Combating Racism and Prejudice in Schools: Keynotes

Keynote 6
The Abrahamic Religions: Islam

The following information is also relevant to Keynote 6:

**The Introduction:** Background information outlining the context and purpose of the project.

**Keynote 1 – Violence and Conflict: Issues and Strategies for Schools:** A theoretical background to understanding conflict and violence and how schools can address issues of intolerance.

**Keynote 2 – A Whole-School Approach to Combating Racism and Prejudice:** An audit strategy for schools to plan and monitor their approaches to combating racism. This is adapted from Racism No Way (www.racismnoway.com.au/strategies/framework/body-Schools.html); a web site aimed at teachers seeking to challenge and counter racism.

The following Keynotes cover the nine most significantly represented religions in Australia and include suggestions for classroom activities:

**Keynote 3 – The Abrahamic Religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam**
**Keynote 4 – The Abrahamic Religions: Judaism**
**Keynote 5 - The Abrahamic Religions: Middle Eastern Christians**
**Keynote 6 – The Abrahamic Religions: Islam** (this document)
**Keynote 7 – Arabs and Muslims in Australia**
**Keynote 8 – Indian Religions: Hinduism**
**Keynote 9 – Indian Religions: Sikhism**
**Keynote 10 – Indian Religions: Buddhism**
**Keynote 11 – Bahá’í Faith**

You can also download a full version of *Combating Racism and Prejudice in Schools*, which includes all of the Keynotes listed above. This full document, as well as all of the above sections can be downloaded from the [Keynotes Explained](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/programs/multicultural/tchkeynotes.htm) web page on the [Multicultural Education](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/programs/multicultural/default.htm) site.
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Introduction

Islam, Judaism and Christianity trace their origins to religion revealed by the Prophet Abraham and have much in common. All three believe in one God, prescribe a way of life for humanity, and believe in life after death. They share a common history and reverence for particular sacred stories, which gives them links and recognition as People of the Book.

Islam is one of the largest world religions with 22 percent of the world’s population.

While followers of Islam are linked by the essential beliefs of their faith, there is great individual and cultural diversity among its followers. The same diversity is reflected in Islam’s growing communities in Australia.

Of the total number of Muslims around the world, most live in South Asia (416 million), Sub-Saharan Africa (254 million), in the Middle East (252 million) and Southeast Asia (239 million). There are also significant Muslim populations in Central Asia (76 million), Eastern Europe (21 million) and Western Europe (13 million), especially France, and North America (5 million). In the Balkans, the Muslim population is approximately 8 million, mostly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania (70% of the population) and Republic of Macedonia. There are 1 million Muslims in South America. (Bedah and El Matrah, p 54)

Only about 18 percent of Muslims live in the Arab world. The 10 countries with the largest Muslim populations, in descending order, are: Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Nigeria, China, and Ethiopia. Of these, only Egypt is an Arab country (Bedah and El Matrah).

Within most religions there are a variety of groups whose practices identify them as belonging to one shade of difference or another. Many of these differences have evolved over many centuries and have been shaped by the history of different regions.

All religions would wish to be viewed for their beliefs as defined in sacred texts and laws and not by the expression of any one group or individual claiming to speak in the name of the faith. Islam should not be judged by the behaviour of extremist groups.

Some of the conflict in the Middle East is reported to be based on religious differences:

- between faiths, for example, between Jews and Muslims
- within faiths, for example, between Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims or supposed Muslim fundamentalists in Iran and Iraq, and
- between liberal and fundamentalist Jews in Israel.

To accept such a simplistic explanation of conflict, however, is to deny the significant influence of economic, international, political, cultural, territorial and nationalistic factors. Without accurate information about the religious groups...
purportedly in conflict, the complexities of conflict are too easily explained by stereotyping the groups.

Media treatment of the events since 9/11 reflects the Australian community’s lack of knowledge about the beliefs of Islam and Muslims in Australia. There seems to be a general feeling that Islam is ‘foreign’ and promotes conflict and war. This is somewhat like blaming the beliefs of Christianity for deaths during the Crusades or assuming that other well-known contemporary figures who act from a Christian background represent the Christian faith of all cultures and branches.

