ISLAM AS THE RELIGION OF 'FAIR GO': AN IMPORTANT LESSON FOR AUSTRALIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Introduction
Among the many roles enjoyed by religious education, setting the record straight may be its most important. In a world disposed towards division and the inevitable conflicts that go with it, misunderstanding and misrepresentation are rife. When these things occur in relation to religion and religious matters, a sound and effective religious education will respond with a content and pedagogy aimed at understanding and proper representation. In the case of Islam, misunderstanding and misrepresentation are persistent and put at risk the very fabric of our civilization. The task before religious education of correcting this is therefore particularly urgent.

A popular stereotype of Islam is that it is intolerant and harsh in its social relations. In a related understanding, many in the West would regard it as backward in matters of social justice, and especially about the issue of women's equality. In regard to this latter point, the issue of polygamy would rank high as an apparently well-known indicator of this backwardness. In contrast to these views, when one examines the facts based on its scriptures and its early record, there is no religion less appropriately characterized in this way than Islam. There is no religion that has such strong and explicit tenets towards tolerance in its sacred text, and no religion with such a strong track record of social reform in its origins, including about the issue of women.

Indeed, one could well propose the argument that Islam was a thousand years ahead of the period the West describes as the 'Enlightenment'. The Enlightenment characterizes that period in Western history when those many issues of human rights and social justice that we cherish and rely on today were championed and passed into law in many Western institutions. In the early Middle Ages, when there was not much tolerance to be found anywhere, Islam built model civilizations based on multi-culture and multi-belief and passed into its own laws precedents related to all manner of human rights and social justice. Lewis (1993) shows how Western scholarship has gradually come to understand Islam in this way, an interpretation that allows us to speak with legitimacy about Islam as the religion of 'Fair Go'.

'Fair Go': The Issue of Tolerance
Tolerance was not an accidental feature of early Islam. Tolerance was practised because of Muhammad's, and hence the early Muslims' belief that Islam truly was the fulfilment of the ancient Promise that God would establish a model community in the midst of the nations. This was a belief shared by Jewish, Christian and Islamic scriptural evidence. Hoyland (2001) shows that, in spite of its inherently Arabic nature, it is the central beliefs shared with Judaism and Christianity about the nature of the model community that had the greatest influence on the shape and form of the original Islam. This model community was to function in a way that reflected God's deep desire that humankind should live in peace and practise all forms of personal integrity and social justice. This would be the community that would be different from other nations; it would be the 'light to all nations'.

For Muhammad, it was Islam that finally took up the challenge to be this community, this Ummah of Allah, this 'People of God'. Inspired by Moses and Jesus, the founders of Judaism and Christianity, Muhammad went on to establish the religion that, he believed, was what both these founders had striven for in their lives and missions. As far as Muhammad was concerned, Moses and Jesus were strictly speaking Muslims (ie. submitters to God), as was Abraham, the ancient prophets, John the Baptist and Mary, all of whom strove to do God's will (cf. Adang, 1996). These beliefs are well testified to in the Qur'an itself. So too, any Jew who lived by the Ten Commandments or any Christian who followed Jesus' Great Commandment (to love God and neighbour) was a Muslim, in effect, and so to be respected and accommodated as such. Furthermore, any devout religious follower of any persuasion was deemed to have a place in sharing in this Promise (Qur'an 3):

Islam ... teaches that all human beings have equal status and all humanity is one ... true believers ... can be found anywhere
irrespective of the religious title the person might have. (Ozalp, 2004, p. 54-55)

For the era that coincided with the birth of Islam, its perspective on multi-faith difference represented a remarkable gesture of multicultural largesse and it issued in one of the more notable features of what would become known as the 'Golden Age of Islam'. Within the great Islamic Civilization that went on to capture the hearts and minds of most of the Middle East and much of Europe, Africa and India, the concept of the *dhimmi* communities was unique (cf. Nettler, 1995). The *dhimmi* communities were those minority groups that lived within an Islamic society that followed another religion yet were tolerated, respected and indeed often regarded as an indispensable contributor to the richness of Islamic society. For hundreds of years, generations of Jewish and Christian communities, in particular, lived and prospered within Islamic worlds as *dhimmi* communities, this tolerance being justified by Islamic scriptures as being at the heart of God’s plan for Islam.

