as well.

As the survey was administered under the auspices of each school, and in class time, it is unlikely that there was any significant non-response at the student level. However, certain schools and school agencies declined to participate. Many school principals and school agencies were supportive. They suggested that the survey was in the best interest of all Australians. However, most of them declined to consider participating in the survey prior to meeting with the chief researcher and assessing his credentials. One of the community principals, an imam, insisted that the researcher meet with him at his home. Only one principal of European background sent his approval to conduct the survey promptly by email. He indicated that the survey was relevant to Year 11 students of Religious Education, and that they should be encouraged to explore the beliefs of other religions whenever that was possible.
The survey was refined in the light of the pilot, after which 431 students were administered the full survey form. The percentage of female participant students (57%) was slightly higher than male students (43%). Almost the entire sample (93%) declared themselves to be Muslim. We do not know the circumstances of those who gave ‘Other’ (i.e., not Muslim) as their religion. It is possible that some were children of interreligious marriages, and others just rebellious. There were more students born in Australia (61%) than overseas (39%). However, the percentage of fathers (3%) and mothers (9%) born in Australia was significantly lower.

Over 66% indicated that their friends were mostly Muslim and 3% indicated that they were mostly non-Muslim; the remainder were ‘half and half’. Most students (93%) spoke other languages at home. This accords with the finding that most parents were born overseas. In the companion study only 19% non-Muslim Australian students spoke other languages at home. Respondents were presented with 18 statements concerning subjective attitudes towards Islam and Muslims and asked to rate their agreement on a three-point scale of Agree through Neutral to Disagree.

**Knowledge of Christianity**

Respondents were presented with ten statements concerning objectively verifiable facts about Christianity, and asked to rate their agreement on a five-point scale from Strongly agree through Neutral to Strongly disagree. Responses were tabulated for each question and aggregated into a score representing each respondent’s knowledge. To avoid bias, questions were worded so that approximately half had Agree as the correct response, and half Disagree.

**Overall results**

The survey revealed some lack of knowledge of Christianity (Figure 1). Muslim students’ knowledge of Christianity was, however, noticeably better than non-Muslims’ knowledge of Islam (Ata, 2012a). On two particular questions – Jesus wrote the Holy Bible and Christians believe that Jesus was the son of God – respondents were overwhelmingly correct in their responses. This may be because on these points Christianity and Islam disagree most starkly in matters of fundamental doctrine.
Saint Paul was the first Pope. The correct answer to this is Disagree, since most Christians accept St Peter as the first Pope, and do so on the authority of Matthew 16:18: “And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Mary was the mother of Jesus. The correct answer to this is Agree. Christians believe that Jesus, though divine, was born of an earthly mother.

Jesus wrote the Holy Bible. The correct answer to this is Disagree. The Bible, scholars and Christians agree, is a collection of books written at different times by different authors.

Jesus was born in Jerusalem. The correct answer to this is Disagree. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, which is near Jerusalem but not in it.

Christians believe that Jesus was the son of God. The correct answer to this is Agree. This is unlike Muslims, who hold that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was not God but a messenger for God.
The Pope is the leader of the world's Christians. The correct answer to this is Disagree. The Pope is the highest spiritual authority for Catholics, but not recognized as such by Orthodox Christians or Protestants.

Jesus was a carpenter by trade. The correct answer to this is Agree.

Christians should try to make a pilgrimage to Rome at least once in their lifetime. The correct answer to this is Disagree. There is no injunction for Christians to make a pilgrimage to Rome or anywhere else, unlike that for Muslims to make pilgrimage to Mecca.

The Holy Bible contains four gospels. The correct answer to this is Agree. They are the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Jesus was crucified on Easter Day. The correct answer to this is Disagree. Jesus was crucified on Good Friday; he was resurrected from the dead on Easter Day.

**Knowledge score (method 1)**

Under this method of scoring, wrong answers were penalized (figure 2). Respondents who got many questions wrong could received a negative score. Hence, it revealed the degree of misinformation as well as correct knowledge. Some 12% of respondents received a negative score, meaning that they got more questions wrong than right; 15% scored zero, meaning that they got as many questions wrong as right, or alternatively did not know; and 73% received a positive score, meaning that they got more questions right than wrong. We conclude that although ignorance of Christianity is widespread, those who are correctly informed outnumber the incorrectly informed in the ratio of six to one. This is considerably better than the comparable ratio for non-Muslim students, 2.5 to one (Ata, 2012a).

