

The Call to ‘Live Peacefully’. Islamophobia, ‘The New Normal’ and the Christian Faith.

Abstract: The task of a Christian public theology is to participate in the desire to nurture a civil society. To this end one of its tasks in contemporary Australia is to address incidences of Islamophobia. In order to do so it must address those organizations that lay claim to the Judeo-Christian heritage of Australia for purposes of campaigning against Islam. It is time to come to terms with ‘the new normal’ of cultural and religious hyperdiversity and for faiths to live peacefully with one another.

Keywords: Islamophobia, public theology, ‘the new normal’, terror, ‘creeping blight’.

The Quest for Definition

One of the conventions of a Christian public theology is to discern the signs of the times. It seeks to respond to issues that arise in the public domain and investigate the prospect of a civil society and its various associated themes of the common good, social cohesion and the flourishing of all. In terms of a social responsibility the Christian tradition in Australia has been most inclined to address the climate emergency, the integrity of democracy, the plight of refugees and those detained on off-shore sites, and the well-being of the poor, the disabled, and the disadvantaged. It has only occasionally engaged in matters to do with Islamophobia in a way that lies beyond participating in Abrahamic conferences and the annual round of Iftar meals. There has been relatively little theological response to a raft of incidents which include the Cronulla race riots (2005), political dog-whistling, and numerous neighbourhood objections to the building of Muslim schools and mosques in ‘our’ suburb.

This muted stance from a faith that shares some stories with rival tellings is part of the fabric of a society in which the rhetoric of Islamophobia has emerged. The exact moment when this much contested word was first used in Australia is difficult to determine. It first appeared in the English language in 1923 but did not acquire a common currency in the United Kingdom until the last decade of that century. It was then put into popular usage by the landmark report of the Runnymede Trust in 1997.¹ Whether it migrated to the other side of the world at that time is doubtful. Nahir Kabid’s historical study of the presence of Muslims in Australia through to the close of 2002 discloses anti-Muslim sentiment in response to the Gulf Wars, 9/11, the Bali bombings and several gang rape crises. Her

¹ Gordon Conway, (chair), *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, (London: Runnymede Trust, 1997); also, see: Farah Elahi and Omar Khan, eds, *Islamophobia: Still A Challenge for Us All: A 20-th Anniversary Report*, (London: Runnymede Trust, 2017).

descriptive language is one of perceptions, backlashes and the intensity of such, and the practice of stereotyping.² Kabid does not employ the term Islamophobia. Its first use in Australia would appear to have been later.

That this absence of the word until more recently should be the case lends itself to a rather awkward debate over definition. What is the relationship between anti-Muslim sentiment and Islamophobia? The latter term suggests a fear as distinct from simply being in opposition or exercising some critical distance. Being anti-Muslim appears to refer to a posture, a position, the possibility of an action and reaction. Islamophobia evokes more of a feeling, an emotive predisposition, an atmosphere that permeates an organization or society. The phobia side of the word distinguishes it from anti-Semitism which includes the dimensions of bigotry, prejudice and discrimination but does not necessarily carry the presentiment of fear.

It would seem as if the origins of that fear lie in incidents and rumours of terrorism and terrorist cells. The momentum then builds in such way that the religion which lies behind that fear is made culpable. It is declared to be 'other' and 'alien'. Its foundational scriptures are declared to be responsible for those acts of violence; the difference between those who are moderate and extreme is ignored. And, it is not too difficult then to indulge in what has been described as the 'raceing of Islamophobia' where the distinctions between race, culture and religion are conflated into one another.³

The sensitivity that surrounds the very idea of Islamophobia was made evident in the recent failure (16 May, 2019) of the British Parliament to accept a formal definition.⁴ All of a sudden 'fear of Islam' became bound up with cries of racism, a social evil, scaremongering, policing and talk of 'perceived Muslimness'.⁵ It faltered on the grounds submitted by the chair of the National Police Chiefs' Council: it was reckoned that the proposed definition might cause confusion with regards to policing Islamophobic offences and pose a threat to

² Nahir Kabid, *Muslims in Australia: Immigration, Race Relations, and Cultural History*, (Abingdon and New York: Kegan Paul International), 2005.

³ Claire Alexander, 'Raceing Islamophobia', in Elahi and Khan, eds, *Islamophobia: Still A Challenge for Us All*, (2017), 13-15.

⁴ <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CDP-2019-0086>

The definition advanced in the report read: 'Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness'. For the Parliamentary debate, see: 'Definition of Islamophobia', <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2019-05-16/debates/CF834846-65CA-46CD-B955-CDEF42BAFB26/DefinitionOfIslamophobia>, [accessed, 26 June, 2019].