It could not be over-emphasized how ground-breaking the social attitude and practice of *dhimmi* was, nor how unmatched and unrequited when Muslims (and indeed Jews) found themselves living within a Christian world, for instance. The important thing to note about the Muslim social ethic of the time was that *dhimmi* came directly from the Muslim understanding of the will of God, as communicated by Muhammad through the Islamic scriptures. As such, the injunction towards tolerance was clearly part of the model community that was established in God’s name. It was part and parcel of being the ‘People of God’ that it should respect difference in this way. ‘Fair go’ was not a matter of chance; it was part of the ideology and theology of the religion. To be Muslim was to be fair and to be just, in the way enjoined by God.

Kramer (1999) illustrates how important the witness of respecting difference in early Islam became to a twentieth-century post-war Europe searching for the kinds of radical models of social harmony that might overwhelm the damage done to Europe’s fabric by the horrors of two World Wars and, especially by the Holocaust. Along with Lewis (1987; 1993), Kramer shows how particularly important this re-discovery of radical acceptance of difference became to post-war Jewish scholarship.

‘Fair Go’: The Issue of Social Welfare

Tolerance is not the only issue that might surprise and disrupt the stereotypical thinking likely to be found in the religious education student. Students might also be challenged to realize how remarkable early Islamic civilizations were for their social welfare systems and for their universal education and healthcare schemes. As with ethnic and religious tolerance, these were not there merely by chance. Muhammad had taken to heart the message of the ancient prophets, to be found in the common scriptures of the three great religions, that what God wants of his people is justice, mercy and a love that shows itself in practical charity. So, he wrote into the ‘Five Pillars of Islam’ (Ozalp, 2004) (for Muhammad, the complete Ten Commandments/Great Commandment) a practical social welfare scheme of tithing that saw everyone giving a percentage of their goods to the community. By giving a practicality of this sort equivalent status among the Five Pillars with the obligation to pray, it became impossible for Islam to stray into mere platitudes in the way that Muhammad believed both Judaism and Christianity had strayed.

Within Islam, the fact of tithing as a religious requirement guaranteed that, from the earliest days, healthcare and social support were available in some measure to all. Similarly, education was considered crucial as a religious as well as a social duty. Religiously, it was important because, again, Muhammad had heeded the scriptural evidence that an issue for religious leadership in both the Jewish and Christian establishments was that the leaders had a tendency to build their own powerbase by flaunting knowledge from which everyone else was barred through lack of educational opportunities.

As an instance, Jesus, a prophetic hero in early Islam, was seen to say in both the Christian scriptures as well as those Islamic scriptures which became known as the ‘Muslim Gospel’ (Khalidi, 2001) that the religious leaders of his own time flaunted their power by imposing burdens that they did not themselves observe and putting in place religious codes that only the most educated could even know of, much less adhere to. Such an approach was deemed by Muhammad to be self-serv ing and far from the kind of leadership required of the *Ummah*, the ‘People of God’.

As a result, education of the population, especially about religious knowledge and law, was important in the early Islamic communities. In place of priests and monks, altogether too reminiscent of what the prophets, including Jesus, had railed against, Islam established a religious leadership totally focused on universal education. In the original Islam, the ‘imam’ was to have no power or authority other than to interpret the Qur’an and so educate the people, with a special mission to the disadvantaged. Even when Islam established the world’s first ‘modern’ university in the Eleventh Century, its special charter was to be for those sufficiently disadvantaged that their families could not afford private tuition.
‘Fair Go’: The Issue of Women

