Title: Call of Islam

Author/s: Bagnall, Diana

Publisher: Australian Consolidated Press

No. of Pages: 5

Format (eg. Book chapter, magazine article): Magazine article

Subject (eg. History, Legal Studies): English

Date added: 7/11/2011

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Copyright Regulations 1969

WARNING

This material has been produced and communicated to you by or on behalf of Mount St Benedict College pursuant to Part VB of the Copyright Act 1968 (the Act).

The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further reproduction or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.

Do not remove this notice.
Call of Islam

Authors: Bagnall, Diana

Publisher: Australian Consolidated Press

Citation: The Bulletin with Newsweek
vol. 120 no. 6349 5 November 2002 pp.36-42

Subjects:
- ADOLESCENTS IN AUSTRALIA
- CULTURAL IDENTITY [AREA OF STUDY]
- ISLAM
- MULTICULTURALISM
- MUSLIMS - AUSTRALIA

Item Description:
Diana Bagnall interviews a number of young Australian Muslims to find out what it is like to be young, Australian and Muslim in Sydney. Issues discussed include religious and cultural practices, how world and local events such as September 11 and the Bali bombing have impacted on the local Muslim community and the growing trend of young people asserting and expressing their religious identity.
These are formative times for Australian Muslims, particularly the young. To pursue their spiritual beliefs, many feel they must go against society and prevailing attitudes. And the events of September 11 and Bali have led many to reinforce the level of their devotion. Diana Bagnall speaks to members of the community to find out what it is to be Australian and Muslim.

Call of Islam

The cost of belief in Allah and his prophet Mohammed rose exponentially when the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, introduced Islamic fundamentalism to a much broader public. And now, Bali. There have been commemorative services in mosques and letters to the editor from imams expressing sorrow and solidarity. But young Australians such as Daniel Baladjam, 22, and Roshana Sultan, 21, know the cost of being Muslim has just taken another leap. "The sword," murmurs Baladjam under his breath. "I hate it." Sultan’s reaction when she first heard about the nightclub bombing at Kuta was instinctive: “Oh please don’t let it be us again.” She has friends who played football against young men who died.

This is not a good time to be a Muslim in Australia. Correction, This is not an easy time to be a Muslim in Australia. It may well prove to be a good time. For as high school maths teacher Adel Ahmed, 33, puts it: "I have to be moving in a direction that is different to the direction society is moving, in order to benefit spiritually. In a way, it is like the stockmarket, for want of a better metaphor, where one makes money when one is selling when everyone else is buying." Religion and the market have more in common than is usually acknowledged.

In the past several years, as Islam’s profile has grown sharper and darker both internationally and inside Australia’s borders, Australian-born Muslims have been reassessing their level of commitment to the faith that comes with their cultural package. In many cases, they have chosen to ramp up that commitment and accentuate their Muslim identity. Some are setting up Muslim web sites and bookshops, editing Muslim newspapers, volunteering to teach scripture classes in public schools, setting up serious Islamic doctrinal
courses. Many more are changing the way they live: putting on looser, non-revealing clothing (and, in the case of women, the hijab or headscarf), avoiding banks (citing the Koran as forbidding believers to have anything to do with interest – riba in Arabic), quitting addictive substances (again citing the Koran as forbidding anything that is harmful to you) and, most importantly, praying several times a day.

In the process, many profess to be discovering a purer form of Islam and questioning the religious-cultural package their parents passed on to them. Amine Oygur Ataly, 37, sparked a long and bitter family rift when she became openly devout in her early 20s. In Turkish culture, she explains, religion is very much a question of ritual. “When I asked intense questions, they said I would lose my mind. But when I looked at the essence of the religion without the rituals, it worked. I could see Islam wasn’t about being Turkish.”

As Islam increasingly defined how she lived – wearing the hijab, praying five times a day, eating only halal food and refusing to go to functions where there was alcohol – and eventually triggered a divorce, she kept asking herself if she was a fanatic. “But what is a fanatic? I looked at what I was doing and it was the Prophet’s example.”

Ataly meets me in the office of the

Acceptance: Amine Oygur Ataly leads a young women’s class at the Auburn Gallipoli mosque grandly conceived Auburn Gallipoli mosque in western Sydney. It’s as austere as the mosque is ornate, an aesthetic tradition that entered Western culture when the Muslim empire stretched into southwestern Europe from the 8th to the 15th centuries. Her son Harun, 16, has his head buried in a Sun Wos book. “Muslim people are exactly what I turned my back against,” she is at pains to explain. “When you see people who label themselves Muslim and are doing everything in the book that Islam doesn’t teach, that is
tells me. "Islam offers a lifestyle, and if you understand that, you cling to it ... For every person who is trying to give this beautiful religion a bad name, my part is to make sure the truth is heard."