Attitudes to different groups can be manipulated by media interest in portraying the exotic image that emphasises difference rather than images that show the common humanity of people. Impressions of Muslim societies may be based on stereotypes built up through media interest in portraying Muslim women as heavily veiled and archaically dressed as part of a religion and society that represses women. Political repression practised by dictatorial governments, should not be confused with religious repression. In fact, Islam specifies modest dress for both men and women and the dress code of Muslim women is a personal choice. Many Muslim women enjoy high levels of personal freedom in countries that respect human rights.

It is important that students are assisted to view all cultures and faiths in an open way which breaks down stereotyping about particular cultures and faiths. Islamic groups in Australia have a strong record of religious and community harmony despite wide cultural and language differences.

As a significant religion in the Australian community, it is important that students have knowledge of Islam along with knowledge of other religions.

**Origins and historical background**

Islam is the youngest of the Semitic religions. It was founded by the prophet Muhammad in 570 CE but has its roots in the time of Abraham. Abraham established the settlement which today is the city of Makkah (Mecca) and built the Ka'ba or “house of God”, the holy site Muslims visit during their visit to Mecca.

During a religious retreat, Muhammad, a descendant of Abraham through his son Ishmael, received a revelation from God through the angel Gabriel. These revelations which continued for 23 years became the basis of the Qur’an.

The persecution which met Muhammad and his small group of followers, led him to migrate to the city of Madinha (Medina). This migration in 622 marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. By the time of the prophet's death, Islam had spread to much of the Arabic world.

Within a few years, political and military conquests had brought much of North Africa and the Middle East under the control of the Muslim state. Motivations for the conquests were political rather than religious but conversions to Islam inevitably followed. Within 100 years of the death of the prophet, Islam had spread to Spain and southern France in the West and China in the East.
Islam encouraged scholarship: “seeking knowledge is an obligation for every Muslim man and woman”, and from about the beginning of the eighth century onwards, Muslim scholars established many institutions of learning, scientific laboratories and libraries.

The synthesis of Eastern and Western ideas and of new thought with old, brought about great advances in medicine, mathematics, physics, astronomy, geography, architecture, art, literature and history. Many crucial systems such as algebra were transmitted to medieval Europe from Islam. (“Many Faiths, One People”, p. 22)

**Branches of Islam**

There are far fewer different Islamic groups than there are Christian denominations, perhaps explained by the long period of unity in the Middle East and the use of Arabic as the language of the faith. This provides a common language for communication between the many cultures that have embraced Islam. The differences within the faith tend to be political rather than theological. The obligations of every Muslim are the same.

Some Muslims may identify themselves as Muslim but may not observe the rituals or regulations. They are considered ‘cultural ’ or ‘nominal ’ Muslims. (Saeed, Professor Abdullah, (2004) p.28 *Australian Muslims: Their Beliefs, Practices and Institutions*).

Some people are converts to Islam. The main Islamic groups are listed below.

**Sunni**

Sunni Muslims believe that authority in Islam is only found within the Quran and the writings deriving from the Prophet Muhammad. Significant people in Islam, such as the Imam (spiritual leader of a community), are leaders but without absolute authority. A greater part of the Islamic world (about 85 percent) is Sunni, a name derived from the Sunna (practice of the Prophet).

**Shi’ite**

Shi’a Islam believes that authority is found in leaders who are descendants of the Prophet and that every generation of Muslims raises up a spiritual leader who leads the community while they wait for the return of ‘the Expected One’ to carry on the leadership established by the Prophet Muhammad. The majority of Shi’ite Muslims come from Iran, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. Small communities of Shi’a exist throughout the world.

**Sufi**

Sufism began with Islamic mystics in what is present-day Iraq. Sufis seek to be at one with God by the exclusion of external sensations. They practise meditation, chants and rhythmic repetitive dance movements to heighten their spiritual communion. Sufis are part of both Sunni and Shi’ite groups.
Other groups with origins in Islam:

Alawi

Alawite was the name given to this group early this century. Unlike other groups, the Alawites possess a liturgy and observe a number of the festivals associated with Jesus, such as his birth and death. They also use names associated with Christianity as well as Islamic names. The Alawites are a smaller group who practise their religion in private.

Druze

The Druze believe that the Quran contains esoteric as well as literal meaning. Truth is made up of the inner as well as outer meaning. Religious gatherings are held in seclusion on Thursday evenings, not on Friday as for Muslims. Qualified women are admitted to religious leadership.

