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Amelia Johns, Fethi Mansouri & Michele Lobo

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Religiosity, Citizenship and Belonging: The Everyday Experiences of Young Australian Muslims

AMELIA JOHNS, FETHI MANSOURI and MICHELE LOBO

Abstract

Since 11 September 2001 Muslim Diasporas have emerged as objects of anxiety in Western societies. Underlying this (in)security-driven problematisation is the question of whether Muslims living in the West have the capacity to become fully active citizens while maintaining their religious beliefs, rituals and practices. This apprehension has prompted reactionary government programmes, particularly targeting young Muslims. Such responses fail to recognise the societal capacities that practising Muslims possess, including those informed by the ethical precepts of Islamic faith. This paper argues that it is timely to explore expressions of Islamic religiosity as they are grounded in everyday multicultural environments. The paper draws on survey data and interviews conducted with Muslims living in Melbourne, Australia. We take into consideration key variables of age and generation to highlight how young, practising Muslims enact citizenship through Islamic rituals and faith-based practices and traditions. The paper will draw from key findings to argue that these performances provide a foundation for exploring ways of 'living' together in a manner that privileges ethics central to Islamic faith traditions.

Introduction

Contemporary debates about Muslim Diasporas have focused on the question of whether Muslims living in the West have the capacity to be fully active citizens without betraying their religious obligations.[1] These polarising debates also engage with the question of how Muslims are able to negotiate often crude representations of Islamic piety from within an exclusionary Western socio-political context. Such representations characterise Islamic religiosity as having a transcendent orientation which conflicts with immanent citizenship practices, forms of socio-political engagement and modes of governance that normally orient citizens to the places where they live.[2] These racialised discourses, which characterise Islamic religiosity and liberal democracy as being 'immutable essences or opposed ideologies',[3] have become amplified since 11 September—and more recently with the emergence of the so-called 'Islamic State' (ISIS)—leading Muslims in the West to be cast as archetypal suspect citizens who must 'prove' their citizenship credentials in light of events that are often far removed from their religious beliefs, commitments and values.[4] This has contributed to increased marginalisation of Muslims and a more pronounced state-sponsored restriction on their basic civil rights and freedoms.[5]

In Australian domestic politics, these concerns are emerging in relation to fears provoked by allegations that some Australian Muslims are not only being recruited by ISIS to fight in 'foreign wars', but also to engage in terrorist activities on home soil. This was linked, *albeit* incorrectly, to the 2014 Sydney Café siege.[6] In addition to tough new anti-terror legislation, the Australian government has used divisive political

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rhetoric calling upon Muslim religious leaders, organisations and individuals to support new anti-terror laws, implying that their citizenship and allegiance could be cast into doubt for opposing them.[7] Muslim community leaders have expressed alarm over this rhetoric and a sense of grievance about laws that they rightfully feel may infringe their civil and political rights.[8] At the same time there is little doubt that this rhetoric will have adverse outcomes for the ways in which Islamic beliefs, rituals and values are perceived in the wider Australian society.

At the centre of these representations are claims that Islam demands blind obedience to norms and values that are incompatible with liberal, democratic citizenship and the ethical requirements of a multi-religious, multicultural political community.[9] Such claims are often made without any empirical evidence or semblance of an objective examination of how Islamic religiosity shapes civic attitudes and social responsibility vis-à-vis broader communities.[10] Instead these reductionist characterisations are too often drawn from polemical debates that use the persistent threat of religiously motivated extremism to highlight an 'incommensurable divide' between Islamic religious beliefs and secular values.[11] This paper addresses this gap by exploring the beliefs, values and practices that Muslims living in Melbourne hold as important in their everyday lives as Australian citizens and evaluates their relationship to practices and modes of 'active' citizenship.

The first section of the paper focuses on a survey carried out among 96 Muslims living in the city of Greater Melbourne over a nine-month period, from November 2013 to August 2014. The survey asked participants to self-identify their levels of engagement with Islamic traditions, rituals and practices; to discuss *where* they practiced these rituals and how engagement with religious rituals and practices made them feel towards other Muslims and towards non-Muslims as well. The second section of the paper explores in greater depth the relationship between Islamic religiosity and experiences of 'active citizenship' as these expressions are grounded in the places where Muslims live, work and engage as citizens. The concept of active citizenship will be defined more clearly in the review section of the paper, but should be taken to mean a more deeply felt connection to and participation in civil society and culture than normative (legal status, rights) definitions of citizenship account for.

In addressing questions of generational differences in practices of religiosity we examine whether deep religiosity—which we conceptualise in relation to depth and frequency of practice and belief—impedes or provides possibilities for political engagement and active citizenship among Muslim youth aged 18–24 years as a sub-category. We want to highlight the experiences of Muslim youth, first, because this age group experienced 11 September and its aftermath while still at school, in a political environment that suddenly framed them as suspect citizens. For many, this led to a re-examination of faith and religious practice, urging some to shed visible aspects of faith while others engaged more deliberately and publicly with aspects of their faith. Second, the experiences of young people are important because they, more than older generations, are the shapers of an evolving Western Muslim identity that is seeking to move away from minoritised, diasporic belonging towards deeper mainstream engagement. Third, Muslim youth are targeted by policy-makers and practitioners because they represent an optimal demographic for civic education programmes intended to bring migrant youth in line with mainstream society and its values—this is especially so in light of current draconian anti-terrorism programmes that also implicate educational institutions to work with the police to identify disengaged Muslim youth with radical tendencies.[12]

This research was designed to reframe debates on Islamic religiosity, civic engagement and citizenship in the West by focusing on young Muslims who are practising the core

elements of Islamic faith. It recognises that while Islam, from a Western perspective, is often still conceived as a 'foreign' religion, for the growing numbers of Muslims, Islam is increasingly situated in and shaped by the multi-ethnic, multi-faith and secular contexts of Western societies.