⁵ 'Government Rejects Islamophobia Definition ahead of Debate', BBC News, 15 May 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-48283337>, [accessed, 14 June 2019].

‘legitimate free speech on the historical and theological actions of Islamic states’.⁶ Some Christian faith-based organizations complained that it might prevent legitimate theological critique of Islam.⁷

The Creeping Blight

There have been no equivalent such parliamentary debates in Australia. That is despite how the shooting of Muslims at worship in Christchurch (New Zealand), thus in another country, led to media reflection on what kind of society can produce this type of gunman. The alleged shooter livestreamed the attack at two separate mosques: what provoked the media response was the fact that the killer is from Grafton, New South Wales – and is thus an Australian. The subsequent opinion pieces surveyed the messages released in the course of the political history of this new millennium. Jason Wilson argued that Islamophobia is ‘practically enshrined in public policy in Australia’.⁸ The noted columnist Waleed Aly declared that it would be ‘dishonest’ to say ‘that I am shocked’.⁹

The intensity of the media response had been further fanned by the comments made by Senator Fraser Anning who blamed the shooting on Muslim immigration. Anning’s position was closely aligned with his former party leader, Pauline Hanson, who had previously described Islam as a ‘disease’ against which Australia needed to be ‘vaccinated’.¹⁰ Anning was disowned by parliamentary colleagues for his ‘ugly’ and ‘disgusting’ claims that blamed victims and subsequently lost his seat at the next election. His extremism of a far-right and white supremacist nature, nevertheless, is a symptom of the vulnerability of Islam in a multicultural Australia which has a well-researched history of racism.¹¹ Writing in *The Diplomat* Conor McLaughlin noted that Anning had called for a ‘final solution’ to Muslim

⁶ Nesrine Malik, ‘It’s Not Difficult to Define Islamophobia: So Why Does Britain Struggle with It So Much’, *The Guardian*, 19 May, 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/19/define-islamophobia-britain-struggle-tory-party-police-prejudice>>, [accessed, 26 June 2019].

⁷ Marcus Jones, ‘Christian Leaders Question New Definition of Islamophobia’, *Premier*, 15 May, 2019, <https://www.premier.org.uk/News/UK/Church-leaders-question-new-definition-of-Islamophobia>, [accessed, 24 June, 2019].

⁸ Jason Wilson, ‘Islamophobia is Practically Enshrined in Public Policy in Australia’, *The Guardian*, 17 March, 2019: < <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/17/australians-are-asking-how-did-we-get-here-well-islamophobia-is-practically-enshrined-as-public-policy>>, [accessed, 20 June, 2019]

⁹ Waleed Aly, ‘The Most Dishonest Thing to Say Would be That I am Shocked’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 March, 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/oceania/the-most-dishonest-thing-would-be-to-say-that-i-m-shocked-20190316-p514q2.html>, [accessed, 20 June, 2019].

¹⁰ Amy Remeikis, ‘Pauline Hanson Says Islam a Disease Australia Needs to “Vaccinate”’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 March, 2017: < <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/pauline-hanson-says-islam-is-a-disease-australia-needs-to-vaccinate-20170324-gv5w7z.html>>, [accessed, 20 June, 2019].

¹¹ Gwenda Tavan, *The Slow Death of White Australia*, (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2005).

immigration.¹² For a Christian public theology the most dismaying claim with reference to the Christchurch shootings was his citing of Matthew 26:52 – ‘all they that take the sword, shall perish by the sword’ – as a justification for the terrorist attack on Muslims.¹³

Now the question becomes to what extent are Anning’s ‘disgusting’ and ‘appalling’ statements representative of a much larger constituency.¹⁴ Here some discretion and a distinction need to be made. In terms of the former the most obvious response is the intensity of ‘fury’ and ‘parliamentary censure’ Anning was accorded. The extent to which he generated popular antagonism was only too evident in his being ‘egged’ by a seventeen year old (Will Connolly) at a media conference for a right wing rally in Melbourne.¹⁵ Anning’s views and his timing of such statements were widely deemed to be inappropriate. It is at this point that the distinction needs to be made. It is best expressed through a question. Had the public domain in Australia been primed over a period of time in such a way that enabled Anning to feel as if he was expressing what many others thought – albeit they in a more reserved or complicit manner? Was Anning *sui generis* – one of a kind – or not?

