

This is a phenomenon that is noticeable even in Muslim majority nations such as Pakistan, Egypt, Iran, Indonesia, and Malaysia and so on. A Muslim feminist movement which is vastly different from the Western model is an unstoppable development, and in Australia, to the consternation of many Muslim leaders or clerics, it is challenging the traditional decision making processes and structures dominated by males. And fourthly, the increasing number and ethnic diversity of the community has brought with it a parallel increase in the number and grades of Muslim clerics. This group, which historically took upon itself the responsibility of guarding the 'Islamic orthodoxy', is now making a mark in the Australian public arena and asserting its power within the Muslim community.

A few recent controversies surrounding the public posture of certain clerics that received wider coverage in the national and international media have embarrassed the clerical community and forced them to take remedial measures. The formation of a National Federal Council of Imams (NFCI) early this year, though a welcoming step, may still prove contentious in the medium and long run if AFIC and NFCI do not work out a modus operandi to integrate with each other or to work as partners.

In sum, the main problem that AFIC faces now is one of providing adequate representation to the different collective entities that have multiplied over the last three decades. To analyze this problem in detail the constitutional structure of AFIC requires serious scrutiny. Without entering into an arena of legalistic details let us look at the general framework of the constitution. AFIC claims to be a democratic organization based on a three-tier structure.

At the bottom of the pyramid are the micro organizations scattered around all the states, including Christmas Island. In the middle of the pyramid are the nine state councils, each representing some of but not all micro organizations in their respective states. At the apex is the AFIC executive directly representing the state councils and through them the latter's constituent bodies. The real problem lies at the state level. Since the Muslim population is not evenly distributed across the states, larger ones like New South Wales and Victoria hold almost two thirds of the total population while the remaining one third is spread unevenly across the rest. Of these, Christmas Island and Tasmania hold the least. While the population strength of the nine state councils is uneven their voting strength at the federal level is even. This is nothing unusual because, even in the United Nations a country like China with over one billion people has one vote at the General Assembly while a tiny atoll like Maldives with just four hundred thousand souls also has one vote. However, to counter balance this disparity the UN has the Security Council whose membership is confined to the most powerful and resourceful nations. AFIC does not have anything parallel to this.

When AFIC was in operation it led to a situation where the larger states, because of their population strength and consequently their numerous societies, dominated the executive and the smaller states naturally felt deprived of participation at the executive level. AFIC's structure reversed this and now the larger states are crying foul. There is also the problem of geography.

The newly elected executive committee of AFIC has no representation from Western Australia and the Northern Territory, which means almost one half of Australia's territory is left unrepresented. The time has come now for AFIC and the community to look at the constitution once again to devise a suitable mechanism by which membership at the executive council could strike a balance between population proportionality of the state councils and their participatory equity. On the same line of argument the Muslim youth, Muslim women and the community of imams also should find representation at the executive level. Currently, even at the state council level these sectors are not adequately represented.

The AFIC executive consists of four elected members and five appointed members. The former are elected by the nine State Councils and the latter are also chosen by them but on the recommendation of the President of AFIC. By bestowing the entire power to choose the executive of AFIC to just nine individuals in the community the constitution has oversimplified the task of electioneering for executive positions. To describe this process as democracy may be technically correct but leaves much to be desired. The size of the voting electorate has to be enlarged to add substance to the democratic claim. Also, the number of AFIC executive members should be increased to provide representation to the competing sectors of the Muslim population. But the overarching issue in all these desired changes is their high cost. Because of the tyranny of distance in this country centralization of the decision making process is prohibitively expensive to any voluntary organization. ►

Although AFIC is a resourceful organization, thanks to the wisdom of its previous managers, its resources are nonetheless finite. How to deepen the democratic process while keeping the cost at a minimum is a daunting task to AFIC. Decentralization of decision making without recklessly depleting the resources may be one of the solutions that can be explored.

