Christian–Muslim Dialogue
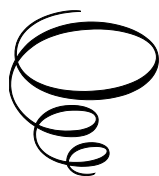
Christian–Muslim Dialogue:

Encounter and Co-existence

By

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To Jennifer, with love, appreciation and gratitude.

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PREFACE

In March 2009, when I was studying for a Bachelor of Christian Theology degree, I travelled overseas for the first time. I travelled alone as a backpacker visiting, among other things, sacred Christian sites in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Having crossed the numerous Israeli checkpoints to enter Bethlehem, I was fearful of the Palestinians who lived on the other side of the "security" wall—fearful perhaps due to my preconceived notions of Palestinians, Arabs or Muslims generally. Having visited Bethlehem on foot for the day, I hurried back to the safety of West Jerusalem, only to be consumed by a deep sense of shame about the way I had reacted to the Palestinians who lived in the West Bank.

In my ignorance, I viewed the Palestinians not as fellow humans, but as dangerous terrorists and radicals (perhaps due to the representations I was exposed to by Western media and political rhetoric, and lack of first-hand encounters). Over time, the deep sense of shame I felt compelled me to return to visit the Palestinians with a renewed sense of purpose. This time my visit was not as a tourist, but as a volunteer youth worker in a Palestinian refugee camp. This role allowed me to spend time with the Palestinian people (mainly Muslims), listen to their stories, understand their worldview and be exposed to Islamic practices and culture. This experience had a profound impact on me, where I came to understand—deep down—we are all the same: we all want a home, we want the best for our children, we want to feel safe, and religious people, regardless of their doctrinal allegiances, all strive in their own way for a connection with the divine.

These experiences made a strong impact on me in that they made me question my assumptions or preconceived notions of the "other". My first-hand experience with the Palestinians, and other similar world experiences, compelled me to go further in my search for understanding. Thus, a few years later I enrolled in a Master's degree in Islamic Studies, hoping to gain a deeper and more objective understanding of Islam and Muslims. As a Christian growing up in Australia, this was important because I wanted to build on my experience with the Palestinians and dispel any preconceived notions inherent in me as a "Westerner". When people (non-Muslim Australians, friends, family and others) asked me about my studies and I told them "Islamic studies", their responses were often clearly grounded in ignorance, fear and prejudice. These responses were a stark reminder of my

own attitudes, prior to living among Palestinian Muslims in the refugee camp.

These types of comments, especially from those deeply versed in the Christian Gospels, caused me to question: What was the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Australia? Was this type of negativity common between Christians and Muslims in Australia? What, if any, was their experience of each other? Surely, I thought, if each was exposed to the beauty inherent in the other's tradition, and had meaningful personal interactions, then such stereotypes and misconceptions would be absent or at the very least minimised.

The culmination of my experiences with the Palestinians, pursuing Islamic Studies and people's reactions to it, urged me to want to know more about the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Australia. My curiosity led me to pursue this research with the aim of exploring the factors that influence interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims who reside in Adelaide, South Australia, where I reside. This book is the result of that research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Australia is a multicultural society and abundant research has demonstrated that intergroup contact is essential for managing diverse multicultural societies. Intergroup contact, given the right conditions, reduces prejudice and builds trust between groups. Critics warn the failure to correctly manage this interaction will lead to an "incoherent society of cultures isolated from each other, existing parallel to each other and united by nothing more than physical proximity and a nominal citizenship".[1] A useful and workable definition of intergroup contact states: "contact between individuals who belong to different groups can foster the development of more positive out-group attitudes".[2]

Through the decades of development of intergroup contact research, policy makers and other interested parties have come to understand the factors necessary for intergroup contact to be effective at producing positive outcomes. For instance, if people work towards common goals, are co-operative, have equal status and their work is seen as being sanctioned by relevant authorities, then intergroup contact is generally successful. These findings have usually, with occasional exceptions, been developed from a focus on ethnic or racial intergroup contact. However, people's social identity is not only defined by their ethnicity or country of origin. Religion can be an important social marker as it offers a sense of positive identity, certainty and belonging, and shapes one's worldview. As such, contact theorists have less understanding of the impact of religiosity.

Contact theory over the decades since its inception has provided considerable insights into the factors affecting intergroup contact. For example, the conditions necessary for positive interaction, how prejudices are reduced and the impact of cross-group friendship. Given the significance of religion in many people's identities, the impact of religiosity should be an important component when considering various types of social cohesion initiatives—such as interfaith dialogue. Much in the way contact theorists have developed conditions for ensuring positive intergroup contact, scholars

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[1] Erich Kolig, *New Zealand's Muslims and Multiculturalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 76.
[2] Sofia Stathi and Loris Vezzali, *Intergroup Contact Theory: Recent Developments and Future Directions* (London: Routledge, 2017), 1.

and religious leaders working in the fields of comparative religions, ecumenical studies or interfaith dialogue have either theorised or observed key components that contribute to successful interfaith exchanges. These include epistemic humility, commitment (to a faith),[3] interconnection, humility and hospitality.[4] These components, combined with the findings of contact theorists, have provided a useful framework for religious leaders and state actors in developing inter-religious initiatives.[5]

Many religiously diverse Western countries, such as Australia, have acknowledged the need to facilitate and promote inter-religious exchanges as an important contribution to social cohesion. However, whilst this body of research has enabled interested parties to promote and facilitate successful interfaith programs, many people choose not to take up these opportunities, whilst some actively avoid engaging with these other groups altogether. The factors influencing these choices is an area of research which has received considerably less attention. In particular, what factors motivate some religious people to interact with the religious "other", whilst inhibiting others to do the same? Therefore, understanding the factors that enable or inhibit these interfaith exchanges will be vitally important to the success of social cohesion in increasingly religiously diverse Western societies.