Writing some time prior to the Anning episode Linda Briskman had already described Islamophobia in terms of a ‘creeping blight’ through to its becoming ‘fully institutionalized’ in Australia. The action that lay behind her claim was a series of raids undertaken in September 2014 by federal and state police on households in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane suspected of harbouring terrorists. It was one act inside a sequence of a ‘train of events’ which left her wondering ‘what next’.¹⁶ The train of events in question included a media frenzy, statements made by the Prime Minister of the time, Tony Abbott, and the introduction of further counter-terror legislation. In response to the threat of home-grown terrorism *via* attacks by cells and lone wolves Briskman referred to these measures as ‘gestural and draconian’. They were in keeping with warnings issued in the wake of 9/11 to be ‘alert and not alarmed’. Now this creeping blight was fast becoming an index of a ‘paradigm shift’ (according to an ‘unnamed security official) which ‘signals a trajectory

¹² Conor McLaughlin, ‘The Islamophobia Epidemic in Australia’, 29 March, 2019:

<<https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/the-islamophobia-epidemic-in-australia/>>, [accessed, 20 June, 2019].

¹³ Michael F. Bird, ‘Fraser Anning: Don’t Drag Jesus into Your Hatred’, *Eternity*, 16 March, 2019; <<https://www.eternitynews.com.au/opinion/fraser-anning-dont-drag-jesus-into-your-hatred/>>, [accessed, 20 June, 2019].

¹⁴ Latilka Bourke, “‘Disgusting’”: Morrison Slams Senator’s Comments on Christchurch Massacre’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 March, 2019, <<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/disgusting-morrison-slams-senator-s-comments-on-christchurch-massacre-20190315-p514oj.html>>, [accessed 20 June, 2019].

¹⁵ Paul Sakkai, ‘Fraser Anning Lashes Out After He Was Egged by a Teenager’, 16 March, 2019, *Sydney Morning Herald*, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/fraser-anning-lashes-out-after-he-was-egged-by-teenager-20190316-p514ss.html>, [accessed, 21 June, 2019].

¹⁶ Linda Briskman, ‘The Creeping Blight of Islamophobia in Australia’, *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 4:3 (2015), 112-121 at 112-113.

where Islamophobia is no longer relatively latent but has become entrenched and normalised'.¹⁷ The occasional statement made by political leaders that these measures were aimed at crimes not religions failed to address how the accompanying rhetoric allowed for the possibility of 'collateral damage' mediated through a 'rise of community venom at Muslims'.¹⁸

Protecting 'Australian values' and the Judaeo-Christian tradition

Read from this perspective Anning's offensive statement may not seem quite so odd as first might be imagined. Over the past decade there have emerged a number of organizations that have an explicit anti-Islam agenda as part of their platform. These formal movements tend to the preserve of small minorities and are sometimes readily dismissed. That is not an option for a Christian response to the nurture of a civil society. The reason for such is because it is not uncommon for these societies to lay claim to the Judeo-Christian tradition. The failure to address their rhetoric can lead to the potential co-option of the Christian faith in the service of the promulgation of fear and leave ordinary members of churches unclear as to what to think about their faith's relationship to Islam. The matter is further compounded when otherwise high profile churchmen express opinions to do with Islam which resonate with the discourse of those on the far right. For those who bear the name Christian Anning's employment of Matthew 26:52 is a worrying sign.

In terms of particular societies there are those which maintain that they are only concerned with the spread of ideas, education and Australian values. There are others that are more overtly self-consciously political. Through to the present there has been no real attempt made by any denomination to counter the arguments proposed in a concerted and cohesive way. It is likely that only Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party and Fred Nile's Christian Democratic Party are most likely the most well-known - primarily because they hold seats in state or federal parliament and attract a degree of media reporting. That default position is likely to play down how a populist sentiment is nourished by organizations which, for the most part, fly under the radar of ecclesiastical surveillance. One of the critical tasks of responding to Islamophobia is to name such societies and describe their activities and thus disempower their relative neglect. It is time for a public theology to describe the activities of the Q Society of Australia, the Australian Liberty Alliance (now renamed Yellow Vest Australia) and Rise Up Australia as well as the better known political parties.

¹⁷ Ibid., 113.

¹⁸ Ibid.

The Q Society takes its name from its being established in the Melbourne suburb of Kew back in 2010. It has attracted the support of a handful of Liberal-National coalition politicians; it has held training programs, mounted protests against halal certification and the prospect of a mosque being built in Bendigo. The Q Society has sponsored a number of guests and lectures, including the visit of the noted Dutch anti-Islamist, Geert Wilders. It describes itself as ‘Australia’s leading Islam-critical organization’.¹⁹ The Australian Liberty Alliance is, in effect, the political wing of the Q Society. It shares some personnel including those who exercise positions of leadership. At the heart of its range of policies it vows ‘to stop the Islamization of Australia’.