The beliefs of Islam

The following information lists some elements of the Islamic faith and readers are encouraged to refer to authoritative sources such as those listed in the Bibliography that is part of these project materials.

Belief in one God

A belief in one God … is central to Islam. According to Islam, God has four fundamental functions: creation, sustenance, guidance and judgement. The ultimate purpose of humanity is to be in the “service of God” to worship him alone and to construct an ethical social order” (Australian Police, Multicultural Advisory Bureau, A Practical Reference to Religious Diversity).

Islam teaches that because of humanity’s moral weakness, God sent prophets to teach both individuals and nations correct moral and spiritual behaviour. Muslims believe in all prophets of God from Adam and Abraham (Ibrahim) to Jesus (Isa) and finally Muhammad.

Like Christians and Jews, Muslims believe that this life is only a trial preparation for the next realm of existence.

Muslims believe in the Day of Judgement, freedom of choice and individual accountability for actions.
Religious observances

Five pillars of Islam

Islam has five essential religious principles, often known as the foundations or pillars of Islam.

Declaration of faith (shahadah): ‘There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah’. Note, the use of the word Allah is not confined to Muslims; it is Arabic for God, and, as such, is used by Arabic speakers of various religious affiliation.

Prayer (salat): Obligatory prayers are performed five times a day. They can be performed anywhere if people are unable to pray in a mosque. On Fridays Muslims attend congregational prayer at the mosque where the Imam (religious leader) preaches and reads from the Quran.

Almsgiving (zakat): a percentage of income is contributed for distribution to the poor. The word zakat means both purification and growth.

Fasting (sawm): Muslims are expected to fast during the month of Ramadan, from dawn until sundown, abstaining from food, drink and sexual relations. Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, the month that the Quran was first revealed to the Prophet Mohammed. Ramadan is a time of piety and self discipline.

Pilgrimage (hadj): The annual pilgrimage to Mecca is an obligation only for those who can physically and financially afford it once in their lifetime.

The holy day for Muslims begins on Friday and special services are held at the mosque.

Islam does not have a hierarchical priesthood. The Imam is the spiritual leader and is chosen by the community. Traditionally, imams are community leaders, as well as religious leaders and spiritual counsellors.

Sacred texts

Islam is a total way of life prescribed in sacred texts revealed by Allah to the Prophet Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel over 23 years.

The Quran (literally, that which is recited) is a record of the exact words revealed by God to Muhammad and written in purest Arabic. It contains the accounts of the revelations, the stories of the prophets and the Divine Laws (Sharia, the ‘right way’), which apply in all places and circumstances. Although there are differing views, many Muslims believe the Qur’an was finally put into written form around AD 650.

The Sunna contains all the traditions and practices of the Prophet Muhammad that have become models to be followed by Muslims. These texts must be studied by all Muslims throughout their lives, for they determine responsibilities and accountabilities to Allah.
Moral Code

Islamic law defines what is halal (permitted by God), what is haram (prohibited by God), and what is makruh (detestable).

The Islamic moral code is defined by what is halal and what is haram.

Killing, stealing, adultery or sex outside marriage, gambling, wasteful consumption, bribery, spreading gossip, pornography, prostitution and intoxicants are prohibited.

Muslims do not endorse or participate in forms of entertainment that promote what is considered haram.

Islamic law

The Sharia Islamic law, is derived from the Qur’an. It is a comprehensive system of laws addressing religious, moral and social issues.

Structure and organisation

Islam does not have a hierarchy of clergy nor any intermediaries between God and the individual, as in some other faiths. The Imam is an individual with a great knowledge of Islam who is chosen to be the religious leader. He is usually salaried to serve the community like the clergy, rabbi or priests in other faiths.

An imam leads the congregation in prayer but he is not a priest in the sense of being ordained. In Islam there are no sacraments or rites which only a religiously qualified person can perform.