The shading of that truth varies considerably, depending on whom you are speaking with. Islam prides itself on being an evidence-based religion, authenticated by a document, the Koran, believed to be the word of God as revealed to the prophet Mohammed. Scholars are required to back up any explanation with reference to the text. They can't shoot from the lip. "The beauty of Islam is that it's crystal clear," says Gibran Webbe, 34, a convert who was born a Lebanese Christian. As any number of ardent young women and men with bright eyes told me, a Muslim is not allowed to cut down a tree in war, or to kill an ant. War is permissible only under certain conditions, such as self-defense and well-defined limits, the Islam Council of Victoria's web site informs browsers under a link titled "Addressing some misconceptions about Islam."

Which begs the question of how the adjective "Islamic" can be coupled with the noun "terrorist" and, more recently in Sydney with the noun "rapist." I find an answer to the former in conversation with Dr Mohsin Labban, an urbane multilingual professor of econometrics and Islamic banker who has spent the bulk of his career with the United Nations. In 1997, he returned to live in Australia, to which he'd originally migrated from Egypt in 1967. Context is everything, he suggests to me. "The Australian community mistreats Muslims," he says. "So to justify to themselves the animosity of those who are humiliating and insulting them, they find a verse in the Koran and misconstrue that and from that we develop new radical theories."

Without naming names, he continues: "Devoutness ... is a defence mechanism. If you don't insult me, I don't have to cling together. The gang mentality appears only when you are not accepted at large and then you are forced to clout with those in a similar position." Labban has no tide in the Australian Islamic community. He has no mosque. He preaches acceptance of Christians and Jews. Islam, he says, is an encompassing religion, although this, he adds, is completely against the understanding of the world about Islam. His Sydney students, a hundred or so of whom gather in a community hall on Friday nights to hear him lecture, come from about 15 different ethnic backgrounds. "I am not a local man. I have students in seven or eight countries with whom I have closer ties than to Sydney," he says. "Eighty per cent of what I see about Islam in Australia is more cultural than Islamic in behaviour. I have never seen a more confused Muslim community in the world than this one in Sydney."

But the mosques, which for decades have been propped up by the efforts of old men, are starting to attract younger crowds. And there's a different type of dialogue going on outside the mosque which expressly relates Islam to the local environment while acknowledging tensions involved in doing so. That young Muslims are prepared to embrace the inherently...
oppositional nature of being a believer is obvious in the rapid spread among young women of the *hijab*, which identifies the wearer as Muslim just as surely as if she were wearing the T-shirt “I was Born a Muslim” (which is also available). None can be ignorant of the consequences of openly subscribing to an ideology that is again taking shape in the minds of many westerners as “the great other”.

Ali (born Andy) Cabbab, 31, who runs Muslim Aid Australia, understands that better than most. He’s a convert. Two of his former schoolmates at the Christian school he attended work as missionaries, one converting Muslims in Indonesia. “It’s not that [Islamophobia] is a contemporary disease,” says Cabbab. “It is deeply embedded in our belief system.”

That there are now emerging young Muslims who can speak for and about their faith in an intelligent and reasonable way is what’s changing in Australia. The younger generation is anxious to distance itself from the older generation’s stuttering cultural politics and cut to the chase of applying their beliefs in daily life.

“The thing that appeals to me about Islam is its logic and its reason,” explains Kuranda Seyit, 33, the newly installed editor of *The Australian Muslim News*. We’re at a cafe in Auburn, the heart of Turkish Sydney. At that moment, an example of religious middle-headedness passes by our table – a young woman dressed in tight pin-stripe trousers and a body-hugging tee-shirt, topped with a large headscarf. “That doesn’t make sense,” says Seyit. The thinking behind the *hijab* is that a woman hides her charms in public. Men are also meant to dress modestly. The object is to keep sexual relations tidy, and thereby protect the family unit. If that is difficult in the current highly sexualised public domain, well, so be it.

“Muslims don’t want to have a diluted religion, and that is where the clash is,” says Seyit. That doesn’t mean they have to get up people’s noses. There are ways and means of making religious practice more palatable to the locals – for example, not saying “peace be upon him” after the name of Prophet, every time it’s mentioned. “We just have to change our approach. Muslims came to Australia and Australians are saying, ‘Who are these people, can we trust them, are they against our values, are they a threat to our country?’ We have to prove that we are not, and it will happen. I think that within 20 years, we won’t be talking about these things; they will be redundant.”