Both of these organizations have been able to adopt an anti-Islam agenda on the basis of ‘Australian values’ and freedom of speech. It is a plausible stance in the light of how often politicians from mainstream political parties use this kind of terminology. The motto of the Q Society is quite explicit: it commits the society to ‘Upholding Australian values’ which is then further defined in the appropriate literature as standing in opposition to a ‘nihilistic multiculturalism’.²⁰ In a similar vein Yellow Vest Australia insists that migrants come to Australia in order to experience ‘the justice, freedom and prosperity only Western civilisation creates’.²¹

The Q Society’s opposition to Islam is based upon what it perceives to be a religion that ‘considers our laws as deficient’ and ‘advocates the violation of basic human rights’. The Society claims to be asking ‘the questions our media is afraid to ask’ and reckons that it is seeking to defend the rights of women and children.²² It stands against the ‘stealth’ of a ‘civilizational *jihad*’. Through its endorsement of the work of American anti-Islamists, David Horowitz and Robert Spencer, it dismisses claims of its being Islamophobic: the very term Islamophobia is said to play upon irrational fears and those who express a critical stance on Islam – like these societies – are deemed to have committed a ‘thought crime’ emanating out of a ‘totalitarian future’.²³

The recourse to freedom speech and Australian values is bound up with a particular rendering of Islam. Here another distinction can be made. In this instance these two societies did refer back to the Judeo-Christian heritage of Australia (which needed to be protected)

¹⁹ The Q Society of Australia, <<http://qsociety.org.au>>, [accessed, 26 June 2019].

²⁰ The Q Society of Australia, <http://qsociety.org.au/australian_values.htm>, [accessed, 26 June, 2019].

²¹ Yellow Vest Australia, <<https://www.yellowvest.org.au>>, [accessed, 26 June 2019].

²² The Q Society of Australia, <<http://qsociety.org.au/about.htm>>, [accessed, 26 June 2019].

²³ David Horowitz and Robert Spencer, ‘Islamophobia: Thought Crime of the Totalitarian Future’, (Sherman Oaks: David Horowitz Freedom Center, 2010), <<http://qsociety.org.au/Islamophobia.pdf>>, [accessed 21 June, 2019].

but it was not emphasized as much as Rise Up Australia. The tendency rather was to follow a long-established practice in western thinking which is to demonize Islam. The Q Society has made a distinction between the mosque, on the one hand, and a church and a synagogue, on the other. Islam is deemed to be a ‘political religion’ which has not undergone any comparative reformation as have the other two Abrahamic faiths.²⁴ Its threat to international good order and freedom is mediated through a reading of the Caliphate, *sharia* law and *jihād*. Speaking on behalf of both societies their president, Debbie Robinson, has argued that there is no moderate Islam. It is ‘a wolf in sheep’s clothing’ that begins with ‘a subtle push’. It is global terrorists who best represent the hatred and violence which is to be found in the teachings of the Qur’an and the Hadith.²⁵

This passion for the Judeo-Christian heritage of Australia and antipathy towards Islam is even more powerfully represented in the policies of the Rise Up Australia Party which has close links to the Catch the Fire Ministries. Both are currently led by the Revd. Danny Nalliah.²⁶ As with the Q Society and Yellow Vest Australia the rejection of ‘Islamic doctrine and ideology’ is woven into a platform that is hostile to multiculturalism. The objective is to ‘keep Australia Australian’ and a place which is ‘multi-ethnic, one culture’.²⁷ It seeks to protect ‘Aussie’ jobs, ownership, way of life and customs. There can be no place within the Australia values for Islam for the Qur’an is believed to be ‘oppressive and incompatible with the Australian way of life’ nor ‘dual legal systems’ – that is *sharia* law. In order to preserve this one culture the party’s immigration policy is exclusionary on faith-based grounds: the boats must be stopped because ‘eight out of every ten refugees are Muslims’.²⁸

The same sorts of concerns mark Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party. It is the only party ever to have released a specifically ‘Islam policy’ for the sake of a forthcoming election. It did so on 26 April, 2016.²⁹ One Nation is not a specifically Christian political party. Its Islam policy, nevertheless, begins with the claim that ‘Australia is a country built on Christian values’. That seemingly confessional claim that is made for political purpose is most stridently advocated by the Christian Democratic Party. Its aims are designed to uphold and advance a ‘Christian Commonwealth’, ‘our Christian Constitutional Monarchy’ and

²⁴ Horowitz and Spencer, 4-8.

²⁵ Mike Secombe, ‘Inside the Sick World of the Q Society and the Australian Liberty Alliance’, *The Saturday Paper*, 25 February - 3 March, 2019.

²⁶ Rise Up Australia, <<http://riseupaustaliaparty.com/our-leader/>>, [accessed, 25 June, 2019].

²⁷ Rise Up Australia, <https://riseupaustaliaparty.com>, [accessed, 25 June 2019].

²⁸ Rise Up Australia, <<http://riseupaustaliaparty.com/our-policies/multi-cultures/>>, [accessed, 25 June 2019].

