



An Introductory *Resource*

ISLAM AND LIVING IN AUSTRALIA



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AN INTRODUCTORY RESOURCE MANUAL: ISLAM AND LIVING IN AUSTRALIA

1. What is the real meaning of 'Islam'?

"So [you believers], say, 'We believe in God and in what was sent down to us and what was sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and what was given to Moses, Jesus, and all the prophets by their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we devote ourselves to Him.'" (Qur'an 2:136)

Often, there is a heated debate about the real meaning of 'Islam'. Literally, the meaning of the term 'Islam' is obedience and complete submission to God. Technically, Islam (noun) is the name of the religion of Muslims, a monotheistic faith which was revealed through Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him – hereafter PBUH). Today, more than 1.5 billion people around the world follow Islam. The followers of Islam are called Muslims, and are culturally, linguistically and nationally diverse. Islam is also defined as a complete way of life for the Muslims.

Regardless of how one defines Islam, the following are important points to note.

1. Islam is complete submission and obedience to Allah (God), according to:

- the teachings of the Qur'an, the divine words of Allah that He has revealed to His last Messenger, Muhammad (PBUH)
- the Sunnah, the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)
- the consensus (ijma') of the scholarly community.

2. Islam, as a complete submission to God, was the religion of the Prophets and Messengers of God who came before Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Therefore, Muslims believe that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) did not find Islam in the 7th century; rather, it is a continuation of the message of Noah, Abraham, Moses and the other 21 messengers and prophets named in the Qur'an. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, *"Both in this world and in the Hereafter, I am the nearest of all the people to Jesus, the son of Mary. The prophets are paternal brothers; their mothers are different, but their religion is one"* (Sahih al-Bukhari 3443). Muslims generally understood this Hadith to mean that the monotheistic message, i.e. worshipping one God, is the same, but the practical details could vary, depending on time and place.

There are verses of the Qur'an describing these messengers as Muslims (literally, submitted to the will of God). For example, the Qur'an says this about Prophet Abraham: *"Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian. He was upright and devoted to God, never an idolater"* (Qur'an 3:7). Muslims are also obliged to believe in all of God's Messengers, as stipulated in the Qur'an, *"The Messenger [Muhammad] believes in what has been sent down (revealed)*

to him from his Lord, as do the faithful. They all believe in God, His angels, His scriptures, and His messengers. 'We make no distinction between any of His messengers,' they say, 'We hear and obey. Grant us Your forgiveness, our Lord. To you we all return!'" (Qur'an 2:285).

3. Islam is not confined to private worship only, but involves all aspects of life – including political, social and economic affairs. For believers, Islam governs not only one's relationship with his/her Creator, but all of humanity, all living beings and the environment. Islam provides guidance not only for spiritual life, but daily life too – including routines and habits concerning personal hygiene, eating and manners.

This variation of definitions has been demonstrated by many Hadiths (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)). For example: Umar bin Al-Khattab (May Allah be pleased with him) narrated the story when the Angel Gabriel came and asked the Prophet (PBUH):

"O Muhammad (PBUH) Tell me about Islam". He replied, "Islam is to testify that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah, and that Muhammad (PBUH) is the Messenger of Allah; that you offer daily prayers (Salat), pay Zakat, fast Ramadan (sawm) and perform the pilgrimage (Hajj), provided you have resources to do it."

And:

"A Muslim is one from whose tongue and hand people are safe, and a believer is one from whom people's lives and wealth are safe."

These narrations demonstrate that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has provided comprehensive meanings of Islam.

2. Islam and Family

"People, be mindful of your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it, created its mate, and from the pair of them spread countless men and women far and wide; be mindful of God, in whose name you make requests of one another. Beware of severing the ties of kinship: God is always watching over you."
(Qur'an 4:01)

The Arabic words for family are 'usra' or "ailah" and are derived from root-words denoting unity, closeness, provision, support and protection. The first family originated from the union of Adam and his wife (Eva or Hawa in Arabic), indicating that husband and wife are the foundation of the family. Therefore, the Islamic concept of family is a group of people consisting of parents (man and wife) and their children living together as a unit. Family may be nuclear or extended.