Given Australia's reliance on migration, combined with its humanitarian commitments to refugee resettlement, minority religions—such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism—are expected to grow. This growth is in sharp contrast to Christianity, which has been in decline since the 1970s. This changing social trajectory highlights the importance of inter-religious contact. As such, ensuring the continued success of Australia's multicultural project into the future will require ongoing positive interaction between these religious groups. The key to that success will be developing a clear understanding of the factors that enable or inhibit these exchanges from taking place.

This book aims to make a contribution to understanding these factors. It focuses on Australia's two largest religious groupings, Christianity and Islam. At its core, this research empirically and critically analyses the

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[3] Whilst I acknowledge faith and religion can be defined differently, I use these terms interchangeably throughout this book.
[4] Catherine Cornille, "Conditions for Inter-religious Dialogue," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 20–33.
[5] Interfaith dialogue is the technical term for inter-religious exchanges. Inter-religious initiatives are inter-religious exchanges orchestrated for the purpose of promoting social cohesion.

factors affecting the ability of Christians and Muslims in Australia to engage in intergroup contact.

Australia is one of the most multicultural countries in the world, and home to the world's oldest continuing culture and to 27 million people from almost 200 countries. In the 1970s, the Australian government, as a nation-building exercise, introduced a multicultural social policy. This was a strategy in response to the growing ethnic and cultural diversity brought on by mass migration in the decades following World War Two. This strategy signalled a shift away from the historical "white Australia" policy and assimilation to one that welcomed and supported cultural diversity. There were subsequent revised multicultural policies in Australia:

> The 1980s and early 1990s, under the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, were the high point of official multiculturalism. By the later 1990s and onwards, especially under the coalition government of John Howard (1996–2007) and, later, that of Tony Abbott (2013–2015), official multiculturalism was wound back and supplanted by neoliberal practices.[6]

The most recent policy states that:

> Australia celebrates and values the benefits of cultural diversity for all Australians, within the broader aims of national unity, community harmony and maintenance of our democratic values. It is committed to a just, inclusive and socially cohesive society where everyone can participate in the opportunities that Australia offers.[7]

From a global perspective, Australia is seen as a successful multicultural society. Today nearly half of all Australians were either born overseas or their parents were. The multicultural diversity is highlighted by the fact that over 400 different languages[8] are spoken in Australia. In 2018, 85% of Australians agreed that multiculturalism has been good for Australia but anxieties around cultural diversity still arise in the public space.

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[6] Jon Stratton, *Multiculturalism, Whiteness and Otherness in Australia* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 203, Springer ebooks.
[7] "Multicultural Policy Since 2010: A Quick Guide", Parliament of Australia, Accessed August 22, 2022,
https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp2122/Quick_Guides/MulticulturalPolicySince2010.
[8] Of these, 167 are actively spoken Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander languages.

Some examples of these anxieties are the emergence of the right-wing populist One Nation political party[9] and the Cronulla race riots.[10] These, combined with the terrorist events of 9/11, the Bali bombings[11] and other somewhat similar tragic events created a political shift away from discussion of multiculturalism to a focus on "Australian values".[12,13] Scholars and public commentators have argued the political rhetoric around Australian values has evolved since the events of 9/11 in a way to suggest they are "Western values", which are supposedly inconsistent with Islam. In Australia, as in many Western countries, the main cause of reaction against multiculturalism is concerns around Muslims. Critics argue that multiculturalism's ability to allow for Islamic institutions conflicts with "Western" values.

A parliamentary committee inquiry into the role of multiculturalism in Australia, which held public submissions and hearings across the country, highlighted some groups were opposed to Muslim inclusion.[14] Submissions from some non-mainstream Christian groups—such as the Endeavour Forum, Saltshakers, Family Council of Victoria and the Christian Democratic Party—argued that Islam was incompatible with Australia's Christian-based democracy. Research has also shown mainstream Australian Christians prefer to be socially distanced from Muslims, with "a large percentage wanting Muslims to be kept out of the country altogether".[15]

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[9] One Nation's leader, Pauline Hanson, is an Australian politician who has expressed strong anti-Muslim sentiment. In 2018 she wore a burka into the Australian Parliament to criticise an immigration policy that allows Muslims to settle in Australia.

[10] The 2005 Cronulla race riots were clashes between Anglo-Australians and men of Middle Eastern backgrounds. In total 26 people were injured and 285 charges laid.

[11] On 11 September 2001, 2977 people were killed in a series of co-ordinated terrorist attacks in America by Islamic extremists. On 12 October 2002, 202 people, including 88 Australians, were killed in separate terrorist attacks on the Indonesian holiday island of Bali by Islamic extremists.

[12] Maria Chisari, "Re-imagining Australian Citizenship: Australian Values and Allegiance to Australia." *Coolabah* 24–25 (2018): 30–44.