Rishad Ahmed, 28, a “reired” computing professional who recently opened the Islamic bookshop in Bankstown, is bringing in a much wider range of books about Islam than was previously available locally. Books giving an Islamic perspective on cloning and organ transplantation, books about Islamic world history and the environment. Even books on how to teach your children about sex. “There were plenty of books about rituals but not much beyond that,” he says. “I’m trying to turn people into thinkers.” So are intellectuals such as Amir Butler of the Melbourne-based Australian Muslim Public Affairs Committee, who contributes to the op-ed pages of major broadsheets, and Kaddous, who teaches at the campus mosque at the University of NSW and posts his lectures on the internet. “There is an Islamic mindset and it is confronting,” Kaddous says. “But the way I see it, it sometimes you need to have a confronting mindset to see solutions to the problem ... I live in a secular society, and as a member of that society I have an obligation to contribute. For example, in the current discussion about whether service stations should be able to sell alcohol, there is a Muslim point of view.”

John Bates, the rector of Brighton/ Rockdale Anglican parish in Sydney's
in Sydney's west for Sheikh Shady's class. At 84, Shady is a tall and heavyset man with a short, red-tinted beard. He wears a long white robe, white cap and sandals. Lessons are in English. That's a breakthrough at Lakemba mosque, the largest in Sydney. When I ask him what he's teaching, he says, "the natural way." Shady, he says, is the good life of every Muslim being. Some of his contemporaries, he says, find themselves a long way from the good life. They're now in one of two places: the mosque or the lock-up. He laughs. He's a Punchbowl boy, all right. "We want to show that Islam makes you a winner. It will get you to the top in whatever you want... But the problem is that being on the wrong path is easier than being on the right path, and a lot of boys end up on the wrong path. They haven't had the right teaching."

Praying alongside Muslim-born believers in the mosques are a growing number of Christian-born converts (or revert, as they're called by Muslims, who believe that every human is born Muslim but some lose their way then "revert" to the faith). Their decision to adopt the world's most stifled religion when disbelief is the societal norm can be read as doubly perverse or doubly brave, depending on your perspective. "One of the beliefs of coming to Islam is that you can talk about God," says Ibrahim (born Glenn) Anderson, 39, a doctoral student in economics, who converted in 1995. "You can't talk about God with most people. They get embarrassed. They go into a big cringe. It's seen as childish to believe in God."

So much in his element does Anderson feel among fellow believers that two years ago he and his Malakan born wife, Jilaniha Azez, moved from inner-city Glebe to Lakemba, known in Sydney as a Lebanese Muslim heartland. Their daughter will go to an Islamic school. Some converts have a high public profile. For example, Dinwood Goddard, 46, born David, son of an Albury doctor, brought up an Anglican, is secretary of the Supreme Islamic Council of NSW and an acerbic observer of his adopted community's social and political dynamics. 'Most Muslims who came from 'Muslim' countries have discovered Islam in Australia, with few exceptions. Australia hasn't helped the emergence of Islam by creating a selective pressure for Muslims to balance an Islamic identity with the freedoms, high standard of living and benefits of living among non-Muslims. They cannot enjoy this kind of freedom in Egypt or Turkey, to name two."

Ahmed Kilani, 33, agrees. His parents escaped from Gamul, Abdel Nasser's Egypt. His father, an industrial chemist, started a Saturday school when he arrived in Australia, teaching the Koran and Arabic. "Most so-called Muslim countries are run by despots, dictators or military regimes which are unrepresentative of the people. I couldn't live in that environment because I didn't enjoy the religious freedom I have here," says Kilani, who runs a web site islamicsydney.com with his partner, Muslim convert Sam de Francesco.

The privilege of being an Australian something he tries to convey to children in scripture classes. It isn't easy. He tells of his experience at Granville Boys' High, in western Sydney. "I asked my class who here thought of themselves as Australian, and no one raised their hand. I asked them who here is Lebanese, and about three-quarters raised their hand. I asked who here is Turkish and the other quarter put their hand up. I asked them who has been to Lebanon - no one. I asked who had been to Turkey - one or two. I asked who could read or write Arabic - one or two. I asked who was born in Australia - just about all of them raised their hands."

"I said to them: You are Australian and you are Muslim, whether you like it or not. I try and tell these kids all the time that Islam is compatible with society here. We are not going anywhere."