REFUGEES IN AUSTRALIA
Sally May
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Sally May, a UK Theology graduate, wrote this reflection on the asylum seeker debate in Australia during a short placement with the Yarra Institute for Religion & Social Policy

The Whole Story Through my Eyes
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Immigration is a key issue in Australia. Increasing numbers of migrants arrive each year, a large number of whom are refugees seeking asylum. Recent world conflicts have meant that many refugees coming to Australian shores are Muslim, and this has posed new challenges – both cultural and racial – to an increasingly diverse society.

Until the 1960s, the government encouraged migrants to assimilate into Australian society, the basis of which was British-style institutions and values. Due to the fact that many migrants did not have even a basic knowledge of the English language, this policy became unrealistic. As a consequence, the policy of multiculturalism was introduced.

Multiculturalism came with recognition that ethnic communities could maintain distinctions such as unique culture and language without any risk to the legitimacy of their Australian citizenship. There is evidence, however, of certain 'slippage' in this policy, especially concerning funding decisions, and most obviously in political rhetoric and public opinion (Tazreiter, 2004, 130).

Immigration has been of economic and social benefit to Australia, rather than a drain on public funds – the latter being a characterisation which is popular around migrant intakes (Tazreiter, 2004, 129), thus raising questions about the basis for hostility towards these refugees. All but the first wave of boat arrivals, often from developing countries, have been subject to mandatory and non-reviewable detention (Tazreiter, 2004, 141).

Muslim immigrant issues

Muslims in Australia are still a minority group, being only 1.7 percent of the population (2006 Census). But in light of political events of the last ten years, it has arguably been increasingly difficult for them to integrate into Australian society. Australian Islam is ethnically diverse, and Muslims have come to Australia at different times and under different categories of migration. Their settlement experiences have been varied, however (Dunn et al, 2007, 565). The Tampa incident of August 2001[1] and how it was presented in the Australian media meant that a fear was developing of being 'overrun' by refugees. This was followed closely by the events of 11 September of the same year, and meant that Muslim and Arabic asylum seekers were often directly associated with the threat of

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[1] The Tampa Incident refers to the events in which a Norwegian freighter rescued 438 Afghan refugees from a distressed vessel close to Australian waters. Australian authorities refused entry to the Tampa, and when it crossed into Australian waters it was boarded by Australian troops. The Australian government was aiming to prevent the refugees from applying for asylum in Australia, as they would be able to do on arrival.

terrorism (Klocker, 2004, 2). The Bali bombings of 2002, which claimed the lives of 88 Australians among others, made the situation even worse for Australian Muslims, and as a result some Muslim families in Australia were subjected to highly public raids during the month of Ramadan (Maddox, 2004, 9).

These events have had implications for the religious and cultural milieu of Australia, and raise questions about how increasing migration, especially of refugees, can affect inter-faith relations as well as public opinion towards asylum seekers. There has only been limited research done in this area. Despite religious persecution featuring prominently in UN definitions of refugee status, and faith-based organisations providing emergency relief to refugees and facilitating their settlement, discussions on religion and refugees has been limited (Gozdziak, 2002, 129). Initial study has been possible, nevertheless, and in this unique Australian setting I have examined issues including resettlement, public perception, and racial issues.

Perception issues

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Despite the fact that almost half the population of Australia is a migrant or the child of a migrant, and over 700,000 refugees have found a home in Australia since the Second World War, one of the most important factors in refugee resettlement is public perceptions of their arrival into the community and of their different religious beliefs and practices.

Firstly, there is very little understanding of a refugee's plight. Modern Australia has never experienced the full horrors of prolonged war and oppression on its own territory, and this good fortune blocks comprehension of and empathy for the 'push' factors influencing a refugee's decision to flee (Crock et al, 2006, 8). There is also a lack of understanding of the way in which the physical and psychological trauma associated with the refugee experience can lead to lethargy, and this is therefore often perceived as laziness. These factors lead to prejudice and ignorance about the refugee process. The often-mistaken idea that it is illegal to seek asylum is one of the biggest impediments to successful resettlement (Woodlock, 2008, 18) (Klocker, 2004, 5). Critics often use these problems of resettlement to demonstrate the incompatibility of refugees (Muslims in particular) with the 'Australian way of life' (Casimiro et al, 2007, 65).

