

Chapter 9

Negotiating Norms of Inclusion: Comparative Perspectives from Muslim Community Leadership in the West

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The accommodation of ethno-religious diversity, the integration of Muslims, and issues of ‘entrenched differences’ between Muslims and the wider community have become a significant challenge in western societies (Nesbitt-Larking 2008: 351, Wise and Ali 2008). Fear, anxiety, and mistrust of Islam and its value system often stimulate questions of political loyalty and allegiance as well as negative public perceptions of Muslims (Ramadan 2004, Cesari 2005b, Meer and Modood 2009). These anti-Muslim perceptions are exacerbated by ongoing security risks associated with radical Islamist groups since 9/11, government policies that tightly link domestic issues of immigration and national security to the international fight against terrorism, and opinion leaders who unashamedly express their aversion to Islam. Following such reactions to the ‘new visibility’ (Zwartz 2009: 4) of Islam in the West, this chapter will explore how Muslims in positions of leadership in Paris and Melbourne engage in practices to negotiate ethno-religious diversity and engender ‘new sources of self’ (van der Veer 2002: 105). These practices affirm rights to belong, dispel cultural stereotypes, and demonstrate their ability to ‘talk back’ to local government. Given the arrival of Muslim migrants from developing countries experiencing economic difficulties and political instability, as well as the increase in French and Australian-born Muslims, practices of ethno-religious negotiation are timely and relevant for understanding how everyday life offers opportunities for claiming rights to the city.

The chapter draws on in-depth interviews with community leaders in the City of St Denis, Paris and the City of Whittlesea, Melbourne, both ethnically, diverse suburban areas that continue to attract new migrants from overseas. Eleven interviews in the City of St Denis (in French) and thirteen interviews in the City of Whittlesea (in English) were conducted during 2008–2009 with leaders from ethno-specific groups, multicultural community support groups, migrant/refugee support groups, youth support groups, charitable groups, religious institutions, educational institutions and the media. The smaller sample size in Paris may be explained by the difficulties encountered in obtaining participant consent: a consequence perhaps of the social perception of Muslims as an ethno-religious group constituting a sensitive issue, and the political nature of conversations about

Islam, which are considered to be a private matter in French society. In Melbourne, it was relatively easier to get access to and engage community leaders in discussion. The interview transcripts were analysed using discourse and narrative analysis to explore initiatives taken by Muslims in positions of leadership to reflect on and negotiate dominant norms of inclusion. These methodological tools that involve storytelling are relevant for understanding the construction of social identities and the potential for transformative social relations (Fairclough 1995, Fincher and Costello 2005).

Muslims in France and Australia

In France, Muslims constitute approximately five million or 8.5 per cent of the total population and are more likely to be socio-economically disadvantaged and experience racial discrimination than other ethno-religious groups (Benhabib 2006, Open Society Institute 2007). But such disadvantage and discrimination, particularly among Muslims of North African heritage is rarely acknowledged; there are no official statistics on ethnic or religious affiliation. In upholding the principles of equality and ensuring religious freedom for all citizens, the French model of integration (*l'intégration à la française*) and the 1905 principle of *laïcité* have been identified as expressions of 'aggressive secularism' (Bhargava 2009: 559) that result in one-sided exclusion; precluding intervention by religion in state affairs but justifying state interventions that inhibit religious freedom in everyday life. Islam, in particular, rather than Judaism or Christianity has been subjected to such intervention. This was evident with the institutionalisation of Islam through the formation of the *Conseil Français du Culte Musulman* (CFCM) in 2003, a committee that claimed to defend the interests of Islam in France, but also played a role in regulating and marginalising radical elements. Other interventions are the headscarf controversy in 1989, the 2004 law banning religious symbols worn by students in government schools, and the recent law approved by the French Senate in September 2010 banning the *burqa* in public spaces (Sénat 2010). Such practices have been supported by official debates on 'national identity' by the recently constituted Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-Development that underline the dangers of *communautarisme* (communitarism) in ways that exclude Muslim citizens as 'outsiders' whose religious practices must be regulated (Bowen 2009).

