

# The Australian Muslim Identity

Hawke Centre 01/05/08



Bismillah ir rahmaan ir raheem – I begin in the name of God the most gracious, most merciful.

Muslims who live in Australia, as we have already heard today, come from different cultural groups and religious branches. In fact there are over 70 different ethnic groups. The majority of Muslims in Australia are Sunni and the next largest group is Shii'a. We have people who call themselves Sufi's and those who follow other doctrines that have grown up as a result of the spread of Islam through the world. Ultimately though we all fall under the title of "Australian Muslim".

## Aus-tra-lian *n.*

1. A native or inhabitant of Australia.

## Muslim *n.*

1. A follower of the religion of Islam.

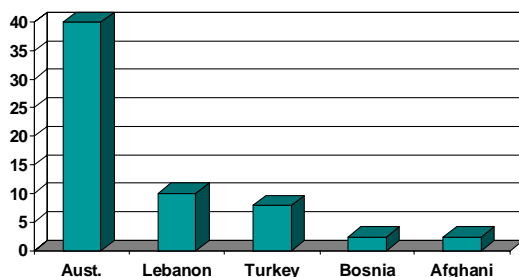
*adj*

1. Belonging or relating to Muslims or to Islam.

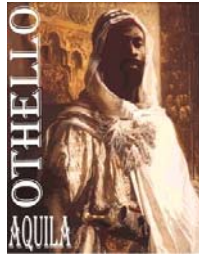
**Etymology:** 17c: from Arabic *muslim*, literally 'one who submits', from *salma* to submit (to God).

2 Muslims have been a part of Australia's history for over 75% of its existence since European Settlement and have always played a vital role in the development of this country. First as pioneers, then as migrants and now as Australian born and raised.

## Australian Muslims places of birth



3 When I embraced Islam I was totally ignorant to the magnificent creations that existed within the Islamic world. And the amazing contributions Muslims had made to civilization as a whole. Lets face it as a teenager in school the only Muslim I was exposed to in literature was 'Aladdin and his magic lamp' or Shakespeare's 'Othello". Not exactly people you would take home to meet your parents!!



"An honourable murdered, if you will;  
For naught I did in hate, but all in honour"

"Othello" William Shakespeare  
Act 5:Scene 2

4 I was awed by the enormity of the 'Islamic worlds' achievements and shocked that as a history student I had been fed such a selective and racist account of the worlds people and civilizations. That we in the West had been given so much and given little if any recognition in return.

5, 6, 7 Selections of Rumi and Omar Khyyam and 1001 Arabian Nights were the extent to which I knew Islamic literature. I was amazed to find that Muslims developed publishing in its modern form. Libraries and universities were first seen in the Islamic world.



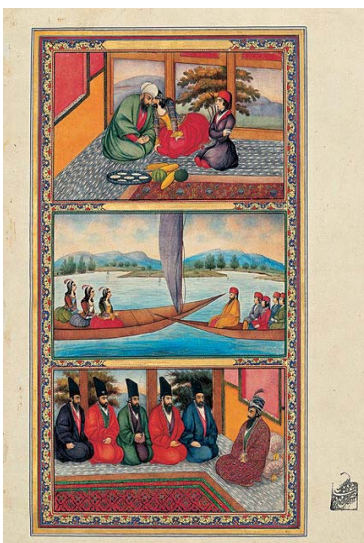
Rumi

Maulana Calal-addin Rumi – a Sufi has been depicted in the West as a poet and humanitarian – he was so much more. A devout follower of the Prophet Muhammad and a committed Muslim was revered by millions of Muslims in his life time and since.

Omar Khayyam



"Be happy for this moment –  
this moment is your life."



### Shaherizade and 1001 Arabian Nights

Stories that depicted  
the Islamic world as  
filled with exotic  
people and fantasy  
lands.



**The origins of the term chairperson or 'chair'.**

Over a thousand years ago, Muslim schools and universities had study circles with groups of students gathered around a professor who was seated on a chair or kursi. It is this notion that evolved into a professional position, the chairperson

**8** As a lover of history I became engrossed in what I was discovering. I drank in the beautiful images of scholars locked in philosophical debates. The idea that scientists and artists so long ago were encourage to consistently push the boundaries of conventionality and give us such things as chess, algebra, the Taj Mahal (the largest collection of Islamic Calligraphy in the world). They invented spherical geometry, hospitals, the basic law of light and I think most importantly – the tooth brush. But it does not stop there – things we take so much for granted these days were once just a whimsical thought in the mind of a Muslim in a far away land in a far away time. My children often tell

me that I am like the father on "My big fat Greek wedding" the one who says 'every word in the world can trace its origins to Greek – even Kimono!' because I am always saying – you know a Muslim invented that!! I have to disagree with him – every word does not have its origins in Greek – they come from Arabic – like sugar, coffee, jar and magazine! There is such a wealth of knowledge that has come from the Islamic world to the West and we know so little about it.



**9** As Muslims in Australia we are filled with a huge challenge – that of developing our own 'Australian Muslim Identity'. Coming from over 70 different ethnic groups and a variety of religious dogmas creating something we can all identify with is not so easy.

**10** I believe the place to start is with our past for even though we do not have a collective present (contrary to popular belief we are not one homogenous group – as one Aussie Muslim comedian so eloquently put it ) but we do have a collective past. The great achievements of Muslims from many different cultures and nations and the immeasurable contribution they made to all civilisations, past, present and future

As Australian Muslims we deserve to know and understand our heritage – to give us something to be proud of. The actions of some Muslims in the recent past have made us anything but proud. We



**Ibn Al-Nafis (1213-1288)**

Renowned expert on Islamic Jurisprudence as well as a reputed Physician.