Key Theoretical Frames

Emerging theories of citizenship are informed by a pluralist ethos, encouraging active and equal participation of minority groups towards deliberations regarding the public good.[13] In particular, the concept of 'active citizenship' has emerged as a model that addresses a perceived disconnect between 'static' models of citizenship that confer legal status and rights through membership of the political community; and the capacity and agency, particularly for minority ethnic and religious groups, to claim and express those rights through full and active participation in projects that shape the society and its values.

And yet, despite a growing number of references to 'active citizenship' in youth, education and multicultural policy domains,[14] it remains a vague concept that does not have a singular definition. What *can* be deduced, however, is that there is a gradual shift away from static or passive models of citizenship defined through legal status, individual rights and responsibilities[15] towards a greater focus on *active* and *felt* participation in all domains of society. That is, active engagement not only in formal employment and political participation[16] but also equal participation in civil society and the public sphere—which may encompass making claims to differential rights or cultural preservation[17] as well as actions directed towards a 'common good'.[18]

In this study, these active citizenship practices are understood to be strongly grounded in inter-subjective encounters and 'acts' that take place in everyday life rather than in relation to abstract notions of 'values'. These embodied practices that unfold in culturally diverse spaces of local neighbourhoods and communities where participants live, contribute to our conceptualisation of *grounded religiosity*. Such religiosity is a form of participation that involves ethical responsibility and is tied up with the expanded repertoire of ideas being developed in citizenship studies. Within such an articulation of citizenship, there exists a dynamic encounter between group rights to cultural identity and preservation of cultural traditions *and* grounded encounters with culturally diverse others in multicultural urban environments, which is imagined to stimulate new civic identities, grammars and experiences of belonging.[19]

Tariq Ramadan[20] engages with these debates from an Islamic traditional perspective by advocating for a more active dialogue between Islamic conceptions of ethics, social justice and rights and evolving concepts of 'the common good' and active citizenship in Western societies.[21] He believes that the 'struggle' for human rights, equality and social justice enshrined in Islam and its core values is a source of connection and solidarity between Muslims and non-Muslims alike: 'there is no part of Muslim ritual, from prayer to the pilgrimage to Mecca, that does not emphasise—even prioritise—the collective dimension'.[22] He perceives this collective or 'universal' dimension to also be central to a Western lineage of citizenship and democracy, underlying his message that Islam and Western, liberal political traditions are not incompatible but have the potential to nourish more inclusive public spaces of the city where religious difference is encountered.[23]

The encounter between Islam and the West is increasingly taking place in multi-ethnic, multi-religious Western cities in ways that are often highly visible and produce both contest and conviviality.[24] Such encounter is also situated in and increasingly shaped

by novel socio-political and historical contexts that no longer fit with older conceptions of citizenship that demand loyalty to a static concept of the national political community.[25] Rather, under conditions of globalisation, the composition of the global Western city reflects a deepening of the social reality of cultural and religious diversity, and the presence of more fluid identities that may conceive of citizenship as a process of community engagement and 'collective mobilisation activities' that exceed the nation-state.

In *Finding Mecca in America*, Muhacit Bilici describes the challenges that Western Muslims face in negotiating citizenship rights and belonging in an environment often hostile to these goals, but he also highlights the increasingly active and peaceful contributions Muslims are making to American civic and political life, at an institutional level and grassroots level.[26] He particularly cites the explosion of interfaith dialogue and new creative practices of Muslim citizenship and belonging (i.e. Muslim comedy) which actively insert Muslim signs of identity into urban and popular culture.[27] In Australia, scholarship highlighting the challenges faced by Muslims to become fully active citizens has been particularly critical of policies which, in the aftermath of 11 September, targeted Muslim youth for civic education intended to bring them in line with mainstream society and its values.[28] The scholarship highlights the shortcomings of this approach. This is especially the case in relation to the reality of young people's modes of civic engagement, which are typified by openness to difference, befitting a multicultural social environment, rather than obedience to mono-cultural values.[29]

Importantly, these and other studies envision how the interaction between an Islamic religious framework and a dynamic multi-faith, multicultural environment encourages Muslim subjectivities which are open to and nourished by respect for diversity as a central component of Islamic *and* liberal democratic conceptions of social justice and 'the common good'.[30] This paper draws upon these concepts and frames but uses a comparative, mixed-methods research design to develop a greater evidence base for examining connections between Muslim religious beliefs and practices, connection to place and community and active citizenship practices in Melbourne.

Methodology

This paper is based on findings from an Australian Research Council Discovery Project involving research partners from Deakin University and City University New York (CUNY). The research incorporated a mixed-methods approach with the aim of bringing together diverse Muslim voices from three cities (Melbourne, Australia; Detroit, USA; and Lyon, France) to explore the possibilities that exist to view Islamic rituals and faith-based community participation not merely as 'habitual acts of reverence and obedience'.[31] Rather, they are also affective and grounded performances that provide the possibility for belonging and political engagement. The article focuses on Melbourne, Australia where 96 surveys, 49 interviews and 5 focus groups were conducted with self-identified 'practising' Muslims from a broad cross-section of demographic and immigrant contexts.

Melbourne was chosen because, after Sydney, it is the most culturally diverse city in Australia and has the second largest city-based Muslim population,[32] making it larger than the metropolitan average. And yet despite this, Muslims comprise less than 3% of the total population.[33] On this basis, focusing on Melbourne provides some insights into tensions between everyday experiences of religiosity in culturally and religiously diverse urban spaces and persistently negative forms of representation in the discursive

sphere. It will also highlight how such tensions are negotiated and how they impact on Muslims in their daily experiences of belonging.

The Study Sample

The study employed purposive sampling techniques to connect with and recruit participants from diverse religious communities and organisations. Therefore, the results are not generalisable, as they do not necessarily survey the attitudes of those Muslims who Akbarzadeh and Roose describe as the 'silent majority' of cultural or non-practising Muslims.[34] However the surveys collected, in combination with in-depth interviews and focus groups do provide empirical insights that highlight connections and tensions between deep Islamic religiosity, active citizenship and political engagement in specific urban settings.