[13] The official definition of Australian values stated by the Australian Government's Department of Home Affairs is: "Respect for the freedom and dignity of the individual, freedom of religion, commitment to the rule of law, Parliamentary democracy, equality of men and women and a spirit of egalitarianism that embraces mutual respect, tolerance, fair play and compassion for those in need and pursuit of the public good."

[14] Anthony Moran, *The Public Life of Australian Multiculturalism: Building a Diverse Nation* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 272–279, Springer ebooks.

[15] Gary D. Bouma, "Minority, Religious Identity and Religious Social Distance in Australia," in *Australia: Identity, Fear and Governance in the 21st Century*, ed. Juliet Pietsch and Haydon Aarons (Canberra: ANU Press, 2012), 56.

Religious trends in Australia, which have historically followed migration patterns, can be seen to have contributed to a structural tension in the Christian–Muslim relationship. The domination of the Australian cultural and religious space by predominately white Protestant Christians was an artificial construct created through the "white Australia" migration policy.[16] The disbanding of this policy in favour of multiculturalism has caused significant disruption to that established space. These changes have caused some to feel their once privileged social and economic positions and values are being challenged.[17] The emergence of these types of views, as demonstrated in the cited examples above, has the potential to disrupt the ongoing success of Australia's multicultural social space. This possibility was recognised in a 2017 Senate Select Committee's report[18] into ways of strengthening and protecting Australia's multiculturalism. The committee's final recommendation was to establish an independent national centre to provide strategic and coordinated research in the area of multiculturalism and religious diversity.

Australia has had a history of racial tension—in the 1950s and 60s towards Greeks and Italians, then the Vietnamese in the 1970s. Given this trend, in the case of Muslims, some assume "it is just their turn". However, the religious componentry of this particular "wave" (i.e., Australian Muslims) adds extra layers of complexity absent in previous patterns of racial tension. Western/European hostility against Islam is centuries long, dating to the crusaders in the 11th century. Since the time of the crusades, Islam in the West has been seen as a violent religion, spread by the sword, anti-scientific, untrustworthy and prone to perverted sexual practices. As such, Islam is seen by some as a threat to a Christian-styled Australia. This view may have been exacerbated by some Muslim groups requesting the implementation of a plural legal system in Australia to accommodate *Sharia* law; political rhetoric; the conflation of Islam and terrorism by authorities; and aspects of the mainstream and social media's dehumanisation of Muslims. Additionally, over 150 Australian Muslims are estimated to have

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[16] Gary D. Bouma and Anna Halafoff, "Australia's Changing Religious Profile Rising Nones and Pentecostals, Declining British Protestants in Superdiversity: Views from the 2016 Census," *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 38, no. 2 (2017): 129–43, doi:10.1558/jasr.34826.

[17] Bouma and Halafoff, "Australia's Changing Religious Profile", 133.

[18] Joseph A. Camilleri, *Multiculturalism: Australia's Pathway to the Future: Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Strengthening Multiculturalism* (2017), 16, accessed May 1, 2024, https://www.aph.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=c2e29818-2c66-4904-afb3-488bdd0dbe6f&subId=511325.

left Australia to join the terrorist group ISIS[19] and, by 2019, 47 had been charged domestically with terrorism-related charges. Cumulatively, these factors have aggravated the negative perception of Australian Muslims, leading to distrust and disengagement. Could these and other factors have impacted Christian–Muslim interfaith dialogue in Australia? This is what I am interested to explore in this book. The Christian and Muslim communities in Australia are large and diverse, and it would not be feasible to examine them all. Therefore, this study has a particular focus on the Uniting Church and Sunni Muslims of Adelaide. The Uniting Church was selected for this study based on its non-hierarchical structure and its localised historical lineage.

Protestant Christianity and Islam in Australia

The history of religion in Australia is rich and expansive. As such, it is beyond the scope of this book to discuss much of it here. What follows is a contextualisation of British Protestantism (the Uniting Church being a sub-group of this) and Islam in the research location of Adelaide, and Australia more broadly. This will provide the reader with a sense of the changing social trajectories of these two religious communities. Situating this study within these societal shifts will provide an insight into the forces that have, and continue to, shape the lived experience of the participants of this research.

Australia is a European settler country shaped by Christian ideals.[20] Protestant Christianity established itself in Australia alongside its establishment as a British penal colony. Prior to its uniting under Federation, each Australian colony developed large and prestigious Protestant churches. These would become immensely important in shaping communities due to their links with the ruling elites. After Federation, the implementation of a "white Australia" immigration policy, which privileged British migrants, ensured British Protestantism would remain a dominant force in the social fabric of Australian society. British Protestantism held influence over the social space through its definition and production of public culture along

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[19] ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), also known as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) or by its Arabic acronym *Daesh*, is a Sunni Muslim terrorist organisation. At the peak of its influence, it controlled 88,000 square kilometres in parts of Iraq and Syria. In 2014 it declared the establishment of its caliphate.

[20] When a British penal settlement was established in Australia, the Christian Church was enrolled as "a guardian of moral order". The first Governor was ordered to enforce due observance of religious order through public Christian worship. Roger Thompson, *Religion in Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1.

with its contribution to the development of social policy. During much of its history, being Protestant in Australia was key to success in politics or business.