These interventions by the state are predicated on the assumption that the teachings of Islam are irreconcilable with French Republican values and that Muslims deliberately resist integration into French society, and are open to manipulation by extremist Islamist groups from abroad. In other words, the Muslim presence in France is constructed as a potential national and global security threat that needs to be carefully scrutinised and controlled (Cesari 2005a, de Wenden 2005, Echchaibi 2007). Paradoxically then, the French principle of *laïcité* promises utopia in France, but in practice engenders religious antagonism

and permits the abjection and exclusion of Muslims who are French citizens. Despite the creation of the *Haut Conseil à l'intégration* (The High Integration Council) in 1989, various official reports on integration seem to address the following message to the immigrants and their children: 'we have a problem with integration, with *your* integration' (Weil 2005: 47).

In Australia, the presence of Muslims can be traced to the sixteenth century with the arrival of Macassan fishermen and later Malay pearlers, Afghan cameleers and Indian hawkers (Deen 1995, Dunn 2004). The Muslim population increased significantly in the post-war period and was 22,311 in 1971 as compared to 2704 in 1947 (Dunn 2004, Humphrey 2007). The increase can be attributed to the abolition of the White Australia Policy in 1972, displacement following civil war in the Middle East (Lebanon), and government policies of industrial expansion and assisted migration. More recent increases in the Muslim Australian population, however, are a result of migration following conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Iraq and Afghanistan; the recruitment of professional and skilled workers; the arrival of tertiary students; and the growth in the Australian-born Muslim population. Today there are 340,000 Muslims who constitute 1.7 per cent of the Australian population (Wise and Ali 2008). Despite comprising such a small minority, the visibility of Muslims and the racialisation of Islam is a significant issue in Australia that has implications for understanding social inclusion.

Unlike France, social inclusion of ethno-religious groups in Australia was first understood within the ideology and Policy of Multiculturalism introduced in the 1970s. This policy agenda replaced the White Australia Policy with its outmoded emphasis on cultural assimilation. Increasing ethnic diversity coupled with conservative views during the era of the Liberal Government under John Howard, however, engendered increased fear about cultural diversity and antagonism towards the arrival of Muslim migrants. This atmosphere of fear was further exacerbated following the events of September 11, when Muslims began to be viewed as residents who threatened the cultural unity and security of the nation (Kabir 2007, Hage 2008). In contrast to these neo-conservative approaches that later led to a backlash against the Policy of Multiculturalism, the approach from the Left recognised that although multiculturalism has provided economic benefits for the nation, it has deepened class divisions, exploited the ethnic labour market, produced elite male leaders and has therefore been limited in challenging structural racism (Dunn 2005, Turner 2007). The outcome during the Howard era was a retreat from multiculturalism by the State and the emergence of a policy agenda dominated by a discourse of civic integration and social inclusion (Poynting and Mason 2008).

The Social Inclusion Agenda of the Federal Labor Government at the time of writing envisages greater social, civil and economic participation by citizens and a shared responsibility among government and non-government organisations to alleviate social disadvantage and recognise the 'positive contributions' (Australian Social Inclusion Board 2008a: 2) of people from culturally and linguistically backgrounds. Although the Agenda underlines the need to facilitate active

involvement within the community, sustainable planning for social inclusion has been informed by the establishment of benchmarks and the adoption of quantifiable targets, rather than grounded ethnographic research discussed in this chapter. We argue that qualitative research is necessary given the contemporary literature on everyday life in Australian cities demonstrates that Islam is racialised, Islamic religious practices are stigmatised, and the visibility of Islam in the public sphere engenders suspicion, fear, hostility and anxiety (Dunn et al. 2007, Poynting and Mason 2007). Muslims have become the ‘current enemy’ in Australia (Kabir 2007: 1277), even though they do not necessarily identify with militant Islam. In the following section we draw on the concept of active citizenship to illustrate how Muslims in Paris and Melbourne negotiate dominant norms of social inclusion that construct them in stereotypical ways. These insights are significant given the debates on national identity and integration in France and the formulation of a new multicultural policy in Australia that aims to value diversity.