To make AFIC more democratic, transparent, accountable, resourceful and economical are issues that affect the organization internally. Externally also there are challenges that this peak body has to face in the future. These issues arise in parallel with the changing role of this nation in the South East Asia and Pacific region. Australia is emerging undoubtedly as a regional power. Most countries in this region seek Australia's assistance and advice in solving some of their economic, security, and even political problems. This region also has a substantial Muslim population. In fact the largest Muslim country in the world, Indonesia, lies at Australia's doorstep. At the same time, in the Pacific area, Australia has the largest Muslim population. Therefore, to the Muslim population in this region, the Australian Muslim leadership could be a source of guidance and strength. This role was discussed at the last General Assembly of the Regional Da'wah Council of South East Asia and the Pacific (RISEAP), held in Bogor, Indonesia during January this year. AFIC is a constituent member of this august body of twenty-two nations.

Since its inception in 1980, RISEAP, with its secretariat in Malaysia, has borne the full brunt of all expenses in carrying out its da'wah work, defined "in a broad sense to encompass practically every kind of positive Muslim activity that can possibly be conceived in the name of Islam: from the building of mosques, to the provision of Islamic education, to provision of social welfare services", in its member countries. Here again, as in the case of AFIC, while the membership and the enormity of tasks involved have increased phenomenally the resources needed to carry out those tasks satisfactorily have failed to keep pace accordingly. Decentralization of responsibility and a new role for RISEAP were two issues discussed at the assembly.

On the first issue of decentralization an enhanced role for Australian Muslims was discussed. Not all the Muslim populations in the twenty-two RISEAP-member countries are at the same level in terms of their da'wah needs and development. In the Pacific region of course, Australia, with its four hundred thousand or so Muslims and with its most resourceful and the most senior representative organization AFIC, is adequately qualified to share some of the responsibility of da'wah in this region. It was the consensus of the General Assembly that Australian Muslims with their resourceful organizations like AFIC and the Australian Islamic Cultural Centre (AICC) should play a regional leadership role. The AFIC constitution should be reviewed in this new light to insert provisions enabling this new role.

A new role for RISEAP in providing conflict resolution was also discussed. The recent court battle between different parties in AFIC that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars of precious funds is public knowledge. RISEAP as a non-partisan observer is in a neutral position to play the role of mediation when its members are found in a state of conflict. RISEAP's leadership volunteered to play this welcoming role in order to protect the image and assets of its members. Just as AFIC is in a neutral position to play the mediation role when its own member societies and councils are in conflict so too is RISEAP in a similar situation. Should AFIC's constitution be amended to accommodate this offer from RISEAP?

In conclusion, the time has arrived to review the entire structure and role of AFIC as the premier organization of Australian Muslims. All over the world the Muslim community is facing new challenges by the day, and it is being forced to 'rise up' (sounding RISEAP) to the challenges. AFIC is no exception. No organization could remain static on the premise that what was good in the past must be good for the present and the future. AFIC: quo vadis? ■

## Take A Moment...

*"Be mindful of Allah and Allah will protect you. Be mindful of Allah and you will find Him in front of you. If you ask, ask of Allah, if you seek help, seek help of Allah. Know that if a nation were to gather together to benefit you with anything, it would benefit you only with something that Allah has already prescribed for you. And that if they gather together to harm you with anything, they would harm you only with something Allah had already prescribed for you. The pens have been lifted and the pages have dried."*

Hadith of the Prophet SAW narrated by Abu Abbas, Abdullah the son of Abbas (May Allah be pleased with them both)



# Address to New South Wales Parliamentary Committee

What local Governments can offer to Muslim communities  
- A NSW perspective

BY BR NEIL KADOMI

The Muslim community considers itself to be an integral part of the wider community of New South Wales. While we may have needs that are specific to our religious identity, we do not see that this takes away from our identity as Australians. But as a community with certain beliefs and practises, we have certain issues and concerns that needs to be addressed, especially in light of the negative publicity that Muslims receive in the media, and even as a result of the statements and rhetoric of some of our political representative.

“ *It fails to recognize the crime as a product of society this Australian society in which these people were born and raised.* ”

The first thing I believe needs to be addressed is the terrible images and misrepresentations of Muslims. As a community we have stood up, at the highest levels, to denounce the abuse of our religion for terrorist purposes. We have condemned the actions of people who claim to be Muslim but who in fact act against Islamic teachings. And yet the main problem we face is that our media still uses language that associates Islam with terrorism. Some of our political representatives have also been guilty of generalisations. We need our local government to stand up against such language and generalizations.