The importance of the family stems from its role in the making of an individual who is responsible and not only benefits himself/herself but others. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, *“Every one of you is a guardian, and responsible for what is in his custody. The ruler is a guardian of his subjects and responsible for them; a husband is a guardian of his family and is responsible for it; a lady is a guardian of her husband’s house and is responsible for it, and a servant is a guardian of his master’s property and is responsible for it”* (Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 93, Hadith 2).

The family is the basic building block of a larger society, hence, Islam recognises humans as a family of different races, languages, genders and ethnicities. Given the significance of the family unit, Islam provides teachings and principles that aim to protect the honour, chastity, purity and lineage of the family. In fact, Islam considers the protection and preservation of progeny one of its highest objectives as and a fundamental human right.

A significant part of preservation of the family unit is respectful and compassionate spousal relationship. The base of spousal relationship in Islam is described in this verse, *“Another of His [God’s] signs is that He created spouses from among yourselves for you to live with in tranquillity: He ordained love and kindness between you”* (Qur’an 30:21). In addition to living together in tranquillity and love, married couple have the responsibility of nurturing wholesome children that can contribute positively to society. Therefore, marriage in Islam is not only a legally binding contract but as God calls it, a “solemn pledge” between the parties, demonstrating a sincere commitment to each other.

Islam considers one’s relationship with others an indicator to his/her relationship with God, however, there is a particular emphasis placed on close family members, especially parents. Parents have a very special status and respecting them is one of the most significant aspects of Islam regardless of their religion. God says in the Qur’an, *“Your Lord has commanded that you worship none but Him, and that you be kind to parents. If either or both of them reach old age with you, say no word that shows impatience with them, and do not be harsh with them, but speak to them respectfully, and lower the wing of humility towards them in kindness and say, ‘Lord, have mercy on them, just as they cared for me when I was little.”* (Qur’an 17:23). The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: *“He is not one of us who does not have mercy upon our young, respect our elders, and command good and forbid evil”* (At-Tirmidhi, Vol. 4, Book 1, Hadith 1921.) These references clearly demonstrate that relationships in Islam should be based on mercy and respect.

3. Islam and Violence

Violence is an unfortunate human phenomenon that has existed in all societies and social formations. Given that there is no record of any society that has successfully eliminated or completely eradicated violence, it might be an inevitable human condition regardless of one’s religious belief or cultural background. However, culture has an influence on the

understanding of what is acceptable behaviour, and on what constitutes harm, and thus, what is considered violence. Muslims are no exception, and violence that exists in other communities may also exist in Muslim communities to a greater or lesser degree. However, Islamic teachings speak volumes against all kinds of violence, although it may occur in some Muslim cultures.

The term commonly used for violence in Arabic is **عنف** (Unf), a word which is not found in the Qur'an. In the Sunnah, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) taught Muslims to be gentle and kind, not harsh, aggressive and violent—not even in verbal communication. He said to his beloved wife Aisha: **"Allah is Gentle and loves gentleness, and He grants reward for it that He does not grant for harshness"** (Sahih Muslim). He also said: **"Be gentle and calm, O `Aisha! Be gentle and beware of being harsh/violent and of saying evil things"** (Sahih Al-Bukhari). In another hadith he says, **"Whenever leniency/gentleness is added to something, it adorns it; and whenever it is removed from something, it leaves it defective"** (Sahih Muslim). Islam teaches its followers to be gentle and kind even with tyrants like the Pharaoh. Allah instructed Moses and Aaron to be gentle with Pharaoh. **"Go both of you, to Pharaoh, for he has exceeded all bounds. Speak to him gently so that he may take heed or show respect."** (Qur'an 20:43–44)

Muslim scholars have always argued that Islam is premised on two foundations mercy and justice, not only for human beings, but for all creatures including animals and plants. In fact, Allah described His Messenger Muhammad (PBUH) in the Qur'an as a mercy to the worlds (Qur'an 21:107). This is also evident in the hadith where Ibn Mas'ud (RA)¹ reported: **"We were with the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) in a journey when he drew apart (to answer the call of nature). In his absence, we saw a red bird which had two young ones with it. We caught them and the red mother bird came, beating the earth with its wings. In the meantime, the Prophet (PBUH) returned and said, "Who has put this bird to distress on account of its young? Return them to her"** (Riyad as-Salihin). There are many examples of the Prophet (PBUH) taking a stand against animal cruelty. **"It is a great sin for a person to imprison those animals which are in his power."** (Sahih Muslim).