Muslims have developed various models and traditions on the role of imams in an increasingly complex world of diaspora communities and Islamic states. In Australia, where Muslims come from a multitude of countries and religious traditions, there has not been agreement among the Muslim population as to what role imams will play and if a formal Islamic structure will represent Muslims. Generally, imams have provided some form of leadership for their respective ethnic/sectarian communities or their immediate geographical community. (Bedah and El Matrah)

In Australia, imams frequently find themselves called upon to act as community counsellors and arbiters on questions of religious law, community representatives and welfare officers as well as prayer leaders. (Bedah and El Matrah)
Life cycle in Islamic cultures

Birth

When a baby is born the call to prayer is whispered in one ear and the prayer beginning ‘God is most great’ is whispered in the other so that the first word the child hears is the name of Allah.

Children are given a Muslim name, most often those mentioned in the Holy Quran, the names of Muhammad or his relatives and early leaders of Islam. Hence names such as Muhammad, Ali, Ahmet, Fatima and Aminah are common. Islam does not believe in original sin and babies are considered to be born pure so the sacrament of baptism is unnecessary.

Growing up

Circumcision of boys occurs before the age of 12 and represents adherence to the Prophet’s instructions to take all measures for hygienic and healthy growing. It is an occasion for joy and festivity. Female circumcision is not an Islamic prescription or based on any authentic Islamic source, but has been a cultural practice in some African and Asian countries.

Among the most inalienable rights of the child in Islam is the right to life. Preservation of the child’s life is the third commandment in Islam. Responsibility for, and compassion towards, the child is a matter of religious importance as well as a social concern.

Marriage

Marriage in Islam is a contract, not a sacrament. It is considered a very serious commitment because God is a party to the marriage contract, which is made by the couple in front of witnesses in a mosque or in the home of one of the couple.

Monogamy is the usual form of relationship; however polygamy is permitted with the agreement of the parties and if all wives are treated equally. Polygamy is no longer a common practice in most Islamic countries.

Divorce

Divorce is considered the last resort in marital disputes and the Quran provides guidance for steps to be taken to try and have differences resolved. Both men and women have the right to divorce.

Birth control

Birth control is allowed in Islam as long as it does not harm the body. Having children, it is believed, is a matter of God’s will, whatever the circumstances. Abortion, however, is considered to be wrong except in cases where the safety of the mother and child is at risk. It should be noted that different schools of Islam hold varying views on whether other reasons for abortion are permitted.
Interaction between males and females

Muslim children are encouraged from an early age to avoid interacting alone with members of the opposite sex outside the family, particularly from the age of puberty. This is related to the concept of honour of the family and the need to protect the integrity and honour of both men and women.

Festivals

Muslim calendar

The Muslim calendar is lunar and approximately 11 days shorter than the internationally-accepted calendar. Newspapers in Islamic countries carry the dates of both calendars. The star and crescent are common signs of Islam and are used on the flag of many Islamic countries. One explanation of the symbol is connected with the lunar calendar and the symbolism of rebirth associated with the moon. Anyone who has been in the Middle East is aware of the clarity of the crescent moon in the desert sky.

Ramadan

The ninth month of the Islamic calendar is of major importance for Muslims. It is a month of fasting between dawn and sunset and a time when Muslims pay particular attention to religious obligations.

Eid Al-Fitr

This festival marks the end of the fast of Ramadan and is celebrated by prayers, gatherings of families and friends and festive food. It is a time for new clothes and presents for children. In Islamic countries it is the occasion of a three-day holiday. In Australia many Muslims may take a day off work or school if it falls on a weekday; some of the festivities may be deferred to the weekend.

Eid Al-Adhha

This is the second major festival in Islam and is celebrated two lunar months and nine days after Eid Al-Fitr. It is a festival of sacrifice – its origins remember the prophet Abraham who was willing to sacrifice his son for God’s will. It is celebrated with family and community gatherings and is as significant as Eid Al-Fitr.

Other feasts of the year include:

- **Lailat al Qadr**, the night on which the angel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad and revealed the first message of God to him.
- **Lailat al Isra and Miraj**, the night of Muhammad’s journey to Jerusalem and ascent to heaven.
- **Ashura**, which commemorates the day Prophet Mousa and his followers were saved.
Customs

Place of females in Islam

A Muslim female is entitled to freedom of expression. In Islam’s history, women have been leaders, soldiers, traders and breadwinners. They have expressed their opinions and participated in serious discussion. Women’s rights are upheld in the Holy Quran in matters of marriage and divorce, property and inheritance, and economic security. Education is a mandatory duty for all Muslims, but it is tempered by individual, cultural, economic and family considerations.

