

# NON-MUSLIMS TALKING ABOUT ISLAMOPHOBIA

## HOW CAN WE RESIST ANTI-MUSLIM HOSTILITY?

The idea for this document came from Mehmet Dinc, a Muslim narrative practitioner from Turkey who was recently living in Australia for 12 months. Mehmet realised that most non-Muslim Australians receive such limited information about Islam and that this information is generally filtered through a mainstream media which fosters Islamophobia and paints a very narrow picture of the diversity of Islamic life. The anti-Muslim discourse is so pervasive, that Mehmet came to believe that non-Muslim Australians who are not Islamophobic must be taking active steps to achieve and/or maintain this stance. And so, this small project was born. Mehmet began to ask us – his non-Muslim Australian friends and colleagues – ‘How are you trying to avoid being Islamophobic?’

During Mehmet’s time in Australia, the Christchurch massacre took place, so the questions he asked us took on even greater significance:

- ▶ At this time in Australia, since there is such a strong discourse against Islam and Muslims, how are you trying to avoid being Islamophobic?
- ▶ What helps you to keep this position? Who helps you to keep your position?
- ▶ What values have helped you to take this position and what is the history of these values?
- ▶ Are there things you try to remember when you catch yourself having ideas, comments or images against Muslims or against Islam?
- ▶ Do you have any routines – doing something or reading something or talking to someone – to avoid being Islamophobic?

We had never been asked such questions before. And at first some of us hesitated in trying to answer them. But Mehmet’s insistence that we respond to these questions and his generosity and genuine belief that it actually requires considerable efforts, actions, even skills to subvert the power of dominant anti-Muslim discourse at this time in Australia (and elsewhere) has now seen the creation of this initial document. This piece is a collection of our individual responses to Mehmet’s questions.

Mehmet specifically wanted us to focus on our own personal, individual, experiences of trying to avoid being Islamophobic ourselves. We have also included here some ideas about our broader responsibilities to play a part in dismantling Islamophobia and racism at this time.

This document is just a beginning. We invite others to add to it (and/or to critique it).

*We would welcome hearing from you.*



## Questioning and challenging ourselves

A number of us spoke about how it's necessary for us to question and challenge ourselves.

### Catching myself

I try not to assume I'm somehow separate to these issues. While I don't find it difficult to find obvious Islamophobia objectionable, I do try to watch myself to see if I am being influenced by attitudes, assumptions, or practices that are problematic in more subtle ways. It seems important to be watchful.

If I ever catch myself having ideas or images against Muslims or Islam, I talk with my partner about these matters and try to hold ourselves and each other accountable. Also, my Muslim friends ... those I remember from my past and those who are in my life at present ... they help me stay connected to the reality of it all and remind me that it's not some hypothetical concept or political position I'm choosing to take up, but about real people, friends, families, and their everyday lives. I think about how an idea, comment or image might be experienced by Muslim people, and what personal and wider effects there may be.

### Remembering my travels

One of the most significant things for me in coming to think differently about Islam was travelling and visiting Istanbul. While there are relatively few Muslims here in Australia, walking around Istanbul, being in a city with so many Muslims and with such diversity ... and also it being a place where both religious people and non-religious people live side by side ... somehow changed my perspective re Muslim life. My picture of Muslim life was so expanded. When I come across narrow ideas of Islam here in Australia I try to remember my travels.

### Asking questions of media and of myself

When I am reading or watching media representations that are generalisations about Islam (or any other people), I find it helpful to ask who does this particular version of this story benefit? If I'm watching with my partner or friends we can discuss this together.

I also try to remember to ask myself, what stories about Islam do I hold in my mind? And what are the stories about Muslims circulating among my friends and community? And then I seek out alternative accounts to the dominant stories circulating among my friends and community. Australian Muslim feminist Susan Carland, is one researcher whose stories I appreciate and try to read and share. Her stories foster respect and chip away at fear and ignorance.

### Retelling stories that don't fit stereotypes

I recently heard a story about what occurred during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. Tragically many people were killed within churches, they sought safety there but were betrayed by priests. The few mosques, however, were places of sanctuary. The Imams and the Muslim community actively sheltered and protected people. I have tried to share this story with people here. And if I find myself swayed by stereotypes of Islam, I remember stories like this one.





## Questioning contempt for religion

For many years I was contemptuous about all religion. I was a certain atheist. A number of things occurred over the years though, including being profoundly influenced and moved by individuals and communities whose lives are shaped by their faith. And when I read a book about the history of atheism it somehow helped me to realise that my atheist certainty about and contempt for religion really wasn't very different than the certainty of the most ardently religious. Realising I was an evangelical atheist was a bit of a shock! While I'm still not religious in any way, I've come to see that my lack of belief doesn't have to be accompanied by lack of respect for the belief of others. Most of my earlier contempt had been in relation to Christianity, but I realise at a time of anti-Muslim sentiment, that any generalised anti-religious sentiment, or contemptuous atheism, doesn't help.

## Exposing myself to unpleasant ideas so I don't get complacent

Most of my friends actively resist Islamophobia, but I expose myself to other views too, otherwise those of us who aren't negatively affected by them can become complacent. I think we have to be careful we don't protect ourselves from unpleasant knowledge and fail to respond to the issues, or not take them seriously enough.