²⁹ One Nation, <http://www.onenation.com.au/current_affairs/islam-policy-released>, [accessed 2 September 2016].

‘Christian Westminster System of Government’. It seeks to ‘support and promote recognition of our Christian heritage by uplifting the Judeo/Christian ethic’ while promoting the ‘true welfare of the people of Australia through all legislation being brought into conformity with the revealed will of God in the Holy Bible with special emphasis on the Ministry of Reconciliation’.³⁰

These principles lie behind the comments made by the Revd. Fred Nile on behalf of the Christian Democratic Party on a raft of overseas incidents of terror: - the Moscow theatre hostage crisis (2002), the Charlie Hebdo and Jewish kosher market attacks in Paris (2015) and various ISIS acts of atrocity. With regards to asylum seekers Nile has argued that priority must be given to the most vulnerable who are then deemed to be the Christians in Libya (the Copts)³¹ and Syria.³² On occasion Nile has called for a moratorium on Muslim immigration to Australia: ‘Australians deserve a breathing space so that the situation can be carefully assessed’. Nile’s undifferentiated fear of Islam (and its ‘dangers’) is masked in his conviction that Christian refugees will be those ‘whom can readily assimilate and embrace the Australian way of life’.³³ Those Muslims who were critical of this ‘logical’ argument were subsequently dubbed ‘bigots’ who should be ‘ashamed’ of their failure to discern how the conflict in the Middle East is a ‘religiously driven war’ and persecuted Christians are the most vulnerable minority.³⁴

The anatomy of practice and thinking that lies behind Islamophobia in Australia is thus found to be expressed clearly in these extremist movements. It is an amalgam of ‘Australian values’, a reading of personal freedoms, concern over immigration and a belief that multiculturalism has failed. It is animated by an often undifferentiated understanding of Islam where terrorism is equated with a true rendering of the Qur’an – though, to be fair, Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party has more recently conceded that ‘not all Muslims are terrorists’.³⁵

³⁰ Christian Democratic Party, <<http://www.christiandemocraticparty.com.au/about-the-cdp/cdp-national-charter/>>, [accessed, 27 June 2019].

³¹ Christian Democratic Party, <<http://www.christiandemocraticparty.com.au/media-releases/libya-fred-nile-condemns-coptic-massacre-by-islamic-is-terrorists-criticises-u-s-foreign-policy-in-north-africa-calls-for-coptic-inclusion-in-refugee-program/>>, [accessed, 27 June 2019].

³² Christian Democratic Party, <<http://www.christiandemocraticparty.com.au/media-releases/rev-fred-nile-refugee-crisis-australia-must-give-priority-to-those-most-at-risk-the-christians/>>, [accessed, 27 June 2019].

³³ Christian Democratic Party, <<http://www.christiandemocraticparty.com.au/media-releases/rev-fred-nile-refugee-crisis-australia-must-give-priority-to-those-most-at-risk-the-christians/>>, [accessed, 27 June 2019].

³⁴ Christian Democratic Party, <<http://www.christiandemocraticparty.com.au/media-releases/rev-fred-nile-only-logical-that-christian-refugees-must-be-a-priority/>>, [accessed, 27 June 2019].

³⁵ One Nation, <<https://www.onenation.org.au/policies/radical-islamic-terrorism/>>, [accessed, 27 June 2019].

Set against this background Anning's claims – and his invocation of Matthew 26:52 – are not as idiosyncratic as might first be imagined. They fall within one extreme of Briskman's 'creeping blight'. It would be a serious error to imagine that Australia as a whole is inclined towards Islamophobia, however. Here the evidence supplied through an empirical 'survey of perceptions' carried out by Riaz Hassan and Bill Martin from the University of South Australia is apposite. They invoked the sociological principle of social distance which is a metric designed to discern levels of empathy and prejudice. Hassan and Martin concluded that 10% of Australians declared themselves to be highly Islamophobic, 20% were undecided while 70% reckoned themselves to have a very low-level of such fear and apprehension.³⁶

Constructing a Christian public theology in a time of Islamophobia

These statistics should not be taken to be a means of diminishing the threats posed by occurrences of Islamophobia. The task of a public theology is indeed one of hearing the voice of the vulnerable and those most at risk. In this instance personal records exist through Mariam Veiszadeh having felt 'compelled' to set up the Islamophobia Register Australia back in September 2014. She herself had been a victim of such abuse and subsequent on-line bullying and death threats. Through the leadership of Derya Iner an interdisciplinary report was published which classified the nature of Islamophobic incidents while placing their incidence inside descriptions of the Australia cultural and religious context.³⁷

What is especially striking about this report is the number of young women wearing hijabs who were targeted. Rather than be terrorist suspects these women were waiting for the children outside schools or shopping in malls. Some of the taunts were extreme and were suggestive of acts of violence likely to occur outside schools or child care centres. The mothers were placed in an invidious position seeking to deal with aggressive threats and provide security and stability to young children. The report rightly attracted national and international attention.