Different rules for men and women

Many of the differences in the treatment of Muslim men and women are based on cultural and socio-economic factors rather than religion. Women across the world experience gender inequality, and people who suggest that women are oppressed in Islam, often lose sight of the mistreatment of women and discrimination against them in other cultures and communities.

Islamic dress code and behaviour

The practice of dressing and behaving modestly is considered by some non-Muslims as evidence of repression. The Holy Quran specifies modest dress for both men and women, but there is diversity in how this is interpreted. Some Muslim women wear a hijab (hair covering), while others believe they can demonstrate modesty and their commitment to God without one.

Modesty for Muslims reflects religious and cultural mores about how individuals present themselves, particularly in relation to elders and teachers for whom respect is given and guidance is expected.

Members of the Islamic community explain that modest dress assists the woman to be respected for her mind and not her physical form, and protects her from the dictates of fashion. They also value expression of a universal sisterhood and identity among Muslim women.

The dress code of Muslim women is a personal declaration of their dedication to God – hence the great variety in practice and interpretation in dress. After puberty many women cover the body, except for the face and hands, so that physical beauty and form is not displayed.

In Australia, the most identifiable aspect of Muslim female dress is the hijab (head covering), but there is a great range of dress style in a religion that encompasses so many different cultural traditions. In Turkey, which is a secular state, the hijab is not permitted in schools and the public service, though it is an individual choice in private life. Tunisia’s government also prohibits the wearing of hijab in public places and offices. In Australia, many Turkish women wear a dark long coat and a colourful scarf. Muslim women from Lebanon generally choose a white scarf, and those from the Indian subcontinent and Northern Africa wear clothes and scarves of a rich pattern and colour.
Purdah (complete veil and covering), is not a requirement of Islam, but an interpretation of dress requirement by some Islamic scholars. It is adopted by some groups in a small number of countries.

Muslim women and girls wearing their hijab often suffer harassment and ill-informed comments despite it being accepted that in a democratic society anyone can wear clothes of their choice provided they do not offend accepted codes of decency.

Muslim men may also be identified by particular religious dress which includes the 'sunnah hat', otherwise known as a skull cap.

**Food**

Islamic dietary principles are based on the teaching of the Prophet that to maintain a pure heart and a sound mind, and to nourish the soul, special care should be taken of the body. Islam teaches that what is pure in itself and good may be lawful diet if taken in moderation.

Islam has particular dietary guidelines prescribed in the Quran. Haram is that which is unlawful. This includes the flesh of the pig in any form.

Food that is lawful is halal. Muslims are allowed to eat meat that has been slaughtered according to Islamic ritual, which invokes God’s understanding that the animal is killed only because of the human need for sustenance. If halal meat is not available, meat from Jewish or Christian butchers is acceptable, though many Muslims would be reluctant to buy such meat regularly.

Islam also prohibits intoxicants.

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**Schools should ensure that all students are aware of, and respect, the rights of others to feel that their cultural and religious backgrounds are legitimate. The perceived divergences from the mainstream are not so different from the way most families and religious groups celebrate, reflect, pass on traditions and beliefs, and go about their lives in the wider community.**

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**Settlement and history in Australia**

**Early history**

The religion of Islam has been part of Australian history since before European settlement. The map of Java of Muhammad Ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi, 820 CE, shows Cape York Peninsula, a v-shaped Gulf of Carpentaria and a curved Arnhem Land. A later map of Abu Isak Al-Farisi Istakhari, 934 CE, also includes an outline of the northern coast of Australia.

From the late 1600s until the early 20th century, Muslim trepangers and traders from Sulawesi (in present Indonesia) visited northern Australia for six months each year during the wet season.
There were Muslims among the first settlers of Norfolk Island, an Australian Territory, from 1796. Along with other settlers, they were given land grants in Tasmania in 1818 when the Norfolk Island settlement closed.

Muslim Afghans opened up the interior of the continent in the 1800s by carrying water and food supplies to mining camps, stations and missions, and materials for inland railways and the Overland Telegraph (1872). The train to Alice Springs is called The Ghan in recognition of the Afghan cameleers. Adelaide Mosque was built in 1885 and the Perth Mosque 20 years later (AMES).