## Learning about the effects of Islamophobia

It has sometimes come as a shock to learn about its effects. There's a story told by a young Muslim woman here in Adelaide that has really stayed with me. This young woman described what she does in the face of anti-Muslim hostility and also its effects. She spoke about how, when facing hostility, she remembers she is special to someone:

I say to myself, 'I am special to someone. I am going to live for them.' And this gives me back my confidence. Otherwise I could be imagining that people are hating me every single minute. And if you start thinking this, if you start feeling all the time that you are hated, it starts killing you. And you start taking it out on your loved ones. (see: [dulwichcentre.com.au/part-4-we-try-not-to-take-peoples-hate-into-our-hearts/](http://dulwichcentre.com.au/part-4-we-try-not-to-take-peoples-hate-into-our-hearts/))

Those words about the effects of feeling all the time that you are hated have really stayed with me.

There are other things we are trying to learn about too. As we are often shown just one picture of Muslim people – we have needed to expand our picture!

## Islamic histories in Australia

I am trying to learn more about Islamic histories in Australia. I used to think that Islam is new to these shores. I've only recently learnt that the Yolgnu had close trading and friendship relations with Muslim Macassans from what is now Indonesia, long before Europeans set foot in Australia. And the Afghan cameleers first arrived in South Australia 180 years ago. I'm trying to learn more about these histories.



## The diversity of Islamic traditions

There is so much I don't know about Islam! And as soon as I learn one thing, I then get a bit overwhelmed at what opens up. For instance, I recently came across an article by Adis Duderija, who explains that there are at least eight different forms of Sunni Islamic tradition: 'scholastic traditionalism, political Islamists, "secular"/liberal Muslims, cultural nominalists, progressive Muslims, theological puritans, militant extremists and Sufis.' And that's only within the Sunni tradition! While there's no way I am ever going to know a lot about Islam, knowing just how much there is to learn, knowing something of the diversity of Islamic traditions, does make it a little easier to question any generalised statement about Islam.

## Partnerships and friendships

Many of us spoke of the significance of friendships and partnerships with Muslim colleagues.

### Friends and colleagues

Having friends and colleagues from multiple faith and cultural backgrounds has made a big difference to me. Knowing Muslim people whose lives, relationships and work reflect a generosity of care, concerns, love, compassion, justice, among other things, for other people, their community, the world. And knowing a little of the long history of these commitments in the Islamic faith makes a difference in reminding me that the depictions and descriptions that are hostile towards Islam and Muslims are just one story that continues to circulate and that serves particular purposes for particular groups of people.

### Not knowing what to do

After the Christchurch massacre, I really didn't know what to do. We knew we had to do something, even if a small thing. It was only in talking with a Muslim friend and colleague that some ideas and initiatives emerged (including the idea for this project) and then we could join in these projects together. That's what friendships make possible.

## Talking with my extended family

I have a complex family. There is someone who holds objectionable views on many issues and I often stay away from them because I end up frustrated and disappointed. But it's also problematic when people take up more subtle discriminatory positions. I try to be watchful rather than keeping away ... to notice and name how the ideas being put forward are not benign or neutral but have effects and expose divisive attitudes.

With extended family it's sometimes complex ... partly because I don't have a great deal of opportunity to speak with them ... but also because of some difficult attitudes. Sometimes I let things be known in non-direct ways ... like speaking of an event I've attended if this can make my position clear.





## Dismantling Islamophobia

Some of us are trying to do what we can within wider spheres of influence to diminish Islamophobia. We're talking about the issues in our workplaces and trying to create platforms for Muslim colleagues and their creative work. Ensuring the perspectives of Muslim colleagues and thinkers are included in teaching programs and curricula seems significant. As does responding to invitations to partnership for public projects. Some of us are also trying to honour the contributions of Muslim thinkers generally and within our own field (see [dulwichcentre.com.au/muslim-contributions-to-narrative-therapy-and-community-work/](http://dulwichcentre.com.au/muslim-contributions-to-narrative-therapy-and-community-work/))

Some of us encounter Islamophobia in other contexts, like on the cricket field, and we're trying to speak up about this and take steps to prevent it.

We know there is much more we can do and we'd like to share ideas.

### My profession

My profession, Social Work, is sometimes implicated in anti-Muslim sentiment. I recently read a great chapter by Lobna Yassine and Linda Briskman (2019), 'Islamophobia and Social Work collusion'. They describe two forms of collusion:

... first, the scant attention given by social work to the 'wicked problem' of Islamophobia and, second, complicity by the Australian Association of Social Workers through adopting CVE (Countering Violent Extremism) policies' (p. 55)

'CVE initiatives are undeniably linked to surveillance, identification and monitoring.' (p. 62)

I am trying to talk about this with other Social Workers to try to contribute to dismantling Islamophobia within my profession.

## Final words

### Gratitude

In these times in Australia, it feels like actively resisting Islamophobia is a basic requirement for being a decent person. But I often feel I'm not doing enough, so it's good to have a chance to join with others. I really appreciate this opportunity.

### An image of hope

When I need encouraging about these things, I have an image that I try to keep in my mind of all the flowers that had been laid at the Mosque on Marion Rd Parkholme, following the Christchurch attacks. This reminds me of the many Australians who laid those flowers and gave other gifts in support of the Muslim community in southern Adelaide. I find this a very encouraging image.



### To contribute to this project

We are hoping that this draft document will be added to overtime.

If you would like to contribute, please contact

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Thanks!

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### Reference

Yassine, L. & Briskman, L., (2019). 'Islamophobia and Social Work collusion'. In D. Baines, B. Bennett, S. Goodwin & M. Rawsthorne (Eds.). *Working Across Difference: Social Work, Social Policy and Social Justice* (Chapter 5, pp. 55-70). London, UK: Macmillan International Higher Education/Red Globe Press.