Adelaide, the site for this research study, and its surrounding colony was unique in this respect. Its founders urged Protestant Christians who had dissented and had been persecuted by the Church of England to settle here. This promotion led to a distinctiveness from other Australian states because of its rates of non-Anglican Protestantism. For instance, there was a Methodist church in almost every town and community in South Australia. By Federation, a quarter of South Australia's population was Methodist. They built prestigious churches in Adelaide, established schools and throughout the 1920s and 30s established numerous aged care facilities. Methodists in Adelaide became a comprehensive community consisting of wealthy businesspeople, professionals, store owners, as well as miners and pastoralists.

Whilst British Protestantism continued to dominate Australian culture and society through the post-war period, its influence began to decline in the 1970s. Primarily due to internal difficulties, the rise of counterculture and secular[21] alternatives to entertainment, social life and values, these churches have become marginalised in Australian society.

Whilst Christianity, as a whole, has continued to decline in numbers (63% in 2006 to 43.9% in 2021) and influence, it remains the most common religion in Australia today. Given that people over the age of sixty-five are most likely to self-report as Christian, this decline is likely to continue in the coming years. In contrast to declining rates of Christianity, other religions continue to rise. Islam, while still relatively small, has grown from 1.7% of the population in 2006 to 3.2% in 2022, making it the second largest in the country. The most significant shift in the religious landscape has been towards secularism. Nearly a half (40%) of all Australians indicated "no religion" in the last Census of 2021.[22]

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[21] The term "secular" can be understood in a variety of ways. Philosopher Charles Taylor notes secularism can be described as "the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church". Charles Taylor, A *Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 2.
[22] "Religion in Australia," Australian Bureau of Statistics, accessed July 4, 2022, https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia.

The Uniting Church in Australia

The Uniting Church in Australia is deeply rooted in this history. It is the result of a merger in 1977 of three of these dominant Protestant churches: the British Methodist (discussed above), Congregationalist and Scottish Presbyterian churches. Today the Uniting Church is Australia's largest non-hierarchical Christian church.[23] However, the rise of secularism and the church's ageing demographic has led to a sharp decline in its membership. Despite this decline, it currently retains 2000 congregations Australia wide with around 673,000 members and adherents.[24] As one of the largest providers of community services in Australia, it employs around 20,000 people Australia wide in community services work, Lifeline telephone counselling services, a medically supervised injecting room, schools, hospitals, family support services and caring for the homeless. However, as Keith Suter observes, "the declining membership is threatening the church's faith identity and points to the possibility of a future merely as a flourishing welfare sector".[25]

In Adelaide, the site of this research study, membership of the Uniting Church reflects this national decline. Formerly known as "the city of churches"[26] due to the historical proliferation of Protestant churches, only 3.9% of its residents identified as Uniting Church in the 2021 Census.[27] This percentage was down from 5.8% in the previous Census five years earlier in 2016. Despite this decline in members, the Uniting Church retains a strong visual presence in the city with churches of historical significance. It also retains an active participation in education, being associated with eight schools and colleges in Adelaide with a total of around 6,000 students. It is also the largest provider of residential aged care in South Australia with five facilities across western and northern Adelaide.

Theologically mainstream, the Uniting Church describes itself as uniquely Australian with a focus on "the fellowship of reconciliation and

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[23] The Catholic Church is numerically the largest Christian denomination (22.6% of the total population) followed by the Anglican Church (13.3%). The Uniting Church is significantly smaller (3.7%).

[24] See "Welcome to the Uniting Church," Uniting Church in Australia, last modified 2020, https://uniting.church/about/.

[25] Keith Suter, "The Future of the Uniting Church in Australia: The Application of Scenario Planning to the Creation of Four 'Futures' for the Uniting Church in Australia" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2014), 18.

[26] By 1895, with the entire South Australian population being only 357,000, Adelaide had 908 churches.

[27] "Greater Adelaide," Australian Bureau of Statistics, accessed July 4, 2022, https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/4GADE.

the living God's love and acting for the common good to build a just and compassionate community". It recognises a past where Christianity, whilst originally emerging as a counter-cultural movement, developed a position which became infected with imperialist aspirations. It claims this emphasis on financial and imperial success corrupted the true purpose of being a servant in the way of God and turned other faiths into enemies. Thus, the Uniting Church can be seen, from a theological perspective, as open and welcoming to people of other faiths. Based on their biblical interpretation, "God delights in diversity and the Spirit (of God) is present in all life"; it holds that "God [is calling] the church to engage with people of other faiths".[28]

Whilst these stated positions are constructed through the structure of interrelated councils,[29] it is worth noting the church's membership is very broad from biblically progressive through to conservative. This diversity among members has been on display recently with its struggles to determine a position on same-sex marriage. Therefore, the adherents of the Uniting Church should not be viewed as a theologically homogeneous grouping.

Islam in Australia

Australia's association with Islam and Muslims predates European settlement. Muslim fishermen from Indonesia would travel to Australia annually from the 1700s in search of sea slugs. During the four months they would spend in the top end of Australia they traded, socialised and intermarried with local Aboriginal people. Whilst a few arrived as convicts in the 1800s, the first Muslim settlement was in the 1860s with the arrival of camel drivers (cameleers) from Afghanistan. These Muslims were viewed with suspicion by some members of the wider Australian community and discriminated against based on their colour and ethnicity.[30] Despite this discrimination, they made a significant contribution to the opening of Australia's interior through railway lines.

