



Culture and Religion Information Sheet

Islam





Aim

This information sheet aims to raise awareness and understanding of Islamic religious and cultural practices to assist service providers in the government and not-for-profit community sectors to improve service development and delivery.

Introduction

Western Australia is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural society. Religious freedom and mutual respect for all religions are integral parts of our shared culture and are important underlying principles of multiculturalism and democracy.

There are a number of international treaties and national laws that recognise freedom of religion and belief as fundamental human rights, such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948*, the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966* and the *Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986*.

In Western Australia it is unlawful under the *Equal Opportunity Act 1984* to discriminate against a person because of their religious conviction in certain areas of public life including employment, education,

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the provision of goods, services and facilities, in accommodation, clubs and in application forms see the Equal Opportunity Commission website <http://www.eoc.wa.gov.au/Index.aspx>.

Service providers and employers who recognise, value and promote cultural and religious diversity can address more fully the needs of their clients and staff, thus providing services based on good practice. Respecting the roles of religion in various cultures is part of courteous, ethical and professional behaviour, which promotes a just and equitable society.

History of Islam in Western Australia

In the early 16th century, Australia's first Muslims were fishermen from Makassar (Indonesia) who lived among the Aboriginal people of the north coast of Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland.

Centuries later, the discovery of gold in WA in 1880 boosted the need for camel trains as a means of transport in WA's arid interior. During the gold mining boom, camel drivers from various parts of Afghanistan and present-day Pakistan worked at Coolgardie, Kalgoorlie and coastal port towns such as Albany, Fremantle, Geraldton and Port Hedland. They lived in 'Ghan' (from 'Afghan') camps or towns and followed the Islamic faith.

It was these Muslims who started planning the construction of the Perth Mosque in William Street, Northbridge, in 1895. Its foundation stone was laid in 1905 and the mosque was opened in 1906.

After World War II, particularly in the 1960s and the 1970s, more Muslims started migrating to Australia. They came from many different countries such as Malaysia, Turkey, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Lebanon, Afghanistan, South Africa, Iran and Burma. Most Muslims



from Sudan, Iraq, Albania, Bosnia and Somalia started arriving in the mid-1990s.

In 1975/76 the Perth Muslim Association (PMA) and the Islamic Council of Western Australia (ICWA) were formed to coordinate Islamic activities in Perth and the State. This was followed by the formation of more local Muslim associations/societies, which are generally affiliated with ICWA. Each State has an Islamic Council which is affiliated with Muslims Australia (previously known as the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC)) which is the national Muslim body based in Sydney, NSW.

There are a number of Islamic schools and mosques available to metro and regional communities in WA.

Demographics

The 2011 Census indicated that there were 39,160 people affiliated with Islam in Western Australia, an increase of 14,887, or 61.3 per cent, compared with the 2006 Census.

Between the 2006 and 2011 Censuses the number of people who identified themselves as Muslims in Australia increased to 476,290, an increase of 135,897 or 28.5 per cent.

Islam: background and origins

Muslims follow the teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), who was born in 570 CE [Current Era] in Makkah (Mecca), Saudi Arabia. He was born into a noble Arab family, the Quraysh, the descendants of Abraham through his first son, Ishmael.

The Prophet Muhammad received his first revelation at the age of 40. As soon as he started preaching Islam, he and his followers were persecuted and faced severe hardships. He was therefore commanded by God to migrate to Madinah (Medina), a city north of Makkah.

During a short span of 23 years, he completed his prophethood and died at the age of 63. He was put to rest in the city of Madinah, leaving no wealth or property. Muslims believe that he led a perfect life and set an example for all human beings. His biography illustrates in real life the meaning and implications of the Qur'anic teachings.

Key beliefs

1. Belief in the oneness of God (Allah): Islam enjoins faith in the oneness and sovereignty of God, which makes people aware of the meaningfulness of the universe and of their place in it.
2. Belief in the angels: Muslims believe in the angels of God. They are purely spiritual and splendid beings whose nature requires no food, drink or sleep.
3. Belief in the books of God: Muslims believe that God revealed His books to various messengers to guide their nations. The four main books that were revealed were Taurah (the major part of the Old Testament), Zaboor (Psalms of David), Injeel (the Gospel or New Testament) and the Holy Qur'an, which Muslims believe is the final revelation.
4. Belief in prophets: According to Islam, God created us for a noble purpose: to worship him and to lead a virtuous life based on his guidance as taught by his prophets.
5. Life after death: the world, according to Islam, is a place of trial and people are continually being tested. Following death, the deceased will rise to stand for their final and fair trial in front of God. People with good records will be generously rewarded and warmly welcomed into the Heaven of God, and those with bad records will be punished and cast into Hell.
6. Divine decree and destiny: Muslims believe in the timeless knowledge of God and in his power to execute his plans.

