

We need mellow Muslims and moderate imams

Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, The Australian, December 16, 2015

Recently we have seen calls for a reformation of Islam. This requires a reality check and some basic facts being instilled into the debate. Let's also consider the debate in the context of our diverse Australian society.

The Koran is the holy scripture of Islam. It comprises a collection of revelations by God to the Prophet Mohammed from AD610 to AD632. The word Koran means "that which is recited" because the revelations received by the Prophet were repeated verbatim by those around him and eventually put into written form. It is written in Arabic using allegorical and prescriptive approaches and, like other religions, there are various approaches to its interpretation.

Islam does not have a hierarchy of clergy. Unlike other world faiths, there are no intermediaries between God and the individual. There is no overarching authority to establish or forbid religious practices or interpretation of the Koran. An imam is a person who leads his congregation in prayer. He is not a priest. There are no ordinations, sacraments or rites that only a religiously qualified person can perform. Imams may be married and have families.

This differs from other religions. In Islam, a person with sufficient religious knowledge can act as an imam. An imam can be appointed by his local mosque and where there is no imam a member of the congregation can fulfil the role.

Simplistic calls for "revolution", "change" or "reform" fail to take into account these complexities, especially the lack of hierarchy and authority. A more realistic and achievable approach lies in ensuring imams preach a more modern and moderate interpretation of the Koran.

There is no official training institute for imams in Australia and no system to regulate the teachings and conduct of imams. Most of our imams come from overseas undertaking religious studies at an Islamic university such as al-Azhar in Egypt. It is the influences of such universities that guide the moderation or otherwise of the imams.

In my discussions with Muslim communities around Australia, it is clear there is support to address these issues. The establishment of a framework would ensure more Australian-born and reared imams whose teachings would be in an Australian context and whose outlook would reflect our way of life.

It is vital their interpretation of the Koran be moderate and reflect Islam in the modern context. In Australia, the interpretation of the Koran should reflect the approach of the overwhelming majority of Australians of Muslim faith who want to get on building a good life for themselves and their children.

While some may feel a public flogging of the Grand Mufti, Ibrahim Abu Mohamed, may have served their own political ends, he does not represent or speak for all Muslims in Australia. He is elected by the Australian National Imams Council, which brings together about 200 largely Sunni imams. The election of Shady Alsuleiman, our first Australian-born imam as ANIC's president is an important resetting point.

Last week, I represented Julie Bishop at the 8th Bali Democracy Forum. Our neighbour is the largest Muslim country, where not only does moderate Islam prevail but the coexistence of the diversity of faiths and tolerance is a good example for others to follow. We have a strong intercultural framework that has come about from decades of successful migration. This is underpinned by religious freedom sanctioned by our Constitution and a strong interfaith framework.

Moderate Muslims need our support to ensure their positive migration legacy is not tainted by the actions of those bent on mayhem and destruction of our values. Megaphone politics not only distracts from this but has implications for our relationships with our neighbours.

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