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[28] "Who We Are," Uniting Church in Australia, accessed November 16, 2020, https://sa.uca.org.au/about-us/who-we-are/.
[29] The Uniting Church in Australia is governed by four non-hierarchical interrelated councils: Congregational (local), Presbytery (regional), Synod (state) and Assembly (national).
[30] Nahid A. Kabir, *Muslims in Australia: Immigration, Race Relations and Cultural History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 42.

Then in the 1970s, a combination of the end of the white Australia policy[31] and labour shortages saw an influx of Lebanese and Turkish Muslims to the country. During this time Turkish immigrants founded religious institutions such as the Turkish Islamic Society in Melbourne. The 1990s saw an influx of Bosnian Muslims fleeing the war in Yugoslavia followed by Afghans after the Soviet invasion. During the years 2006–2016 the Muslim population rose 78% due to immigration and refugee intakes.

Today the population of Australian Muslims is still relatively small at around 813,000, amounting to 3.2% of Australia's total population. Of these 37% were Australian born, with the remaining coming from 183 different countries. Thus, Islam is one of the most culturally and nationally diverse communities in Australia.

In Adelaide, the site for this research study, Islam has been a permanent fixture since the building of Australia's oldest permanent mosque in 1888/89, although Adelaide did not have a significant Muslim population at the time as the Afghan cameleers would only visit infrequently. Attendance for Friday prayers would generally range between 20 and 40 worshippers. At this early stage, the Adelaide Mosque served as a place of rest and relaxation during the month of *Ramadan* when camel transport ceased. During *Ramadan* the number of worshippers could increase to up to 100 in total.

Today, Muslims represent 2.8% of the overall population of the city. However, large numbers of overseas students coming from Muslim-majority countries, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, to attend local universities makes Islam more visible, particularly around university precincts. The greater city area currently has six mosques and seven Islamic schools, with many more prayer rooms located in various accessible locations.

The relationship between the Muslim community and the wider Australian public has often been problematic. Since the events of 11 September 2001, Muslims have been viewed increasingly as culturally incompatible and a potential threat to national security. Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism in Australia have become widespread. Poynting and Briskman have highlighted that these anti-Muslim sentiments have shifted from "the fringe elements of Australian society to a position of respectability

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[31] One of the first acts of the newly formed Australian Commonwealth in 1901 was to enact a restrictive migration Act known as the "white Australia policy". It was intended to severely restrict non-European migrants and reflected Australia's desire to maintain itself as a white, British nation. Gwenda Tavan, "The Dismantling of the White Australia Policy: Elite Conspiracy or Will of the Australian People?" *Australian Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 1 (2004): 109–25.

through its institutionalisation in public and private spheres".[32] In 2005, the Cronulla beach riots between "men of Middle Eastern appearance" and Anglo Australians prompted further anti-Muslim sentiment by groups such as "Reclaim Australia". Pauline Hanson's One Nation political party shifted its focus from concerns about Asian immigration to the "scourge of Islam". The Australian government's criminalisation of asylum seekers has also contributed to the perception of Muslims as a threat to Australian society. Another factor impacting on attitudes is Australia's involvement in conflicts with Muslim-majority countries.

As a result of these and other factors, studies of Australian Muslims show that "citizenship and identifying as Australian are no protection from stereotypes and prejudice".[33] The impact of this prejudice on the lives of Australian Muslims is highlighted in a recent national report on Islamophobia. The report was based on 349 verified reported incidents in Australia in the two-year period of 2018–2019.[34] It included reports of online incidents and physical harassment in public spaces with no onlookers intervening. It noted a steady increase of anti-Muslim incidents in guarded areas and commonly frequented areas such as shops, parks and transport. The report suggests this increase indicates "the accommodation of hate and allowance for perpetrators".[35] It noted these types of public incidents left some victims feeling they do not belong in Australia. It similarly noted 58%

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[32] Scott Poynting and Linda Briskman, "Islamophobia in Australia: From Far-Right Deplorables to Respectable Liberals," *Social Sciences* 7, no. 11 (2018): 5, doi:10.3390/socsci7110213.

[33] Riaz Hassan, *Australian Muslims: A Demographic, Social and Economic Profile of Muslims in Australia* (Adelaide: International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, 2015), 14. Gordon Allport in his seminal work on prejudice defined it as "an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalisation. It may be directed towards a group as a whole, or towards and individual because he is a member of that group." Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 9.

[34] Derya Iner, *Islamophobia in Australia Report III (2018–2019)* (Sydney: Charles Sturt University and Islamic Sciences and Research Academy of Australia, 2019), accessed April 14, 2022, https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/208330970/Islamophobia_Report_3_2022_LR_Spreads_RA.pdf. The Islamophobia Register Australia is a non-profit organisation run in conjunction with Charles Sturt University. It acts as a platform which collects data on hate incidents directed at Australian Muslims for the purpose of recording and analysing such incidents. During the report's 2018 and 2019 period, 551 incidents were reported, of which 349 were verified and used in the report (see https://islamophobia.com.au/).

[35] Derya Iner, *Islamophobia in Australia Report III (2018–2019)*, 6.

of mosques across Australia have experienced targeted violence during the reporting period.