Negotiating Ethno-Religious Diversity: Active Citizenship in Paris and Melbourne

Contemporary academic and policy discourses on active citizenship emphasise practices of involvement and responsible participation of citizens in civil society in ways that uphold human rights, adhere to existing laws, and maintain the values of equality and diversity (Hoskins and Mascherini 2009). Existent literature shows that there is inadequate quantitative data available to cover the ‘breadth or the depth of the concept’ (Hoskins and Mascherini 2009: 460), and therefore more in-depth qualitative research is necessary to explore participation in informal groups, underlying values that motivate community participation, and intercultural understanding. Moreover, contemporary conceptual understandings of active citizenship are constrained by the language of status and rights, focus on the ‘doer’ or the deed, and do not explore the transcendent or ontological qualities of actions (Isin and Nielsen 2008). We draw on Isin and Nielsen’s theoretical concept, ‘acts of citizenship’ as a way of thinking of social inclusion in terms of individual and collective deeds in everyday life, when accepted norms that constrain but also constitute subjects are ruptured. As such, these acts are not understood using the language of calculation, responsibility or intentionality, but are significant in the ways that they impose obligations of answerability towards the Other. These obligations provide the condition of possibility to contest existing norms of inclusion that victimise and exclude Muslims and racialise Islam.

This chapter builds on such understandings of active citizenship to empirically and theoretically further develop the concept of social inclusion, a ‘buzz word’ (Anthias 2002: 283) in policy circles traditionally underpinned by communitarian ideals that reproduce and reinforce normative assumptions of social behaviour (Cameron 2006, Young 2006). The analysis of in-depth interviews with Muslim community leaders in St Denis, Paris and the City of Whittlesea, Melbourne,

demonstrates that when such cultural normalisation is negotiated and contested, social inclusion can begin to be seen through the lens of active citizenship rather than through social pathological discourses that racialise/victimise Muslims and hold them responsible for their own problems.

Saint-Denis has a population of 97,900 (INSEE 2009) and is located 9.4 kilometres north-east of Paris within the Seine-Saint-Denis *département*. It is one of the most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas in the Paris region with one of the highest populations of North African heritage and Arab-Muslim ethno-religious identity. The City of Whittlesea, on the other hand, is located 20 kilometres north of Melbourne, Victoria and has a population of 132,000 (City of Whittlesea 2007). It is the third most ethnically diverse area in the State of Victoria that attracts migrants from the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, and has the fastest growing Iraqi migrant community in Melbourne (Whittlesea Community Connections 2005, City of Whittlesea 2007). In Whittlesea the local municipality is proactive in developing settlement strategies, implementing multicultural programs, and providing services to meet the specific needs of ethnic minority residents, Arab-Muslims and humanitarian migrants. In St Denis, on the other hand, the focus is on the equality of civic rights for all residents (including migrants and foreigners) irrespective of ethnicity and citizenship status (City of Denis 2010).

Acts of Citizenship: Affirming Rights and Belonging

The analysis of the interviews with Muslim community leaders suggests that the struggle to affirm rights and belonging is part of everyday life in Paris and Melbourne despite government policies that focus on equality and social inclusion. In the City of Whittlesea, Muslim leaders spoke of difficulties in developing strong social bonds with people from different cultural backgrounds and dealing with the daily stress of proving their loyalty to the nation. They struggle to negotiate feelings of rage and sadness when their dress or way of life is ridiculed, they are identified as dangerous and threatening, stigmatised as terrorists (sometimes in jest), or treated with little respect in the public domain. Alya, a leader of a Muslim women's group and Asif, a leader of a youth support group draw attention to the scrutiny they encounter as part of their everyday life:

Alya: Even if you are not wearing the veil, if you have black hair and black eyes, it happened with me in Centrelink (Government office providing welfare benefits and services), they treated me very badly, after 11th September. It does not matter wearing the veil or not, just being Muslim or Arab.

Asif: It's really hard to find sometimes your friends. I can't even have a conversation without [people] mention[ing] Muslim and where my background is. I'll say that's huge.

