



Uniya

Jesuit Social Justice Centre

## A Background Brief on

# Muslims in Australia

*The essence of Islam cannot be contained in a few pages. Like Christianity Islam is a rich and complex religion with a breadth of history, interpretation and lived experience. What is offered in this information brochure is a very basic introduction to a certain number of fundamental beliefs and practices of Islam. Muslims throughout Australia and the world agree on some of the basics, but will differ in their interpretation and practice of many of these beliefs.*

## What is Islam?¹

ISLAM is one of the three monotheistic religions, along with Christianity and Judaism. Islam in Arabic means “submission” and is derived from the Arabic root *salima*, meaning “peace, purity, submission, and obedience”. Islam is the submission to the will of God, or Allah. There are an estimated 1.3 billion Muslims in the world, making Islam the world’s second largest religion.

Islam is a whole way of life based upon the will of God revealed in the Qur’an, and in the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad. Every aspect of life is seen as part of an indivisible whole, literally inseparable from all other aspects.

For Muslims, the Qur’an is immediate to God. Everything necessary for salvation and the understanding of God’s covenant with humankind is contained between its covers. The Qur’an, moreover, is composed not of Muhammad’s words, but of God’s words. To read the Qur’an aloud is to say God’s words, and to listen to it is to listen to God’s words as though God were saying them.

*Exploring Religion*. Oxford University Press, Australia, p126



## Beginning of Islam

IN the sixth and the early seventh centuries of the Common Era (CE), Mecca (in the country known today as Saudi Arabia) was a commercial town on the trade route between south and north of Arabia.

The **Prophet Muhammad**, born in Mecca about 570, began to preach the religion called Islam in 610 CE. He taught that Islam’s primary focus is acknowledging that there is only one God and that human beings have a duty to ‘submit’ to God’s will. He also said that all prophets before him (such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus) taught the same thing.

At the time of the Prophet’s death in 632, Islam had spread to all corners of Arabia and a large part of the population had embraced the new religion.

1. Much of the material throughout this paper is adapted from Abdullah Saeed, *Muslim Australians* (unpublished educational material and used with permission)

The word **Qur’an** is an Arabic term which means ‘recitation’. God’s revelations to the Prophet Muhammad were made over a period of 22 years.

The first revelation to Muhammad was made one day while praying and meditating in a cave near Mecca. Muhammad heard a voice addressing him, asking him to ‘read’ without saying exactly what to read. The voice asked him to read three times. Each time, Muhammad said, ‘I cannot read’. The third time, the voice said:

*Read in the name of thy Lord, who has created — created Man out of a germ-cell! Read — for thy Lord is the Most Bountiful One who has taught [Man] by the pen — taught Man what he did not know! (Qur’an 96:1-5.)*

For Muslims, the Qur’an is literally the word of God, not the words or opinions of Muhammad. The revelations were, for the most part, written down during the lifetime of the Prophet and collected in book form shortly after his passing — that is, within two years of the Prophet’s death in 632.

Muslims believe that the Qur’an is God’s final and complete revelation. It is the infallible word of God. While it does include confirmation of previous revelations made through the Prophets, including Jesus, it is also believed to supersede such revelations.

### Muslims of the world at a glance

- There are 1.3 billion Muslims in the world today.
- 22 per cent of the world population is Muslim.
- Approximately one-third of Muslims live as minorities in non-Muslim majority countries such as India, China, Russia and France.
- Approximately 20 million Muslims live in Europe and the Americas.
- There are 56 states with Muslim majorities.
- The countries with the largest Muslim populations are Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Nigeria and China. Of these only Egypt is an Arab country.
- Arab Muslims comprise approximately 20% of the Muslim population of the world.
- Australia’s Muslim population is 281,578 according to the 2001 census.

# Key Beliefs of Islam

## One God

The most fundamental belief of a Muslim is that there is only one God, who is the Creator and Sustainer of everything in the universe. There are no other gods besides God. God created the universe and everything in it. In Arabic, the word for God is 'Allah', and often Muslims prefer to use this name. In the Qur'an, God is given many names such as Merciful, Compassionate, Forgiving, and Just. God is neither male nor female.