Our community, especially our youth, suffer when they are represented with the actions of a minority and when they are lumped into the one box. Our youth feel disconnected and victimised when they see only negative stories in the media and by our police force. Time and again we see only negative stories in the media we need our local government to defend us against those who seek to label us under the one negative banner.

Language is very important. One area that is of grave concern to our community is how crime is described in the media and by our police force. Time and time again we see this description: Of Middle Eastern Appearance.

We hear of Middle Eastern criminals and offenders when such people prove to be Australian s. most of them Australian born. Crime has nothing to do with race but to link a criminal with their racial background is to blame an entire community. It fails to recognize the crime as a product of society this Australian society in which these people were born and raised. Murder, theft, rape, petty crime these are all crimes that have nothing to do with the person's ability to speak Arabic or eat hommos for breakfast.

Such crimes are committed by people of all racial backgrounds. Race should not be kept out of the equation to be fair to communities and to also address the roo causes of the problem. That is why the existence of a Middle Eastern Police Squad is a terrible shame on New South Wales. We are not in the Middle East we are in Australia. Yes, we have people of Middle Eastern background but they are Australians. Their lives and choices are shaped by this country, not another continent. Such a police squad unfairly and racially targets an entire race and suggests that there is some special way of dealing with so called Middle Easterners. My community is offended by such a police squad's existing.

It is no wonder then that some of our youth, especially our males, feel that they are judged as guilty even though they are innocent. This targeting builds a victimisation complex and that is dangerous because disconnected youth do not mature into productive members of society. That is why we need positive ways to connect our youth and give them a sense of identity as Australian Muslims. That is why our major need is our government's support of a youth centre and a mosque in Parramatta area.

Parramatta has the largest concentration of Muslims in New South Wales and yet we must travel to Lakemba or Auburn to pray and attend a Centre that unites us. We need a Centre in the heartland of Sydney Muslims that offers young Australian Muslims a chance to unite. Some of our Muslims are limited in the type of activities they can do outside of school, such as swimming or sports clubs. To have a centre that gives Muslims girls a chance to play sports in a religiously acceptable environment would be wonderful.

Whatever we do needs to be a two way street. Muslims need to learn to integrate and not isolate themselves because of their fear that the wider community is suspicious of them. To do this, we need to see that we have people at the highest levels of appreciating our concerns and respecting our right to feel as Australian as the next person. I hope that we can built a relationship of mutual trust, respect and understanding so that Australian Muslims can develop into an even more productive and dynamic community. ■



## COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENT

**To: The President  
Islamic Councils and Societies in Australia**

Dear Brother/Sister,

Assalaamu Alaikum,

I hope this note finds you and your members in good health and high Iman by the Grace of Allah SWT.

I would like to take this opportunity to bring to your attention the availability of the Government's current round of funding under the "Living in Harmony Community Project".

I strongly advise that you consider seeking funding for your organisation by endeavouring to plan and implement a project that will be beneficial to your local community. You can obtain details on the perimeters of funding and other requirements on the web at: [www.harmony.gov.au](http://www.harmony.gov.au)

I reiterate the importance of taking full advantage of this opportunity for your organisation to gain funding for a worthwhile project.

I wish you all the best in your endeavours, Inshallah.

Assalaamu Alaikum.

Ikebal Patel  
AFIC President.



الاتحاد الأسترالي للمجالس الإسلامية

## THE AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION OF ISLAMIC COUNCILS INC.

ACN 002 757 155

PO Box 7185 SSBH, Alexandria NSW 2015 **Tel:** (02) 9319 6733 **Fax:** (02) 9319 0159 **Email:** admin@afic.com.au **Web:** www.afic.com.au

4 May 2007

To: Chairmen of State Islamic Council , Presidents of Islamic Societies, Imams and Religious Leaders, General Members of the Muslim Community

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Islam  
Assalamo alaikum wa Rahmatullahi wa Barakatuh,

### OPENNESS & TRANSPARENCY IN AFIC

I am pleased to take up yet another opportunity to communicate with you and pray that this will find you in good health and high spirits.

