

ISLAM AND MUSLIM LIFE IN WESTREN COUNTRIES: THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract:

This article delves into the intricate relationship between Islam and Western societies, focusing on Australia's unique experience. Historically and contemporarily, this relationship has been marked by both interaction and tension. In secular Western nations like Australia, the growing presence of Islam has heightened concerns and Islamophobia, particularly post-9/11. This article examines how Muslims in Australia, many of whom are immigrants, practice Islam differently compared to their counterparts in majority-Muslim countries. The history of Islam in Australia traces back to the 16th century with Makassar fishermen and continued with Afghan and Indian settlers in the 19th century. Despite Australia's multicultural policies, Muslims often face discrimination and negative stereotypes, exacerbated by government policies and media portrayals that link Islam with extremism. The impact of the September 11 attacks significantly altered Western perceptions of Islam, associating it with terrorism and influencing Australian policies. As a result, Muslims in Australia struggle to balance their religious identity with societal integration, frequently encountering racism and marginalization, despite their substantial contributions to the nation's cultural diversity.

Keywords: Muslim, Discrimination, Religious Identity

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Islam and the West is always an interesting topic to discuss. This is partly because Islam is a religion whose population continues to grow over time and is spread across many Western countries. On one hand, the increase in the number of followers of Islam shows that this religion can develop in predominantly secular Western countries. On the other hand, the increase in the Muslim population has brought its own challenges for Western society. Today, many Western people are considering and questioning the rapid rise in the Muslim population in various countries, whether through immigration or conversion, such as in America. This issue is further complicated by the increasing symptoms of Islamophobia that have emerged in some Western circles recently.

Looking back, the relationship between Islam and the West has not only existed since the 20th and 21st centuries. This relationship has been ongoing for a long time and is not something new. Abdullah Saeed, an Islamic expert from the University of Melbourne, Australia, stated that since the beginning of the 7th century AD, Islam and Muslims have influenced and been influenced by Europe and the West. The identity of Europe and the West today has been shaped to some extent in relation to Islam through war and peace, trade and science, and of course through the colonization carried out by the West on Islamic countries (Saeed, 2005, p. 3). This shows that Islam and the West are two civilizations that have been connected for a long time, experiencing both positive and negative interactions.

Regarding the relationship between Islam and the West, it must also be noted that being a Muslim in the West and parts of Southeast Asia (such as Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines) is very different from practicing Islam in a country with a Muslim majority population, such as the Middle East and Indonesia. The difference is mainly because Islam in this region is a religion embraced by a minority of the population. In addition, Islam in these countries is mostly embraced by immigrants who arrived later. Although, in recent developments, many indigenous peoples in Europe, America, and Australia, for example, have converted from Protestantism or Catholicism to Islam.

Being Muslim in a secular country means that Muslims there do not enjoy the same concessions and comfort as those who live in Muslim countries. When praying, for example, some rules must be obeyed so that Muslims do not disturb the comfort of

followers of other religions. Likewise, they have to adapt and acculturate to the local culture in their daily lives and life rules. They also cannot always listen to the call to prayer, recitation of the Koran, Islamic arts festivals, or Islamic atmospheres like in Indonesia or the Middle East. **Moreover**, being a Muslim in a secular country like Australia is also tested by the negative impact of the attack on the World Trade Center (WTC) and the Pentagon by Al-Qaeda led by Osama bin Laden on September 11, 2001. This terrorist attack, which claimed the lives of thousands of people, brought severe implications for the existence of Muslims and Western views of Muslims.

DYNAMICS OF ISLAM IN AUSTRALIA

The history of the arrival of Islam in Australia predates the presence of Europeans in **the kangaroo** country. This is because Muslims from Makassar who worked as fishermen had penetrated this area since the 16th century until the end of the early 20th century. After that, Muslims also came who worked as pearl divers from Malay (Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia) (Mulyana 2000: 19). However, because Europeans were more experienced and aware of the importance of marking their findings, they were ultimately considered to have discovered the Australian continent and subsequently became its owners and developers.

A more systematic wave of Muslim arrivals was seen in the presence of Afghans and Indians in the 1860s, who then also built permanent settlements. Their arrival started from an expedition and trade mission **and they were** employed by white people. They built many telegraph networks and railroads as well as mosques in the areas they passed. Traces of this history can be seen from the establishment of mosques in Broken Hill in 1891, Perth in 1904, Brisbane in 1907, and the Adelaide Mosque in 1889. Meanwhile, they built the first mosque in Alice Springs in 1864 (Mulyana 2000: 19-20). From there, it appears that the new wave of immigrants who were initially employed by Europeans then systematically built settlements and mosques as a basis for strengthening their existence in Australia.

