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Ata, Abe 2013, How Australian Muslims are fitting into a newly emerging Australian identity, *ISLAMiCommentary.*

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Abe Ata: How Australian Muslims Are Fitting into a Newly Emerging Australian Identity

December 4, 2013

An estimated half-a-million or more than 2% of Australia’s population are Muslim —

by ABE W. ATA for ISLAMiCommentary on DECEMBER 4, 2013:

Australia has an outstanding record, perhaps beyond any other multicultural society, in displaying tolerance and in accommodating an incredibly diverse population.

Like other Western multicultural societies, the Australian community by and large continues to look for ways to act on behalf of the common good, but it takes time to appreciate its diversity and discover common values between its disparate groups.

Clearly the cultural and historical differences between Christian and Muslim communities worldwide are too wide to make a complete reconciliation, but, given the alternatives, a creative dialogue must continue.

Just as in mixed marriages, certain differences between the two faiths may be identified, even if they are not fully reconciled. First we should identify misconceptions, misgivings and the roots of grievances.

People who advocate and promote a mono-religious and mono-cultural Australia may be motivated by a kind of loyalty, but they are hindering the development of a newly emerging Australian identity.

The Australian Bureau of Census (2011) puts the number of Muslims 476.3 thousand (out of 21.5 million) or 2.2 percent of the population; with a growth of 61.5% between 2001-2011. So I estimate that in 2013 there are about 500,000 Muslims living in the country.

It is my hope and indeed my belief that the new Australian identity will come to see Muslim-Australians as Catholic-Australians, Italian-Australians, Irish-Australians, etc…. that is, both Muslim and Australian.

In Australia, the separation between one’s religious and public identities is a cultural and political given. Many Australians may have been influenced by Christian values, but, unlike citizens of many Muslim countries, their identity is not exchangeable with their religious affiliation.

Muslim participants in a study I conducted in Us and Them (Australian Academic Press, 2009) identified with their particular religious group as a main part of their identity, but fewer Christian partners did.
The Muslim/Arabic press in Australia, (e.g El-Telegraph; al-Watan, Saut al-Mughtareb) has succeeded in helping to perpetuate the keeping of a native cultural tradition in a host society, perhaps more so than any other migrant press. With time this isolation may give way to strengthening integration, no doubt with the second generation maturing as bi-cultural citizens. It may provide the community, most of whom hail from the Middle East, the Asian sub-continent and Eastern Europe, with increasing confidence, sufficient comfort and psychological bonding to open up to bicultural values and put aside defensive reflexes.

The flow of information and sense of fair play is a two-way street. The ethnic Muslim communities and their press were less sophisticated and more cut off from the mainstream cultural life during the last three decades. Today I see more second-generation migrants writing and editing for the mainstream media, which should speed up this process of greater integration.

Australia’s Muslim communities want to live in Australian society and not live apart from it. Muslim thinkers are tilting in the direction of increased integration and participation in civic life.

So, one of the critical next steps is to engage with education/curriculum consultants nationally and at a state level. They may propose inclusion of courses related to the building of a multicultural Australia, including courses on the diversity of Muslim, Christian and Jewish cultures around the world. Educators will also have to be knowledgeable about the emerging identities of children of Christian-Muslim (and other mixed) marriages and their willingness and eventual participation in the cultural, artistic, literary, and political expression of the mainstream society.

Children of mixed marriages, can make their position clearer as to their stance on issues of extremism and moderation — that a minority of extremists do not speak in the name of a majority. In doing so, they will allay the fears of many ‘other’ Australians in wanting to know who the moderates are and who the fanatics are? Such a dilemma has often been expressed in the ‘Letters to the Editor’ section of print media. One suggested:

“Either you are opposed to barbarism in the name of your religion or you are not... If you do not, you shouldn’t be surprised when those who are the targets of terrorists eye you suspiciously” (The Age, Letters, 22 October 2002).

That said, significant differences between the two religions, Christianity and Islam, are not to be side-stepped. This could lead to a false sense of security. Differences in interpretation of social values and way of life, individual accountability, consensual decision-making, and attitudes towards implementing moral imperatives do exist. It is feasible that we should be able to acknowledge them, respect them and address them without necessarily aiming for compromise.

Dialogue doesn’t always mean compromise. These different approaches have concrete implications to these communities who are living together in a shared place. Prof. Robert Manne has referred to this capacity of accommodating many cultural and religious expressions — within a single language, law and polity — multiculturalism.