Communication is the fundamental aspect of human society and when there is lack of communication there is undoubtedly misinformation which leads to suspicion. I am therefore inviting you to communicate with me and the members of the AFIC Executive committee on any issues that concern you and the community around you. The names and contact details of the AFIC Executive Members can be found in the attached list.

However, let me say at the outset, that I and all the other members of the AFIC Executive Committee are volunteers and have jobs, businesses or professions to take care of as well. Therefore, I humbly request you to be mindful of this when making telephone calls during the business hours of the day.

I believe that it is always better to put your enquiries or views in writing and to communicate through the email for immediate and assured delivery to the addressee. Views expressed in writing can also be responded to more appropriately. Offcourse, contact can be made directly with AFIC Head Office in Sydney or its Branch Office in Melbourne during business hours.

I make this special request to all of you to send to me or to the Executives of AFIC suggestions and proposals for improving the current activities and services of AFIC and any proposals for new projects, activities and services that can be undertaken by AFIC for the benefit of the Muslim community. These would definitely be a positive contribution to the work of AFIC.

I remind our general Muslim community members that it is very easy to criticise others who may be engaged in Islamic community work and not realise how difficult this can be. Therefore, I invite those who are arm-chair critics to offer alternative suggestions and proposals when criticising those who may be doing their best. This will show the goodwill of those who are sitting on the critics chair.

Finally, I would like to assure you all that the AFIC Executive Committee will take very seriously all communication that it receives and would like to assure you that all correspondence will be acknowledged and feedback provided after appropriate consideration is given to the issue in question. Please be mindful that sometimes this may require AFIC Executive Committee or AFIC Council meetings to be held to make a decision which could result in substantial delays in the feedback. I would expect this to be an exception rather than the rule.

Looking forward to your input in the work of Islam in Australia.

Wassalam

Yours brotherly,

Ikebal Adam Patel.  
President of AFIC.



الاتحاد الأسترالي للمجالس الإسلامية

## THE AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION OF ISLAMIC COUNCILS INC.

ACN 002 757 155

PO Box 7185 SSBH, Alexandria NSW 2015 **Tel:** (02) 9319 6733 **Fax:** (02) 9319 0159 **Email:** admin@afic.com.au **Web:** www.afic.com.au

21 May 2007

To: State Islamic Council, Islamic Societies, Mosques, AFIC Executive Committee Members

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Islam  
Assalamo alaikum wa Rahmatullahi wa Barakatuh,

I hope this finds you in good health and high spirit of Iman.

I refer to my earlier correspondence of 7 March 2007 in which I mentioned about pooling our insurance needs to a single provider with considerable savings.

We had a meeting with AON representative today and would like to offer this service to all State Councils, Societies and mosques around Australia. The AFIC Executive Committee is happy to offer this to all interested Societies irrespective of whether they are present members of AFIC or not. This will not only have great savings but also provide an insurance policy that covers a lot of activities conducted at our Mosques and Societies such as Jumaa prayers, Weekend Quran Classes, Eid Gatherings and any other activity conducted at our Mosques.

If your Society is interested in getting this cover please provide the following information:

Name of the Society: \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Telephone Numbers \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Executive Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Financial Members \_\_\_\_\_ Maximum Attendance at any particular event \_\_\_\_\_

Property Owned or Leased (please circle one)

Contents worth at Society \_\_\_\_\_ Security Details (care taker or alarm) \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Employees \_\_\_\_\_ Wage Roll \_\_\_\_\_

Motor Vehicles (if any make and model) \_\_\_\_\_

Please send the completed form at your earliest to facilitate AFIC to negotiate a good price on your behalf. Once we received the above information we will get in touch with you with the price and the type of cover required for your Society.

If you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact AFIC Office.

Yours brotherly,

Ikebal Adam Patel.  
President of AFIC.