**Knowledge score (method 2)**

Under this method of scoring, wrong answers were not penalized (figure 3). Some 22% of respondents scored zero, meaning that they got no questions right. The rest got at least some right, with a mode of four correct.
Figure 2. Proportion of respondents, by knowledge score (method 1).

N=970
This demonstrates how students differ in their level of knowledge.

Figure 3. Proportion of respondents, by knowledge score (method 2).

N=970
A demonstration of how students differ in their level of knowledge.
A significant difference was found between the mean knowledge scores of boys and girls ($F(1,416) = 7.36$, $p<.007$). Girls were more knowledgeable of Christianity (mean score 2.53) than were boys (1.78).

A significant difference was found between the mean knowledge scores of those born in Australia and those born overseas ($F(1,386) = 6.21$, $p<.013$). The Australian-born were more knowledgeable of Christianity (mean score 2.47) than the overseas-born (1.77).
Discussion and findings

Figure 6. Level of Knowledge and positive attitudes.

The assumption behind cross tabulating the two variables was that a knowledgeable person (in this case Muslim students) will answer in one way and those with little knowledge will answer in another. More to the point: Those who are knowledgeable about Christianity will not be bigoted (a reasonable assumption). It is possible, though, that people can dislike Christians and be knowledgeable, because of their ethnic and religious affiliation; that is one is swayed to express tendencies that they believe share with the rest of the community.

Figure 6 shows that people who are knowledgeable about Christianity, at a high ranking of 2.4 and above, disagree with the statements outlined above. It is shown in particular that the five statements above, for example, Most Muslims dislike the Australian way of life, ranked highest (at 2.9) on the knowledge scale. On the other hand, the statement Movies show Muslims in a fair way ranked lowest (at 2.45).

Given the high bi-directional relation between the two variables, surprisingly no group was found to fall in the middle, i.e., showing a flat line. This is expected in that a knowledgeable person will answer in one way and one with little knowledge answer in another. It is clear that the hypothesis is cor-
robated by evidence – one that suggests bigots are ignorant but those who have a high level of knowledge are not.

**Figure 7. Level of Knowledge and negative attitudes.**

Figure 7 shows people who disagree with the four statements: *Some Muslims face discrimination because they dress differently; Since being at this school I understand non-Muslims better; A person can be both a good Muslim and a loyal Australian; I have learnt a lot about other religions besides Islam at this school.* Those who are least knowledgeable about Christianity (at a ranking that ranges between 1.1 – 2.0, lower that the 2.4 knowledge threshold shown in Figure 6) disagree with these statements. These results do not show causality. One could say, though, that being pre-disposed towards other cultures, and by extension Christianity, would show a positive movement/attitudes on average towards the group in focus. Three false beliefs were particularly prevalent with the statements *I have learnt a lot about other religions besides Islam at school and A person can be both a good Muslim and a loyal Australian.*

It is understood that if participants were given the opportunity to express all the reasons behind their attitudes, more false beliefs were likely to have emerged.
People who are ignorant (i.e., those with neutral attitudes shown in Figure 8) do not agree or disagree with the statements listed above. That is, they have no opinion. Statements in Figure 8 clearly demand some form of knowledge, and those who indicated neutrality in their responses are presumed not to show any disposition of knowledge.

Participants who spontaneously mentioned false beliefs and had low levels of knowledge reported significantly more negative attitudes to Christians than those who did not. This is an important result because it is possible that accepting incorrect information may be shaping negative attitudes toward Christians.

On the basis of the research analyzed, the results show that there is no conclusive relationship between prejudice and the degree of knowledge of or cultural perception of Christians in the Australian society.

Educating people to reduce prejudice levels may be seen as an agenda flagged by some interest groups. The agenda behind this research is to present new findings that will generate alternate ways of thinking and educational interventions.
References