What was rather striking about the personal accounts in this confronting report was the absence of any overtly religious goading. It is conceivable on that basis that the Christian churches – and their theologies – might not feel the need to make any response. As a matter of fact no denomination in Australia has issued a formal statement condemning Islamophobia.

³⁶ Riaz Hassan and Bill Martin, *Islamophobia, Social Distance and Fear of Terrorism in Australia*, (Adelaide: University of South Australia, 2015), 6, < https://www.unisa.edu.au/siteassets/episerver-6-files/global/eass/mnm/publications/islamophobia_report.pdf>, [accessed, 14 June, 2017].

³⁷ Derya Iner, ed, *Islamophobia in Australia*, (Sydney: Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilization, 2016).

There are no equivalents to the statement made by National Catholic Advocacy Organisation in June 2016.³⁸ The problem with this relative silence is one of consequences. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks in New York, the Canadian theologian, asked the question to what extent was the Christian faith complicit in the humiliation of Islam and thus the emergence of terrorism. The specificity of his critique depended upon the recourse to a theology of glory at the expense of a theology of the cross. Hall argued that a theology of glory lent itself too easily to a triumphalistic version of the Christian faith. His ancillary argument held that a people's belief system will eventually work itself out in practice. In a position that was unusual at the time of 9/11 Hall wondered what might be the consequences of a triumphalist Christian on Muslim self-worth.³⁹

With regards to Islamophobia there are implications for a Christian public theology emanating from Hall's positioning. It assumes that there is a raft of Christian perspectives on such matters in the public domain at any given time: some may be detrimental to the flourishing of others and the prospect of a civil society. Hall's privileging of a theology of the cross recognizes that injustice suffering and vulnerability are the potential outcomes from the exercise of power. That theological reading might then be placed alongside the way in which the quality of thin relationships determines the fabric and well-being of civil society. Here the language of thin relationships refers to the way in which people who do not share common experiences, a common identity, and may only encounter occasionally (if at all) the other under discussion relate to one another.

For such a public theology in Australia there is an imperative to counter the highly visible comments and stands made by prominent churchmen. It can matter what theological signals leading churchmen provide for their denominations. What is said or reported can strengthen the plausibility structure of the need to fear Islam in a time of terrorist threat – or, such can possess a more eirenic intent consistent with what is known about the importance of nurturing those thin relationships.

³⁸ Franciscan Action Network, 'National Catholic Advocacy Organisations Statement on Islamophobia', <https://franciscanaction.org/article/national-catholic-advocacy-organizations-statement-islamophobia?utm_content=buffer7ebe&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer>, [accessed, 20 June, 2019]. the Uniting Church in Australia has released a 'hot election brief' on an inclusive society, <<http://unitingjustice.org.au/election2016/item/1179-an-inclusive-society>>, [accessed, 20 November 2016], and made submissions on the right to freedom of religious observance, <<http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/human-rights/submissions/item/1103-religious-freedom-inquiry>>, [accessed, 22 June, 2019].

³⁹ Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003), 1-7.

Of particular importance in this respect were the well-publicized views of Cardinal George Pell and his call for his fellow Catholics to read the ‘Koran’ for themselves. Pell’s lecture on ‘Islam and Us’ was delivered in the United States while he was still Archbishop of Sydney. It was reported widely in secular, academic and church media.^{40 41 42} With regards to Muslims Pell made a distinction between ‘genuine friends, seekers after truth and cooperation’ and those ‘who only appear to be friends’.⁴³ Pell sought to dispel the belief that Islam was a religion of peace. He declared the Koran to be riddled ‘with invocations to violence’.⁴⁴ Pell further argued that the revelatory status of the Koran as ‘coming directly from God, unmediated’ did not allow for ‘critical analysis’ and theological development. Through his rendering of the Koran as a static text Pell was effectively calling into question the prospects of Islam’s impact on democracy and its ‘economic and cultural development’. Pell further argued that ‘claims of Muslim tolerance of Christian and Jewish minorities were largely mythical’.⁴⁵

The insistence on freedom of speech which lies behind the far right’s opposition to Islam allows for Pell to make such claims; it enables him to have a critical regard to Islam and for that not to be deemed to be a subliminal form of Islamophobia. The dilemma his views on ‘Islam and Us’ present is more of a cumulative nature. He has strung together a number of discrete points of contention in a way that creates an apparently coherent argument emerges. From the perspective of a public theology each one of those threads needs to be disentangled and subject to an interdisciplinary enquiry which also allows for Muslim to speak for themselves. Such an alternative is necessary for the sake of the common good given the significant shifts in the nature of Australian society and the place of religion within. How to responding to Islamophobia thus should be set up within a more comprehensive reading of what is happening in Australian society in general.

