Project Report

How Muslim Students' Knowledge of Christianity Is Related to Their Attitudes to Mainstream Australia and Australians: A National Survey

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Abstract: Outlined below are selected results of a 5-year long national survey which investigated the knowledge, values and attitudes of 430 Year 11 and 12 Muslim students in eight Muslim High schools towards the mainstream Australia and Australians society. The findings reflect a wide spectrum of responses with a strong implication that much work is needed to bring about an appropriate degree of adjustment. Providing awareness sessions to students and parents—both non-Muslims and Muslims—which address critical social, religious and cultural issues including stereotyping and inclusivity, is key.

Keywords: intercultural communication; inter-ethnic relations; Muslim students; inter-religious education; cross cultural attitudes; stereotyping; schools and integration

Social media are abuzz with daily articles asking the same questions: Do Muslims find it harder than other migrants to integrate, or is the bigotry of some that perpetuates it? Is Islamophobia the flipside of inherent racism that some Australians lashed in stages against Aboriginals, Greeks, Italians, Chinese, Africans and Middle Easterners? Or perhaps it is the cultural and historical (and religious!) differences between the Christian and Muslim communities worldwide that are too wide to make a complete reconciliation? Why do religious minorities in Muslim countries have fewer rights than Muslims do in Western societies? Do Muslims need reform and reflection similar to those of Catholic Priests? Are Muslim and Australian identities compatible or are they mutually exclusive? And lastly, are the schools doing enough in fostering goodwill and inter-communal relationship!

I will not pretend to have set theories or clinical remedies to these questions. I will, however, address the government's key question. What kinds of programs and initiatives are needed to identify,

and eventually modify falsehoods and incorrect information that precipitates attitudes to mainstream Australia?

Mindful that what it means to be a Muslim in Australia could present a difficult and sensitive task, I will refer to what students across this country have already told us as a result of a recent national survey which I was commissioned to investigate on the *knowledge, values and attitudes of Muslim students towards the mainstream Australian society*. Over 430 completed questionnaires were obtained from students, aged 16 to 18 years, at eight Islamic schools (six high schools and two community schools) in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia. South Australia, the Northern Territory, Australian Capital Territory, and Tasmania did not take part for logistical reasons. The percentage of female participant students (57%) was slightly higher than male students (43%). Almost the entire sample (93%) declared themselves to be Muslim. Only selected finding have been extracted below for the purpose of this short report.

Here is what we found:

First, on the question of knowledge *The survey of Muslim students* revealed a moderate lack of knowledge of Christianity (Figure 1). Students were presented with ten statements concerning objectively verifiable facts about Christianity. Muslim students' knowledge of Christianity was, however, noticeably better than non-Muslims' knowledge of Islam. On two particular questions—Jesus wrote the Holy Bible and Christians believe that Jesus was the son of God—respondents were overwhelmingly correct in their responses. This may be because on these points Christianity and Islam disagree most starkly in matters of fundamental doctrine.
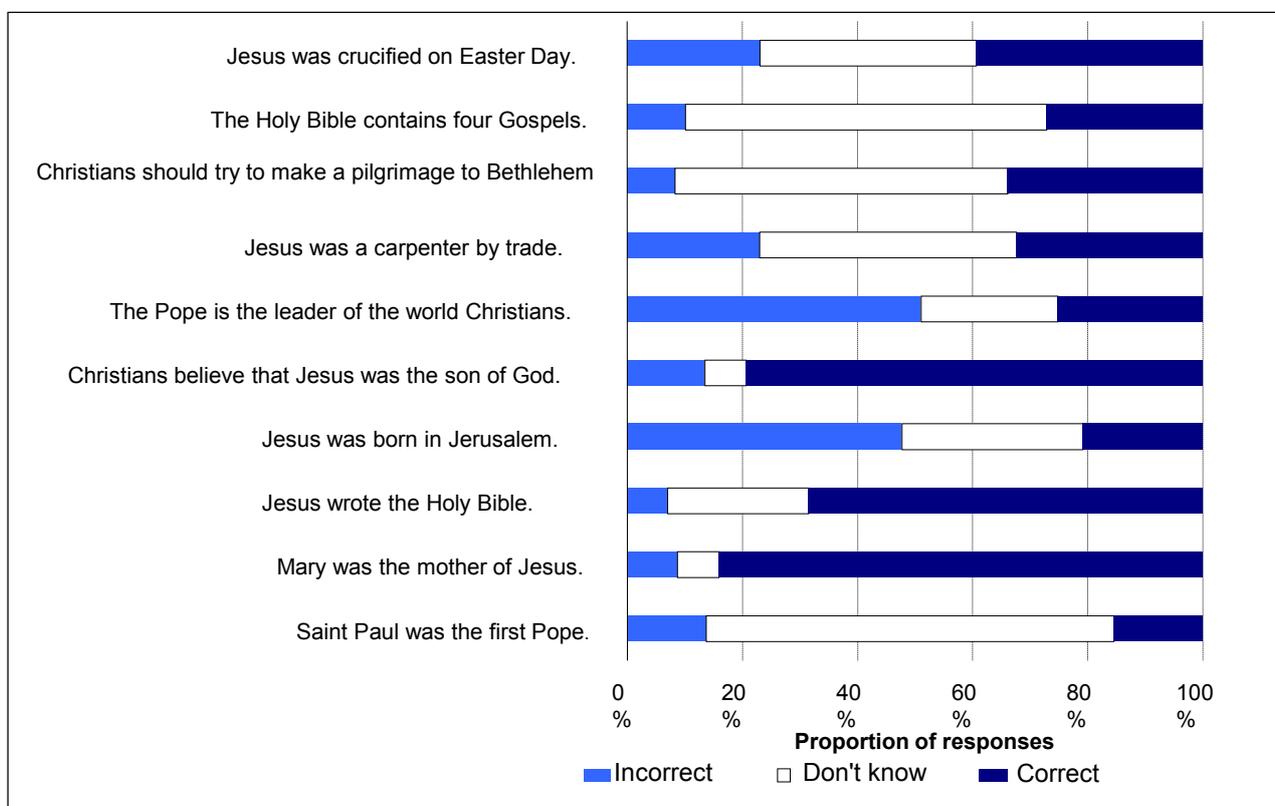

Figure 1. Proportion of correct and incorrect responses.

The results show that participants who spontaneously mentioned false beliefs and had low levels of knowledge reported significantly more negative attitudes to Christians than those who did not. This is an important result because it is possible that accepting incorrect information may be shaping negative attitudes toward Christians.

Given the high bi-directional relation between the two variables, surprising no group is found to fall in the middle, *i.e.*, one showing a flat lining. That is expected in that a knowledgeable person will answer in one way and others with little knowledge answer in another. It is clear that the hypothesis is corroborated by evidence—one that suggests bigots to be ignorant but those who have a high level of knowledge are not. More to the point: if a person is knowledgeable about Christianity s/he will not be bigoted (a reasonable assumption). It is possible, though, that people can dislike Christians and be knowledgeable, because of their ethnic and religious affiliation; that is one is swayed to express tendencies that they believe share with the rest of the community.

Under this method of scoring, wrong answers were penalized (Figure 1). Respondents who got many questions wrong could therefore receive a negative score. Hence, it revealed the degree of misinformation as well as correct knowledge. Some 12% of respondents received a negative score, meaning that they got more questions wrong than right; 15% scored zero, meaning that on balance they got as many questions wrong as right, or alternatively did not know; and 73% received a positive score, meaning that they got more questions right than wrong. We conclude that although ignorance of Christianity is widespread, those who are on balance correctly informed outnumber the incorrectly informed in the ratio of six to one. This is considerably better than the comparable ratio for non-Muslim students, 2.5 to one.

The assumption behind cross-tabulating the two variables was that a knowledgeable person (in this case Muslim students) will answer in one way and those with little knowledge will answer in another. More to the point: If a person is knowledgeable about Christianity s/he will not be bigoted (a reasonable assumption). It is possible, though, that people can dislike mainstream Australians, that is Australian Christians, and be knowledgeable, because of their ethnic and religious affiliation; that is one is swayed to express tendencies that they believe share with the rest of the community.