The 'other' in society

In addition to the religious differences of Muslim refugees, there are problems of race tied up in these issues. Dunn et al discuss a 'cultural racism' in Australian society, whereby a cultural group's way of life is judged as being outside of society or in some way 'other'[2]. This leads to generalised complaints about the whole of Islam, but these complaints also have a racial aspect, as Christian Arabs can be subjected to the same treatment (2007, 567-568). McMichael notes that the post-9/11 view of Islam in Australia is that it is anti-

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[2] 'I have often sensed, just beneath the surface, a particular kind of brittleness about multi-culturalism in Australia, as if very little evidence is required to convince large swathes of people that one or another ethnic group will never fit in' (Manne, 2006, 47).

Western, anti-modern, and anti-democratic. Muslim women are seen to be repressed, marginalised and subject to the conservative forces of sexual ideology within Islamic patriarchy (2002, 173). Although localised, direct evidence has been found to suggest these views concerning Muslim refugees, as in Klocker's study on community antagonism towards asylum seekers in Port Augusta, South Australia (2004). Klocker notes that asylum seekers constitute a socially constructed group in Australian discourse and have been categorised using negative, stereotypical and misleading labels, and their ethnicity and religion have been demonised (2004, 3). The results of the study note that responses were xenophobic, discriminatory, and negative toward asylum seekers, who were viewed as the 'other' in society. Asylum seekers are also thought to be illegal immigrants, an economic burden, unwelcome, and ungrateful (Klocker, 2004, 5). The majority of people asked also agreed with the Australian government's policy of mandatory detention (Klocker, 2004, 7). Crock *et al* remark that, as many asylum seekers were separated from the community in remote detention centres, their humanity and their plight were hidden, making it easier for this idea of the 'other' to grow. Furthermore, it is not difficult to promote the idea that these individuals are a threat, or are somehow less deserving than 'real' refugees waiting in camps in Kenya, Pakistan, or Jordan, for example (2006, 8).

The 'other' and its use in government rhetoric

Australia's Shame
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Government policies and media attitudes have been factors in this hostility towards Muslim refugees and asylum seekers. Dunn *et al* argue that after the 2001 Tampa Incident the government became increasingly negative about Islam and asylum seekers as a whole. Government spokesmen used words such as 'illegitimacy', 'illegality' and 'threat', with plenty of references to the 'self' – in this case meaning Australia and its borders (2007, 578). The article also concluded that negative media representations of asylum seekers "depended heavily on, if had not been directed by, the representations in the Federal government" (Dunn *et al*, 2007, 579). Maddox notes that in 1998 a former High Court Judge, Sir Ronald Wilson, drew attention to the government's re-branding of desperate asylum seekers as 'illegals' despite their recognition under international law (2004, 2). Maddox continues to argue that government opinion led to images in the Australian public mind of 'queue jumpers' who brought crime and violence. Prime Minister John Howard's method of dealing with the Tampa Incident increasingly publicised this idea of the Muslim 'other', especially with regard to arriving Iraqi and Afghan refugees, whom he presented as a challenge to the Australian national identity (2004, 3-4). Direct accusations were never made, but there were repeated references to 'these sorts of people' and 'terrorists' (Maddox, 2004, 6).

An association with terrorism

There have been heightened social pressures in Australia post 9/11, and the previous phobia of being swamped by refugees was then replaced by a fear of Muslim terrorists (Casimiro *et al*, 2007, 58). This fear is enhanced by government and media hostility to asylum seekers and a security emphasis that implies that Islam is the origin of terrorism (Dunn *et al*, 2007, 569). Surveys have found that many Australians subscribe to cultural

myths or generalisations about Islam, for example, that all Muslims want to make Australia an Islamic state (Dunn *et al*, 2007, 572). 40 percent of those questioned in the Port Augusta survey identified these asylum seekers as 'abusive to children', 'diseased' or 'terrorists' (Klocker, 2004, 6). This generally poor perception of Islam in Australian society has a negative impact both on Australian Muslims and on the resettlement process – for example opposition to mosque building and targeted violence (Dunn et al, 2007, 582). Some Muslim refugees have experienced harassment from neighbours who use threatening and abusive language about their Islamic beliefs, and many refugees stated that they did not feel secure in a place where Muslims are portrayed in the media as terrorists (Casimiro et al, 2007, 65).