The New Normal

⁴⁰ Linda Morris, ‘Pell Challenges Islam – O Ye, of Little Tolerant Faith’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 May 2016; ‘Islam Not A Tolerant Religion, Says Pell’, *The Age*, 5 May 2006.

⁴¹ For example, see: ‘Pell Says Catholics Should Read the Koran’, *CathNews*, 4 May 2006; <http://cathnews.acu.edu.au/605/29.html>;

⁴² George Pell, ‘Islam and Us’, *First Things*, June 2006; <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2006/06/islam-and-us>

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3-5.

Writing as a sociologist of religion Gary Bouma has identified what he describes as the ‘new normal’ in the Australian institution of religion.⁴⁶ Here the word institution is not being applied to how individual faiths, religions and denominations organize themselves. It is a sociological category that is designed to explain how religion *per se* is established in a particular political or geographic entity. In this respect it is similar to how the economy or the judiciary function in a nation. In this instance Bouma was noting how the religious landscape of Australia had altered in the aftermath of changes made to the country’s immigration policy during the 1970s and the relative failure of the secularization thesis. The latter had held sway since the 1960s. It had then been imagined that if anyone was religious, the faith most likely adhered to was Christian, followed by Judaism. The common assumption had been that, in the course of time, even these religious practices would fall away before the acids of modernity and secularism.

In the intervening years between then and now there has been a marked deepening of agnosticism, atheism and what has been called ‘apatherianism’. There are several ways in which that process can be represented. The first is by way of census figures. There has been marked decline in the percentage of those who describe themselves as Christian and a corresponding rise in those who have elected to endorse the previously unrecognized category of ‘no religion’.⁴⁷ There has also been a proliferation of literature in the tradition of Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), Christopher Hitchens (*God is Not Great*) and Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*). These writers are English and American but their writings are readily available in book chains throughout Australia. They are perhaps more well-known than their Australian counterparts, most notably Phillip Adams (*Adams vs God: The Rematch*) and Warren Bonnet (*The History of Australian Atheism*).⁴⁸ It is now claimed that the prospect of the intergenerational transfer of religious belief and practice is increasingly unlikely.⁴⁹

In a similar vein the prestigious Boyer Lectures for 2005 delivered on National Radio serve as an example of a contemporary Christian concern for mission and evangelism. The theme for the five lectures given by Peter Jensen, the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, was

⁴⁶ Gary Bouma, *Being Faithful in Diversity*, (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2011).

⁴⁷ At the 2016 census 30.1% declared themselves to have no religion; the number who declared themselves to be Christian was 52.1%. In 1966 the figures read: Christian 88.2%; no religion 0.8%. See, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170919010053/http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Religion%20Data%20Summary~25>, [accessed, 14 June 2019].

⁴⁸ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, Philip Adams, *Adams v God: The Rematch*, Warren Bonnet, ed, *The History of Australian Atheism*,

⁴⁹ Gary Bouma, ‘Religion in Australia: What are the Implications of ‘None’ being the New Normal?’, < <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/religion-in-australia-what-are-the-implications-of-none-being-th/10094576>>, [accessed, 14 June 2016].

dedicated to ‘the future of Jesus’. Jensen self-consciously set the context as one of where the ‘Christian’ Jesus had been cast as anonymous presence in the dominant culture: Jesus had seemingly become a ‘footnote in history’. The outline of his life and ministry and the confessions made concerning him in the light of his crucifixion and resurrections were now not so well-known.⁵⁰

The discussion concerning Islamophobia is not exempt from this secular and indifferent realism. Hidden away in those titles above are significant critiques of religion in general. The sub-title to Gitten’s work has to do with how ‘religion poisons everything’. It lends itself to the rather condemnation of religion and fails to discriminate within religions. It is a way of thinking which can create an over-easy suspicion of the other: in matters of Islamophobia the practice readily becomes one of identifying terrorist attacks carried out in the name of ISIS, the caliphate, Al Qaeda elsewhere with all Muslims, including those resident in Australia.

Jensen’s Boyer Lectures also illustrate a further aspect of the problem. It is true that Islam first came to modern Australia with the Afghan cameleers in the nineteenth century.⁵¹ The case can also be made for an Islamic presence before the Christian faith through the early encounters between indigenous peoples and Macassar trepanners.⁵² That history does not alter a widespread ignorance with regards to Islamic belief and practices. This dearth of extant knowledge is such that little or no exception was taken to Jensen’s core thesis: the aim was to explore what was Jesus’ future ‘in Australia’. The lectures made no reference whatsoever to the prophetic role of Jesus / Isa in the Qur’an. One of the lectures was also broadcast on the evening of the outbreak of the Cronulla race riots.