Australia's first mosque was built at Marree in northern South Australia in 1861. The first major mosque was built in Adelaide in 1890. Another was built in Broken Hill (New South Wales) in 1891 (DFAT *Islam in Australia*).

**Twentieth century**

In the early part of the twentieth century, Muslims from north-west India (now Pakistan) served rural and outback communities as hawkers. They were seen as the more reliable and trustworthy itinerants as their religion forbade alcohol or meat that had not been ritually slaughtered, so they were welcomed and given hospitality on farms they served.

After World War I, Muslims from the Balkans (Europeans) were able to migrate, and the second national census in 1911 recorded 4971 Muslims, an increase of approximately 2000 from 1901. However this dropped to just under 2000 in the 1921 and 1933, despite some migration. This decline was due to the departure of many earlier Muslims when they were denied the right to settle permanently in Australia and descendants of those married to Australian women were unable to practise or maintain their religion.

Muslim Albanians migrated in the late 1930s and early 1940s and others came from the Balkans in the immediate post-war period. Coming from farming and merchant backgrounds, they settled in country Victoria as well as Melbourne. For many years, these Muslims gathered in Melbourne for Ramadan, but it was not until the late 1950s that the first Muslim organisations were formed. A significant Albanian settlement in Shepparton from the pre-war period did not have a mosque until 1959.

The White Australia policy restricted migration from Asia (and therefore Muslims from other than European countries such as Yugoslavia, Poland and Cyprus) until the policy was relaxed in the 1960s. After that, Muslims from Turkey, and those from Pakistan, India, Malaysia etc., who had skills and professions were able to meet immigration requirements. In recent years immigration policies have allowed migration and refugees from a wider range of countries and cultural and religious backgrounds.

The Australian Federation of Islamic Societies (AFIS) was formed in 1964.

The Islamic community in Australia was, in 1964, only a very small community of Turkish, Arab, Bosnian, Fijian Indian, Pakistani and some smaller ethnic groups, which were too small to form any larger body or community such as Indonesian and Chinese. There were, however,
enough people concerned about preserving their faith to begin a loose federation of the various communities across the country. The AFIS was formed and this small organisation administered the affairs of the community, especially in terms of raising money to build mosques and schools. (Bedah and El Matrah)

Among thousands of Asian students studying in Australia, a significant number are from Muslim backgrounds, particularly from countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

A great majority of migrants from Turkey are Muslims. They are the largest group of overseas-born students of Muslim background in our schools (see Keynote 7 for further information).

Many new immigrants from North Africa, the former Yugoslav state of Bosnia and Eastern European countries such as Bulgaria are Muslims.

Note: For further information on Muslims in Australia see Keynote 7 on Arabs and Muslims in Australia.

Population Data – see Keynote 7 on Arabs and Muslims in Australia.

Community organisations

Like other religious groups and community organisations in Australia, Islamic communities are organised at a local, state and national level. Islamic societies are proud of their democratic traditions.

There are 25 Islamic schools in Australia attended by 12,000–15,000 students. (Jonas).

A range of organisations provide religious, educational and welfare services to Australian Muslims.

Local

Membership on Islamic societies is open to all Muslims. Fees are determined by the local society. Office bearers who manage the affairs of the society are elected by members.

A mosque may be run by an ethnically-based society, but will still be attended by local Muslims regardless of ethnicity.

Many Islamic societies have premises bought by the communities. In Victoria there are Islamic societies in Brunswick, Broadmeadows, Carlton, Campbellfield, Coburg, Dallas, Doncaster, Deer Park, Doveton, Fawkner, Fitzroy, Footscray, Dandenong, Heidelberg West, Hoppers Crossing, Huntingdale, Kensington, Keysborough, Lysterfield, Maidstone, Meadow Heights, Newport, Noble Park, Springvale, Preston, Reservoir, Sunshine, Thomastown and West Melbourne. In regional Victoria there are societies in Albury-Wodonga, Mildura, Shepparton and Geelong.
Societies include the Fijian Islamic Society, the Afghan Islamic Society, the Somali Islamic Society, the Oromo Islamic Society, the Harare Islamic Society (the latter two formed by East African communities), the Islamic Cultural Centre (mainly South African), the Sri Lankan Islamic Society and the Malaysian Islamic Society.

