

Bridges

Building relationships between Christians and Muslims



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**Columban Centre for
Christian-Muslim Relations**
c/o Bishop Bede Heather Centre
1-5 Marion St
BLACKTOWN NSW 2148
E: info.cccmr@columban.org.au
P: (02) 9672 3616
www.columban.org.au

 /ChristianMuslimRelations
/AbrahamConference
/TheSydneyStatement
/YouthPoWR
/WesternSydneyWomens
InterfaithInitiative

 /YouthPoWR
/TheSydneyStatement



From the Editor

In the biblical tradition, Ishmael and Isaac are brothers, or to be more precise, half-brothers. The first was born from Hagar, and the second from Sarah (c.f. Gen 16 and 21). The Arabs claim physical descent from Abraham through Ishmael; the Jews claim physical descent from Abraham through Isaac; and the Christians claim spiritual descent from Abraham through faith in Jesus Christ. Thus, all three religious traditions claim connection to the ancient Patriarch, each in their own way. Hence, Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all kin; all belong to one family; are all sisters and brothers; are all daughters and sons of Abraham. Accordingly, we speak of the “Abrahamic religions”.

Just as in any family or body, when one part suffers, the whole suffers; when one part hurts, the whole hurts; when one part is attacked, the whole is injured; when hatred is expressed to one part, the whole agonises. Thus, antisemitism is not a concern for Jews only but affects Christians and Muslims too; Islamophobia is not just a concern for Muslims only but affects Jews and Christians too; and

Christianophobia is not just a concern for Christians but affects Jews and Muslims too.

Since Jews, Christians, and Muslims all belong together in the one Abrahamic family, similarly the attacks on them – antisemitism, Christianophobia, and Islamophobia – belong together too. When incidents of one form of discrimination rise, there is a corresponding increase in the others. There is no cure for one without curing the others too.

As members of the Abrahamic religions, Jews, Christians, and Muslims must support and reach out to each other in these troubled times, showing respect, compassion, and understanding of the similar suffering that each is enduring.

As people of faith who confess the one God who is Creator of all peoples, in the name of our common humanity, we must oppose all forms of hatred, discrimination, prejudice, racism, polarisation, extremist nationalism, or supremacist ideology that alienates, divides, and dominates some at the expense of others.

As creatures who share the one planet and are interconnected with all other creatures in myriad ways, we must oppose all forms of waste, violence, destruction, war, and exploitation, and build relations of mutual solidarity and co-responsibility for our common home.

As Martin Luther King Jnr said, “We must all learn to live together as brothers [and sisters] or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.” (National Cathedral, Washington DC, 31 March 1968).

REV DR PATRICK MCINERNEY

Fr Brian Vale Returns to CCCMR

Fr Brian Vale has returned to his former ministry at the Columban Centre for Christian Muslim Relations after his time in leadership in Melbourne (2017-18) and Hong Kong (2018-2024). He kept up his contact with Interreligious Dialogue while in Hong Kong through local networks and events and as the International Coordinator of the Columban Interreligious Dialogue Network. He looks forward to renewing old relationships in Sydney as well as forging new alliances, especially in the areas of spirituality and ecology.



Jewish-Christian Conference

From 2-4 February 2025, **Fr Patrick McNerney** participated in “Heads, Hearts and Hands: What Can Dialogue Do for Us?”, a Jewish-Christian conference organised by the [Australian Council of Christians and Jews](#), in partnership with the [International Council of Christians and Jews](#) and the [Sisters of Our Lady of Sion](#). It was a very contemporary and at times challenging

encounter. The conference design included sessions of deep listening, similar to “spiritual conversations”, where participants shared their pain, confusion, and conflict about the war between Israel and Palestine. The process was very moving. A stand-out moment was when a Jewish leader publicly acknowledged the pain and suffering of the Palestinian people, a piece that has too often been missing in reports over the past year. The conference highlighted the importance of listening to each other. *For more see bit.ly/3X4FOAq.*

Professional Development on Islamophobia

On 2 November 2024 **Fr Patrick McNerney**, **Kim Chong**, some members of the Interfaith Commission Diocese of Parramatta, and other friends in interfaith, gathered for a Professional Development workshop on Islamophobia in Australia, delivered by [Associate Professor Derya Iner](#) from the Centre for Islamic Studies and Charles Sturt University. Islamophobia is on the rise in Australia, with 80 per cent of National Survey participants reporting some form of unfavourable treatment based on their religion, race, or ethnicity. Statistics show that it is mostly young Muslim women who are victims of Islamophobia, perpetrated mostly by older white males. Derya explored with us how we come to unconscious biases about others and how it can be recognised to stop it escalating into racist beliefs. We also explored how our faith influences our actions and how we could safely intervene if we see a Muslim person attacked in public. It was an informative, engaging, and personally engaging day.