The secular disposition of the public sphere can make it difficult to respond to the emergence and growth of Islam in Australia and its popular reception. The default position quickly becomes one of the need for integration, a summons to tolerance and, as the Cronulla riots evinced, a mix of a call for law and order with some dog-whistle politics.

Towards the end of 2018 the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, for example, ‘sparred’ with Muslim leaders over their failure to ‘take a lead’ in response to an act of terror and ‘letting their communities down’ as a consequence. It was time for them to speak up. There was little in the way of examining why writers further afield – like Todd Green – have argued

⁵⁰ Peter Jensen, *The Future of Jesus: Does He Have a Place in Our World*, (Sydney: ABC Books, 2005).

⁵¹ Regina Ganter, ‘Muslim Australians: The Deep Histories of Contact’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 32:4 (2008), 481-492 at 490-491; Janak Rogers, ‘When Islam Came to Australia’, BBC Magazine, 24 June 2014, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-27260027>>, [accessed 14 June 2016].

⁵² Ganter, ‘Muslim Australians’, 482-484.

why it may not be right to ‘ask Muslims to condemn terrorism’.⁵³ Green was well aware of how such calls play into a sense of all Muslims being ‘presumed guilty’. He was responding to a comment made by Donald Trump in Florida, but doing so, mindful of the observation made by Abraham Joshua Heschel that ‘words create worlds’.

‘Live peacefully’ with one another.

Writing in his *Australian Soul* at the turn of the millennium Bouma observed how much more religious and spiritually diverse Australia had become. The category of religion is flourishing but not in a way that had previously been organized. In the midst of increasing religious pluralism (existing alongside a deepening secularization) has emerged this ‘new normal’ of hyperdiversity. The signs of the times are such that now members of different faiths and religions should learn how to ‘live peacefully’ with one another.

That advice is not, of course, as simple and straightforward as the secular state’s accent on tolerance might assume. The Christian faith and Islam share a long history of inherited competition and conflict stretching back to beyond even the first Crusade of the late eleventh century. There has been a long-standing occidental practice of demonizing Islam and regarding it as a heresy. In terms of the typology proposed by Alan Race the dominant response of the Christian tradition has been one of exclusivism rather than one of inclusivism or pluralism.⁵⁴ It envisages an understanding of the Christian faith which is liable to brook no rival and which may see the other as a false religion. It is a position which, when expressed in its most rigid form, could create a substratum of opinion which is either indifferent to injustices suffered by another faith – or, indeed, lend itself to overt intolerance.

The role that a Christian theology might play in reducing anti-Muslim sentiment – and thus Islamophobia – in contemporary Australia has scarcely been explored. The inter-religious witness and practice has often been one of sharing hospitality, expressions of a common humanity and now and then engagement with common problem. The theological task has been relatively neglected and yet its importance cannot be underestimated. In the

⁵³ Todd Green, *Presumed Guilty: Why We Shouldn’t Ask Muslims to Condemn Terrorists*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018).

⁵⁴ Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Other Religions*, (London: SCM Press, 1983); *Interfaith Encounter: The Twin Tracks of Theology and Dialogue*, (London: SCM Press, 2010). *Thinking About Religious Pluralism: Shaping Theology of Religion For Our Times*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015); Alan Race and Paul Hedges, *SCM Core Text: Christian Approaches to Other Faiths*, (London: SCM Press, 2008); Tony Bayfield, Alan Race, and Ataullah Siddiqui, *Beyond the Dysfunctional Family: Jews, Christians and Muslims in Dialogue with Each Other and with Britain*, (London: The Manor House Abrahamic Dialogue Group, 2013). For an accessible critique of Race’s typology, see: Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Eerdmans, 3rd edition, 2014), 314-346.

service of a civil society there is need for an educational programme whereby members of the church become familiar not what it is like to be on the receiving end of Islamophobia; it is time for a public theology to make more widely known the fuller range of typologies to do with the Christian faith engages with other religions. It is likewise time for a public theology to emphasize its bilingual vocation and work towards a deeper understanding of Islam within the churches. To this end programmes to do with scriptural reasoning whereby participants from both faiths explore their scriptures together with reference to themes and persons common to both.

This theological task is still in its infancy. It is established in Hall's argument that theological beliefs have consequences in practice. It recognizes the important of contesting the arguments of far right political organizations that to caricature Islam; this theological vocation is designed to take seriously Bouma's 'new normal' Australia and acknowledge the Islamic past of Australia.

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