The Five Pillars of Islam

The above beliefs or articles of faith are considered the foundation of Islam, the structure of which is supported by the Five Pillars:

1. The Declaration of Faith, which is the testimony “I bear witness that there is none worthy of worship except Allah (God the Creator), and that Muhammad is His Messenger”.
2. Five daily prayers, which are prescribed as a duty towards God. They are: (i) Subuh or Fajr Prayer (between dawn break and sunrise); (ii) Zuhur (or Dhuhur) Prayer (midday or early afternoon); (iii) Asr Prayer (late afternoon before sunset); (iv) Maghrib Prayer (at sunset before the evening twilight disappears); (v) ‘Isha’ Prayer (after the twilight has disappeared until late at night).
3. Zakaat (alms giving), which is an annual payment—for those who are able—of 2.5 per cent of one’s net savings, as a sum to be spent on the poor and needy. Zakaat is said to purify the wealth of a Muslim and purify their heart from injustice, covetousness and greed.
4. Fasting, which is observed once each year during the month of Ramadan (the ninth month of the Muslim Lunar Calendar). Fasting means abstention from food, drink and sensual pleasures from dawn to sunset, and also from all evil intentions and desires, as a means of developing a higher state of God-consciousness.
5. Pilgrimage (Hajj) to Makkah, which is obligatory once in a lifetime for every adult Muslim, provided one has the financial and physical means to do so.

Language and communication

- When organising interpreters, arrangements should be made according to the gender of the concerned person: a male interpreter for a man and female for a woman, if available. If the person needing an interpreter is female, the interpretation can also be done by a male interpreter in the presence of her male relative.

Body language and behaviour

Non-verbal communication has a powerful effect on relationships and effective service provision. Non-verbal signals acceptable in one culture may be completely unacceptable or even offensive in another. Some of these sensitivities include:

- Beckoning ‘come here’ with the palm upwards or pointing to a person or object with your index finger, hand or foot is offensive to some Muslims.
- For some Muslim ethnic groups, particularly the Malays, the head should not be touched by other people as it is considered to be humiliating. However, this does not apply to Muslims coming from the Middle East for whom rubbing the head is considered a sign of love and respect.

It is Western Australian Government policy to provide competent interpreting and translating services to clients who are unable to communicate effectively in spoken or written English.¹

Government agency staff can contact the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on telephone 131 450.

1. The Western Australian Language Services Policy, 2008, Office of Multicultural Interests, Western Australian Government.



Greeting

The following sensitivities need to be observed on greeting or introduction:

- ❑ Many Muslims do not shake hands with members of the opposite sex.
- ❑ Be considerate of personal space: many Muslim men or women are not comfortable with someone from the opposite gender standing too close.
- ❑ Muslims do not expect non-Muslims to greet them with the Islamic greeting ‘assaalam alaikum’ meaning ‘Peace be upon you’, with the response ‘wa alaikumus salam’ meaning ‘and upon you be peace’. It is therefore not necessary for a non-Muslim to learn the Islamic way of greeting, since it is acceptable to greet Muslims with normal English greetings such as ‘good morning’ or ‘good evening’.

Names and titles

There is no uniformity in Muslim naming systems as Muslims come from different cultural backgrounds. There are, however, three naming systems by which Muslim names can be categorised:

1. Muslims who have a surname or family name. In general Muslims coming from Turkey, India, Pakistan, South Africa and Arab countries have surnames or family names. Certain Muslim ethnic groups—such as those coming from Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, especially those of Arab descent, Indonesian Batak or Mandailing (from Sumatra) and some influential families from Java—have family names.
2. Muslims whose fathers’ names or second names are treated as surnames.

The Malay people coming from Malaysia, Singapore, Christmas Island, Cocos Islands, some African countries and some from Indonesia have their fathers’ name as their surname. Most Malaysian and Singaporean Malays normally have, before their fathers’ names, the word ‘Bin’ or ‘Binti (Bte)’ respectively, meaning ‘the son of’ or ‘daughter of’. For example, Osman bin Ali is ‘Osman, son of Ali’. He would probably be called Mr Osman, not Mr Ali as Mr Ali would be Osman’s father.²

3. Muslims who have only single names. This applies to Muslims from Indonesia only. In Indonesia the first given names are important, while the father’s name is unimportant. As a result many Indonesians have only a single name, such as Suharto or Sudomo, for example. People arriving in Western countries such as Australia, have some difficulties completing government forms that most often require and emphasise a surname or family name.

Dress and appearance

The following dress codes are advocated:

- ❑ The Islamic dress code for males and females is prescribed to be modest.
- ❑ Muslims may wear any national or chosen dress code if it loosely covers certain parts of the body, consisting of the area from the navel to knee for the male, and the whole body with the exception of the face, hands and feet for the female. These areas of the body are referred to as the Awrah.
- ❑ The wearing of the niqab, burka or purdah (face cover) by Muslim women is not obligatory.