# ISLAM'S COMING RENAISSANCE WILL RISE IN THE WEST



A WAVE OF RATIONALISM IS SPREADING FROM ÉMIGRÉ MUSLIM INTELLECTUALS

*In the minds of many Muslims, an imagined West is the source of all or most of the problems afflicting the world of Islam. Similarly, in the West, an imagined Islam, purposefully structured and popularly propagated, has created a perception that this religion is a threat to Western civilisation. Between these mutually exclusive mind-sets a new phenomenon is emerging in the real West, laying the foundations for a new wave of Islamic rationalism in the 21st century.*

Published in The Australian April 30, 2007

**BY AMEER ALI**

The Islamic resurgence of the post-1970s strengthened the hands of the religious orthodoxy and engendered the spectre of political Islam but failed to rekindle the spirit of intellectual rationalism that once pushed Islam to the frontiers of science and modernity. That failure was compounded and worsened by the rise of tyrannical regimes in the Muslim world. The absence of democracy and lack of popular support forced these regimes to look for legitimacy elsewhere.

By championing the cause of religious orthodoxy of the dominant variety in each context, these regimes masqueraded as champions of popular and populist Islam. Any intellectual pursuit that threatened this state-mullah alliance was aggressively curtailed. In Egypt, in Pakistan, in Syria, and in many other Muslim countries Muslim intellectuals who challenged populist Islam faced condemnation not only by the religious hardliners but also by the secular elite that

governed these countries. One happy outcome of this tragic situation was the voluntary exodus of Muslim intellectuals to the West. From an inhospitable environment of political tyranny and ideological oppression Muslim scholars migrated to find refuge in the West, where the mind enjoys more freedom to think, debate and express. As a result, the migrant Muslim intellectuals are now producing a new genre of publications, many of which are questioning centuries-old interpretations of the primary texts in Islam. A new era of *ijtihad* (independent thinking) rooted in scientific, objective reasoning is spreading from the West and is beginning to make its mark in the Muslim mind-set.

These intellectuals are not necessarily religious scholars by training, like the graduates from al-Azhar University in Egypt or Zeituna from Tunis or Qarawiyyin in Morocco, but scholars trained in other fields such as social sciences, medicine, engineering, physical sciences and law.

For example, Mohammed Arkoun, an Algerian Muslim, is an emeritus professor of Islamic thought at the Sorbonne, Paris, who approaches the Quran and other classical texts in Islam from historical, social, psychological and anthropological angles. The methodology of his research, the sharpness of his arguments and conclusions of his writings are dynamite to traditional Islam. Laleh Bakhtiar, a Chicago-based American female convert to Islam, is not a classically trained Arabic scholar, but has translated the Quran after years of research and is questioning the conventional meanings of some of the Quranic concepts.

Bassam Tibi, a political scientist, who writes mostly in German, applies sociological and anthropological theories to study Islam and finds that the cause of Muslim underdevelopment lies not in the West but in Islam as understood and preached by the orthodox clerics. ►

Amina Wadud, an Afro-American Muslim convert from Bethesda, Maryland in the US, has a PhD in Islamic Studies and Arabic from the University of Michigan and is pioneering the research on gender relationship in Islam and retheorising Quranic hermeneutics. Abdelwahab El-Affendi, a former Sudanese diplomat based in London, published *Who Needs an Islamic State?* in 1991, in which he questions the theological arguments advanced by the protagonists of an Islamic caliphate.

And finally, Abdullahi An-Naim, a law professor at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, questions the inadequacies of Islamic Sharia and its suitability for a pluralistic society.

There are too many of these scholars to enumerate and the number is increasing. All these cases underline the revolutionary thinking among Muslim intellectuals that is setting the pace for a new wave of Islamic rationalism radiating from the West.

Even writers from Muslim countries who are afraid to publish their works at home are doing so abroad. For example, *The Book and the Quran: A Contemporary Interpretation* by Muhammad Shahrur, a civil engineer from Syria, is banned in his country. He argues that human understanding of the Quran is relative and changing and that it requires the continuous exercise of human reason.

His appeal to apply tools of modern epistemology and objective scientific reasoning to the study the Quran is anathema to hardline Islamists.