Despite the attempt by some media outlets, politicians and others to negatively stereotype Muslims, a survey found the majority of Australian Muslims believe Islam aligns with human rights, civil liberties and democracy. They think engaging with non-Muslims as family, friends, colleagues and in general interaction is "normal and good".[36] In other words, they do not perceive a tension between being a good Muslim and being a good Australian.

Much like the Uniting Church, the Muslim community is not theologically homogenous. It encompasses elements from Sufism, liberal progressives, traditionalists, through to political Islamist, legalist and militant orientations.[37] These later orientations have received a significantly higher profile over the last 15 years due to the imprisonment in Australia of around 50 Muslims for terrorism-related offences. Also, Australia having the highest per capita rate of foreign fighters joining ISIS in 2014[38] may have exacerbated bias against Australian Muslims.

At the time of writing this book, a number of Australian Muslims are gaining a popular public profile. The first two Muslim federal ministers and the first Hijab-wearing female Muslim Senator have been sworn into office. Other high-profile and popularly liked Muslims can be found playing Australian rules football at the highest level, and representing Australia in rugby league, cricket and boxing. They can be found as hosts on prime-time Australian television and even as celebrated comedians. Arguably, this trend may indicate early signs of a movement towards normalising Islam into the social fabric of Australian life.

Through this historical and social contextualisation of British Protestantism and Islam, I have sought to highlight the contrasting trajectories of these two faith communities. British Protestantism, previously being foundational in the fabric of Adelaide society, dominating culture and social life, has slipped to the margins, with its very existence as a faith community under threat.[39] Given the ageing demographic of this community, these significant shifts would form a part of their lived experience. In contrast, the Islamic community is a younger migrant community with predictions of continuing growth due to migration and birth rates. Whilst churches are

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[36] Halim Rane and Adis Duderija, "Muslim Typologies in Australia: Findings of a National Survey," *Contemporary Islam* 15, no. 3 (2021): 309–35, doi:10.1007/s11562-021-00473-3.

[37] Rane and Duderija, "Muslim Typologies in Australia," 323.

[38] Rane and Duderija, "Muslim Typologies in Australia," 313.

[39] Suter, "The Future of the Uniting Church in Australia," 18.

closing due to declining membership, mosques and Islamic schools are showing signs of continued growth. Whilst Protestantism is being marginalised, Islam, whilst still facing considerable challenges, is beginning to show signs, albeit tentative, of being normalised in Australian society.

Research methodology

The research presented in the chapters that follow is based on thirty-four interviews with leaders and everyday adherents from the Uniting Church (17) and Sunni Muslim (17) communities in Adelaide, South Australia. Participants were mixed gender, Australian citizens or permanent residents, over the age of eighteen, and actively engaged in the rituals of their faith.

An interview guide was designed using open-ended questions aiming to understand factors that motivate or inhibit Christian–Muslim dialogue, both in the case of the participants and in their observations of others. The questions were intended to capture any theologically informed beliefs, experiences, sociological issues and worldviews that informed attitudes towards Christian–Muslim dialogue in Australia.

The recruitment process for this study proved difficult. Many religious people I spoke with told me how important they considered this type of research, but did not wish to participate. Similarly, I received telephone calls from people wanting to understand my motivations in undertaking this research, and they also declined to participate. It took a total of twelve months to recruit these thirty-four participants. Those who participated were motivated by the importance they placed on this research. It was this attitude that enabled participants to openly discuss their beliefs, attitudes and experiences with me. Pseudonyms are used throughout this book to protect the privacy of participants.

A grounded theory method was utilised in the analysis of these interviews. This approach allowed the voices of the participants to create an independent theory about the factors affecting the ability of Australian Christians and Muslims to engage in both formal and informal interfaith dialogue. The constructivist grounded theory approach to analysis, used in the following chapters, differs from the more traditional methods readers may be familiar with.[40] Rather than imposing categories from pre-existing

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[40] Grounded theory works to discover a core category. This category is a particular phenomenon that represents the main theme of the research. This process enables grounded theory to move beyond merely describing a situation to providing the foundations of a theory that will explain the behaviour underpinning it. Unlike other methodologies, it does not approach the study with a theoretical framework. As a method, its inductive approach allows theories to be generated by systematically

theories, this approach begins with identifying action words or phrases participants used when discussing specific subject matter. For example, these might be *removing ignorance* or *working together*. These are then categorised and further investigated to identify the core categories present in participants' words when discussing that particular subject.

The book is arranged to guide the reader through the attitudes, beliefs and experiences of the Christians and Muslims who graciously participated in this research. First, the book seeks to situate the participants in their respective social, historical and religious spaces. Following from this, it will draw out, categorise and discusses the factors affecting Christian–Muslim dialogue as discussed by the participants. It is important to note here that the findings of this study are not generalisable; they are specific to these participants in a particular time and space.

Summary of this book

Chapter 1 provides a religiously based context to this book. It discusses how from the inception of the Parliament of World Religions in 1893 a normative modern-era model for interfaith dialogue has been constructed. This model signalled a shift away from proselytising towards developing an openness to learning and listening about other faiths to foster greater understanding. The chapter also discusses how interfaith dialogue has been conceptualised in modern times. This framework includes categorising interfaith dialogue into the fields of theology, spirituality, action or simply the *dialogue of life*. The chapter concludes with a study of how the foundational texts of Christianity and Islam have approached engaging with "the other".