Vale Cardinal Ayuso Guixot, Champion of Interfaith Dialogue, Welcome Cardinal Koovakad, New Prefect of DID

Cardinal Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, a Spanish-born prelate and prefect of the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, died on



25 November 2024, at age 72, after a long illness. Cardinal Ayuso's expertise in interreligious dialogue led to his appointment as a consultor of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 2007. A respected expert in Islam, Cardinal Ayuso devoted much of his career to promoting dialogue with the Muslim religion and played a key role in Pope Francis' [*Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*](#), signed in Abu Dhabi in 2019. He took part in Pope Francis' historic visits to Muslim-majority nations, first as secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and, after October 2019, as the dicastery's prefect.

Pope Francis has named Indian Cardinal George J Koovakad to be the new prefect of the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue (DID). Koovakad, who was in the diplomatic service of the Holy See for 14 years, is part of the Syro-Malabar Church, one of the Catholic faith's Eastern-rite Churches. He was the first Syro-Malabar priest to be elevated to cardinal directly from the priesthood. Cardinal Koovakad has experience living, working and ministering in countries where Catholics are a minority and interreligious dialogue is an accepted fact of life. Koovakad helped organise several of Pope Francis' religious dialogue-focused trips, including to Kazakhstan and Bahrain in 2022, to Mongolia in 2023, and to Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, East Timor, and Singapore in September 2024. *Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/4hW82W1, bit.ly/3QqNtrr and bit.ly/4jZt4VM.*

Interfaith Call to Action on Climate Change

The COP29 Interfaith Call to Action was developed by members of the Interfaith Liaison Committee, tabled at the Interfaith Talanoa Dialogue, endorsed by 61 organisations, and presented to COP29. The opening words read: "We stand at a crossroads, facing an existential threat to life on Earth as we know it. The urgency to act cannot be overstated. As people of faith from diverse traditions, we believe the climate emergency must be addressed on a moral level, with decisions driven by honesty, compassion, courage, trust, and foresight. The survival of our planet and future generations depends on the choices made today. The protection of our common home, Mother Earth, cannot wait. We need to act now to confront and remedy the interconnected crises of climate breakdown, biodiversity loss, and land degradation" For full text see bit.ly/41exaSi. For Media Report see bit.ly/412GDL4.



Pope: Interreligious Dialogue Key to Peace

As the world faces the persistent threat of nuclear conflict, people of faith must unite in advocating for peace and fostering dialogue, Pope Francis said during a November 2024 address to participants in a Joint Colloquium between the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue and the Interreligious and Intercultural Center of Tehran, Iran. In a world "divided and torn apart by hatred, hostility, wars and the threat of a nuclear conflict", the pope appealed to all

believers in the God of Peace "to pray and work for dialogue, reconciliation, peace, security and the integral development of all humanity". The Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations also supports campaigns for nuclear disarmament, recently becoming a signatory to an [anti-nuclear statement](#) released by the Buddhist Soka Gakkai community. *Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/4k73SNO and bit.ly/413eunk.*



Cardinal and Bishop Appointed for Algeria

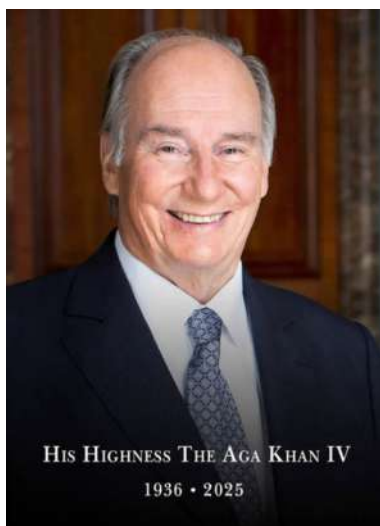
The Pope affirmed the church's presence among Muslims by making the Archbishop of Algiers, Mgr Jean-Paul Vesco, a cardinal. The French-born Dominican was ordained in 2001, appointed Bishop of Oran in 2012, Archbishop of Algiers in 2021, and granted Algerian citizenship in 2023. He is committed to Christian-Muslim dialogue. In 2018 he hosted the beatification of the 19 martyrs of Algeria, among them the seven Trappist monks of Tibhirine and Bishop Pierre