Scholars have also been keen to highlight the recent nature of this Australian Islamophobia. Muslim and Arab migration has been happening on a significant scale for 40 years, so it is not the latest ethnic group to arrive, and for global and local reasons hostility towards this group has risen sharply over the past ten years (Manne, 2006, 52). Others argue, however, that this 'stranger in society' idea is common to Australia, and the mandatory detention policy is regarded as acceptable partly owing to the historic Australian policy of cordoning off or segregating Aboriginal peoples (Tazreiter, 2004, 127). The remoteness of detention centres, for example Woomera in Southern Australia, means that refugees are effectively invisible to the majority of Australians (2004, 157).

Ethnicity

Vujcick's study on Bosnian Muslims settling in Western Australia suggests that although these individuals are Muslims, they are spared the same harassment because they are ethnically European and well-educated. Vujcick notes that the majority of these Muslims' qualifications are recognised, and resettlement problems were focused on achieving their potential in the workplace, rather than on finding work at all (Vujcick, 2007, 88). This raises significant questions about the racial and religious differences in Australian society, and about how one treats or feels threatened by the visible 'other', or feels less threatened by a person who may assimilate visually but not necessarily religiously. This can be partly demonstrated by the Australian response to the Kosovan refugee crisis compared to those in other countries during the same period. Overwhelming public support meant that Australia rescued displaced ethnic Albanians from Kosovo in 1999, but boat refugees arriving in the same period were met with tightening legislation and public announcements of these arrivals as 'queue-jumpers' associated with criminal activity (Tazreiter, 2004, 147).

Religion as a positive force in resettlement

Classroom childrenofwar, flickr cc

Studies show that religious practice and identity often aid the integration of refugees and asylum seekers into Australian society, providing skills to cope with the strains of the resettlement process (Woodlock, 2008, 3). Although Woodlock is mostly dealing with Islamic refugees settling in rural New South Wales, the same benefit is demonstrated by Iranian Baha'i refugees settling in Melbourne. Williams notes that the strong sense of community in Baha'i teaching means that refugees can join a community almost anywhere with a strong sense of familiarity and common values. This automatic collective identity means that refugees maintain a notion of 'home',

a sense of belonging, and mostly identify themselves religiously before nationally. This produces a 'hybrid or trans-national identity' in a new land, that allows for successful resettlement (Williams, 2009, 3)[3]. Similarly, McMichael's work (2002) on Somali refugees in Australia concluded that Islam provided an 'enduring home' for these women that is carried through displacement and then resettlement. Islam is conceived as a mobile anchor that provides stability in refugee life – the practices and teachings offer a sustaining thread during their lives, and a source of emotional support and solace in the face of loss of family support and social networks (McMichael, 2002, 171-172).

Problems of resettlement

There are still serious problems that hinder successful resettlement of refugees and asylum seekers. Woodlock argues that advance planning and tailored provision of services in consultation with the local receiving community is vital (2008, 5). Furthermore, service provision in regional and rural areas has not kept up with the increase in refugees and immigrants, and life is increasingly hard for those with limited mobility or language problems (2008, 11). The two biggest challenges are learning the English language and obtaining employment in a country in w hich qualifications may not be recognised (eg Williams, 2009, 9). Casimiro *et al* note that some Muslim women do not attend English language classes, as the classes are mixed gender. Moreover, many have suffered torture or trauma, preventing them from concentrating for long periods (2007, 61). Evidence has shown that refugees experience racism when looking for employment, and there is also a lack of understanding about religious beliefs and practices within the workplace, for example daily prayer and wearing the hijab (Casimiro *et al*, 2007, 63-4). Muslim women have also struggled to deal with Australian or Western cultures of drinking, sexual permissiveness, and swearing. These cultural differences can become barriers, particularly in a context of loss of family support and social networks (McMichael, 2007, 57). The provision of ethnically-specific services have demonstrated a positive contribution toward the inclusiveness of newcomers, with benefits for the broad receiver society. But these services are also regularly attacked in public discourse as unfairly favouring one segment of society (Tazreiter, 2004, 131-2). Unfortunately, without community-specific funding, including translators and legal representation, resettlement and integration will not be as successful, which in turn increases hostility towards asylum seekers.

