

# Cronulla Race Riots and the Disease of Islamophobia

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On 11 December 2005, over 5,000 mostly Anglo-Australians assembled at Cronulla in Sydney's south to 'reclaim the beach from outsiders'. Violence erupted as the crowd attacked people of Middle Eastern appearance, sparking two further days of rioting. Incited by an attack on surf lifesavers and fuelled by sections of the media, the riots exposed deep racial tensions.

20 years later, the Cronulla race riots continue to ignite conversations about Islamophobia in multicultural Australia. Cohabitation of Islamophobia with multiculturalism is still an open wound, with the question for the future. Although the Cronulla riots can serve as an expression of the problem of Islamophobia in a multicultural society, this article deals with these issues in a more general context. It is based on my research inquiries to numerous respondents conducted over the past year.

Australian society comprises Muslims, Christians, Jews, followers of other faiths and those of no religious belief, who endeavour to find a decent purpose in life, free from prejudices and violence. However, while for some Muslims their religion does not always fill the void by offering a sense of purpose, some hard-line secularists or evangelical hardliners are moving toward a troubling extremism. Their common 'world of darkness' is not new under the sun; moderation, though, as the opposite of any extremism, is always the way of understanding and bridge-building. Sincere religious or non-religious views have nothing in common with extremism, so interfaith or intercultural dialogue is always welcomed.

The Cronulla scene is unforgettable: eruption of prejudices, bottle- and stone-throwing, rampage in the streets, obscenity, shouting and insults, broken windows, smashed cars, promoting tattoos of ugly symbols, many inflamed by drugs and alcohol, their lack of education and indoctrination, dozens of injured women and men, over 200,000 nasty text messages, and over 100 arrests. Sadly, some people draped in Australian flags sang 'Advance Australia Fair', also hostilely chanted 'Kill the Lebs' and 'no more Lebs'.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after, the inflamed rhetoric, 'Muslims who want to live under Shariah law have no place in Australia' was necessary and insulting, too. For the vast majority of Muslims in Australia, Shariah law in public is *nonsense* as it has no ground in their thoughts. Worse than all these problems are the echoes of these days of riots. However, the great efforts of the police forces who tried to maintain law and order must be acknowledged.

Two decades later, while troubling echoes of the Cronulla riots remain, the question is how we see or should see Muslims in multicultural Australia. Australia's Race Discrimination Commissioner, Tim

Soutphommasane, warns, 'the Cronulla riot represented not the best, but the worst of national pride'.<sup>2</sup> The rusty Islamophobia by no means sleeps, as its proponents see themselves as a 'cultural vanguard' and the 'most evolved of the species'.<sup>3</sup> It leads to increased scrutiny of race relations and multiculturalism in Australia.<sup>4</sup>

Dominant scholarship identifies Islamophobia as a form of racism where race and religion have become conflated in social structures.<sup>5</sup> Some experts warn that Islamophobia is rising to an 'alarming level'.<sup>6</sup> It rises from 'hypocritical blindness to anti-Islamic attitudes, from condescension to violence'.<sup>7</sup> It is a contemporary disease that creates a lot of paranoia and mistakes. Stereotypes against Muslims have evolved and expanded momentum under conditions of the 'war on terror', the global economic crisis, and challenges related to the management of religious and cultural diversity. It also sees Islam not as a religion but an ideology, and Muslim as a 'terrorist identity as inherently non-white, alien, threatening, and opposed to the West and the Judeo-Christian tradition'. In short, they see Muslims as 'colonial backwards'.<sup>8</sup> Anti-Muslim rhetoric often associates Muslims with terrorism and extremism or portrays presence of Muslim communities as a threat to national identity. Consequently, in the eyes of the vilified, it emerged in Australia as an outcome of opposition to multiculturalism and Muslim immigration.<sup>9</sup>

Islamophobic concerns are becoming 'fixated on the past', instead of facing the present and being open to the future.<sup>10</sup> To avoid such a disease, the Islamophobes should not learn from the ideological limitations that belonged to past decades or centuries. People, as social beings, must build primarily *intersubjective values* as the future is not anticipated, but built by shared conscious minds which may correct other minds who are without a justified reason.<sup>11</sup> The people are not just a mere mass, but the subject of culture and multiculturalism. Their cultures are not merely entertainment (such as different cuisines or art), but the *building* of an individual and a group identity towards a shared life in a pluralistic society. As a consequence of such acts of respect, people can form friendships and, ultimately, strong ties that cut across ethnic, religious, and racial affiliations.<sup>12</sup>

However, Muslims are often portrayed as monolithic, with a culture incompatible with human rights and democracy. Clearly, this view denies human diversity and dignity. Therefore, the Australian multicultural society, firstly, needs to change the 'negative difference' attached to Muslim and other minorities in terms of 'alienness, inferiorisation, stigmatisation, stereotyping, exclusion, discrimination, and racism', which diminishes or makes it difficult to attain equal membership in the wider society.<sup>13</sup> It is well known (by the majority of Muslims

and many non-Muslims) that fake media 'informing' and 'forming' public opinion by creating anti-Muslim sentiments associated with Muslim communities in Australia result from factors outside Muslim communities.<sup>14</sup> It frequently demonises Islam and creates an 'entertaining' fear-mongering narrative in recent years. It also feeds social divisions, not cohesion.