Chapter 2 explores why intergroup contact is so important for diverse societies. It will also introduce the reader to the complexities within Christian–Muslim relationships by highlighting the key issues that can affect dialogue between these groups. The chapter highlights various theological issues, such as how religions discern the validity of claims by other religions, issues regarding evangelism and *da'wah*, doctrinal claims, and how theological doctrines can be either negative influences and/or positive drivers of dialogue. The chapter also explores a range of outside factors, such as the role of the media, geo-politics, social policies and fear, which can add to the complexities of inter-religious attitudes.

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collecting and analysing data. As such, it is based on the premise that the experiences, views and perceptions of the participants will guide the formation of theories. The theories that emerge therefore will be "grounded" in the data.

Chapter 3 analyses how the participants in this study understand the purpose of Christian–Muslim dialogue. It seeks to understand what, if any, influence their faith and/or the Australian context have on their attitudes to Christian–Muslim dialogue. The chapter reports and categorises Christians' responses to the question: What is the purpose of interfaith dialogue within the Australian perspective? It similarly reports and categorises Muslims' responses to this question. Lastly, the chapter compares and contrasts these responses.

Chapter 4 focuses on interviews with Christian participants. It offers a deep analysis to draw out the factors that motivate or inhibit attitudes towards engaging with Australian Muslims. It highlights various fears and reveals the emotional and theological impact of the church's decline as negative factors. This chapter also draws attention to the ability of Christian theology to prime participants towards inclusivity. Lastly, the chapter shows how relational proximity to a Muslim can trigger curiosity as a motivating factor.

Chapter 5 focuses on Muslims' attitudes towards engaging with Australian Christians. Following the same pattern as the previous chapter, it offers a deep analysis to draw out the factors that motivate or inhibit attitudes towards engaging with Australian Christians. It highlights the negative impact of dehumanisation and Islamophobia. Issues of leadership, language and culture are also shown to inhibit participants. This is shown to be offset by the positive influences of theological perspectives and Australian multiculturalism.

Chapter 6 presents an analysis of whether participants considered Christian–Muslim dialogue in Australia to be successful. It firstly draws on Christian participants' experiences of engaging in various types of dialogue with Muslims. Following this, it considers Muslim participants' experiences of engaging in various types of dialogue with Christians. The chapter concludes with a summary of these experiences. It uses the participants' own criteria for success, as set out in Chapter 2, to ascertain the success, if any, of these encounters.

Chapter 7 discusses the findings of this research. The implications in the findings of the previous chapters are discussed in relation to previous research. Most importantly, this chapter draws together an analysis of the previous chapters to answer the core question this study addresses: What

are the factors affecting Christian–Muslim dialogue in Australia based on the views and experiences of followers of these faith traditions? The chapter concludes with policy recommendations based on the findings of this study.

1

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

> The fraternal union of the religions of the world will come when each seeks truly to know how God has revealed himself in the other. (Charles Bonney 1893)

Whereas the introduction provided a social and historical context for this study, this chapter outlines and explores the concept of interfaith dialogue. To this end, the chapter is divided into four sections. The first explores the concept of dialogue. The second explains how a normative model for interfaith dialogue has emerged in the modern era. The third section will discuss how, in more recent times, interfaith dialogue has been conceptualised more broadly to encompass various types of exchanges ranging from the formal through to the everyday experience of social life. The fourth section explores the religious underpinnings of interfaith dialogue from Christian and Muslim perspectives.

What exactly is dialogue?

Before discussing how a normative model for interfaith dialogue has been constructed, it is worth pausing to consider: What is dialogue? Socrates has been quoted as saying: "writing is a careless use of words, and the only serious communicative medium is conversation". However, for Socrates a dialogue was the imparting of knowledge onto his interlocutor to modify their thinking. This was done by asking and responding to questions to prompt critical thinking. The exchange would then continue in a way that posed critical questions to ensure they understood the knowledge Socrates wished to impart.

In contemporary times, Louise Phillips[41] observes dialogue has become a buzzword with a taken-for-granted positive value. In contrast to Socrates'

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[41] Louise J Phillips, "Analysing the Dialogic Turn in the Communication of Research-Based Knowledge: An Exploration of the Tensions in Collaborative Research," *Public Understanding of Science* 20, no. 1 (2011): 80,

hierarchical stance towards his interlocutor, dialogue is seen as a vehicle for building bridges across difference.[42]

Behavioural scientists such as David Bohm state that to engage in dialogue is something more than merely having a discussion with others. Bohm notes much of what is labelled today as dialogue, such as within the United Nations and other high-level interaction, is not dialogue; rather it is discussions or negotiations. Bohm describes this difference in the following way:

> The object of a dialogue is not to analyse things, or to win an argument, or to exchange opinions. Rather, it is to suspend your opinions and to look at the opinions—to listen to everybody's opinions, to suspend them, and to see what all that means … We can just simply share the appreciation of the meanings, and out of this whole thing, truth emerges unannounced—not that we have chosen it.[43]

Scholars such as Stephen Fife, reflecting on the work of Martin Buber who philosophised about dialogue in the early 1900s, describe genuine dialogue as: "A relation of co-constituted mutuality, with each honouring what is real and important to the Other and embracing similarities and differences without losing a sense of his or her own 'Otherness'".[44] These descriptions can be seen to encapsulate the spirit of dialogue within the modern interfaith context. It points to something much deeper than mere doctrinal discussion or theological negotiation.