His major contribution was the discovery of the pulmonary circulation. Ibn Al-Nafis was the first to correctly describe the constitution of the lungs and gave a description of the bronchi and the interaction between the human body's vessels for air and blood. He also elaborated on the function of the coronary arteries as suppliers of blood to the cardiac musculature.



Ibn Al-Nafis manuscript - Pulmonary Circulation and Digestive System

His works were used as medical texts both in the East and the West for over 700 years.

need to know that our fellow Australians acknowledge and understand the contributions we have made to the world and the we are still making. The West's account of history can no longer be a selective one. Australia can no longer call itself a nation of Anglo Celtic origin – there are too many variables here today for that to continue to be true. I am of Anglo-Celtic heritage – but I now also belong to the world of Islam and all that has to offer, past and future. As an Anglo-Muslim-Australian I believe this is the key to moving forward.

How can we shape our future without ever knowing and understanding our past. I am not the only Australian Muslim to feel this way. Today we have a growing number of emerging and very successful Muslim authors who all want to help us understand where we have come from. To help heal the rift that has grown between Muslim and non Muslim Australia so we can all move forward together as one nation. (Not as Pauline Hanson's One Nation – but one that respects every individual's right under our constitution to freedom of religion and religious expression).

Authors are coming from all walks of life to tell their stories and put a human perspective on issues that have made us all a little dehumanized.

## Randa Abdel-Fattah



Australian born Muslim with Palestinian/Egyptian Heritage – she is an acclaimed author world wide. She lives in Sydney and works as a Lawyer

## 11 Randa Abdel Fattah

Since 9/11 the Muslim community in Australia has been working tirelessly and often against all odds to try and bridge the gap that was wide enough before that terrible day but has now developed into a chasm being made deeper and deeper with every horrific event that happens.

We have tried to liaise with the media – to put ourselves forward and to portray our true selves to the wider Australian community. But we have not gotten very far.

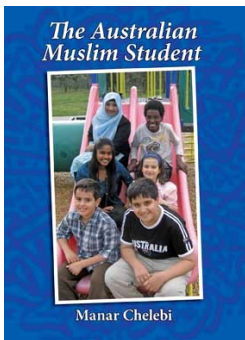
## Waleed Aly

Born and raised in Melbourne from Egyptian heritage Waleed is a Lecturer at the Global Terrorism Research Centre at Monash University



## 12 Waleed Aly

So some of us decided to write. Many of us because of a deep sense of frustration of being 'voiceless' – some of us through the realization of the lack of information on Islam that is available in Australia. But no matter what the catalyst the result has been the same.



### Manar Chelebi



Senior Consultant, Diversity Connect International. Manar is a mother and lives with her

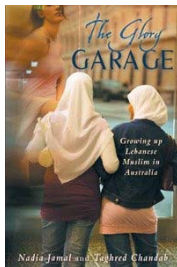
family in Melbourne. A qualified teacher she is instrumental in supporting schools to help their Muslim students gain confidence and a true sense of themselves.

### 13 Manar Chelebi

Our stories, our willingness to put a 'piece of ourselves' on the page and to try to 'connect' through our shared experiences and humanity has hit a cord in the wider community. The response at times has been overwhelming. The thirst for knowledge about Islam and Australian Muslims does not look like being quenched any time soon, and the stories that are yet to be told are in no danger of drying up.

### Nadia Jamal & Taghred Chandab

Both award winning journalists Nadia & Taghred have also won awards for their book about the challenges faced growing up as Australian Muslims of Lebanese heritage.



### 14 Nadia Jamal & Taghred Chandab

The door to understanding Islam through the eyes of Australian Muslims and being able to share their experiences through the pages of a book has been flung open and non Muslims here in Australia and all over the world (as our books are sold internationally) are steaming through it.



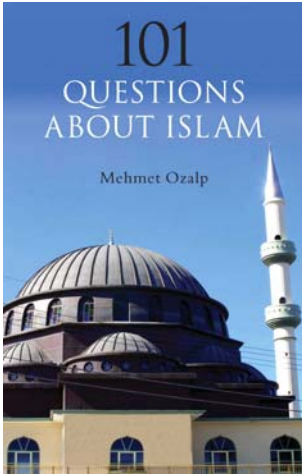
### Abdullah Saeed



Born in the Maldives, Professor Saeed is the Foundation Chair of the Sultan of Oman Endowed Chair in Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Melbourne. He is Director of the Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne and Director of the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies (in conjunction with Griffith University and the University of Western Sydney). He has written numerous papers and books on 'Australian Muslims'.

### 15 Abdullah Saeed

It is so heartwarming to experience this because it affirms in me the very thing that was always constant in my belief about being an Australian – our ability to give everyone a 'fair go' really does exist its not just rhetoric there are Aussies who truly practice it.



## Memet Ozalp



Originally from Turkey Mehmet, President, Affinity Intercultural Foundation is part of a growing number of Muslims world wide committed to building better relationships between all communities. He lives in Sydney.

## 16 Mehmet Ozalp

Muslims have always connected to literature because the commandment to 'Read' given to the Prophet Mohammed by God through Angel Gabriel was the beginning of our journey with books. The most important book of all to us is the Holy Koran, and in its pages we are commanded to seek knowledge. It is every Muslims duty to seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave. Muslims have made massive contributions in many areas but I believe that the most uniting of these is in the Arts – for Art, Music, Literature cut through all barriers – not every piece of 'Art' touches everyone but everyone will be touched by a piece of 'Art' in

some way at some time in their lives.



17 Perhaps it is again this thirst for gaining and imparting knowledge – (the thirst that so engrossed our Muslim ancestors and inspired them to such great things) that will bring our nation together. That through our past we will certainly find our future.



*The middle path is the way to wisdom.*

*Rumi*