Thus, Islamophobic hate in a pluralistic society openly attacks tolerance and acceptance. It also attacks a community's health and society in general. Hate tears society along racial, ethnic and religious lines. It divides people, causing community conflict, civil disturbance and even riots. It is often fuelled with abuse and vandalism. Hate is fundamentally anti-democratic – all these aspects ruin social cohesion.<sup>15</sup>

Some so-called Muslim preachers also contribute to misunderstanding religion and ruin social cohesion through their own parochial, often radical, interpretations, creating unnecessary 'anti-Shariah panic'.<sup>16</sup> However, any action, Muslim or non-Muslim, that provokes misunderstanding or perpetuates the cycle of revenge violence, thereby causing more harm than good, is categorically rejected in Islam.<sup>17</sup>

Besides Islamophobia, the other invented terms were also coined: 'Muslimophobia', 'Hijabophobia' and 'Shariahphobia'. While Islamophobia refers to religious and racial discrimination, 'Muslimophobia' as distinct from Islamophobia in its narrow religious sense targets Muslims.<sup>18</sup> It considers Muslims, especially Middle Eastern Muslims, and Islam also as a race through 'racecraft' tools and practices of racism.<sup>19</sup>

Hijabophobia forms part of Islamophobia, considered a 'gender-type of hostility', although *hijab* (veil) is, without reason, treated as a 'threat' (Zain at all, 2018: 3) as perhaps the most overt form of Islam known in Australian public spaces.<sup>20</sup> Objections to public wearing of hijab are not isolated; the impact of prejudice and attacks is increasing against Muslim women and their religious freedom. Wearing the hijab often evokes discrimination and will continue to unless more is done to address it. Muslim women should feel empowered to make choices without fear. In fact, banning a Muslim woman from wearing a hijab or other Islamic dress code is a direct contravention of religious liberty. It is the Muslim women's right, their choice, their dress and style, as their image for the cause of Islamic reverence, modesty, and reducing vanity.<sup>21</sup>

The intention to implement official Shariah law in Australia is 'neither practical nor necessary'. 'Shariah law should not be the law of the land in countries that are secular and multifaith'. Therefore, the fears propounded about Muslims practicing Shariah are 'unfounded', according to several Muslim intellectuals.<sup>22</sup> It is also true 'many Muslims live in Australia because they chose not to live under Shariah'.<sup>23</sup>

Australia belongs to all its citizens, its problems no less than its gifts. In mutual recognition of this shared ownership by both non-Muslims and Muslims lies the hope of a secure and inclusive future without being voiceless.<sup>24</sup> Despite the impact of Islamophobia, if Muslims remain steadfast, avoiding reacting emotionally, upholding their religious principles and universal values, and continuing to educate themselves and contributing to society, they will remain a strong, flexible and influential

community. They are more determined to support each other and bring these issues to the government and other avenues to highlight the need to control them. This underscores the necessity for the Muslim community to continue to actively engage in community initiatives and interfaith relations to dispel negative stereotypes and ensure that harmony, mutual understanding, and cooperation prevail within the wider Australian society.<sup>25</sup>

It is equally important to stress that 'A proper education has power to transform lives'.<sup>26</sup> This statement can be expanded to those without basic historical knowledge of Muslim heritage and contributions in Australia. It might contribute to shaping Australia's common future rather than repeating mistakes. There is a big gap in presenting positive Muslim stories, especially in the media. Importantly, in higher educational curricula, the rich Islamic history and culture, as an integral part of Australian history, has often been silently ignored or deliberately distorted. Except for topics on Islamic terrorism, Islamism, Islamophobia, and the subjects of Islamic theology, there are scant Muslim historical topics at universities, and no department for the History of Islam and Muslims in Australia.

Certainly, this type of education is among the persistent needs for religious and secular people in developing *intersubjective values*. Focusing on the history of religion can provide a broader and more objective understanding of religious phenomena than solely studying Islamic theology. A comparative and historical understanding of different religions also allows for a more nuanced and informed perspective and proactive steps on religious diversity in the society in which we live. With a deeper awareness of Islamic history, there can be a greater sense of shared belonging to Australia. Without learning from Muslim history, culture and civilisation, how can we transform the behaviours of some Muslims and non-Muslims for the sake of social cohesion? Let's remember the wisdom of the great Sufi master, Rumi:

In generosity and helping others -  
Be like the river  
In compassion and grace -  
Be like the son  
In concealing others' fault -  
Be like the night  
In anger and fury -  
Be like the dead  
In modesty and humility -  
Be like the soil  
In tolerance -  
Be like the ocean  
Either appear as you are or -  
Be as you appear.<sup>27</sup>

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## Endnotes

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