The Islamic Women’s Welfare Council, the Coburg Islamic Women’s Society, Muslim Women of Australia and Young Muslims of Australia are among Victorian Islamic organisations.

For a more detailed listing of community organisations in Victoria, visit:


**State**

Each state and territory in Australia, including Christmas Island, has an Islamic Council with which societies are affiliated or associated. Not all societies are affiliated.

State Councils are managed by an executive committee, which is elected biannually at general meetings of affiliated societies. Regular meetings are held to discuss issues and make policy on matters of concern to the Muslim community.

A Board of Imams meets regularly to discuss matters of concern, to make policy on religious matters, and to make recommendations to the State Councils.


**National**

The Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC) is the national body whose two office-bearers are elected by state councils every two years. Since the 1970s, AFIC has been the main advocacy body for Muslim Australians at federal level. A National Congress is held each year at which issues of national concern are discussed and policy decisions made. It is attended by delegates of every affiliated society.
Considerations for Schools

Religious observances

Muslims may pray at the mosque or wherever they are, at prayer times. At least one of the obligatory prayer times falls during school hours, and the provision of a private area for prayer and facilities for ritual ablutions would be appreciated by Muslim families.

The Holy Quran (sometimes called the Koran), like all holy books, should be treated with reverence.

Ramadan is a month-long period of fasting during daylight hours and a period of special religious observance. Particular consideration should be given to students during this period. For example, avoid planning school celebrations or class parties to coincide with Ramadan. Attendance at evening meetings during Ramadan is difficult for parents.

Arabic is both a sacred and secular language to Muslims and its use should be treated with respect.

Canteen, home economics and school party menus should consider Muslim dietary laws, particularly the need to exclude pork products such as ham, salami and bacon. Students and their parents would wish to know if certain foods contain pork, particularly those with a combination of ingredients such as casseroles, soups and fried rice. Many Muslims are also particular about only eating meat that is slaughtered in a halal manner. Students may therefore lack the confidence to try unknown dishes.

Female dress

Islam specifies modest dress for men and women. The hijab (hair covering) for women is part of a personal commitment to God. It is not a decorative item to be removed during sport or other activities. Purdah, total face covering is not a requirement of Islam, but can be a choice. Modesty of dress when visiting a family can influence the relationship that could be established with the family.

Many Muslim girls find school uniform an appropriate form of dress that accords with their beliefs. They may like to wear longer hems and sleeves (leaving the dress loose-fitting), long pants or socks, and add a hijab (head covering).

Attitudes to dress and behaviour can affect Muslim students’ participation in sport and activities such as drama. Public changing rooms, and the wearing of shorts and other sports clothes, particularly bathers, can embarrass a student and present difficulties that the individual is often loathe to express. Long sleeves and track pants for sport, segregated classes for swimming, and privacy in change rooms should be considered and discussed with students and parents.

Note: It is important that other students are aware of the reasons for this difference in dress and behaviour codes so that no students suffer ridicule.
Relationships between the sexes

Muslim family attitudes to unsupervised interaction between males and females should be considered in relation to school activities, in particular excursions, social events and camps.

A Muslim woman is not required to adopt her husband’s name on marriage, although her children will have their father’s name. Many women of Muslim background may follow cultural traditions and change their name on marriage, especially in Australia.

Islam gives considerable guidance about interaction between males and females, particularly from the onset of puberty.

In a non-segregated class, less formal or less directly supervised activities, such as sport, drama, camps etc. may be a cause of disquiet for some families.

Many Muslim women are unwilling to attend functions such as parent-teacher interviews without being accompanied by a male relative. In the context of shift work, this may cause difficulties for Muslim families.

Home visits and interviews should also be considered in this context. However a teacher visiting a lone adult of the opposite sex at home could cause some degree of discomfort.

Hand-shaking between males and females is not a custom in Muslim and many Middle Eastern communities. It may cause embarrassment if you offer your hand to a member of the opposite sex.

Home and family

Family structures are well defined in Muslim cultures and it is important that senior family members are greeted formally first, usually beginning with the head of the household. Children are greeted last, usually in a hierarchy of age, though the males often take precedence over females.