## Prophets

Muslims believe that God has sent prophets and messengers to all the peoples on the earth. Adam is the first prophet, Muhammad the last. The Qur'an mentions twenty-five of the prophets sent by God. These include Abraham, Ishmael, Moses, David and Jesus.

## Scriptures

Muslims believe that God gave scriptures to prophets. The Qur'an mentions the Torah given to Moses, the Psalms of David and the Gospel. These contain revelations from God, but the Qur'an is held as the definitive and final scripture.

## Angels

Muslims believe that God created special beings called angels with certain functions and duties to fulfil. Gabriel, for example, carried messages of divine guidance to the prophets.

## Day of Judgement

Muslims believe that one day life as we know it will come to an end and at some point the Day of Judgment will come. On that day each person will be accountable to God for his or her actions in this life. God will bring back to life all human beings and gather them for judgment, showing everything each person has done in his or her life.

## God's timeless knowledge

Muslims also believe that God knows everything that happens in the universe. God has full knowledge of the past, present and future, although we cannot understand how. God's foreknowledge does not detract from human free will.

# The 'Five Pillars' of Islam

*Muslims have major beliefs that shape their religious practice. These 'five pillars of Islam' express their fundamental way of life.*

## The declaration of faith (*shahada*)

The first pillar is the profession of faith. Muslims must declare and accept that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God. This affirmation and creed is fundamental to Islam and the first and most important of the 'five pillars'. The *shahada* must be constantly repeated and lived throughout life so that its truth penetrates to the centre of one's being and is continually reinforced. In a Muslim family, this is the first thing a newborn baby is expected to hear, and the last thing a Muslim should hear before death.



## Prayer (*salat*)

Daily prayer is the second pillar of Islam. A Muslim is expected to pray (*salat*) at least five times a day.

Before each prayer, hands, face, arms and feet are washed, and if the prayer is performed outside a mosque, the place chosen must be clean. The person praying faces towards Mecca. The prayer involves a number of movements: standing, bowing down, prostrating, sitting, and recitation of the Qur'an and set prayers.

The purpose of prayer is to keep in regular touch with God and to be mindful of God's presence in daily life. The Prophet likened the prayer to bathing in the river five times a day, so that the Muslim becomes spiritually clean.

## Charity (*zakat*)

The third pillar of Islam is charity in the form of almsgiving. *Zakat* is a compulsory contribution, or poor tax, for the welfare of people in need. Muslims consider themselves to be trustees of the wealth that belongs to God.

## Fasting (*sawm*)

Another pillar is fasting. During the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim year, Muslim adults abstain from food, drink, smoking and sex during daylight hours.

Fasting is more than going without; it is also a time of spiritual development. During Ramadan, Muslims are encouraged to spend more time in prayer, acts of charity and reconciliation in order to come closer to God.

## Pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*)

At least once in a lifetime, a Muslim who is physically and financially able is expected to perform the pilgrimage, called *hajj*, to Mecca. This is the final pillar of Islam. *Hajj* takes place during the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar. Devout Muslims the world over eagerly await the day when they can fulfil this important ritual, many saving a lifetime for the journey.

## Branches of Islam

*There are many branches of Islam with Sunni and Shi'i being the two major ones. Some of the other branches are Wahhabi, Ismaili and Sufi. Sufis (mystics) are Muslims who give a high degree of emphasis to the spiritual dimension of Islam. The vast majority of Muslims worldwide (about 85%) are Sunnis.*

### Differences between Sunni Muslims and Shi'i Muslims

The difference between Sunnis and Shi'is started as political but has become more theological and ideological over time. Significant division occurred after the death of Muhammad and subsequent debate over who should succeed the Prophet as the leader of the community. Some Muslims, later known as Shi'is, believed preference should be given to the Prophet's family, while another group, later known as Sunnis, argued that political succession should be open to anyone capable of handling such responsibility.