Although there are benefits in religious belief and practice, religion and cultural values can, at times, also be impediments to successful integration. A common theme is that when settling in a foreign place, religious differences, and often conservative tendencies, are reinforced and magnified as a way of coping with transition (Woodlock, 2008, 20) (Vujcick, 2007, 73). Casimiro *et al* note that many female Muslim refugees found their husbands particularly controlling in this new environment, and the women by being obedient to them were often denied information and resources which would aid resettlement (2007, 64).

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[3] Baha'i adherents consider themselves as 'citizens of the world'; therefore refugees are merely relocating to a different part of their global home. Also Baha'is traditionally believe that extreme nationalism is exclusionary, and this affects their new trans-national identity, first as Baha'i and secondly as Iranian or Australian (Williams, 2009, 5). Owing to their need to spread the faith, Baha'is also maintain a high sense of community involvement, for example in local charities, inter-faith work, and the local Baha'i administration (Williams, 2009, 9). Consequently these factors may lead to successful resettlement and integration into society, although this article would suggest better educated, and perhaps wealthier, Iranian migrants have a better standard of life in Australia than, for example, Somali refugees.

Faith-Based Organisations

Faith-based organisations play a significant role in the process of refugee resettlement in Australia. These predominantly Christian organisations use concepts and practices consistent with Christian hospitality in order to challenge public discourses and provide services to asylum seekers to ameliorate the harsh effects of the Australian immigration policies (Wilson, 2011, 548). This notion of hospitality is based on Christian teaching that every human is sacred, and one must follow the example of Jesus by welcoming the stranger in society. Faith-based organisations have distinctive characteristics offering an ability to relate to refugees who hold strong beliefs, and a sensitivity to the spiritual wellbeing of asylum seekers (Wilson, 2011, 549). In a context in which asylum seekers and refugees are depicted as illegal or criminal in the Australian discourse, faith-based hospitality reminds opponents that all are inadequate and unworthy, not just a marginalised few (Wilson, 2011, 552).

This added dimension of religiosity does create additional risks in certain contexts of proselytising, exploitation, and manipulation. These faith-based organisations also use the Christian community as a source of funding, resulting in a dichotomy. On one hand, they reduce or exclude their theological underpinnings when dealing with asylum seekers, but root this work in theological principles to gain funding from their religious congregations (Wilson, 2011, 555). Faith-based organisations also use their church base for education and raising awareness of the refugee plight, 'part of a broader commitment to altering the unjust structures that characterise Australian asylum policy' (Wilson, 2011, 556).

Wilson notes that faith-based organisations in Australia have played a significant role in substantial shifts in Australian government policy, in particular the decision to expand the community detention program. This new policy (2010) will see unaccompanied minors and asylum seeker families with children released into community care rather than held in detention centres while their refugee status is being determined (2011, 548-9). There is evidence of widespread opposition to the policy within the Australian community and a lack of support for compassionate responses to asylum seekers. Wilson argues that churches, faith-based organisations, and other NGOs will need to engage in substantial public education activities in order to foster support for the community model and alter public attitudes towards asylum seekers in the long term. There are still a number of 'at risk' groups who will remain in detention (Wilson, 2011, 558).

Conclusion

In general, the Australian public is ignorant about Islam as well as about the process of seeking asylum and resettlement in Australia. The majority of Australians ignore the diversity of views and practices; many also treat refugees as illegal immigrants simply because of their religion (Casimiro *et al*, 2007, 65). Maddox argues that many Australians of Christian heritage are often profoundly ignorant not only about non-Christian religions but even about the religion they claim as their own (2004, 1). In large part, these negative perceptions of asylum seekers are driven by problematic constructions within the government and the media, then reproduced by the populace and given substance. In many cases, asylum seekers are presented as making a lifestyle choice (Klocker, 2004, 13). These negative perceptions lead to isolation and insecurity during resettlement, and are harmful to the Australian policy of multiculturalism. It also has implications for inter-ethnic, inter-cultural and inter-religious relations in Australia.

How to fix it?

Casimiro *et al* call for a long-term education strategy, in which elimination of anti-Muslim prejudice must be a priority. They argue that, to dispel negative stereotypes of Muslims and refugees, targeted education campaigns should be aimed at specific groups such as youth, service providers, and employers (2007, 67). Furthermore, additional academic research is needed in this field of religious issues and refugees and asylum seekers. In the religious edition of the *Journal of Refugee Studies,* Gozdziak and Shandy argue that research is lacking in many fields, and ask for additional assessment of how religious affiliation affects the selection of certain groups for assistance, and of the opportunities and constraints which govern cross-faith efforts towards successful resettlement. Most workers who deal with refugees are secular, and the question is how, or if, this raises problems for understanding and space for spiritual growth (Gozdziak, 2002, 134). A notable addition to the field has been a 2008 edition of *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, which explores the issues of asylum and the Islamic religion, although not in the Australian context.