The emergence of a normative model for interfaith dialogue

The 1893 Parliament of World Religions is generally regarded as the birth of formal inter-religious dialogue worldwide. The aim of the organisers was to bring all true believers to a return to the primitive unity of the world. Rather than engaging with the "other" to proselytise, this new approach expressed an openness and respect to promote greater understanding. As

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doi:10.1177/0963662509340092.

[42] Socratic dialogue is the basis of the psychological practice of cognitive behavioural therapy. As such, there remains a form of hierarchical Socratic-type questioning in this contemporary application.

[43] David Bohm, *On Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 1996), 26.

[44] Stephen T. Fife, "Martin Buber's Philosophy of Dialogue and Implications for Qualitative Family Research," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 7, no. 3 (2015): 214.

such, it was this event that developed the modern "normative model" for interfaith dialogue.

An attitude of openness and respect in these earlier times was driven by a spirit of inquiry. It involved discussing philosophies and theologies in an endeavour to create a greater understanding of reality. This attitude reflected Christendom's shift in how truth is understood and what meaning and status should be conferred upon it. Whereas previously truth had been static and absolute, it was now becoming relational. It was seen through the prism of historical circumstance, or from the standpoint of the speaker, or even how a text is interpreted. It is noteworthy that the religious leaders who accepted the invitation to participate in this event—the Parliament of World Religions—were not old elites and traditional religious leaders but were often younger modern religious reformers. For instance, the American Assembly of Presbyterians described the proposal for a World Parliament of Religions as "attacking the cross of Christ" and a "masterpiece of Satan". The Archbishop of Canterbury refused to attend because he considered "Christianity as the only religion". The Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, acting as the Caliph, called for a Muslim boycott of the event. This call led to only one Muslim attending, the American convert Mohammed Russell Webb.[45]

As evident in the resistance noted above, this approach has been seen by some Christian and Muslim leaders as a threat. This tension remained with conservative leaders boycotting interfaith dialogue, claiming it was run by liberal Christians who were intolerant of truth claims and sought harmonisation through focusing on commonalities. This liberal approach to dialogue was bolstered by John Hicks' pluralist hypothesis, which claimed all religions are historical and cultural interpretations of the one ultimate reality. However, whilst some remain suspicious of interfaith dialogue, a new paradigm, which Marianne Moyaert describes as a shift from liberal pluralism to post-liberal particularism, began to emerge.[46] This "new" paradigm is founded in a commitment to faith while allowing for the

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[45] Mohammed Russell Webb (d. 1916) converted to Islam whilst serving as the United States Consul in the Philippines. On returning to the United States, he founded one of the first American mosques and the American Muslim Press. During his talk at the first World Parliament of Religions, there were "hisses and cries of 'shame'" from the audience when he defended the practice of polygamy. See Arie L. Molendijk, "To Unite Religion Against All Irreligion: The 1893 World Parliament of Religions," *Journal for the History of Modern Theology/Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte* 18, no. 2 (2011): 228–50.

[46] Marianne Moyaert, "Scriptural Reasoning as a Ritualized Practice," in *Interreligious Relations and the Negotiation of Ritual Boundaries: Explorations of Interrituality*, ed. Marianne Moyaert (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 100.

presence of exclusivist claims, thereby allowing conservative leaders to engage in dialogue. This shift has allowed interfaith dialogue to also become a mechanism in combatting extremist attitudes. A notable instance of the effectiveness of this shift was a 2014 meeting of American Evangelicals and Pakistani Deobandi and Salafi Muslims in Nepal. On the final day of the event these conservative groups sat together, sharing food and stories. Conservative American Christians stood alongside the Muslims for Friday prayers and were later invited into this sacred space by the conservative Salafis to perform their own prayers. In other shifts, the worldwide interfaith movement has expanded its scope to address injustices, such as those motivated by extremism or xenophobia, and global risks such as climate change.[47]

Types of interfaith dialogue

Today the term "interfaith dialogue" applies to a multitude of different types of exchanges. These can range from the formal to a neighbourhood encounter in the local shops between people of different faiths. These different types of exchanges have been categorised by the Vatican Council for Interreligious Dialogue into four distinct domains: dialogues of theology, spirituality, action and life. This categorisation can be helpful when identifying and analysing the challenges and/or the effectiveness of these different types of exchanges.

Dialogue of theology

The first of these, and perhaps the most dominant understanding of what it means to be in dialogue with the religious other, is the *dialogue of theology*. This type of dialogue is usually based on a study of text, belief, doctrines and teachings. As such, it tends to be in the domain of expert professional practitioners. An example of this type of exchange is a form of interfaith dialogue known as "scriptural reasoning". This practice involves Jewish, Muslim and Christian scholars engaging deeply and seriously in each other's texts, not to find common ground, but to make respectful

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[47] For further on interfaith dialogue and climate change action, see Evan Berry, "Climate Change and Global Religious Pluralism," in *Emergent Religious Pluralisms*, ed. Jan-Jonathan Bock, John Fahy, and Samuel Everett (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 279–301.