Islam taught the perfection of good morals. the Prophet (PBUH) said, **"I was sent to perfect good morals/characters."** For this reason, Islam advocates dialogue instead of violence to resolve differences. Aisha (RA) reported: **"Whenever the Prophet (PBUH) was given a choice between two matters, he would (always) choose the gentler as long as it was not sinful to do so"** (Bukhari and Muslim). Islam teaches its followers not to compromise moral character even if others do so, **"Do not let yourselves be Parrot-like imitators, saying: 'If the people are good then we will be good, and if they are wrong then we will be wrong. 'Rather, make the habit that, if the people are good then you are good, and if they are evil, then do not behave unjustly."** (Jami' at-Tirmidhi)

Islam is a pragmatic faith and recognises people's right for justice if they have been wronged or their rights have been violated. It gives people three options to respond in situations of oppression, aggression or transgression. Firstly, retaliation is permitted within the confines of the law. However, the second and better option is to forgive, and this is encouraged and even rewarded. This can be seen in verses of the Qur'an such as: **"If you have to respond to**

¹ RA or *radia-Allahu 'anhu* (Arabic), a salutation that means may God be pleased with him/her

an attack, make your response proportionate, but it is best to be patient” (Qur’an 16:126), and: *“Let harm be requited by an equal harm, though anyone who forgives and puts things right will have his reward from God Himself– He does not like those who do wrong”* (Qur’an 42:40). The third option is to do good towards those who have wronged us, and this comes with even more rewards and is guaranteed to be a better outcome. Allah says: *“Repel evil with good–We are well aware of what they attribute to Us”* (Qur’an 23:96), and, *“Good and evil cannot be equal. [Prophet], repel evil with what is better, and your enemy will become as close as an old and valued friend”* (Qur’an 41:34).

Muslim scholars consider the following verse a succinct summary of the foundations of morality and ethics in Islam, *“God commands justice, doing good, and generosity towards relatives, and He forbids what is shameful, blameworthy, and oppressive. He teaches you, so that you may take heed.”* (Qur’an 16: 90) In the above verse, injustice (*munkar*), oppression (*baghyi*), both of which can be violent, are forbidden.

Anger is one of the main causes of violence between nations and indeed individuals, including family members. For this reason, controlling one’s anger is highly meritorious in Islam. *“It is reported that a man said to the Prophet (PBUH), “Advise me!”* The Prophet (PBUH) said, *“Do not become angry and furious.”* The man asked (for more advice) again and again, and the Prophet (PBUH) said in each case, *“Do not become angry and furious”* (Sahih al-Bukhari). These principles and teachings, if applied properly, would prevent or, at least reduce, violence.

There are many types of violence committed against the more vulnerable members of our communities, including women, children, elders, and mentally impaired people. A common form of violence is violence committed against women, and more specifically violence against partners or wives. Among the terms used to describe this type of violence include: domestic violence, intimate partner violence, gender-based violence and more. The United Nations [Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women](#) defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.” This definition has been adopted by many Australian government and non-governmental agencies.

According to the World Health Organisation, there are more than 1.6 million deaths every year as a result of violence, with most of the victims between the ages of 15-44. Violence is not only one of the major killers but also the cause of much other suffering that places a massive burden on national economies as well. According to [CARE International](#), more than one in every three women worldwide has experienced some form of violence. Thus, this is a global phenomenon that touches the lives of all human beings, Muslim and non-Muslim.

In the following paragraphs, some examples of Islam’s teachings regarding the treatment of women are outlined emphasising the prohibition of violence against them and other vulnerable members of society.

Islam has greatly contributed to bettering the status of women in the world and granted women almost all basic rights, including political rights.

For example, politically speaking, women's pledge of allegiance is mentioned in the Qur'an and not men's. Allah says: *"Prophet, when believing women come and pledge to you that they will not ascribe any partner to Allah, nor steal, nor commit adultery, nor kill their children, nor lie about who has fathered their children, nor disobey you in any righteous thing, then you should accept their pledge of allegiance and pray to Allah to forgive them: Allah is most forgiving and merciful."* (Qur'an 60:12). Other guaranteed rights include the right to education, marriage consent, inheritance, and owning of wealth and property. These are inviolable God given rights.