An example of the proposed re-education plan, especially in regard to Australian Muslims, is demonstrated in the 2009 study by Pederson *et al*. The plan lays out a nine-week anti-prejudice intervention in which participants are given nine seminars about Australian Muslims, asylum seekers, and indigenous Australians, filling in questionnaires beforehand and afterwards (2009, 83). Findings suggest that an important place to start is challenging the populist but negative portrayal of Muslims in the media. They also identified an express need for cultural understanding between Muslims and mainstream society, a lack of which is detrimental to social harmony. As a result of the campaign, participants showed an increased awareness of issues of integration and an articulation of the barriers Muslims can face. They found that prejudice did exist, especially in the workplace (Pederson *et al*, 2009, 85). Although this model may not be suitable for a nationwide campaign, it does show the need and the benefits of education in this field.

Personal Reflections

I argue, from a British perspective, that similar ignorance exists in Britain both about Islam, and about refugees and asylum seekers. Immigration is a serious concern and a significant political issue, yet little is done to educate the populace on the benefits and problems of accepting migrants. In the case of religion, and especially of Islam, I would argue that improved characterisation, knowledge, and exposure to Muslim communities and practices is desirable. I believe the main difference between Britain and Australia is that there is less hostility towards Muslims in Britain than in Australia, where Muslims are still a minority community. Britain's population is larger than that of Australia, and has become racially and religiously extremely diverse.

Although Britain has had its own cases of Islamophobia, the size of the Muslim communities in Britain means that our society cannot so easily deem Muslims as the 'other'. In this way, I would argue that Britain is some way ahead of Australia in terms of inter-ethnic relations as well as of inter-faith work. Britain has simply been dealing with these issues for a longer period than Australia, has a better knowledge of Islamic practices, and consequently feels less threatened by them.

I agree with the scholars above who note that education is the answer to this sort of ignorance, which then leads to prejudice. Unfortunately, the majority of people in Britain as well as in Australia form their ideas about religion and immigration from media representations, which are often less than reliable. From my own experience in Australia,

even the more 'liberal' newspapers would use phrases such as 'people smuggling syndicate' in reference to refugees arriving on boats. Although human trafficking is a serious issue that surrounds immigration, these sorts of phrases suggest premeditated criminal association, unfairly representing the desperation of many of these refugees. A concerted effort needs to be made to educate ourselves on these issues. However, evidence suggests that the Australian authorities do not place a lot of importance on this; cuts in funding have meant that Religious Studies programs have been cut or cut back in major universities such as the Australian National University and LaTrobe University, unhelpful in a country with significant social problems.

To make a comparison about some specific problems concerning Australian and British treatment towards asylum seekers, in Australia I believe one key issue is funding. As mentioned above, funding has been apportioned to ethnic-specific services, which in turn aid the resettlement process and benefit the wide Australian society. However, this ethnic-specific funding is subsequently criticised and cut, and then refugees and asylum seekers are blamed for not fitting into the 'Australian way of life', when in reality they have been given little help in achieving this end. In Britain, on the other hand, there is a major problem concerning how the country deals with those refugees who have not been granted asylum, and the way in which we repatriate them. This duty is sub-contracted to private security firms and there have been incidents of violence and deaths[4].

A further issue worth highlighting is that many studies also deal more with the events and policies of the John Howard government than with recent government policies. It is possible that the situation may have improved in the most recent years, especially in terms of the perception of Muslims in Australia. However, the Gillard government's recent 'Malaysia Solution' would seem to suggest that perception of refugees as a whole is still far from positive. Furthermore, the majority of the scholars I have examined are not directly drawn from a Religious Studies background, but rather from the fields of Political Science, Human Geography, or Sociology. Perhaps a beneficial addition to this topic would be achieved by an exploration of these issues by scholars trained in Religious Studies or Theology.

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[4] For example: http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/sep/06/security-firms-detainees-jimmy-mubenga-racist-violent

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