Organisations involved in the recruitment process included youth, women, Islamic, interfaith and social service networks. From there, a snowballing technique was used and participation was increased to include Muslim business owners and members of non-religious community organisations. To address bias inherent to the snowballing sampling method, purposive sampling allowed for a more balanced recruitment approach with participants enlisted from a broad spectrum of religious affiliations, sects and ethnic backgrounds, contributing to a diverse range of religious perspectives, particularly which came across in the qualitative data.

Data Collection

We used a randomised, online survey which was accessible through the project website but was also distributed through stakeholder organisations and mailing lists. Survey questions were divided into four sections. The first section elicited information on age, gender, birthplace, ethnic heritage, immigration status, length of stay, language, educational qualifications, employment status, income and self-assessed degree of religiosity (on a scale ranging from 'I am a practising Muslim' to 'I am cultural Muslim'/'I am Muslim only by birth'). It should be noted, however, that measures of religiosity (such as the one used in the survey) have been contested on the basis that religious commitment and expression is multidimensional (encompassing ideological, ethical, spiritual and performative dimensions) and cannot be reduced to ritualised performance.[35] Acknowledging these limitations, the survey incorporated open text responses to encourage participants to describe in more detail how core Islamic rituals, beliefs and practices shape their values and sense of belonging to the communities they live in. The remaining sections asked about levels of engagement with the local neighbourhood and experiences of belonging and forms of political participation. The final section asked whether performances of religiosity correlated with participants' understandings of citizenship as a practice that orients citizens towards the communities they live in and engenders contributions towards 'the common good'.

Interview questions and focus groups were incorporated into the project to triangulate survey responses and to engage more deeply with perceived correlations between religiosity, community engagement and active citizenship. Interviews were conducted and recorded by members of the research team in private and confidential settings within various community locations. The focus groups that are relevant to this paper were conducted and recorded with mixed gender and same gender cohorts from five participating organisations. The interviews and focus groups, like the online survey, asked questions

related to levels, frequency and intensity of religious rituals and practices, involvement in local and national political and civic activities, and asked participants to think about how religion does or does not shape their concept of citizenship and political participation.

Profile of Participants

Almost half, or 49%, of the participants were in the 18–24 years age category, which is consistent with Australian census data (the median age of Muslims living in Australia is 26 years of age, the youngest of all religiously affiliated groups[36]). As we were interested in examining connections between age, religiosity, civic engagement and political participation, we found that comparing 18–24-year-olds and 25 years and over provided a more accurate generational analysis. In terms of gender there was a roughly even split across the survey sample (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

There were more participants of Arabic-speaking background than any other migrant group, which may be accounted for by the use of a research assistant from Iraqi background. However, there was also good representation of African, Pakistani and Turkish background participants. Depending upon suburb of residence, some migrant groups were represented in larger number. For example, one target area of the research was the suburb of Dandenong, which has recently experienced a large migration of Hazara Shia Muslims from Afghanistan who have entered the country on humanitarian visas. The number of Hazara Muslims in Dandenong was therefore statistically significant but this was not replicated across the entire Melbourne sample (Figure 2).

There were almost twice the numbers of Australian-born participants in the 18–24 years age category than overseas born (Table 2).

Survey and Interview Findings

Age and Religiosity

The first finding to emerge from the survey data was the occurrence of higher rates of young people identifying themselves as practising Muslims in comparison with those in the 25 years and over age groups. This also related to depth and frequency of practice, which was measured by observance of the five pillars of Islam (*Shahada*, *Salat*, fasting during Ramadan, *Zakat* and *Hajj*) but also mosque attendance, religious festivals, Qur'an reading groups and observation of dress and dietary requirements (Figure 3). As the latter constitute non-obligatory practices, the higher number of young Muslims engaging in these practices was significant.

However, it should be noted that many of the older participants in the study were recruited from outside 'educational' institutions (i.e. Muslim Student Associations) so

Table 1. Age and gender of survey participants.

Age	Female		Male		Total	
	f	%	*f*	%	*f*	%
18–24 years	23	53.5	20	46.5	43	100
Over 25 years	24	45.3	29	54.7	53	100
Total	47	100	49	100	96	100

Note: Here and in subsequent tables '*f*' stands for frequency and '%' stands for percent.

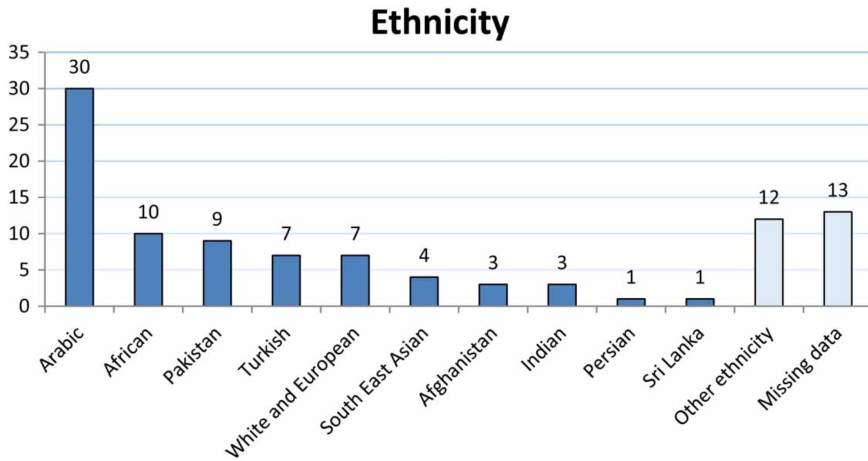

Figure 1. Ethnicity of survey participants.

one would expect religiosity levels to be higher among those more formerly engaged with Islamic associations.