For the average Westerner, especially women, Islam’s attitude to women would likely be regarded as one of its lower points. There is a popular image of chauvinism, at least the way the Westerner would understand this, and there is also the issue of polygamy, often misunderstood to be an inherently chauvinistic device. Far from being a license for men’s waywardness, polygamy was elevated by Islam from being a random cultural practice to being one that ensured the rights of women. It was seen essentially as a practical way of providing women with the support and indeed the dignity that Muhammad believed was required of the community claiming to be the ‘People of God’. In pre-Islamic Arabic culture, where women outnumbered men by a huge proportion, polygamy was rife but marriage did not guarantee any relief from the fact they had no rights and, in many tribal situations, were classed as sub-humans. It was also a huge social issue that so many women lived a hand-to-mouth existence, often having to resort to prostitution or, at best, to belonging to the harem of wealthy gentlemen. Even in the role of a relatively classy courtesan, women had no rights and any offspring were classed as illegitimate and treated accordingly.

A practical way of addressing this situation, that seemed at the time to conform with the spirit of the Ummah, was to continue to encourage men to marry more than one woman, with a number of qualifications that were seen to fit the spirit of the Ummah. First among these was that the first wife must agree to the marriage, and she and the second wife to the third marriage, and so on up to a limit imposed by Islam that there must be no more than four marriages. The reason for this is related to the second huge qualification, regarded as virtually beyond human capacity unaided by God’s spirit. This was that the husband must undertake to treat each wife evenly and fairly, including sharing equally his time, attention and care; with no favour for one over the other. These were/radical reforms in favour of women’s rights in their time. Through the Islamic marriage, women were deemed to have legal rights, including the right to inherit property and to provide witness in court, features that would not come to the West for close to another thousand years. No doubt, it would be difficult to gain consensus among Westerners that this situation amounted to the kind of women’s equality now guaranteed under their laws. Nonetheless, compared to what obtained in most of the world at the time and indeed much of the world today, it was ground-breaking in its conception (cf. Armstrong, 1991).

To the broader issue of women’s rights: what can be said with some certainty is that Islam was quite likely the first religion to raise the issue so explicitly, and its first few hundred years were marked by some major reforms around the issue. This modelling of women’s rights in the early Islamic communities must have some determining power on modern-day Islamic practice. There are some very bold Muslim writers and commentators, including some prominent women, who are taking this issue right up to the world’s Islamic leaders. Justice Majida Rizvi, a prominent former Pakistani judge, is one such woman who, as an educated Muslim, is fearless in pointing out to her own government, constabulary and judiciary that most of what passes for an Islamic perspective on women is not only mere chauvinism but is at fundamental odds with the Qur’an and the witness of the original Ummah. There is, across the Islamic world, a revival of women’s rights among devout Islamic women. While not widely known, the women’s movement in Islam is one of the most potent forces, likely ultimately to reform Islam from within from its latter-day skewed male domination and its chauvinism. Eickelman (1998) notes that the changing attitude towards women in Islam, so notable in modern Islamic scholarship, is central to a renewal of Islam in general.

‘Fair Go’: Re-visioning the Original Islam

Of course, the fact that Islam is not regarded as a religion of ‘Fair Go’ is not entirely the fault of Western narrow-mindedness. There are many who describe themselves as Muslim who are poor emissaries of a religion with the origins described above. Furthermore, there are those who use their scholarship to drive a wedge between Islam and the West, and in particular Judaism and Christianity (cf. Al-Ashmawi in Nettler, 1995). This is a scholarship that stands in marked contrast to what would seem overwhelming evidence of an intrinsically interwoven relationship between these three religions throughout the last fifteen hundred years (cf. Brunswick, 1982; Lassner, 1993; Halpein, 1995; Armstrong, 2000). The goal of a sound and objective religious education must be to examine and sift the many claims made by religious followers of all descriptions and compare and contrast these claims with the evidence provided by their religions’ scriptures and inspirational sources.