Figure 2a,b shows that people who are knowledgeable about Christianity, at a high ranking of 2.4 and above generally, disagree with the statements outlined below—negative and positive. It is shown in particular that the five statements in Figure 2a ,for example, Most Muslims dislike the Australian way of life ranked highest (at 2.9) at the knowledge scale. On the other hand the statement Movies show Muslims in a fair way ranked lowest (at 2.45). Given the high bi-directional relation between the two variables, surprising no group is found to fall in the middle, *i.e.*, one showing a flat lining. That is expected in that a knowledgeable person will answer in one way and others with little knowledge answer in another. It is clear that the hypothesis is corroborated by evidence—one that suggests bigots to be ignorant but those who have a high level of knowledge are not.

These results show that participants who spontaneously mentioned false beliefs and had low levels of knowledge reported significantly more negative attitudes to mainstream Australian Christians than those who did not. This is an important result because it is possible that accepting incorrect information may be shaping negative attitudes toward Christians.
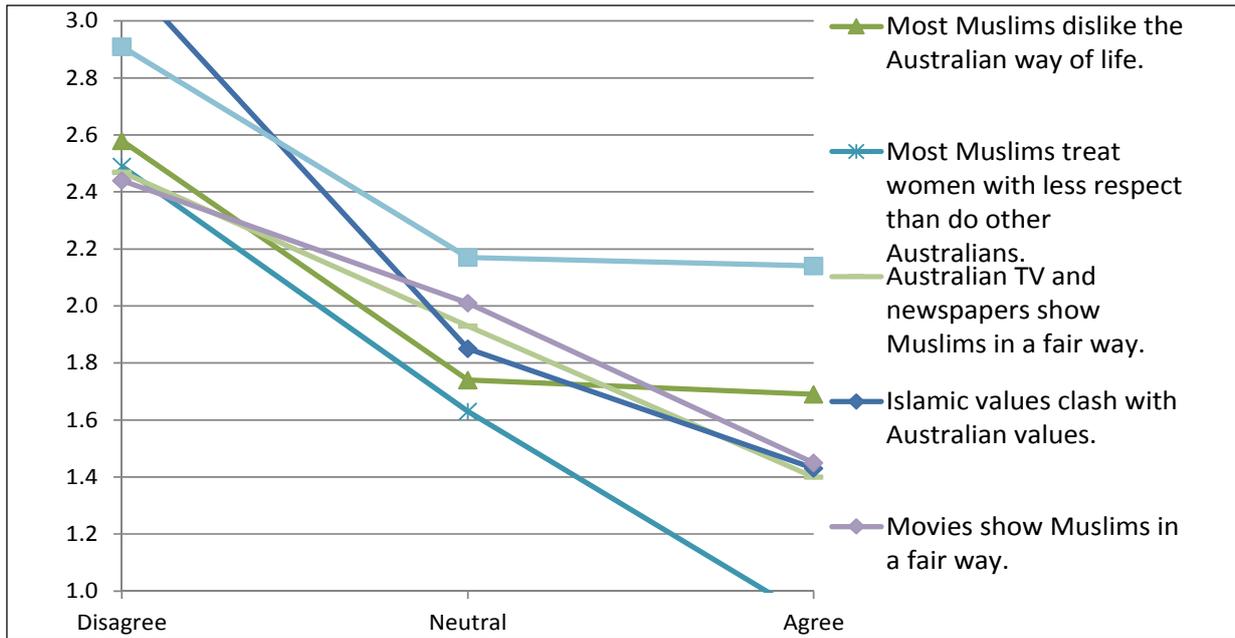
(a)
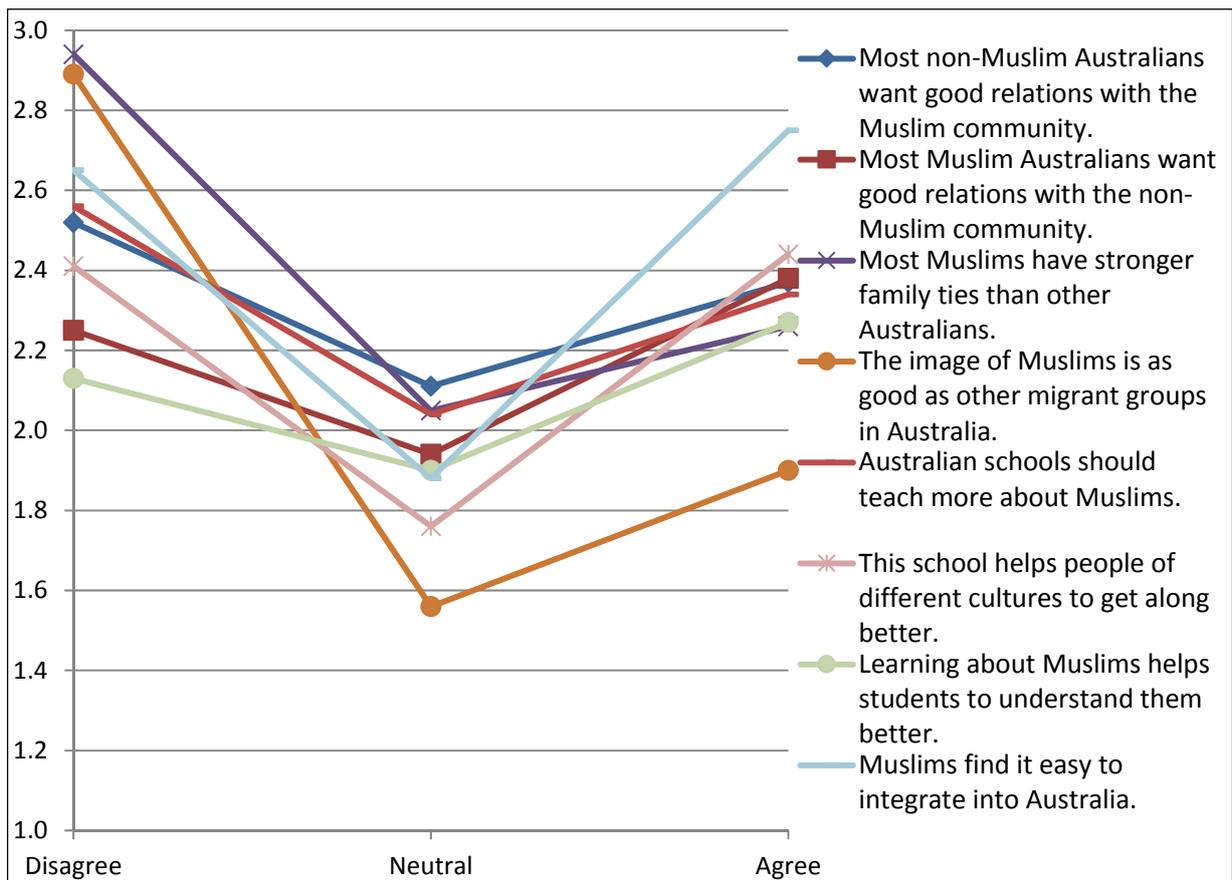
(b)

Figure 2. Tabulation of two variables showing Level of Knowledge and responses of positive attitudes. **(a)** Statements largely relate to the mass media, clash of values and women; **(b)** Statements largely relate to schools and relationship with other Australians.