While the survey did not ask specific questions about reasons for religious observance, interview and focus-group responses did provide further insights. In particular, of the 17 18–24-year-olds who participated in interviews and/or focus groups, religiosity was widely perceived to be subjectively negotiated and different levels of practice and observance of faith was discussed, including a variety of positions on issues which effect presentation of a religious self in public space, such as the wearing of religious garments or modesty, more broadly defined, for women; and whether participants felt that engaging in religious practices, such as prayer, in public spaces was appropriate or not. A number of interesting negotiations between religiosity and public or civic engagement were discussed. However, there were some common themes that surfaced which we wish to highlight here.

Significantly, just over half of participants described 11 September as a formative experience, which led them to engage more deeply and critically with their religion and their rights and responsibilities as citizens. This finding supports Turner, Cesari and

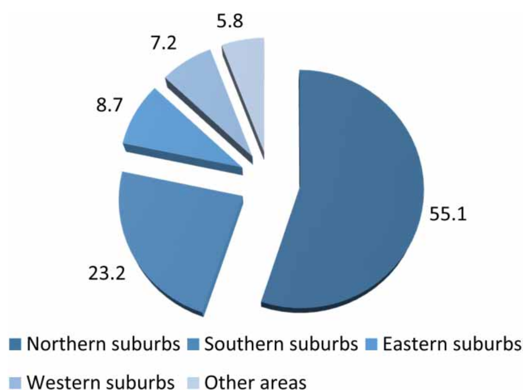

Figure 2. The spatial distribution of participants in Melbourne Area (valid percentages).

Table 2. Age and country of birth of survey participants.

Age	Australia *f*	Australia %	Overseas *f*	Overseas %	Total *f*	Total %
18–24 years	28	65.1	15	34.9	43	100
Over 25 years	19	35.8	34	64.2	53	100
Total	47	100	49	100	96	100

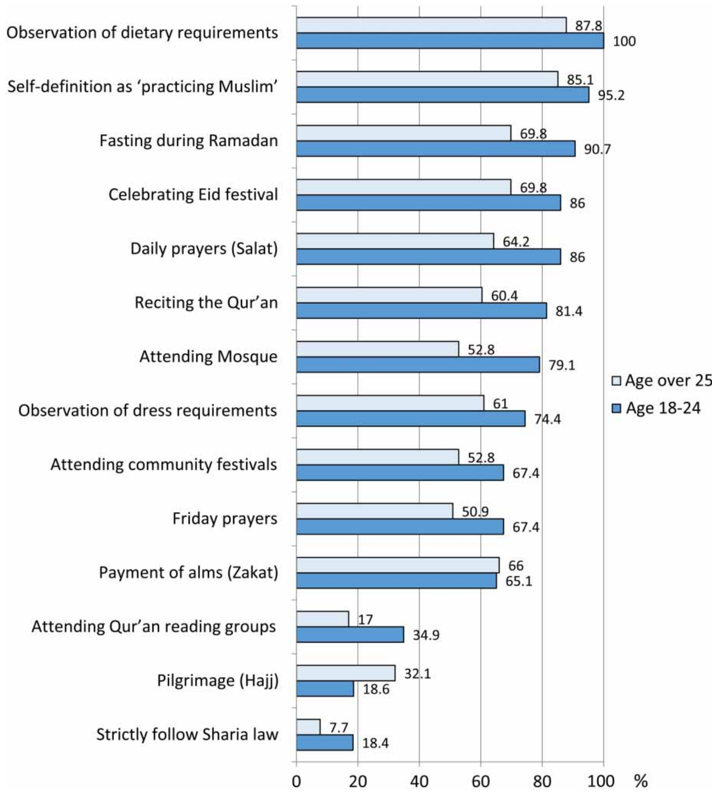

Figure 3. Age and religiosity of survey participants (bars indicate the percentage of participants within the age group who engage in the religious practice).

others, whose research has highlighted increasing forms of piety among young Muslims in response to national or global events and controversies such as 11 September.[37] And yet while these processes of 'pietisation' are sometimes theorised as a rejection or challenge to Western, liberal models of citizenship[38] there is also evidence that since 11 September young Australian Muslims are embracing religion as a means to communicate a more public-spirited and civic-minded identity.[39]

This is reflected upon by Sharif, a 21-year-old Shia Iraqi refugee who settled with his family in the regional town of Cobram before relocating to Melbourne and attending high-school in Broadmeadows; and Samira, an 18-year-old Sunni Pakistani-born young woman who migrated to Australia in her teenage years and went to high school in the regional town of Geelong, before moving to Melbourne to attend university.

Both described 11 September as a turning point that increased personal experiences of racism and harassment at school, but which also oriented them towards learning more about their religion and engaging more visibly and publicly as Muslim citizens. For example, Samira spoke of her decision to wear *hijab* against her family's wishes as a response to the ignorance and hostility her schoolmates displayed towards Islam and Muslims in the aftermath of 11 September:

> **Samira:** It was because of the reaction that I got in the aftermath of 9–11 […] because I was from Pakistan, and people think 'Oh my God there's Taliban there' and stuff like that. But that's what really made me strong, and I said 'you know what, this is me … and if you're going to hate me I don't care. I started wearing it [*hijab*] in high school in year 7.

She described her initial reasons for wearing *hijab* to be political 'in the sense that it was born out of 9–11 and what happened', but she has since embraced wearing the garment as an article of her religious commitments. Rather than restricting her from experiencing deeper engagement with the civic community, Samira explained her choice to wear *hijab* as an expression of 'feminism within', indicating an active negotiation with liberal conceptions of civic rights, responsibilities and struggles, and the identities that contested notions of democratic citizenship have produced:

> **Samira:** The first response is it's to please God, Allah, and secondly it's out of choice … because all sisters have different reasons. My reason is that I would want people to like me for who I am, for my personality and intellect, rather than how my hair looks […] So for me it's sort of like a feminism within.