**Sunni** literally means 'adherent of the Sunnah' which is an Arabic term for tradition or custom. Sunnis believe that Ali, the cousin of the Prophet and the husband of Muhammad's daughter Fatima, was the fourth and last of the caliphs (successors of Muhammad), the first three being Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman.

**Shi'i**, means 'a partisan of Ali'. Shi'is believe that Ali should have been the first caliph and that the caliphate should be passed down only to direct descendants of Prophet Mohammed through Ali and Fatima.

Both groups hold to the Qur'an as the sacred text and Muhammad as the last prophet. But each group has its own version of Islamic law and its own theology. Shi'i Muslims believe in a chain of leaders (imams) and a religious establishment. In principle they adhere personally to a superior authority called a mujtahid. The most important mujtahids are called Ayatollahs.

### Geographical divisions between Sunnis and Shi'is

While Sunnis are the majority in most Muslim countries, in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan and Bahrain the majority of Muslims are Shi'i. Iran is the largest Shi'i country in the world with Shi'is forming an estimated 93% of the Iranian Muslim population. In Iraq, Shi'is make up more than 60% of the Muslim population. The majority of Muslims in Indonesia are Sunnis.

## Milestones in a Muslim's Life

### Circumcision of boys

Boys are circumcised early in their life. Contrary to what many people believe, there is no requirement in Islam for girls to undergo any form of circumcision.

### Puberty

Puberty for a boy is when he starts to produce semen and for a girl it is when she starts to have her periods. When children reach puberty, they are considered to have entered the

adult world for religious purposes and are expected to perform the various rituals of Islam, such as the five daily prayers and fasting during Ramadan.

### Marriage

Theoretically, puberty is also the time when marriage becomes permissible, but nowadays it is usually deferred until at least sixteen.

### Old age

Children have a duty to look after their aged parents. Neglecting to do this is considered a grave sin in Islam.

### Death

There are no complicated or elaborate rites performed when a person is dying. When the person dies, the body must be handled with care and respect. Burial should take place as early as possible. A simple burial is highly encouraged.

## Food and Drink

*In general, Muslims are allowed to consume all foods (eg. grains, vegetables, fish and meat), except those that are explicitly prohibited in Islam. Prohibited foods are very few and include:*

- alcoholic drinks such as beer and wine
- pig meat (eg. ham, pork, bacon) and by-products of the pig such as pig fat
- meat of an animal that has died of natural causes, or as a result of strangling or beating.
- blood that is in liquid ('drinkable' form)

## Sacred Days

*The Islamic calendar has twelve months. Each month is either twenty-nine or thirty days long. The Islamic calendar began with the migration of the Prophet Muhammad in 622 from Mecca to Medina, known as the hijra. Therefore the first year (or 1AH) in the Islamic calendar is equal to 622 in the Gregorian calendar.*

### Two festivals (Eid)

- *Eid al-Fitr*: The first of Shawwal, which occurs immediately after the month of Ramadan.
- *Eid al-Adha*: The tenth of Dhu al-Hijja, which occurs during the pilgrimage season, in the last month of the Islamic year.

No peace among the nations  
without peace among the religions.

No peace among the religions  
without dialogue between the religions.

Hans Küng



## Friday

On Friday, at noon, Muslims gather in the mosque for special congregational prayers. After the “call to prayer”, the imam gives a sermon. They then pray in congregation. In most Muslim countries, Friday is a holiday (part of the weekend).

## Islamic New Year

This is the first of Muharram. In Muslim majority countries, it is a public holiday even if not a formal religious celebration.

## Birthday of the Prophet Muhammad

The birthday of the Prophet, known as “*mawlid al-nabi*” is celebrated on the twelfth of Rabi` al-Awwal.

## Month of Ramadan

Ramadan is the most sacred month of the year. Adult Muslims fast for the whole month, every day from dawn to sunset. They believe that it was in Ramadan that the Prophet Muhammad received the first revelation from God.

## Sacred Places

### Mecca

The most sacred place for Muslims is the Ka`ba in the sacred city of Mecca in modern day Saudi Arabia.