With regard to Islam, religious education has its strongest allies among the Islamic community itself. For example, the Turkish writer, Harun Yahya (2002), a devout Muslim, says:

Muslims must recapture the true spirit of Islam, and reclaim it from those who have harmed its integrity and honour. (p. 13)

In similar fashion, the Tunisian scholar, Mohamed Talbi (1995), another devout Muslim, employs the
scripts of Islam themselves, in drawing up his own case for Islam being the religion of tolerance:

... the dialogue with all men of all kinds of faiths and ideologies is from now and onwards strictly and irreversibly unavoidable. Man has never lived in isolation, and man's history may be considered as an irreversible process of an unceasingly extending communication. Man's fulfillment is in community and relationship. And this is written in the Qur'an: 'O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know (be friendly towards) each other ...' (p. 61)

... we can think of the whole of mankind as a brotherly 'community of communities' – or God's Family as the Hadith states – in which everyone has the right to be different, to be accepted, and fully respected in his chosen differences. To respect others in their chosen and assumed differences ... is finally to respect God's Will ... (p. 67)

Ronald Nettler, an Oxford scholar who specializes in Jewish-Muslim relations, writes of Talbi:

The Qur'an, as basis and foundation of the whole structure, is Talbi's ultimate source. He sees in his theory of pluralism a 'modern' idea from the depths of revelation. Despite his obvious debt to modern thought, Talbi's point of departure is from within the sacred text and its early historical context. (Nettler, 1999, p. 106)

The connection which Talbi makes explicit is that between, on the one hand, the original and unarguably foundational sources of Islam to be found in the Qur'an and the Hadith and, on the other hand, the testimony they provide of an inspired community built on the principles of tolerance, compassion and equity. In Talbi's view, the evidence is incontrovertible that Islam's proudest claim is that it was one of the globe's first communities truly committed to building the kind of glue in a culture that made for social cohesion and mutual care. It is through Islam that the concept of God's Promise to Abraham became most explicit, a Promise that a certain people would be his people, marked not by their worldly success but by the strength of their spirituality and the justice inherent in their community.

The ancient prophets railed against the worldly success of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, just as Jesus railed against the worldly success of the priests and Pharisees. The message of the prophets and Jesus, heard sharply by Muhammad, was that God did not want just another nation, but a people within a people, a nation marked by its justice, love and submission to God. Learning from the tradition stretching from Abraham to Jesus, and picking up especially on the centrality of the Promise, Muhammad makes it his great aim to finally establish the community that God wanted of his people. This is the Ummah, the community that submits totally to Allah, marked by its compliance with the Five Pillars that ensure its spirituality, its integrity and its justice. One could well argue that, by the way it lived over most of its first four centuries, Islam witnessed to the Promise in a more intense and undisturbed way than was ever achieved, to that point in time, in either Judaism or Christianity. At the same time, Idel and McGinn (1999) illustrate well in their own study of the mystical tradition across the three religions that the practical morality and social justice implicit in Muhammad's conception of the Ummah is the common model of holiness to be found in all three religions.

Conclusion

Not all about Islam is untainted. I have written clearly about the challenge to religious education of the very negative and intolerant interpretations provided by elements of modern Islamic scholarship and indeed about the disposition towards violence that is a particular feature of modern Islam (cf. Lovat, 2005). Dealing with the effects of a bruised culture, embittered by events that stretch across a thousand years, is a separate though related matter that religious education must unpick and attempt to heal. More foundational than this, however, is the issue of setting the record straight. Even without the negative image of modern Islam portrayed so regularly by Western media and their populations and government, there is a fixed view in the minds of many that Islam is a religion that has perpetrated only a negative influence on its peoples and on the world. Islam as a religion of tolerance, compassion and social reform is far from the popular image, yet it is the image that evidence suggests is most deserved. The first task of an informed and robust religious education will be in disrupting the stereotypical beliefs and supplanting them with beliefs based on scriptural and historcal evidence. Such a program in religious education is not likely to solve all of the issues related to the role of Islam in the world but it will certainly help.

References


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