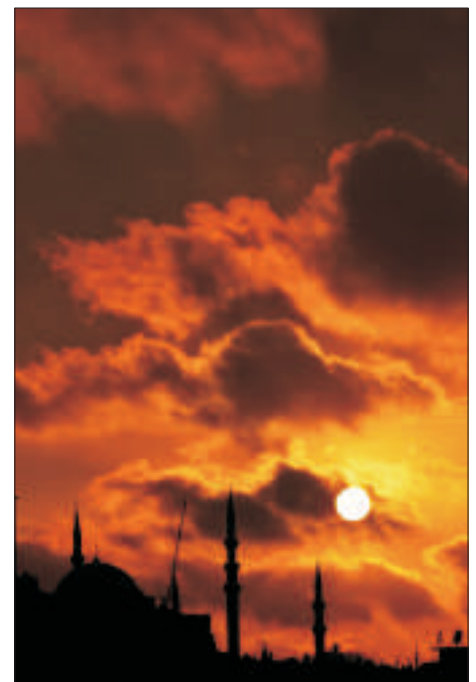
Similarly, Hassan Hanafi, an Egyptian professor of philosophy, is well known for his rationalist views on Islam throughout the intellectual circles in the US, Japan, Germany and Morocco but is frowned upon by the al-Azhar establishment in Egypt. In short, scholars such as Shahrur and Hanafi have become intellectual prisoners in their own countries. The situation is changing fast. The internet and electronic communication technology have revolutionised the production and distribution of knowledge. Sources of information that were only remotely accessible to a selected few are readily available to many at the click of a mouse. Inquisitive Muslim minds do not have to wait for a cleric to arrive for consultation on theological issues. With the help of the internet any verse or chapter of the Quran and any sayings of the Prophet can be accessed from multiple sources and the reader has the luxury of choosing from among a variety of interpretations, meanings and elaborations.

This revolution in information gathering has become a subversive tool and is eroding the power base of traditional clerics. The authority of the pulpit is collapsing by the hour. The traditional argument that one should be a trained Islamic scholar or an imam to interpret the Quran does not carry weight any more.

There is a rising tension between the traditional guardians of Muslim orthodoxy and a new crop of secular educated Muslims, many of whom are better equipped with advanced methodological tools to handle the primary religious texts. An Islamic spring is dawning from the West.

While Western governments and the media are too preoccupied with fighting militant Islam and its terrorist offshoot, the more positive developments that are taking place within the Muslim intellectual world are being ignored. The wave of critical thought emanating from a new breed of Muslim scholars in the West is one of those positive changes. It is a good omen for a long-awaited Islamic renaissance. The hated West has become the surrogate mother of this wave of Islamic rationalism. ■

*Ameer Ali, a former President of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils Inc and Chairman of the Muslim Community Reference Group, is a visiting fellow at the business school at Murdoch University in Perth.*





# The Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) last Sermon

*This sermon was delivered on the ninth day of Dhul Hijjah in the Umranah Valley of Mount Arafat*

After praising and thanking Allah SWT he said:

*“Oh People lend me an attentive ear, for I know not whether, after this year, I shall ever be amongst you again. Therefore listen to what I am saying to you very carefully and take these words to those who could not be present here today.*

*O People, just as you regard this month, this day, this city as sacred, so regard the life and property of every Muslim as a sacred trust. Return the goods entrusted to you to their rightful owners. Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you. Remember that you will indeed meet your Lord, and that He will indeed reckon your deeds. Allah has forbidden you to take usury (interest), therefore all interest obligation shall henceforth be waived. Your capital, however, is yours to keep. You will neither inflict nor suffer inequity. Allah has judged that there shall be no interest and that all the interest due to Abbas ibn Abdil Muttalib shall henceforth be waived...*

*Beware of Satan, for the safety of your religion. He has lost all hope that he will ever be able to lead you astray in big things, so beware of following him in small things.*