### Medina

The second most sacred place for Muslims is Medina, the city of the Prophet, which is also in Saudi Arabia.

### Jerusalem

The third most sacred place in Islam is Jerusalem. It is believed to be where the Prophet Muhammad miraculously travelled in his famous Night Journey, and from where he ‘ascended’ to the heavens.

### The Mosque (*masjid*)

One of the most important everyday places for Muslims is the mosque, where they perform their daily prayers as well as other important prayers such as the Friday and *Eid* prayers.

Situations where war prevails are like an open wound in the heart of humanity. As believers in One God, we see it as our duty to strive to bring about peace. Christians and Muslims, we believe that peace is above all a gift from God. That is why our two communities pray for peace. In bringing about peace, and maintaining it, religions have an important role to play. In this respect, education is a domain in which religions can make a particular contribution.

Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald



## Islamic Law and Sacred Texts

### Shari`ah

Shari`ah, meaning Revealed Law, comes from the root *shara`a*, ‘to introduce’, ‘enact’ ‘prescribe’. Shari`ah is based on two primary sources: the Qur`an and Sunnah. The literature on Islamic law is vast and is considered part of the sacred literature of Muslims. There are literally thousands of books that deal with Islamic law and interpretations of Shari`ah are not uniform among Muslims. Under Shari`ah, all action of a Muslim fall into one of the following categories:

- prohibited
- obligatory
- reprehensible
- recommended
- permissible

### The Qur`an

The Qur`an is the holy scripture of Muslims. It is in Arabic and is a compilation of revelations sent from God to the Prophet Muhammad between 610 and 632. It has one hundred and fourteen chapters (*suras*) of unequal length.

### Sunnah

Sunnah is an Arabic term for tradition or custom. Sunnah refers to the practical model behaviour of the Prophet Muhammad as documented in the Hadith. The Hadith documents what the Prophet Muhammad said and did.

Sunnah (hadith) is the second most sacred text and the second primary source of Islamic ethics, beliefs and practices.

## Mosques and Religious Leaders

*There is no official religious hierarchy in Islam, particularly Sunni Islam. The religious leader of a mosque is called the imam, and in Australia*

*is roughly equivalent to a minister of religion, but does not act in the role as an intermediary between a person and God. A Muslim has direct 'access' to God through prayer, and the relationship between God and the individual is a personal one. Dignitaries or functionaries are distinguished from ordinary believers only by a higher degree of learning or doctrinal expertise. There is no one person or group of people within Australia who can speak on behalf of the entire Muslim community, even on religious matters.*

## Mosques in Australia

THERE are close to one hundred mosques and a number of other prayer facilities throughout Australia. Most mosques are in Sydney and Melbourne, but all capital cities in Australia have mosques. Most mosques are non-sectarian; that is, they do not belong to one particular religious group or legal school. Usually, any Muslim, whatever his or her ethnicity, culture, theological orientation or legal school, may go and pray in any mosque.

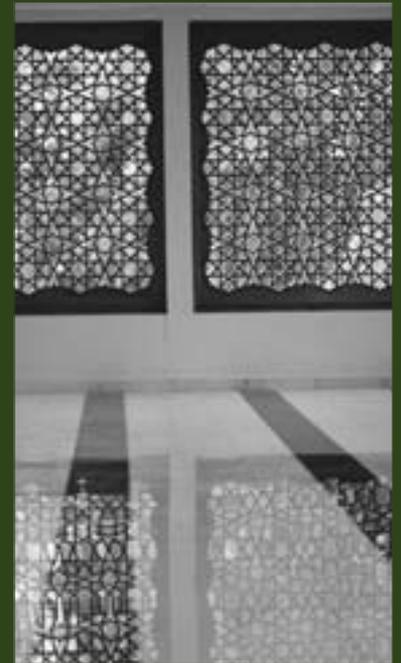
## Women in Islam

ACCORDING to the Qur'an, men and women are equal before God. A quick survey of the numerous Muslim com-



Respect for other people's religious freedom also includes respect for their religious identity. An interreligious partner is not asked to deny his or her religion, but rather in all honesty, sincerity and authenticity to meet other believers and cooperate with them to construct a better world.