For Sharif, his experiences after 11 September also stimulated a reflexive process of inquiry about faith, which began with experiences of racism and Islamophobic prejudice:

> **Sharif:** when September 11 happened I was being called a terrorist and I was 11 or 12 years old. What do I know about terrorism? I wasn't even praying at the time 'cause I still didn't know that much about my religion and it was so hard … I got into fights, I actually failed grade 4 because it was such a distraction and I felt everyone was against me.

Initially, these experiences led Sharif to withdraw from his religious and cultural identity and try to 'fit in' by playing Australian Football League (AFL) football and cricket instead of soccer, and adopting a 'bogan' accent. Sharif describes this time as one when he was most disconnected from himself, despite being involved in 'mainstream' community activities like being part of a football club. It was only when he moved to Broadmeadows and went to a school with a large number of Arabic-background students that he began to feel 'comfortable in his own skin'. This led him to research aspects of his religion, and the sect that he belonged to, as well as what it meant to belong to Western society and live in Western culture.

Upon closely inspecting the beliefs, traditions and practices associated with Islam, principally focused on equality, social justice, peace and taking care of neighbours (as embodied in the practice of fasting and charitable service during Ramadan) Sharif arrived at the view that Islamic principles and practices were easily integrated with the ethical, moral and social imperatives of liberal citizenship. This common ground gave him confidence to engage with a broader public regarding issues of his religious identity and practice:

> **Sharif:** During September 11 … we were kids at the time so we did not have the intellectual knowledge to be like, 'hey, this is not what's going on', we didn't have that so it was so hard, but I look at it now and that's what gives me confidence … because I've had that experience and I've gone through it, it gives me experience now if I was in the city and someone asked me, 'hey, you're a Muslim blah, blah', I'll say, 'yeah I'm a Muslim, so what?'. I guess I'm in my own skin so it's safe.

As these examples show, by engaging deeply with questions of faith after 11 September Samira and Sharif grew in confidence to engage with the broader community as practising Muslim citizens, who were focused on shaping inclusive communities.

Another theme to emerge from the survey and interview responses was the view that participating in interfaith dialogue and community events enabled young Muslims to embody values and principles informed by religiosity, while also opening up an avenue to become more connected and actively involved citizens. For example, interfaith was viewed by participants as a means to connect with other religious and civil society organisations, to address misconceptions about faith and to make a contribution towards conceptions of the public good. This was expressed by Samira and her friend Maryam, a Kenyan-born 18-year-old woman of Pakistani cultural heritage, who said of the interfaith activities she participated in at the university Islamic society: 'it's a good way to break down barriers and remove misconceptions'.

These views were broadly supported across the youth interview and focus-group sample, and directly expressed as a form of civic participation that had grown in popularity since 11 September. Although not in the target age group, Alia described the motivation that 11 September provided for Muslims to engage more deeply with liberal conceptions and traditions of citizenship, without betraying their religious beliefs and values:

> **Alia:** Well I think Interfaith is something that we forgot to do as Muslims and unfortunately it took a tragic event like 9–11 to realize people are afraid of us and that's because they don't know us and that's because we probably haven't really opened our doors to each other. So I was involved with just maybe one or two programs before that, but after September 11th I just kind of exploded in really trying to do as many programs as possible […] So I guess the silver lining in the tragedy that was 9–11 is, it did help a lot of Muslims kind of cling on to their religion, or at least also to question it as well. Is it really as bad as people show? Why do people show bad and how can we show good?

This new dimension of religiosity uses the instruments of cultural citizenship, as well as normative, liberal expressions of civic engagement (involvement in community organisations, interfaith-focused activities, etc.) to engage more actively in communities. One survey participant broke this connection down even further to explain the way that religious ethics, beliefs and practices shape deep civic and community engagement, despite ongoing fear and mistrust of Muslims generated by negative public discourses:

> **A58 (male):** Through dialogue, understanding and service we seek to enact Islamic values of compassion, sharing and pluralism. Voluntarism is integral to the daily lives of many Muslims […] Muslim Australians volunteer avidly in their local communities—local sports clubs, charities, the rural fire service, refugees, community centres as well as globally with the Red Cross, Habitat for Humanity, Doctors without Borders and more. Yet, surrounding the

range of desires among Australian Muslims to participate in Australian civic life is an ambiguous discourse on Islam in the Australian public sphere.

These descriptions are significant in the context of this study because it demonstrates how Muslims conceive and embody the nexus between religiosity and citizenship. In particular, the larger study tries to ascertain whether and how descriptions of 'lived' Muslim religiosity depart from or challenge representations made in the Western public arena, where adherence to religious moral duties and legal prescriptions is depicted as an obstacle to fulfilling duties and responsibilities associated with citizenship. The findings discussed below particularly speak to and contribute new knowledge to this area of research.

Religiosity as a Model of Engagement and Belonging in Culturally Diverse Cities

What might lead a young Pakistani-born Australian female (Samira) to seek out religious organisations at university after having had hardly any Muslim friends at school, to wear *hijab* against her father's wishes and to publicly engage and build relationships with both Muslim and non-Muslim faith organisations as a self-proclaimed 'flag bearer' for Islam? Two key findings emerged through survey and interview data which may explain the sense of confidence and capacity for deep civic engagement and participation that religiosity encouraged for Samira and other participants, particularly in the midst of often hostile representations in the public sphere which in turn were projected on participants by non-Muslim community members. These were highlighted by responses to a question which asked participants to think about how their religion shaped forms of civic engagement and local place attachment (see Figure 4).