Islam advocates love, compassion and mercy in spousal relationships, *"And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquillity in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed, in that are signs for a people who give thought"* (Qur'an 30:21).

The Prophet warned against violence against women, addressing the power inequality and reminding men of the power Allah has over them if they mistreat women and other disempowered members of the community: *"Fear Allah concerning women! Verily you have taken them on the security of Allah, and intercourse with them has been made lawful unto you by words of Allah."* (Sahih Muslim). *"In the security of God"* should be seen as an indication that the safety and security of women in the spousal relationship is inviolable.

Muslims strive to follow the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Allah says, *"There has certainly been for you in the Messenger of God an excellent example for anyone whose hope is in Allah and the Last Day and [who] remembers Allah often."* (Qur'an 33:21) His interactions with others, particularly his wives, was nothing short of admirable. The lady 'Aisha narrated that the Prophet said, *"The best among you is the best towards his family and I am the best towards my family"* (al- Tirmidhi). The Prophet was an excellent example of gentleness. It was reported that the lady 'Aisha said, *"The Prophet never beat any of his wives or servants; in fact, he did not strike any living being with his hand except in the cause of God and he would not avenge for himself except when the prohibitions of God had been violated, only then would he retaliate"* (Sahih Muslim).

In conclusion, Islam advocates gentleness, compassion and mercy toward all of God's creatures, humans, animals and plants. Violence is a human problem and active steps must be taken to stop it. Thus, it is our collective responsibility to stop those who are committing acts of violence and hold them accountable.

4. Islam and Multicultural Societies

"People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another. In God's eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware." (Qur'an 49:13).

Islam recognises freedom of belief and forbids compulsion in faith as stated in the Qur'an (2:256), *"There is no compulsion in religion: true guidance has become distinct from error, so whoever rejects false gods and believes in God has grasped the firmest hand-hold, one that will never break. God is all hearing and all knowing."* Muslims are obliged to respect the beliefs of other people and expect others to do the same. This mutual respect is crucial for a peaceful and prosperous coexistence. To consolidate this important principle, Islam has prohibited abusing or reviling what others worship, *"do not revile those they call on beside God in case they, in their hostility and ignorance, revile God"* (Qur'an 6:108).

Furthermore, as opposed to the passive action of simply tolerating and respecting other beliefs and differences, Islam highlights diversity as a positive concept, which is:

- (a) Inevitable and to be expected for coexistence; and
- (b) Essential for the common advancement of society.

Islam depicts diversity as a value that should be embraced fully, as evidenced in the Qur'an (30:22): *"And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your languages and colours. Surely in this are signs indeed for people who have knowledge (of the facts in creation and who are free of prejudices)"*.

Therefore, co-existence in multicultural society is viewed as a strength and not weakness.

The practical example of Prophet Muhammad established a precedent for equality in Muslim society, making it normative within the Islamic tradition. His policies towards the Jews of Medina, the Christians of Najran (a city in south-western Saudi Arabia near the frontier with Yemen) and the Zoroastrians of Hajar to be citizens of the Islamic state without having them change their own beliefs set a standard for equitable relations with non-Muslim subjects. The Constitution of Medina, drafted by the Prophet Muhammad in 622, constituted a formal agreement between Prophet Muhammad and all of the significant tribes and families of Medina, including Muslims, Jews, Christians and pagans.

Under the leadership of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the Constitution created a multi-religious state in Islam, allowing the community of diverse cultures and beliefs to continue to practice in unity.

In the year 637, 'Umar bin Al-Khatab (634-644), conducted a peace treaty with the Christian Patriarch of Jerusalem, which stated that: "Their money, their churches, their children, their lowly and their innocent, and the remainder of their people. Their churches are not to be taken, nor are they to be destroyed, nor are they to be degraded or belittled, neither are their crosses or their money, and they are not to be forced to change their religion, nor is any one of them to be harmed..." (Arnold 2001).

There are examples of Islamic states that were "home to non-Muslims who participated in government and public life, sometimes in important positions," such as the case of the

Jewish politician-poet-philosopher known in Hebrew as Samuel the Prince, who became a vizier in medieval Granada (Feldman 2003, p.67).

The teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and the spirit of the Constitution of Medina, remain in practise to this day, as many different ethnic groups live together in Muslim majority countries. Presently, Muslim majority countries are more diverse and multicultural than they often perceived.

Muslim jurists have always considered culture to be a strength and not a deficit. For this reason, in deriving laws Islamic jurisprudence considers local cultural norms and practices. This is based on the jurisprudential maxim that says, culture is authoritative, or cultural usage shall have the weight of law, or cultural usage is second nature. In fact, “to reject sound customs and usage [is] not only counterproductive, it [brings] excessive difficulty and unwarranted harm to people” (Abd Allah 2004).

This means that people’s customs are recognized and acknowledged by Islamic Law as long as they do not contradict the fundamental teachings of Islam.

5. Islam and Volunteering

“Those who were already firmly established in their homes [in Medina], and firmly rooted in faith, show love for those who migrated to them for refuge and harbour no desire in their hearts for what has been given to them. They give them preference over themselves, even if they too are poor: those who are saved from their own souls’ greed are truly successful.” (Qur’an 59:09)

Giving up one’s time, money and service for the common good without expectation of any financial gain, is highly regarded by Islam. Volunteerism is a very broad concept that encompasses whatever one does for the sake of God in order to benefit others. There are several reasons why Muslims volunteer. First, Muslims believe in the Hereafter and people will be rewarded based on their actions in this life. Selfless contributions to humanity will be greatly rewarded, and this is a great motivation to partake in and encourage the act of volunteering, *“Whoever has done an atom’s-weight of good will see it”* (Qur’an 99:07).

In addition, many verses of the Qur’an emphasise that God’s Messengers were volunteers, and they unequivocally stressed the need for voluntary activism. For example, the Qur’an says, *“... Say, Prophet Mohamad (PBUH) {I ask no reward for it from you: it is a lesson for all people”* (Qur’an 6:90); *“I ask no reward from you, my people; my reward comes only from Him who created me. Why do you not use your reason?”* (Qur’an 11:51) and *“...help one another to do what is right and good; do not help one another towards sin and hostility. Be mindful of God, for His punishment is severe”* (Qur’an 5:2). Muslims are encouraged to follow the footsteps of the messenger. *“Indeed, you have in the Messenger of God a beautiful example for those who hope for God and the Last Day, and remember*

God much" (Qur'an 33:21). Following the messenger's path, who is the role model for Muslims, requires a high level of volunteerism. Furthermore, Muslims believe that doing good for God's sake will be rewarded by good in this life and hereafter. The Prophet (PBUH) said: *"... Allah helps His slave as long as he helps his brother."* (Muslim, Book 16, Hadith 1465).

There are many examples of the Prophet's voluntary activities recorded in the Seerah books though all his life. For example, when the Prophet (PBUH) received the revelation and came home with his heart severely agitated and said Khadija reminded him, that he, among other things, helps the poor and the destitute, serves his guests generously and assists the deserving calamity-afflicted ones. (Al-Bukhari: Book 1, Hadith 3).

One important point to keep in mind is a Muslim volunteer does not seek fame, respect or reward from people but seeks Allah's Rahmah Mercy. *"And they give food in spite of love for it to the needy, the orphan, and the captive, [Saying], 'We feed you only for the countenance of Allah. We wish not from you reward or gratitude.'"* (Qur'an: 76:8-9).

6. Prayer and Worship in Public Spaces

Adult Muslims, both male and female, are required to perform five daily prayers (*salat*). The five daily prayers is one of the five central pillars of Islam. The prayers are usually performed at home or mosque, but they can be performed anywhere else that is clean.

As exemplified in Hadith:

"The earth has been made for me (and my followers) a place for praying and something with which to perform Tayammum (to purify oneself for prayer). Therefore, anyone (of my followers) can pray (anywhere) and at any time that the Salat (prayer) is due." (Bulugh Al-Maram 126).

In the absence of a designated prayer area, a Muslim may need to pray in a public place provided that does not cause inconvenience to others. However, especially in non-Muslim majority countries, Muslims are still encouraged to seek the most appropriate place and environment to perform their obligatory prayers.



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