These anti-Muslim perceptions, scrutiny, and negative feelings may be attributed to limited interactions between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians, and narrow understandings of loyalty and belonging that are motivated by suspicion. Muslim leaders often respond to this scrutiny through acts that emphasise their emotional attachment to Australia, affirm their Australian identity, and underline their rights as citizens. This was evident when they made such statements as 'I never give up, I see myself as Australian' or 'We are Australians, we are not Muslims, we're not Christians, we're not Buddhist, we are Australians. That's it, nothing else'. By identifying themselves as Australian first, leaders lay claim to the nation and contest normative meanings of Australianness that homogenise national identity by privileging Anglo-Celtic origins, Christian values and whiteness (Hage 1998, Forrest and Dunn 2006).

In St Denis, Muslims are in theory recognised as equal French citizens, though their religious and cultural backgrounds are problematic and can sometimes be perceived as threatening by the broader community. Derogatory terms such as *bougnoul* stigmatise young French-born citizens and construct them within social pathological discourses as 'the wretched of the earth' responsible for rising unemployment and insecurity. Such perceptions are underlined by Salwa, a member of a North African community group who works closely with interfaith networks, migrant groups and women's groups:

Islamophobia has been linked to immigration, to a physical appearance: If you have dark hair and are of North African type, you are a Muslim, a fundamentalist, a terrorist, and insecurity is your fault. So we have felt this very strongly, even among NGOs with whom we work, and who also want to promote diversity, people are starting to be afraid of this context.

Salwa stresses that although non-governmental organisations are committed to valuing cultural diversity, the assertion of a French identity by Muslims is seen as threatening; the cultural blindness of the secular tradition still privileges the *Francais de souche* or 'Real French'. On the other hand, such an assertion of identity enables Ahmed who works with the Islamic media to argue for political representation and question institutional norms that neglect to value the history, culture (colonial) and religious heritage of migrants, construct Islam as archaic, and render Muslims in France invisible. In the following excerpt Ahmed challenges the racialisation of Islam and its incompatibility with secular values of the French Republic:

When one is born here, you are a Muslim from this country, and not a Muslim from Morocco, North Africa etcetera, and actually it only takes some travelling to shed any illusions about this. Now once that is settled, it is all about how to read the values we hold, and this can be applied to all religions, and social justice can be read in the Koran as well as the Bible, or in secular literature. [But in France it is] as if Islam were an alien thing, and we say, but Islam comes from here, and we are the living proof of it, Islam is part of this society.

These stories by Muslim community leaders are acts of citizenship, deeds that question and affirm their rights to 'feel at home', 'feel fully French' and enjoy a liveable life. Butler (in Bell 2010) in her discussion of vulnerability, agency and plurality, argues that such speech acts have the potential to contest the norms of inclusion that cause rage or muteness. Apart from speaking out, community leaders also engage in deeds to dispel cultural stereotypes and strengthen social networks.

Acts of Citizenship: Dispelling Cultural Stereotypes, Strengthening Social Networks

In the public domain, community leaders in Australia and France engage in acts that demonstrate their obligation to provide a voice for Muslim youth who feel trapped and unable to challenge social injustices that they experience as part of everyday life. Leaders work with youth to dispel an essentialist Arab-Muslim identity and strengthen social networks of belonging. For example, Salwa, who works with French residents of North African ethnicity, emphasises the importance of the act of storytelling:

Some groups are working on recapturing this historical memory of immigration; which is what our group is also doing and we started to work on the contribution of this memory. The goal is to recognise, so we have to give a little more push to get this recognition, about the contribution of this immigration; what our parents have contributed to this country, to the construction of France, to the rebuilding of France after World War II, this was done by immigrants, and also, to promote manual labour, what our parents have built with their own hands.