As the data in the figure above show, young people in the study found that their religion helped attach them to the places they lived in more so than older participants. In the interviews and focus groups, this finding seemed to reflect a deeply felt sense of connection between younger participants and the predominantly multicultural ethos and environment of Melbourne. This was not a uniform experience, and almost all young participants we interviewed had experienced racism and isolation either at school or in the broader community, however strong feelings of connection and belonging were commonly expressed in encounters which took place in multicultural environments. And significantly, these encounters with diversity tended to be enriched rather than diminished by Islamic religious beliefs and commitments to diversity and living with difference.

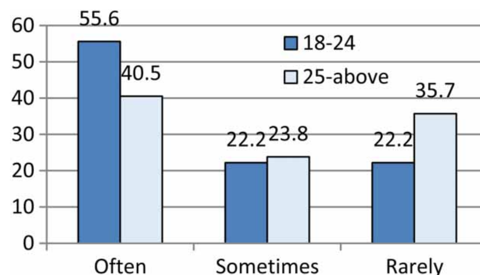

Figure 4. 'As a Muslim, do you feel that your religious and cultural beliefs and practices help to attach you more strongly to your local neighbourhood and community?'
Note: Bars indicate the percentage of respondents within the age group.

For example, Saffiya, an Iraqi-born Sunni woman, 22-years-old, who came to Australia as a refugee in 2005, spoke of an ambivalent sense of connection to Melbourne. As with Sharif and Samira, Saffiya experienced racism at the high school she attended, which was located in the largely Anglo-Australian and affluent Eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Although living in Broadmeadows, she started attending the school, an exclusive private school, after receiving a scholarship. While at school she experienced feelings of exclusion on the basis of her race and religion, to the extent that she felt 'like a colour'. However upon attending university, Saffiya started to experience stronger feelings of connection and belonging to the city as an open, multicultural space which felt like it was a part of 'the world', a feeling that allowed her to reflect on her high school as a space that self-excluded itself from the demographic and cultural reality of Melbourne:

> **Saffiya:** [cultural diversity] doesn't only define Australia, it defines the world–it's a worldly thing, not just an Australian thing and that's why the school [she attended] is always such a surprise because it feels like they're not part of the world […] it's a huge disadvantage for someone that goes there, other students, and the staff because it doesn't feel like it's Melbourne.

Saffiya later spoke of how being part of the culturally diverse mix of the city: 'at university, on trams, on buses, when you walk down the street' shaped her religiosity in ways that opened up new possibilities of viewing Muslim faith not from a solely Islamic framework but through a different lens, i.e. identifying strong connections between the connective principles of Islam and democratic institutions, human rights frameworks, civil rights, etc.

Significantly, Saffiya spoke about how religious and human values were not often reflected in the experiences she had at school, even though it was an Anglican school. For example, she explained that during the coalition-led invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, members of the Australian Defence Forces spoke at her school assembly about Australia's military involvement in Afghanistan as though there was not the remotest possibility that a student attending the school may have family in these conflict zones. These experiences negatively impacted on her feelings of belonging and reflected a set of values that were not inclusive or respectful of diversity. In response, Saffiya sought out civic organisations that organised anti-war protest rallies and experienced a feeling of connection to a large group of people expressing their dissatisfaction at Australia's leadership on issues such as involvement in foreign wars:

> **Saffiya:** I think you can have those views as a human, not just as a person that came from the part of the world I came from […] it was nice to be a part of this huge group that was yelling for the same cause.

Mustafa, a 24-year-old Palestinian-born Sunni Muslim experienced living in many countries in his early childhood but never in his 'homeland'. This made him generally ambivalent about normative concepts of citizenship which related to a national homeland and fealty for a nation-state. On the other hand, he felt that being Muslim was a constant source of belonging which connected him to Melbourne, and particularly the principles of multicultural citizenship. Mustafa perceived his religious upbringing to provide a strong connection to the principles of respecting diversity and difference that he identified with Australian society, and Melbourne more specifically:

> **Mustafa:** In terms of being Muslim, it's been the one thing that I have consistently. So I was born in the United States and then I lived in Jordan, then I came

here. So although those environments change, the society has changed, the only thing that has been consistent with me is religion and Islam. I think in terms of whether it affects how I feel, in a positive or a negative way … I think being Muslim in a multicultural ethnic society like Australia is quite easy. I don't feel conflicted … I suppose at the end you take the best of both worlds, so you take the religious upbringing from there and you bring it here. More so you take the understanding that you've built here [of cultural diversity and multiculturalism] … that is what kind of person I feel like I am.

In a formal sense, Mustafa had multiple citizenships that meant nothing to him in terms of cultivating a particular cultural identity or sense of belonging. However, this meant that his religion, as a language and a universal set of ethical principles, was the one constant, an anchor for his identity that grounded him and gave him a feeling of confidence, connection and belonging to the world. This sense in which Islamic religiosity fosters connections to and respect for multicultural environments, and vice versa, how multicultural environments foster and support religious difference was further elaborated upon by Amira, an Australian-born woman of Pakistani cultural heritage, who articulated specific connections between feelings of belonging and living in a multicultural environment that accommodated the needs of diverse faith communities:

Amira (25–30): When it comes to practising the faith, um, you know, we pray five times a day, so it's being able to have access to prayer spaces as well […] a lot of places are accommodating these needs, especially in Melbourne. Because people understand the importance of multiculturalism and cultural faith diversities. So you've got people opening their doors to accommodate those particular needs. And I think that's a core value of what's happening in Melbourne.

These links between Islamic rituals, beliefs and practices and notions of active citizenship were made more explicit in the last set of questions where Qur'anic references and examples from the Prophet were discussed by survey and interview participants in a manner that explored connections between religious rituals, beliefs and laws, and feelings of active and engaged citizenship. These primarily focused on: respect for diversity, the rights of others and social justice, as well as the requirement to respect the environment in which one lives, all of which were enshrined in the moral teachings of Islam (see Figure 5).