² Information from *Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands*, T. Morrison, W. Conoway and G. Borden, 1994, Adams Media Corporation.

Religious festivals and days of significance

The following key religious festivals and significant cultural and religious days are celebrated:

- Eid ul Fitr is the festival that marks the end of Ramadan (the fasting month), and is celebrated on the 1st of Shawwal (the 10th month in the Muslim lunar calendar).
- Eid ul Adha (festival of sacrifice) is the festival commemorating Abraham's willingness, as an act of obedience to Allah, to sacrifice his son Ishmael (Allah provided him with an animal to sacrifice instead). The festival is celebrated on the 10th of Zul Hijjah (the 12th month in the Muslim lunar calendar).
- Many Muslims also celebrate the Prophet Muhammad's birthday and some other Islamic historical events, but this type of celebration is only a customary practice, and is not required by Islam.
- Some Muslims celebrate individual birthdays but this is not based on Islamic teachings.

Seating

The following sensitivity needs to be observed in seating arrangements for interview purposes or hosting official functions:

- Some Muslims may prefer to be seated next to people of the same gender and this should be considered as a courtesy.
- However, when considering seating arrangements it is best to check with the individual regarding any personal preferences.
- Muslim religious leaders should generally be seated next to people of the same gender.

Food, drink and fasting

Recognising appropriate foods and beverages is essential in responding to the needs of religious communities. When hosting people from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, as a matter of good practice, always serve a selection of vegetarian and meat foods on separate trays. A variety of non-alcoholic drinks should also be available at any official function. The following issues relating to food, drink and fasting should also be understood:

- If possible, organise all food to be halal. This is easy to arrange through halal caterers and ensures that everyone can eat.
- Islamic tradition does not allow the consumption of alcohol.
- During Ramadan Muslims do not eat or drink from the break of dawn to sunset.
- Many Muslims will not eat meat that is not halal.



Similarly, Muslims do not eat any food that contains animal fat or animal by-product, unless it is derived from animals slaughtered according to Muslim tradition.

- It is still best to check with individuals as they may have personal dietary requirements, for example, Muslims who choose to follow a vegetarian diet.

Family and marriage

The differing family characteristics of different religious groups should be appreciated. These include:

- In Islam, 'family' does not denote merely the nuclear family, but includes other close relatives as well.
- In Islam, the strong bond between parents and children is always maintained. Muslim children are not expected to leave the parents to live on their own until they are married.
- The family is the fundamental unit of most Muslim societies.

Medical

- Where possible, female doctors should be made available for consultation and treatment of Muslim women, and male doctors for Muslim men.
- When a Muslim woman is in labour, she or her husband will always try to have a female doctor or at least a midwife available to deliver the baby.
- Some Muslims may take the placenta home to be buried, as it is considered part of the body, although it is not compulsory to do so.

Counselling/interviews

- For interviews involving Muslim women, service providers should attempt to allocate a female interviewer or at least have a female staff member present during the interview. Some Muslim women will request the presence of a family member with them during any interview and this request should be accommodated.
- Should advice on Islamic legal issues be needed during counselling/an interview, an Imam or Muslim cleric should be contacted.

Death and related issues

Death and the grieving process are particularly significant and important for all religious communities. Some sensitivities include the following:

- It is customary for a terminally ill Muslim patient to always have at least one of their relatives or other Muslims by their side to pray for them.
- When a Muslim patient has died, the family or Muslim community should be informed immediately. This enables them to make arrangements and necessary preparations for the burial, which should take place on the same day or as soon as possible.
- Either while in hospital or elsewhere, the body of the deceased must not be left naked or uncovered.
- It is a collective duty of Muslims that before burial, the body has to be ritually washed and wrapped in white cloth according to Islamic rites. Prayers are then offered for the deceased.



Other sensitivities

Other cultural and religious sensitivities that need to be acknowledged and respected are as follows:

- Islam teaches the functional division between the right hand and the left hand. Each hand has different functions. The functions of the right are to give and take, to eat and drink, to shake hands and wave. Using the left hand for these purposes is offensive. The functions of the left hand are to remove dirt and filth and to wash and wipe the private parts after using the toilet. Using the right hand for these purposes is offensive.
- Some Muslim women may not make direct eye contact with members of the opposite sex out of respect and modesty.
- Gambling is strictly against the precepts of the Muslim faith and most practising Muslims abstain from alcohol. Avoid using licensed clubs, hotels and casinos as venues for functions involving representatives from these communities.
- At events where photographs or video footage is being taken, prior permission should be obtained as a courtesy.

Further enquiries

This information sheet has been produced by the Office of Multicultural Interests with the support of the Islamic Council of Western Australia.

For further information please contact:

The President
Islamic Council of Western Australia
PO Box 70
Burswood WA 6100

Telephone: (08) 9362 2210

Email address: info@islamiccouncilwa.com.au

Web: www.islamiccouncilwa.com.au