A Middle Eastern practice (not specifically Muslim) is the removal of shoes before entering a house. This is often not expected of visitors, but should be anticipated. Removal of footwear and ritual washing is an essential preparation for prayer and for entering the mosque. Visitors to a mosque should cover their arms and hair as a mark of respect.

In Islamic and many Middle Eastern cultures, traditional welcomes often have a formality of refreshment and social ritual before the purpose of the interaction is begun.

Note: The spelling of many Arabic names and terms vary according to the transliteration preferred. For example, the Quran is also transliterated as Koran, Eid as Id, Ramadan as Ramazan, Ahmet as Ahmed, and so on.
Respect for teachers

Teachers are accorded great respect by Muslims and learning is emphasised in specific terms in the Quran. Perceived incidents of disrespect for a teacher are considered very serious.

School practices

Consult Muslim parents about excursions and sport programs, and ensure they understand the purpose of these activities and are reassured about the degree of supervision. Where possible, organise girls-only and boys-only camps and swimming programs.

Ensure that food provided as part of school activities meet Muslim dietary laws. Provide lists of ingredients where necessary.

Invite a Muslim community speaker to discuss issues and strategies with staff and student representatives that will maximise student and family participation in school life.

In the classroom

Investigate the contribution of early Muslim scholars to fields of astronomy, medicine, mathematics and philosophy.

Have students identify places of significance in the history of Islam on a map and show with dates the spread of Islam.

Identify countries of significant Islamic populations on a world map.

Invite an Arabic speaker to discuss and demonstrate the Arabic language and study the calligraphic styles and decorative use of the language.

Study the impact of the modern world on dress customs throughout the world.

Point out the different dress traditions and acceptability within any community, such as the hat and gloves our mothers had to wear on formal occasions.

Compare the relative value students place on the dictates of fashion and on peer group pressure to conform to an alternative view, such as that of Muslim women.

Invite a speaker from a Muslim Women’s organisation to speak about women in their community and to answer questions.

Discuss the issue of stereotyping in relation to clothes and appearance.

Set group or individual research topics on beliefs of various religious groups in Australia.

Develop a theme on aspects of many religions, focusing on similarities and differences such as architecture and layout of sacred buildings, major festivals and observances, dietary laws and traditions, organisational structure, etc.
Investigate the Australian Multicultural Foundation Believing in Harmony project which aims to give students a better understanding of a range of religions (http://www.amf.net.au/rsch_research_harmony.shtml).

Investigate the common and different naming (and spelling) traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and regional variations within these traditions.

Discuss the importance of various religious observances such as Ramadan.

Discuss the diversity of different backgrounds of Muslims in Australia.

Encourage students in the class to consider the similarities and differences in their family traditions.

Investigate the observance of the various celebrations of the Islamic calendar. Investigate parallels with other cultures and religions:

- What is similar in Islamic life cycle events and practices to other cultures and religions?
- What is similar in Islamic belief and ritual and practices to other religions?
- What is similar in the rhythm of the Islamic year to their own practices, or others they know of? In other words, what happens in their traditions every day, every week, every month or every year?

Find opportunities in various classes and subjects to present some of the facts about Muslims and Islam in Australia.

Analyse media reports about Muslims to determine point of view and detect bias and stereotyping.

Set group research or assignments on Islamic groups in Australia, including:

- cultural groups in the local community
- similarities and differences in religious beliefs
- major observances
- religions of the Middle East.

Build a geographical picture of people from countries of Islamic origin and migration to Australia.

Organise visits to places of worship.

Prepare a calendar of major religious observances of Middle Eastern and Islamic groups in Australia and discuss these during the year.

Invite speakers from Islamic and Middle Eastern organisations to talk about their community organisations and activities. Have students prepare questions and discuss their appropriateness.

Set a writing topic about being a minority in an imagined society.

Have students or a community member talk about their initial experience as a newly-arrived Muslim.
Have students read some of the children’s and young adult literature recommended in the Bibliography that is written by or about other cultural groups.

Set a history topic on the role of Muslim camel drivers and hawkers in the life of outback Australia.

Discuss the issue of minority groups in a community and have students identify an experience in which they were a minority. A number of the The Really Big Beliefs activities would be relevant to a discussion of this topic (http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au/bigbeliefsbook/activities.html).

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