Australia is currently known as one of the countries that uses the concept of multiculturalism as a recognition of the ethnic diversity that is growing in its territory. In this regard, the presence of Muslims in Australia has more or less helped shape the cultural richness of this country. Moreover, the presence of Muslims in Australia does not

come from one ethnicity and one nation but from Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Based on the 2006 census, the number of Muslims in Australia was 340,401, which is equivalent to 1.7% of the total population. Of that figure, 39% of Muslims were born in Australia; the rest came from immigrants. According to Samina Yasmeeen, an Islamic expert from the University of Western Australia (UWA), this percentage is small compared to the total population. However, this fact shows that the Muslim population in Australia has increased sharply in the last three decades. Between 2001 and 2006, the number increased by 20.9%. In fact, many predict that the number of Muslims in Australia will exceed 1 billion by 2020 (Yasmeeen 2010: 1).

Even though Islam is still often misunderstood by Australians and is considered an uncivilized religion and supports violence, this religion has begun to receive significant attention from the government and society. Most likely, this situation is supported by the Multiculturalism Policy introduced by the Australian government in the 1970s. In this new policy, all ethnic groups and nations in Australia are allowed to develop their culture and traditions freely. This multicultural expression is usually celebrated together on International Day, held in March every year by calling on all ethnicities and nations in Australia to show off their respective cultural riches.

On another level, the development of Islam in Australia can also be seen from electronic media reports such as TV or radio which have programs about Islam. For example, Australian National Radio (ABC) and SBS have the program "Perspectives on Islam." This fact gives many Muslims in Australia confidence that Islam here can develop as rapidly as in America and Europe. To support the progress of Islam in Australia, they also founded organizations such as The Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC) for general organizations, The Federation of Australian Muslim Students and Youth (FAMSY) for students and youth, The Council of Islamic Education in Schools (CIES) for education, as well as various Islamic Centers throughout Australia (Mulyana 2000: 24). Apart from establishing **these** formal organizations, various routine activities are also held, such as Friday prayers, Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha prayers, breaking the fast, recitation of the Koran, and other religious activities at many universities and Muslim settlements.

Even though the number of Muslims in Australia is growing rapidly and has begun to receive recognition from the government, this does not mean that Muslims there have never experienced difficulties in developing themselves. Difficulties that manifest in the

form of discrimination, racism, and stereotypes also color the dynamics of Islam in this country. This incident began when the Federation started in Australia and the implementation of the White Australia policy in 1901. This policy prioritized Europeans coming to Australia compared to other nations and restricted the number of Muslims from Middle Eastern countries from **immigrating** there. In this case, Muslims from Asia, Afghanistan, and Lebanon are often rejected and find it difficult to obtain Australian citizenship under the Immigration Restriction Act 1901. This rejection is often based on the justification of the importance of maintaining cultural homogenization and national interests (Mansouri 2005: 145).

Meanwhile, the repeal of the White Australia Policy in 1973 did not mean stopping discrimination against Muslims and Asians in Australia. Evidently, in the 1980s, Asian nations, Muslims, Arabs, women, and Aboriginal peoples were still often the main targets of racism. Racism can occur in workplaces, residences, public services, and the media, both subtly and roughly (Mulyana 2000: 157-161). In fact, when the Gulf war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict peaked in the 1990s, discrimination and stereotypes against Muslims increased sharply. The media in Australia often equates Islam and Arabic and presents them negatively, and the differences tend to be blurred. Arab and Muslim immigrant communities are often used as the context for stories, which ultimately lead to the conclusion that Muslims have the potential to become enemies within the Australian nation (the potential enemy within) (Humphrey 2005: 141; Mansouri 2005: 158-160).

This fact shows that Muslims and Arabs living in Australia have never been immune from rudeness, suspicion, and marginalization from Australian society at large. According to Fethi Mansouri, a Middle East expert from Deakin University, Western views on Islam since the 1970s have associated Islam with extremism, intolerance, and violence. They legitimized this view with various events such as the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Arab-Israeli Conflict, the 1990-1991 Gulf War, as well as various terrorist acts in the name of Islam (Mansouri 2005: 159). Negative tendencies also continue to this day; Muslims are often identified as part of "the other," both implicitly and explicitly from wider society. **Data shows** that Muslims in Australia have unequal access and cannot fully participate in the economy (Yasmeen 2010: 1-2).