Cardinal Francis Arinze



munities within Australia and beyond reveals substantial diversity in the ways in which women are treated. In some Muslim communities women are considered, in practice and in law, equal to men. Other communities, however, systematically discriminate against women. This treatment is often the result of local cultural practices which may be inconsistent with, if not contrary to, authentic Islamic teaching.

*Both men and women are expected to dress in a way that is simple, modest and dignified. Traditions of female dress found in some Muslim countries are, again, often the expression of local custom rather than religious principle. Women were asked to cover themselves during the foundation period of Islam, not to restrict their liberty, but to protect them from harm. Covering the face is not and has never been universal in the Muslim world.*

*Muslim women read the Qur'an as a liberating holy book. They believe that the Qur'an provides a spiritual and ethical basis and direction in their daily lives. The status of women in Islam is addressed clearly in the Qur'an, and in the Hadith as well. In Islam both men and women have the same religious and moral duties and responsibilities and are therefore considered equal. God created all human equal, from a "single person" or "self" and breathed into each person [God's] spirit. The Qur'an addresses the issue of creation, but does not say that Eve was made from Adam's rib and was therefore second and inferior in creation.*

*In Islam a woman must give her consent to marry freely. She cannot be married against her will and nor can she be inherited or bought. She is entitled to a dowry (mahr) from her husband, but that dowry or marriage gift is for her alone. She is entitled to keep her own name, and property that she owns remains hers after marriage; it does not go to the husband and nor does it become common property. If a woman works she is entitled to her own earnings. Islam places much emphasis on the family as the key social and spiritual unit of society and Muslims are urged to love and care for each other, their children and their parents.*

Helen McCue, *Women in Islam: HSC - Studies of Religion Teachers' Kit*, 2003

# Beliefs Shared by Muslims and Christians\*

## One God

- Muslims and Christians believe that there is one God
- The Arabic word *islam* means to achieve peace through submission to God. Christianity and Islam aim to achieve this
- Prophet Muhammad said that 99 names belong to God. Some names with resonances (if not specific title) in the Christian Scriptures include:
  - The Most Compassionate
  - The King
  - The Granter and Acceptor of Repentance
  - The Creator
  - The Provider
  - The Just
  - The Sustainer
  - The All-embracing
  - The Loving One
  - The Resurrector
  - The Truth
  - The Protector
  - The Glorified
  - The Pardonner
  - The Guide
  - The Everlasting
  - The Bestower of Peace

## Male and Female equal before God

- The soul is neither male nor female
- All humanity is descended from Adam and Eve

## Abrahamic roots

- Shared by Judaism, Christianity and Islam
- Judeo-Christian line of prophets (Abraham, Noah, Moses ...)

## Social Justice and Moral Teachings

- Human rights, economic justice etc.
- Basic commandments and virtues are the same

## Jesus

- Virgin birth
- Performed miracles and raised the dead in God's name
- Second coming of Jesus towards the end of time

## Mary

- In Islam the Blessed Virgin Mary is referred to as "Our Lady Mary, peace be upon her"
- Prophet Muhammad said that Jesus and Mary were the only persons born without the devil touching them

Whenever ye speak, speak justly,  
Even in a near relative is concerned;  
And fulfil the Covenant of Allah  
Thus doth He command you,  
That ye may remember

Qur'an, suray 6:152 Al-an am



## Angels

- Similar to Christian doctrine, including archangels Gabriel and Michael

## Scriptures

- Recognises the Books of the Torah, Psalms and the Gospels (in their original forms) as divine revelation

## Life after death

- Accountability for our actions — the Day of Judgement, Resurrection, Heaven and Hell.

## Devotions

- Both Christians and Muslims pray to God, give charity, fast and make their own form of pilgrimage.