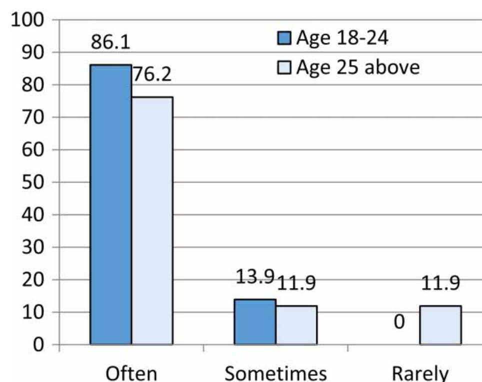

Figure 5. *Religiosity and citizenship*. Q: 'As a Muslim do you feel that your religious and cultural beliefs and practices help to make you a better citizen?'
Note: Bars indicate the percentage of respondents within the age group.

Q1. What Is It about Being a Muslim that Makes You a Better Citizen?

This question, an open text response in the survey, was specifically designed to elicit thick descriptions of the types of connections (if any) that participants made between Islamic traditions, embodied rituals and practices and ideas associated with 'active citizenship'.

Among the 18–24 years age group, responses to this and a later question asking participants to describe specific religious practices and/or beliefs that, for them, encouraged good citizenship (see responses to Question 2) were grouped together and coded around three recurrent themes. The first referred to principles of *equality and respect for diversity* grounded in Islamic teachings and examples from the life of the Prophet Mohammed, which correspond with liberal conceptions and values of multicultural citizenship (15/43 respondents); the second, referred to general *welfare* principles embodied by core principles and practices in Islam that also correlate with active citizenship and civic engagement practices (10/43 respondents); the third refers to *Islamic laws and rules* which encourage 'good deeds' and require vigilance towards protecting the rights of family, neighbours, animals and being responsible for the environment, etc. (22/43 respondents).

> **A92 *(male)*:** 'Kindness to other brothers in humanity'.
>
> **A14 *(female)*:** 'Islam promotes tolerance, acceptance and community welfare strongly'.
>
> **A57 *(female)*:** 'It makes me a better neighbour and environmentally aware as there's an Islamic element to it. E.g. being kind to neighbours, looking after and being responsible for the environment.'

In addressing the first cluster of responses, two survey respondents spoke about a passage in the Qur'an which makes reference to God creating different races and tribes so that people may know one another and work together peaceably (see Qur'an passage 13:49):

> **A58 *(male)*:** Muslims' duty is bound to work for the common good, not only with fellow Muslims but all those in society […] The Qur'an says that God, in an act of beneficence, made peoples different so they may know one another and vie with one another in good works.
>
> **A13 *(female)*:** Islam is a religion that encourages the doing good to people of all Nations, tribes and religions. Chapter 25 of the Holy Qur'an speaks about leadership as a quality of the believers. Hence, practising Muslims are required to participate in any way that they possibly can.

These responses highlight a strong ethical principle of Islam, enshrined in the following verse from the Qur'an (13:49), which speaks of divine intent behind the diversity of communities, tribes and nations:

> O mankind! Behold, We have created you into nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another. Verily the most noble of you in the sight of God is one who is the most deeply conscious of God.

This verse is addressed to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and highlights both internal and external diversity as foundations for intercultural relations and understanding. The Qur'an emphasises that the inherent worth of every individual, irrespective of cultural

or ethnic background, is judged by the single evaluative standard of *taqwā* (piety and moral integrity). Membership of a particular race, tribe or nation does not inherently attribute any privilege in relation to personal worth.[40] These passages show that the moral and religious obligation to respect diversity and the rights of neighbours in Islamic belief shapes a sense of responsibility and belonging to the multicultural community, which is enabled by citizenship rights.

While these teachings may foster ideas which encourage love and respect of neighbours, Muslim and non-Muslim, other responses highlighted the way Islamic practices shaped active engagement to improve the lives of neighbours. In particular, the emphasis on charity, volunteering, and looking after the welfare of others in society were emphasised as a key foundation for Muslim active citizenship practices and comprise the second cluster of participant responses. The active dimension to these practices was further highlighted by responses to the last question:

Q2. Are There Particular Religious Beliefs or Practices that Encourage Good Citizenship?

> **A82 *(female)*:** 'Volunteering and helping out the community, being kind to neighbours […] are encouraged in Islam'.
>
> **A29 *(female)*:** 'The way of life that Islam teaches is one that encourages self-actualisation and peace of mind for the person as a whole entity. It also teaches respect of elders, to help the needy and the sick, values, respect for order/environment/nature, equal treatment for all.'

Nor are these religious, moral and ethical behaviours additional to the obligatory practices of Islam, rather at least three of the five pillars (i.e. *zakat*, Ramadan and *hajj*) encourage spiritual and ethical training that are linked with specific duties and practices of citizenship, namely to help the poor and needy.

Shari'a **Law and Active Citizenship Practices**

Perhaps, the most striking finding of the survey analysis—which brings together the focus on the grounding of theological beliefs in the Western environment through integration of practice—was the central role of Islamic jurisprudence (or *shari'a* law) not only to the practice of religion and piety in the West but also to conceptions of moral citizenship.[41] This comprises the third cluster of responses, which linked citizenship more purposively to aspects of Islamic (*shari'a*) law. This is surprising, particularly because *shari'a* law has become a controversial topic in the Western public sphere, with many commentators claiming that *shari'a* law represents a threat to the Western political community, and the freedoms enshrined in liberal, democratic, political and legal systems.[42]

In particular, Western objections to *shari'a* law make reference to the way it dissolves secular boundaries between public and private spheres, and demands that a separate set of laws to domestic laws be followed. In most cases, anti-*shari'a* sentiment responds particularly emotionally to the introduction of deeply morally conservative religious laws (particularly related to criminal justice and punishment) in some Muslim majority countries that deny basic rights and freedoms. Such depictions according to Tariq Ramadan dismiss the more common application of *shari'a* which is a personal endeavour to be faithful to God by doing right by oneself and others, therefore acknowledging rights to one's spouse, children, elders, neighbours, even care for the environment and the just

treatment of animals.[43] These ethical orientations are considered by Ramadan to provide values and rites for Muslims to live by in any social context, and, in their common application in Western societies, are considered compatible with other laws, which acknowledge and enshrine personal and human rights.[44]