September 11th as a Turning Point in Muslim Existence

It must be acknowledged that the tragedy of September 11, 2001, had a significant impact on the development and dynamics of Islam and Muslims living in the West. In many ways, this tragedy means that Islam is often seen as a religion that supports terrorism, and Muslims are cornered by accusations of being perpetrators of terror. America declared war on terrorism, which threatened the security and existence of the West, and was supported by its allies such as Britain and Australia. However, in much of its rhetoric, the Bush administration **implicitly waged** war against Islam and Muslims. According to John L. Esposito, this is clearly visible from the use of terms such as 'crusade,' 'infinite justice,' and the code name 'the green front.' Moreover, when the code name 'the green front' was used to raid Muslim organizations and homes in Northern Virginia and Georgia suspected of funding terrorist groups (Esposito 2002: 14). In this case, the color green is synonymous with Islam. It is not surprising that many Muslims feel cornered by these accusations and generalizations.

This was compounded by the fact that various mainstream media in America cornered Islam and Muslims after the tragedy. Ironically, political observers and intellectuals generally agree that the 9/11 tragedy was actually the clearest form of the 'clash of civilizations' that Samuel P. Huntington was talking about a decade earlier. The study conducted by Ervand Abrahamian clearly shows this phenomenon. In his research, it appears that the main media in America, such as the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Time, Newsweek, Atlantic Monthly, New Republic, as well as in some cases the Nation and the New York Review of Books, use Huntington's analysis to read the terrorism phenomenon of this global century. An opinion was formed that the West was being threatened by "the Other," namely Islam and Muslims. Apart from that, Huntington in his latest writing also stated that Osama bin Laden accelerated the clash between civilizations and called the current era "the age of Muslim War." Intellectuals such as Thomas Friedman, Bernard Lewis, Salman Rushdie, and Thomas Cahill also legitimized Samuel Huntington's prediction above (Abrahamian 2003: 2-4).

What is interesting is that instead of refuting the news that discredits Muslims by providing a balanced explanation, Bush's supporters actually use media reports and expert analysis as their main legitimacy in the war on terror. This is not strange considering that in the Bush junior era, it was widely understood as the era of the return of the 'neo-cons' to power. The gathering of 'neo-cons' in the Bush administration who

agreed and appreciated Samuel P. Huntington's thesis about the clash between civilizations made the war against terrorism and Al-Qaeda a war with a basis of serious religious commitment, as Christians used to fight in the Crusades. It is not strange that when Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda called for jihad against America as a reaction, many Christian fundamentalists in America responded with calls for a Crusade against Islam (crusade against Islam).

As America's closest ally in the Asia Pacific, the Australian government bases its government policies more or less on references from Uncle Sam's policies. Moreover, the era of John Howard's government from the Conservative Party was very determined to become America's 'Sheriff' in the Asia Pacific. As an implication, many Australian government policies see Islam and Muslims as "the Other" who is suspect because they threaten the national interests and national identity of the Australian nation. Michael Humphrey, a sociologist who has analyzed the Muslim diaspora in Australia, stated that after September 11, the Australian Government had shifted its policy from a perspective of reconciliation and social inclusion that guaranteed the existence of Muslims and immigrants to a policy that relied on exclusion based on suspicion of danger. The era of reconciliation, as recorded in history, was a period when immigrants and natives (Aboriginals) gained political recognition on issues of cultural differences and their rights. Meanwhile, this shift, which is detrimental to Muslims, is mainly triggered by the threat of international terrorism to national security. Restrictions on granting asylum to refugees from Muslim countries are primarily aimed at limiting the arrival of Muslim refugees from Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq (Humphrey 2005: 132-133).

In addition, September 11 has also led the Australian Government to construct and exaggerate specific representations of cultural differences as "foreign" and threatening Australian nationhood. **John Howard likens** immigrants and asylum seekers, especially from Islamic circles, **to** naughty children who cannot be controlled by their parents and who are therefore better off being thrown into the sea. Fethi Mansouri pointed out that as a result of the post-September 11 climate of fear, ministers in the Australian Government stated that one thing that could not be regulated in detail was the fact that some asylum seekers might be linked to international terrorist networks. Even though the immigrants mostly come from Arabs, the Australian Government's attitude makes it difficult for Muslims there to express themselves. This is mainly because Australian

Nationalism has indirectly excluded Muslims and Arab-Australians from Australian nationality (Mansouri 2005: 156).

In daily life, the Australian Government's policies and attitudes towards Islam have contributed to strengthening the Australian nation's sense of hostility and distrust towards all those associated with Islam and Muslims, whether they come from Arabia or other regions. Therefore, amidst this distrust and suspicion, Muslims in Australia experience difficulties in carrying out their functions as good citizens and as devout Muslims.

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