\* Material adapted from the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations



# Islam in Australia

## Origins

Long before white settlement of Australia, Muslims had contact with Australia and her peoples. Fishing for sea slugs, the Macassans (an ethnic group from eastern Indonesia) began visiting the northern shores of Australia in the seventeenth century. Evidence of their presence is found in cave drawings of the distinctive Macassan boats, as well as their artefacts being found in Aboriginal settlements in northern Australia.

Afghan cameleers settled in Australia from the 1860s onwards. Camels were imported and used by Australian explorers to help open up the dry, desert interior and for transportation to different parts of the country. Due to the Afghans' knowledge and expertise with camels, they were credited with saving the lives of numerous early European explorers and were vital for exploration.

In the early twentieth century Muslims found it difficult to come to Australia because of the government's White Australia policy. This changed from the 1970s onwards as the government adopted a policy of 'multiculturalism'.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Muslims from more than sixty different countries had settled in Australia. While the vast majority come from Turkey and Lebanon, there are Muslims from Indonesia, Bosnia, Iran, Fiji, Albania, Sudan, Egypt, Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, among others.

# Some Facts and Figures

## Numbers of Muslims

- The total number of Muslims in Australia: 281 578
- Proportion of the Australian population who are Muslims: 1.5%

## Birthplace

**Figure 1:** The major countries of birth of Australian Muslims

|     |                    |      |
|-----|--------------------|------|
| 1.  | Australia          | 36%  |
| 2.  | Lebanon            | 10%  |
| 3.  | Turkey             | 8%   |
| 4.  | Afghanistan        | 3.5% |
| 5.  | Bosnia-Herzegovina | 3.5% |
| 6.  | Pakistan           | 3.2% |
| 7.  | Indonesia          | 2.9% |
| 8.  | Iraq               | 2.8% |
| 9.  | Bangladesh         | 2.7% |
| 10. | Iran               | 2.3% |
| 11. | Fiji               | 2.0% |

## Australian Muslims are not all Arabs

Australian Muslims are a diverse group. While the largest proportion are Australian-born, a further:

- 28% of Australian Muslims were born in the Middle East or North Africa.
- 16% were born in Asia.
- 9% were born in Europe.
- 4% were born in Africa (excluding North Africa).
- 3% were born in Oceania (excluding Australia);

## Australian Arabs are not all Muslim

Large proportions of Australians born in predominantly Muslim countries are not Muslim themselves.

## Age and Sex

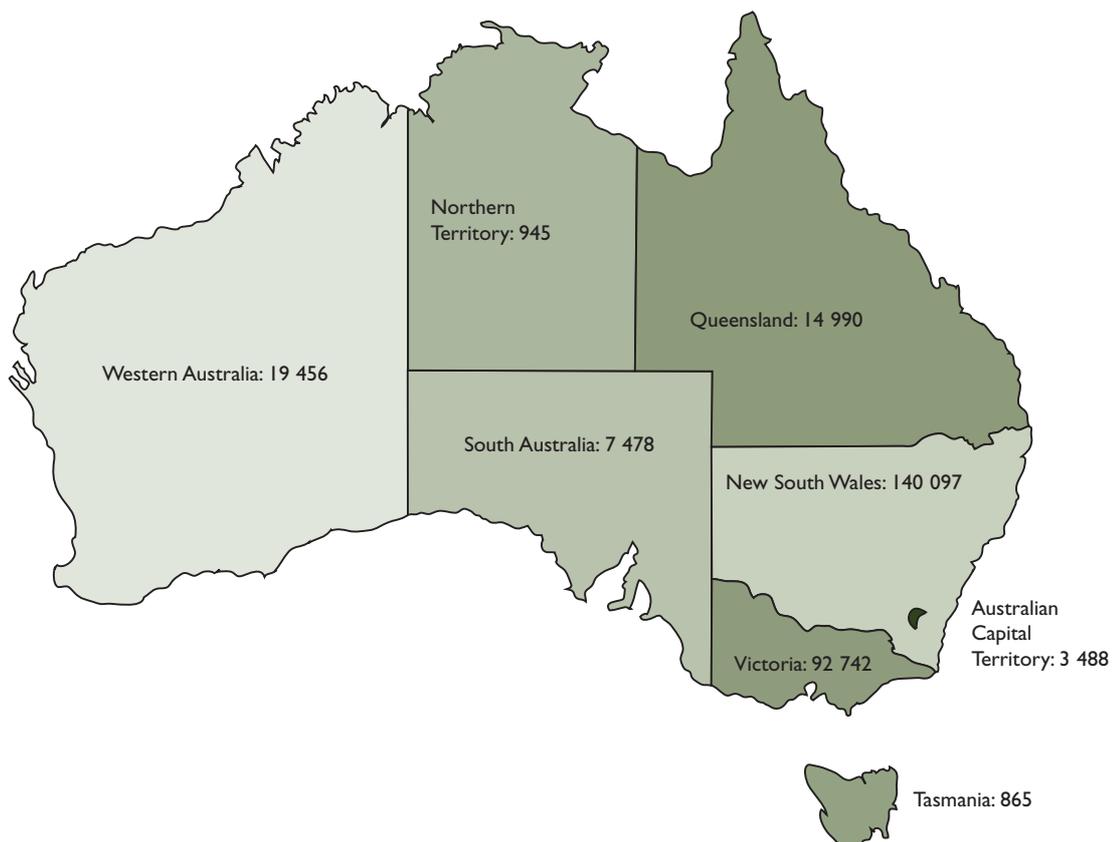
53% of Australian Muslims are male and 47% are female (compared with 49% male and 51% female for the general Australian population). Australian Muslims have a higher proportion of young people with 50% under the age of 25, compared with 34% for the Non-Muslim population.