Those who are least knowledgeable about Christianity (at a ranking that ranges between 1.1–2.0 is clearly lower that the 2.4 knowledge threshold shown in Figure 3) disagree with these statements.
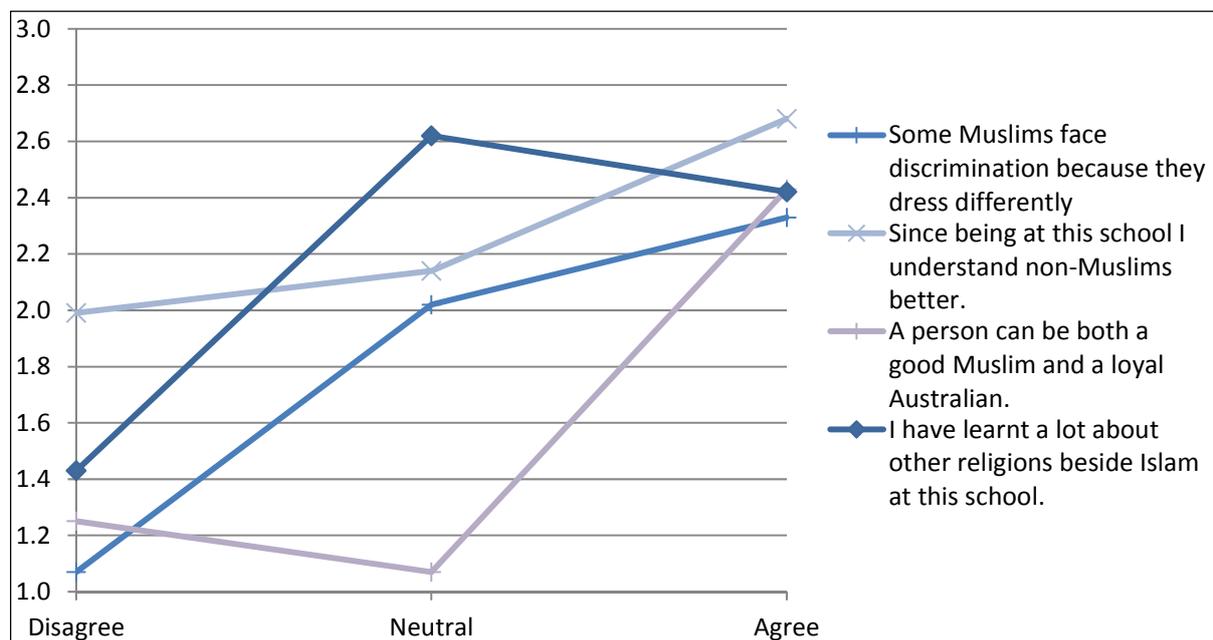

Figure 3. Tabulation of two variables showing Level of Knowledge and responses to statements measuring attitudes and knowledge.

These statements do not show causality. One could say though that being pre-disposed about knowledge of other cultures, and by extension Christianity, that this would show a positive movement/attitudes on average towards the group in focus. Of interest, there was level of significance between negative attitudes and the following statements: *I have learnt a lot about other religions beside Islam at school* (1.4), and, *Since being at this school I understand non-Muslims (Christians) better* (2.1).

It is equally arguable that if participants were given the opportunity to express all the reasons behind their attitudes, more false beliefs are likely to have emerged.

There are profound implications for Western educators and community at large. The premise that Muslim students (and by extension students at large) who are more knowledgeable about Christianity would express more favourable opinions of Australians; and that through knowledge, greater levels of awareness come from equal status interaction between the two. It is thus argued that scale of our knowledge, fashionable or well worn, and negative attitudes are interrelated—a clear falsehood in our findings.

It is possible that incorrect information about the religion of others, be it Christianity, Islam, or Judaism, can lead to a significantly stronger negative attitudes. Similarly being knowledgeable about Islam makes one more likely to see recent terrorist attacks as part of a conflict.

In Australia, the separation between one's religious and public identities is a cultural and political given. Many Australians may have been influenced by Christian values, but, unlike citizens of many Muslim countries, their identity is not exchangeable with their religious affiliation.

That said, significant differences between the two religions, Christianity and Islam, are not to be side-stepped. This could lead to a false sense of security. Differences in interpretation of social values and way of life, individual accountability, consensual decision-making, and attitudes towards implementing moral imperatives do exist. It is feasible that we should be able to acknowledge them, respect them and address them without necessarily aiming for compromise.

Dialogue does not always mean compromise. These different approaches have concrete implications to these communities who are living together in a shared place, *i.e.*, the capacity of accommodating many cultural and religious expressions—within a single language, law and polity—as multiculturalism.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.