Salwa encourages storytelling to dispel cultural stereotypes and empower young Muslims to affirm their rights, develop a sense of belonging, and negotiate feelings of frustration and exclusion. She underlines, however, that although this practice challenges 'historical amnesia' (Rose-Redwood et al. 2008: 161) and can be cathartic there is always the risk of exacerbating feelings of exclusion. These stories that bring to consciousness the social and economic contributions made by parents of North African youth in the post-war reconstruction of France, however, also have the potential to provide a sense of pride and belonging that is empowering. For example, Salwa underlined the role that North African community groups played in commemoration of these stories at the Museum of Immigration, an act that made the collective memory of French Muslims of North African heritage visible in the public domain. Such performative acts that draw on collective memory are beneficial because they can destabilise popular discourses that construct the Muslim presence as a major problem and a security threat, as well as alleviate the burden of an immigrant heritage that sometimes engenders exclusion and misery in disadvantaged neighbourhoods like St Denis.

In the City of Whittlesea on the other hand, Asif a member of a youth support group mentors youth from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and dispels cultural stereotypes of an essentialist Arab-Muslim identity through participation in formal and informal social networks. These networks bring together representatives from the state and local government, charitable organisations, religious institutions, and other non-governmental organisations committed to providing resources and giving a voice to disadvantaged youth, particularly recent migrants and refugees from overseas. Although the focus is on implementing programs that provide equitable access to services and essential skills, such face-to-face interactions also act as a medium to dispel prevalent cultural stereotypes. In addition to these face-to-face networks, Asif uses the local media, in particular radio programs broadcast in Australia and overseas to project a positive vision of Muslims.

I do a lot of volunteering, I do radio, not because I want to do radio, it's because no one else wanted to, no one else has been empowered, the community radio I do, and I do for my heart. I couldn't just sit here and watch my character [being depicted negatively] and have a cold drink, so I'm involved yes. So that's what an Australian is and anyone you know should be more involved in more stuff in the country.

As a Muslim Australian, Asif engages in voluntary community work to challenge cultural stereotypes that scrutinise and mark young Muslim men as dangerous and threatening. Mustafa, a member of an Arab-Muslim community group for mature aged men, on the other hand, responds differently. He takes the initiative to organise charity events and educational workshops for Arab Australians as well as service providers to address intergenerational tensions and misconceptions of Islam and Arab-Muslim culture. Mustafa organises weekly meetings in the local community centre to provide emotional support for Muslim residents from a range of countries like Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Turkey who have experienced vulnerability and exclusion living in refugee camps before arriving in Australia. He organises weekly indoor soccer competitions that provide a convivial atmosphere for Muslim men of different ethnic backgrounds. This atmosphere enables Muslims from diverse ethnic backgrounds to exchange information about access to social support services offered by state and federal government, so necessary for life in a new country.

Similar social acts of interdependence are also evident among members of a Muslim women's group that meets once a week in the local library. The group brings together mature women who have migrated from Iraq, Egypt, Somalia and Syria, some of whom are recent settlers and others who have lived in Australia for several years. The women participate in English classes, swimming and outdoor sport; activities that provides the opportunity to develop social networks with Muslims of diverse ethnicities with whom they never had an opportunity to interact before. Members of the group emphasised that one of the ways to dispel

cultural stereotypes of Muslim women prevalent in the broader community was through such social gatherings. They spoke of initiating a shared activity like cooking that would provide an opportunity for more interaction with other non-Muslim women.

Acts of Citizenship: ‘Talking Back’ to Local Government

Although community leaders in the City of Whittlesea and the City of St Denis engaged in a range of initiatives to negotiate prevailing societal attitudes that homogenise national identity and racialise Islam, they emphasised the necessity for stronger partnerships with the local municipality in this endeavour. In St Denis leaders recognised that local council was ‘way ahead of many cities’ in encouraging participation and considering cultural diversity in decisions on housing policy and cultural events. They lamented, however, the fact that in practice the focus was more on issues of socio-economic disadvantage; local government was ‘less enthusiastic’ about collaborating and providing funds for religious/cultural organisations that incorporate capacities for negotiating cultural issues within and across ethnic communities.

Salwa: Communication remains difficult, not systematic, it takes some effort to find the information we need, contacting them, meeting with them. French politicians drive the work of NGOs in certain directions. And cultural diversity is one project per year, and is funded as they define it, not as I would define it.

