

## OPINION

### **Different identities: We should be careful about trying to impose a single identity on Islamic communities in this country**

*Liza Hopkins 17 March 2008*



IN RESPONSE to concerns about the place of Islam in Australian society, the federal government has announced that a new Muslim group of advisors will be convened, apparently to replace the ill-fated Muslim Community Reference Group which John Howard established to such divisive effect. The aim, no doubt, is to improve communication between government and citizens and to enhance the participation rates of those who appear to be marginalised. Yet such top-down attempts at creating active citizens and more engaged communities seem fraught with danger.

Even in advanced democracies the proportion of citizens who choose to participate actively remains very low. So giving a tap on the shoulder to a small group of hand-picked, high profile citizens who also happen to be Muslims might do little if anything to overcome broader community disengagement and in particular youth alienation. A committee of so-called "irreligious" leaders, whether sports stars, academics or business leaders, is no more representative of Muslims in Australia than a committee of religious leaders.

Some researchers and commentators contend that the idea of universal national citizenship is vanishing as a result of mass migration. As Tim Soutphommasane, a former political speechwriter, has recently argued, "Ethnic and cultural diversity call for a form of 'multicultural citizenship' which acknowledges not only the individual but also the value of the different cultural forms in and through which individuality is expressed."

According to this view, empowering social groups rather than individuals within multicultural societies will overcome the problems of under-representation and marginalisation. But this kind of multiculturalism seems to be running into trouble. The wider community sees it as leading to the formation of cultural ghettos and strengthening transnational ties to homeland communities, at the expense of increasing allegiance to the Australian nation.

In any case, attempting to cohere social groups around the issue of faith is fraught with difficulty. Internal differences between followers of Islam in Australia rest on intractable differences in ethnicity, language, country of origin, settlement experiences and even sectarian difference within the religion itself. Moreover, such internal heterogeneity is further cross-cut by the usual factors of age, gender, class and socio-political beliefs which make any but the very smallest social group as internally diverse as it is different from those outside it.

That said, it is also true that religion is or can be an important part of identity, even when it is not the only part, or even the major part. Particularly in multicultural contexts, religious identity becomes an important mobilising force for some communities, particularly in the face of exclusion and marginalisation. The growth or

rebirth of Islam in a multicultural context is therefore a way of inventing group culture in the face of disempowerment. The effort of trying to construct a group which is representative of "Muslims" rests in part on a culturally homogenised vision of an idealised (non-Muslim) Australian community which does not exist, and almost certainly never has existed, as well as a similarly idealised Muslim singularity.

Theorists who posit a "Clash of Civilisations" between Islam and the West, including both those of the West like Samuel Huntington and those of radical Islamist belief, want us to believe in such a singular Islamic civilisation but the moderates among us must resist such reductionism. In fact the language of religious threat may act as a mask for deeper social rifts, based more closely on economic, political and social forces which marginalise recently arrived groups in society. The highly visible and sometimes violent alienation which results then appears to have its basis in ethnic and religious difference, rather than in globalisation and macroeconomic reform.

In the European or western context, concern lies not with Islam as an expression of personal piety but as a collective identity. In many cases, this kind of minority identity is constructed in opposition to the mainstream and is reactive in its construction. Yet in Britain, as Tariq Modood has written, "[n]ot only have British ethnic minorities failed to unite under a single identity capable of mobilising them all, but the number of identities which generate intensity of commitment and community mobilization has continued to grow." Thus the premise that cultural traditions and religion should disappear with the advent of modernity, and as immigrants are gradually assimilated into the mainstream of society, no longer holds.

Much of the recent public discourse concerning the place of Muslims in Australia has tended to gloss the term "Muslim" not only as a single, valid identity category, but one which is in the main coterminous with an Arab ethnicity. While the Lebanese community in Australia (particularly Sydney) may make up the largest single ethnic group of Muslims, they are by no means an absolute majority of Australian-Muslims, a group which in total consists of less than 2 per cent of the national population.

Recent research conducted with the Turkish community in Melbourne has found a strong resistance to the reification of Islam as a social category. While much of the recent debate around the incorporation of diverse social groups into multicultural societies has focused on issues of hybridity, fluidity, transnationalism and the purported imminent demise of the nation, actual practice demonstrates an ongoing engagement with the establishment and maintenance of cultural boundaries and a stubborn and intractable insistence on ethnic difference. Thus, we should be careful about trying to construct an Islamic community in this country where one doesn't in fact exist. •

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