Moderate Muslims who keep their faith on a personal level avoid bringing religion into politics, and who feel embarrassed at violent actions taken under the banner of their religion,
are in particular need of such an endorsement. Absence of a religious hierarchy – one that is similar to the Catholic one with the Pope at its pinnacle, has prompted many moderate Muslims to take matters into their own hands and become more organized. For a self-serving extremist minority of a mainstream society it may be politically convenient to demonize others on the basis of race or religion, but it never defeats their own phobias.

As Australian society matures into a culture of full inclusiveness, those who promote Islamophobia, Australia’s fear of non-Western cultures and assertion of ‘their’ culture and life, will shrink in numbers. When a conservative member of Parliament, Fred Nile, called for a ban on Muslim women wearing the hijab he sparked an uproar both in the Parliament and community (Sydney Morning Herald, Nov. 22, 2002). He was made to account for his attack on the values of modesty/religious observance, and for his apparent misunderstanding of the nature of religious freedom in a liberal-democratic society.

I have assembled, for my new book “Education Integration Challenges – The Case of Australian Muslims” (David Lovell Publishing, Jan. 2014), a collection of essays that explore the issues and challenges faced by both the Muslim minority in Australia and mainstream society, including apathy, misunderstanding and discussions around the assimilation Western values and lifestyles.

Many Muslims in Australia find themselves caught in the middle of two cultural traditions and wonder if their growing community is being accepted by mainstream society. What are some of the predictors of what may constitute negatives attitudes towards Muslims?

This book maps the thoughts, practices and discourses of mediated, spiritualized social change in pluralist Australia; bringing together scholarly perspectives from around the country and across disciplines.

The authors demonstrate how many of the recent changes within the Australian society have triggered a number of unexpected and unpredictable consequences, including as evidenced in the media. The authors also explain ways in which they, the church and others are engaged in efforts to restructure institutions, beliefs and practices in order to affect social change.

The essays are written by contributors who are members of the Muslim community and outsiders; lay and religious; academic and free thinkers; Australian and beyond. This is many ways widens the frame of reference, effectiveness of argumentation, and style of criticism.

They cover a range of themes including cultural pluralism, the media, religious education, civic engagement, spiritualism and interfaith dialogue, the role of women, asylum seekers, sexual abuse, mental health, mixed marriages, identity, social services and institutions, conversion to and from Islam; tolerance and factionalism, apologists and the faithful, schools and universities, challenges and future directions.

This publication is different from others in two major areas. Firstly, Muslims are not defined solely by province of their faith, but as an emerging group with dual identities – one of which is soul searching, self-critical, reflective and is defined by Islam, and the other the perception of exclusion.

The second posits that if Australians were more knowledgeable about Muslims they would express more favorable opinions of Muslims and Islam. It is thus argued that the scale of our
knowledge, fashionable or well worn, is related to our attitudes — negative or positive — towards Muslims.

The analysis and understanding of what it means to be a Muslim in Australia presented a difficult and sensitive task.

While the broad and diverse topics and perspectives covered in this project are unique, topical, intimate and have not been broached before in published form, the conclusions made in this book should be viewed as a good starting point for further research.

Undertaking to cover all aspects of an important subject such as this was a formidable task. The diversity of issues in this book makes it difficult to go into great depth. For example, the complexity of covering all ethnic Muslim communities and associated variables, dynamics and reactions by various non-Muslims, including secular communities, in one project make it impossible to do the subject complete justice. (It would have been gratifying, for example to have incorporated several other areas such as women prisoners, secular Muslims, generational difference, Jewish-Muslim dialogue, Middle Eastern Christian – Muslim encounters; the persecuted, and marginalized.)

Abe W. Ata is an Honorary Fellow at the Faculty of Arts and Education, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. He is was a UN delegate in 1970; and nominated as Australian of the Year in 2011.

At present there is no distributor in the USA or UK for “Education Integration Challenges – The Case of Australian Muslims” (David Lovell Publishing, Jan. 2014), nor is there an e version as of yet. Any inquiries can be made to publisher@davidlovellpublishing.com or david@davidlovellpublishing.com.au.

Inquiries about “Us and Them: Muslim-Christian relations and cultural harmony in Australia’ can be made to aap@australianacademicpress.com.au

- See more at: http://islamicommentary.org/2013/12/abe-ata-how-australian-muslims-are-fitting-into-a-newly-emerging-australian-identity/#sthash.xuQipLFf.dpuf