Mohammed: For the local government the Centre was like the City of Kabul, because they don’t know what is going on here. They don’t come to us, we don’t come to them; so when we went to see them, they were surprised, now things are starting to change, slowly and unevenly.

Despite the limited recognition by local government, community leaders endeavour to initiate partnerships that provide a voice for women, youth and the working class. They underline the importance of such partnerships in unsettling the elitist and inflexible nature of the French republican model that institutionalises Islam, ‘curb[s] North African hegemony’ (Cesari 2002: 40), and privileges men who are rich, white, and educated in the political arena.

In the City of Whittlesea, on the other hand, community members interviewed demonstrated an appreciation for formal institutional support and were less critical of local government policies and programs. Their engagement with local council is often limited to improving access to financial support and basic support services such as employment, housing assistance, health and education, the development of English language skills, and enhancing knowledge about the ‘Australian way of life’. They argued, however, for local council policies and practices that value

cultural diversity in ways that unsettle understandings of Muslims as residents with 'ways of life' and values that are un-Australian.

Conclusion

Conversations with Muslim community leaders in St Denis and the City of Whittlesea show that grassroots initiatives are important in challenging prevailing societal attitudes that homogenise national identity and racialise Islam. Therefore, although social inclusion has become a 'buzz word' (Anthias 2002: 283) in policy circles in both cities, the effects are limited if communitarian ideals, social pathological discourses, and cultural normalisation denies and represses ethno-religious difference. In this chapter we have demonstrated that when this normalisation is negotiated and contested, social inclusion can begin to be seen through the lens of active citizenship rather than social disadvantage and racial discrimination. We have drawn and built on Isin and Nielsen's theoretical concept, 'acts of citizenship', to think of these acts as performative moments of talking, storytelling, and political engagement that provide the potential to negotiate dominant norms of social inclusion.

Through an analysis of in-depth interviews with Muslim community leaders this chapter has drawn attention to political engagement among Muslims. This engagement is reflected during moments when Muslims affirm their identity and belonging, moments when they take collective action to contest cultural stereotypes and strengthen social networks, and moments when they 'talk back' to the state. This chapter has emphasised that these individual and collective acts have implications for understanding social inclusion for two reasons. First, on an individual level these moments demonstrate how Muslims claim rights to the city and the nation and contest norms of inclusion that exclude them and racialise Islam. Second, on a broader level, such acts demonstrate answerability for addressing injustices within society in ways that move beyond the negotiation of personal feelings of Otherness.

The focus on diverse voices of community leaders has implications for national and local policy agendas that focus on inclusion and cultural integration in Australia and France. The chapter builds on a large body of research that has traditionally focused on the voice of elite male leaders within the context of the politics of mosque development, particularly in Australia. By listening to the voice of 'ordinary' men and women we aimed to broaden the debate on social inclusion. The qualitative insights in this chapter have shown that in St Denis, Muslim men and women were very outspoken about the lack of government policies and the prevalence of daily practices that reinforce prejudice and discrimination. They 'talk[ed]back to the state' (Benhabib 2006: 67), were critical of national policies that scrutinised and regulated Islam as a minority religion that was threatening and un-French. In contrast, community leaders in the City of Whittlesea were more concerned about financial support and the commitment to local policies,

events, and programs that could strengthen Arab-Muslim social networks, affirm belonging and dispel cultural stereotypes within the broader community.

In terms of policy insights, this chapter makes an argument for moving beyond formal governance structures of the city – that unintentionally romanticise or stigmatise difference – and emphasises the power of grass root organisations to bring about social change. Therefore, although policies for accommodating cultural diversity in Australia and France vary, multiculturalism is a lived reality that involves the negotiation of ethno-religious difference. The French model of integration that is blind to religious and cultural difference has meant that Muslim leaders in St Denis are active citizens who engage in individual and collective action to claim rights to the city and the nation, even though this may be considered unfavourably by politicians and the French elite. On the other hand, in Australia, where government policies aim to value cultural diversity, Muslim leaders in the City of Whittlesea, appear to be less vocal in asserting their rights and often experience a sense of inclusion through participation in ethno-cultural networks.