Further, Ramadan considers the sources, beliefs, laws and practices that make up *shari'a* to be the foundation for Muslims as they attempt to deepen their engagement with Western societies, building strong civic and social bonds based on common love for humanity, social justice and human rights:

> 'the path to the spring,' the *Shari'a*, teaches us to integrate everything that is not against an established principle and to consider it as our own. This is, after all, the true universality of Islam […] It should not be otherwise in the West. Here, too, it is a matter of integrating all the dimensions of life that are not in opposition to our terms of reference and to consider them completely our own (legally, socially, and culturally). We must clearly overcome the dualistic vision and reject our sense of being eternal foreigners, living in parallel, on the margins or as reclusive minorities, in order to make way for the global vision of universal Islam that integrates and allows the Other to flourish confidently.[45]

Again, while not representative of the views of everyone in the study, the third cluster of responses highlight these connections particularly as they relate to providing a foundation for rights towards others and obligations to the 'laws of the land', demonstrating a moral and religious imperative to obey the rule of law.

> **A2 *(female)*:** There are many religious practices and beliefs that encourage good citizenship. For instance, a significant part of Islamic law is abiding by the laws and responsibilities of the government under which you live, unless it requires one to go against obligatory Islamic teachings or promotes oppression or tyranny.

> **A58 *(male)*:** Islam has always stood for communities […] Muslims are not permitted to bring harm to their communities. The Prophet Mohamed, peace be upon him, warned his followers against harming their neighbours.

> **A51 *(female)*:** When talking about *shari'a* law I don't believe it is that far removed from domestic law anyway. But there are ways that you are meant to treat people that are automatically at the back of your head … Obviously the way you treat elders, the way you treat children is a part of my faith … Certainly praying is a constant reminder to not hurt people and that is something I carry around with me.

This finding challenges dominant readings of Islamic religiosity and *shari'a* law, and particularly the assumption that Islamic religiosity poses a barrier to active citizenship and democratic political participation. As the following figures shows, the majority of participants practised a combination of domestic law and *shari'a* law (as a set of rules and norms which shape personal or individual ethics, behaviour, etc.) and found no contradiction between their practice and adhering to and respecting domestic law (see Figure 6). Respondents in the age group 18–24 years reported higher levels of observation of *shari'a* law and a stronger perception that religion made better citizens (see also Figure 5).

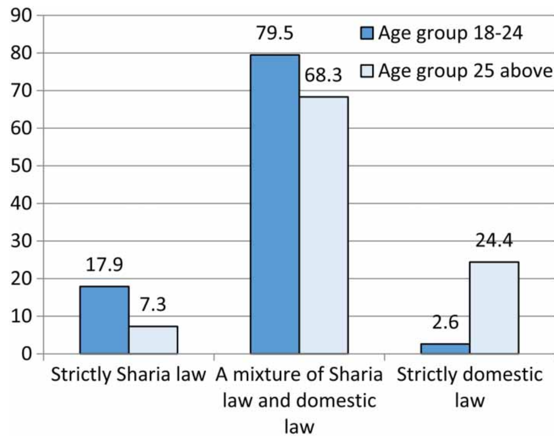

Figure 6. Q: 'To what extent you conduct your daily life in accordance with s*hari'a* law?'
Note: Bars indicate the percentage of respondents within the age group.

Conclusion

This paper has been drawn on research conducted in Melbourne, Australia, which shows that there are 'universal' and 'grounded' dimensions to expressions of Muslim religiosity in the multicultural urban milieu of Western cities.

In exploring this, the paper has drawn upon three key findings, which demonstrate connections between experiences of religiosity and active citizenship. On the one hand, our focus on the depth, frequency and intensity of religious practice showed how Islamic religious practices nourish the ethical and spiritual life of participants in a manner which demonstrates not only strong correspondence with liberal democratic models of civic virtue, but also that these practices affirm a commitment to improving social conditions in the places and communities they live in. Moreover these rituals were considered by many participants to embody a 'lived' practice of *shari'a* in which 'universal' principles of love, tolerance, acceptance and justice are grounded in a duty to nurture all of creation by obeying the laws of the land, respecting one's neighbour by granting them rights, and working towards a 'common good'.

The focus on *shari'a* as a key resource for participants' navigating their duties as Muslims while also providing a guide for more active engagement with the liberal democratic polity was unexpected but demonstrates that Islam is no longer a 'foreign' religion to Western liberal democratic societies but, despite constant challenges and tests, Muslims continue to practise their religion in an integrative manner that encourages active participation and engagement rather than its opposite.

The forms of *action* discussed (respecting and caring for neighbours, the land and the laws of the land) have clear correlations with liberal principles of political participation and citizenship, and were found to be a major motivation for young people participating in the study, for whom religious identity, particularly since 11 September, had been thrust into the public gaze for all the wrong reasons. This instilled a sense of responsibility to shift away from religiosity as a form of private spiritual reflection and moral obedience, and to instead conceive of faith as a set of civic and political relationships and actions which allowed young Muslims to test the boundless aspects of their faith by building relationships with the non-Muslim, multicultural *demos*, and staking a more active claim as citizens of the Western city.

The paper has also shown that Islamic conceptions of morality, generosity and responsibility nourish new religiosities that are dynamic, engaged and which importantly do not require Muslims to betray the sources and the framework of their faith. Rather, Muslims in the multicultural city of Melbourne frequently draw on an Islamic ethics of generosity and responsibility to argue for a greater respect for ethnic and religious diversity that could contribute to a stronger foundation for social justice claims in the Australian context.

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