*O People, it is true that you have certain rights with regards to your women, but they also have rights over you. Remember that you have taken them as your wives only under Allah's trust and with His permission. If they abide by your right then to them belongs the right to be fed and clothed in kindness. Do treat your women well and be kind to them for they are your partners and committed helpers. And it is your right that they do not make friends with any of whom you do not approve, as well as never to be unchaste.*

*O People, listen to me in earnest, worship Allah, save five daily prayers (salah), fast during the month of Ramadan and give your wealth in Zakat. Perform Hajj, if you can afford it.*

*All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non Arab nor a non Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also white has no superiority over black nor black has no superiority over white except in piety and good action. Learn that every Muslim is a brother to every other Muslim and that the Muslims constitute one brotherhood. Nothing shall be legitimate to a Muslim which belongs to a fellow Muslim unless it was given freely and willingly. Do not therefore do injustice to yourselves.*

*Remember, one day you will appear before Allah and answer for your deeds. So BEWARE. Do not stray from the path of righteousness after I am gone.*

*O People, NO PROPHET OR APOSTLE WILL COME AFTER ME AND NO NEW FAITH WILL BE BORN. Reason well, therefore, O People, and understand words which I convey to you. I leave behind me two things, the Quran and my example, the sunnah and if you follow these you will never go astray.*

*All those who listen to me shall pass on my words to others and those to others again; and may the last ones understand my words better than those who listen to me directly. Be my witness. O, Allah that I have conveyed your message to your people.*

*Dear Reader,*

*In Australia, there is firm belief that racism is a thing of the past. Recently, however, a united country is hardly evident. Under attack, people always attempt to place the blame in this case, the fault falls on the Muslim population of the world. I'm a 15 year old Muslim girl, and every day even catching the bus to school is an ordeal. If I'm not the brunt of crude jokes about terrorism, I'm constantly being questioned about attacks, as if I had a personal hand in them.*

*Although I don't wear the head scarf, often people will lash out simply due to my skin colour (I am Indian by birth). It is difficult simply being ethnic, in any form at all. Curiosity is understandable, and I am always willing to answer questions. But mockery and racist comments are both unnecessary and misplaced.*

*I believe that if people are better educated about Islam these sorts of misunderstandings could be avoided. Islam is, in essence, a very peaceful religion in which violence is strictly prohibited. In fact, one of the core beliefs in Islam is that all religions should be respected, and that everyone is entitled to an opinion.*

*Muslims are encouraged to learn more about other religions, whilst at the same time informing others about Islam. Violent methods are not endorsed in any circumstances, with the exception of self defence. Jihad is obviously quite different. Jihad is only permitted if a direct attack is launched at Islam, in which case it is a Muslim's duty to protect their religion. But how is that so very different from other religions? What religion, throughout history, has not taken arms to protect its beliefs? Another of the biggest misconceptions people have about Islam is that Islamic women are oppressed. This is utterly and completely incorrect women in Islam are given equal status to men in all respects. Any restrictions placed on women are for their protection. Muslim women are never prohibited the right to education and are encouraged to work.*

*The headscarf, although often considered compulsory, is totally optional. There is nothing oppressive or degrading about the headscarf, either. Although a lot of people consider it to be restrictive for women, the intentions behind it are quite righteous. The headscarf is intended to protect the women's virtue and her from harm that could be inspired by provocative or immodest clothing. Muslim women are taught to treat their bodies like temples with respect and modesty.*

*The biggest problem Islam faces today is misunderstanding. Many other religions in most western countries confuse Islam with the cultures in which it is practised. Whilst Islam in itself is a peaceful, embracing religion, many devout Islamic cultures take the principles of Islam to extremes. This is highly detrimental to the overall identity of Islam, as it gives others an incorrect impression of the religion.*

*It is unfair for the media and the government to judge all Muslims so harshly due to the actions of a few. If such degrees of racism and distrust can be awakened in such short amounts of time, how far can we really say humanity has progressed? There is no excuse for labelling the entire nation as guilty simply so that the rest of the world can have a scapegoat.*

*I hope in years to come, all misconceptions regarding Islam will be cleared. It seems such a waste to spread so much energy on mistrusting an entire religion when the same energy can be spent targeting the real enemy.*

*Zoya Patel.*