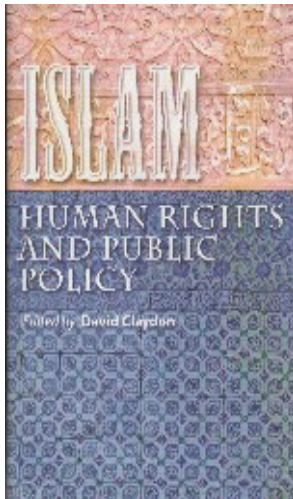


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Author: David Claydon (ed.)
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In recent years the editor of this book, the Revd Dr Canon David Claydon, has led a diverse group of people who like himself are Christian leaders well-informed on Islam. Various policy makers on both sides of politics have appreciated consultations with them about the challenges presented by Muslim migrants and the ideology of Islam. But they tended to be daunted by the wealth of information provided. “We can see it’s important. Put it in a book”, suggested some. This book is the result. It brings together about twenty essays and articles by some fourteen expert Australian and international authors.

Democracy can be a fragile plant. Australia is not a democratic utopia – no country on earth is that – but democratic freedoms and the rule of law are on the whole sturdily established. Paradoxically, that is one reason Australia like other Western democracies is an attractive mecca for Muslim immigrants from countries where their religion and its all-embracing lifestyle is dominant. Not only is there a ready welcome from their relatives and co-religionists already established, but generally new mosques and schools are permitted and quite quickly new migrants can tap into a generous welfare system.

Islamic migrant groups and individuals in Australia, like other migrants, may have to contend with language difficulties, unemployment together with some discrimination and hostility – but even that is counteracted by official campaigns to encourage racial and religious harmony and acceptance of those seen as the “other”. That is so despite or even because of the rise of well-founded fears of militant, extremist Islam due to suicide attacks, such as the Bali bombings, affecting Australians.

In general Australian secular authorities bend over backwards to treat all religions with politically correct neutrality (as illustrated by the recent move to denude the chapel of Sydney’s Royal North Shore Hospital of its bibles and Christian symbols.) Often it’s not neutral at all. So-called “Islamaphobia” is targeted, rarely “Christophobia”. Promotional material for Islam has been distributed in *Living in Harmony* projects, but not for Christianity. Yet when it comes to public policy, it is reasonable to judge between religious systems on the basis of their human rights record, especially in places where a given religion is dominant.

In 2004 the federal government published and promoted the glossy booklet *Muslim Australians* by prominent Melbourne Islamic scholar Professor Abdullah Saeed. His outlook is apparently moderate and reformist, but the booklet may present Islam as he wishes it could be, not as it really is. It glosses over crucial human rights issues like the reality of violent jihad, the position of women and apostasy. It claims that it is a misconception that the Koran commands death for apostasy (leaving Islam). Yet in another much more substantial book, *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam* co-written with his brother Hassan that same year, Saeed argues for freedom of religion, admitting that for the vast majority of Muslims there is no such freedom. [See chapter 1] The killing of apostates in certain countries is a chilling reality and the threat of it a constant deterrent to conversion from Islam. In some countries the death penalty for leaving Islam is part of the legal code. Apostasy laws stand like rocks in the path of true democratic freedoms, which must include freedom of religion.

So do laws affecting the rights of women in education, marriage, dress, legal status and general life choices. Girls who bring shame on a family, such as by engaging in extra-marital sex, or refusing an arranged marriage, can be killed to salvage family honour. In some countries under *Sharia* law, the punishment for adultery is death by stoning, as commanded by Muhammad.

Several chapters deal with issues surrounding *sharia*, the comprehensive system of Islamic law derived from the edicts of the Koran, the Sunna (Muslim practice) and the Hadith (the record of the life and deeds of Muhammad), seen as the ideal and necessary system for true Muslim life. *Sharia* is totally unchangeable because of being handed down directly from Allah. The key inescapable conclusion is that *sharia* is utterly incompatible with democracy and human rights. This is overwhelmingly so for non-Muslims in the same society, but for many Muslims too, women in particular. The best non-Muslims can hope for is to be accorded *dhimmi* rights, granting them lowly, humiliating status. There are warnings too against accepting partial systems of *sharia* such as are demanded in some English cities where Muslims have become the majority.

‘*Sharia is incompatible with democracy*’- European Court of Human Rights.

A chapter by the former Pakistani Anglican Bishop Michael Nazir- Ali, until very recently Bishop of Rochester, Britain, laments the weakened cultural identity of his adopted land and its lack of strong values. Once “...the Evangelicals drew inspiration from the Bible for their humanitarian projects such as the abolition of slavery, universal education and humane conditions for men, women and children.” ... But by the 1960s “Christianity began to be more and more marginal to the ‘public doctrine’ by which the nation ordered itself.” [p. 42.] Britain largely lost its Judaeo-Christian values in the second half of last century. Into the moral and spiritual vacuum which previously confronted what he calls the ‘philosophical, historical and economic nonsense’ of Marxism came a flood of immigrants, many from his own former country, bringing another comprehensive ideology, radical Islamism. His chapter ends cautiously, expressing little hope in a ‘plural, multi-faith and multicultural situation’ of recapturing lost ground.

Twenty-first century Australians too lack a unifying set of values; relativism reigns. On the whole too we are blithely ignorant about Islam. The secular-minded may have a gut-level dislike of the religion, but many also have a similar dislike of Christianity or any other earnestly held faith. Though most contributors to this book are Christians it takes primarily a secular, informative approach to issues relating to the presence of Muslim migrants in a secular democracy like ours. There is plenty of scope for sensational treatment of some issues – honour killings, for instance, jihad violence or the treatment of those who leave Islam – but the book does not go down that track. Rather it is soberly factual and even handed, with careful documentation of claims, quotations and statements supplied in footnotes on the same page.

Unless highly motivated to understand and grapple with the issues, some readers, including the public policy makers at whom it is aimed, may find the book too solidly demanding. One concession to those who might need to skim its contents for easier digestion is the inclusion of brief one-sentence break-outs on many pages to highlight salient points, such as the example shown here. A comprehensive general reading list is supplied, together with some specifically Christian resources; there is a glossary of Islamic terms followed by an index.

Do not accept comments at face value - know the doctrinal and political facts.

The final chapter by David Claydon and John Arnold lists issues and makes recommendations that developers of public policy need to note, under the following headings: **National identity and values; Law and human rights; Manipulation and misrepresentation; Threats and terrorism; and Cultural sensitivity.**

For those inclined to minimise the challenges, this book will make uncomfortable reading. Nevertheless in a world such as ours, to avoid facing them would be folly.