## Education

Australian Muslims are well educated. 71.2% of Australian Muslims have completed Years 11-12 or tertiary education, compared to 56.1% of all Australians.

## Distribution

**Figure 1:** Australian Muslim population by state and territory



## Glossary

|                             |   |                 |  |
|-----------------------------|---|-----------------|--|
| <b>adhan:</b>               | call to prayer, five times a day  |                 |  |
| <b>Allah:</b>               | God   |                 |  |
| <b>Al-Masjid al-Aqsa:</b>   | Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem  | <b>Karbala:</b> | Mosque in Mecca, the holiest place for Muslims on earth  |
| <b>Al-Masjid al-Nabawi:</b> | Mosque of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina                                    | <b>masjid:</b>  | a sacred place for Shi'i Muslims in Iraq   |
| <b>eid:</b>                 | day of festivities  | <b>mufti:</b>   | mosque; place of prayer  |
| <b>Fatima:</b>              | one of the daughters of the Prophet Muhammad                                | <b>Qur'an:</b>  | a Muslim scholar of Islamic law who can issue Islamic legal opinions   |
| <b>fatwa:</b>               | a response by a scholar of Islamic law to a question related to Islamic law | <b>Ramadan:</b> | the Holy Scripture of Islam, revealed to Prophet Muhammad between 610 and 632, in Arabic.                        |
| <b>Hadith:</b>              | sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad as documented by his followers    | <b>sadaqa:</b>  | The ninth month of the Islamic, calendar, the month of fasting   |
| <b>halal:</b>               | permissible under Islamic law.  | <b>shari'a:</b> | charity  |
| <b>hajj:</b>                | pilgrimage to Mecca   | <b>Shi'a:</b>   | Islamic law  |
| <b>hijab:</b>               | veil; headscarf   | <b>Sufism:</b>  | an Islamic religion-political/theological grouping   |
| <b>imam:</b>                | a leader; a leader in prayer  | <b>Sunni:</b>   | a movement within Islam that emphasises Islamic spirituality   |
| <b>Injil:</b>               | Gospel  | <b>Sura:</b>    | the mainstream Muslim community to which approximately 85 per cent of the Muslim population of the world belongs |
| <b>Jibril:</b>              | Gabriel   | <b>zakat:</b>   | chapter of the Qur'an  |
| <b>jihad:</b>               | struggle  |                 | obligatory charity in Islam  |
| <b>ka'ba:</b>               | a cube-shaped building in the centre of the Grand                           |                 |  |

## Resources

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