Claverie, the former bishop of Oran, all killed in 1996. Cardinal Vesco is also inspired by the witness of St Charles de Foucauld, who similarly gave his life to the Muslims of Algeria.

In a further appointment for Algeria, Fr Diego Sarrió Cucarella M.Afr. Is now Bishop of the Diocese of Laghouat. Fr Diego is a friend of the Centre. He was the keynote speaker for the 2019 Abraham Conference in Sydney and gave a workshop on Christian-Muslim relations to the staff of the Centre. Fr Diego has impressive international academic qualifications. He studied in Madrid, Nairobi, Cairo, Rome, and Washington. He served as Director of PISAI from 2014 to 2017 and President from 2017 to 2024. The diocese of Laghouat occupies an area of two-million sq. kilometres, almost seven times the size of Italy and almost four times France. His expertise in Islam and Christian-Muslim relations will serve him well in his episcopal ministry to this vast diocese. We wish him every blessing. *For report on Cardinal see bit.ly/3CO1Xfx. For Bishop-elect Diego's bio see bit.ly/3QqTTXP. For an interview with Bishop-elect Diego see bit.ly/4h9js7Y. For information on diocese see bit.ly/41cNCCB.*

The General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

The Synod affirmed Christian solidarity: "Being in the world and for the world, they walk together with all the peoples of the earth, in dialogue with their religions and their cultures, recognising in them the seeds of the Word, journeying towards the Kingdom." (#17) It encouraged openness: ".... being open to the world allows one to discover that the Spirit has sown the seeds of the Gospel in every corner of the globe, in every culture and in every human group" (#56) It avowed: "A synodal Church commits itself to walk this path alongside the believers of other religions and people of other beliefs wherever it lives. It freely shares the joy of the Gospel and gratefully receives their respective gifts. Through this collaboration, we aim to build together, as sisters and brothers all, in a spirit of mutual activity and aid (cf. GS 40), justice, solidarity, peace and interreligious dialogue" (#123) *For the Final Document see bit.ly/4hAGi9N.*



Death of His Highness the Aga Khan

His Highness Prince Karim al-Hussaini Aga Khan IV died on 4 February 2025, in Lisbon, Portugal, at the age of 88. He was the 49th hereditary Imam (spiritual leader) of the Shia Ismaili Muslims. He held the position for 67 years after he succeeded his grandfather, Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan III, in 1957, at the age of 20. His Highness dedicated his efforts to the spiritual and material well-being of over 15 million Ismailis in more than 25 countries across Central Asia, the Middle East, South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Australasia, the Far East, Europe, and North America. He was committed to improving the quality of life of vulnerable populations through the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) and was recognised globally as a statesman and humanitarian. He is succeeded by his son, Prince Rahim Al-Hussaini Aga Khan V, who was named the 50th hereditary Imam.

For full story see bit.ly/3Qq8jaC and bit.ly/3X2zNEa. For obituary see bit.ly/3D41qP7.



Malala Yousafzai Appeals to Muslim Leaders

At a two-day conference in January 2025, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai appealed to Muslim leaders to champion women and girls' education despite bans imposed by the Afghan Taliban government that the UN says are akin to "gender apartheid". Their curbs have shut women and girls out of secondary school and university education, as well as many government jobs, and seen them sequestered out of many aspects of public life. She also urged Muslim nations not to "legitimise" the Afghan Taliban government. "Do not legitimise them," she said at a summit on girls' education in Muslim nations being held in Pakistan's capital, Islamabad. "As Muslim leaders, now is the time to raise your voices, use your power. You can show true leadership. You can show true Islam," said 27-year-old Yousafzai. The conference brought together ministers and education officials from dozens of Muslim-majority countries, backed by the Muslim World League. *Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/3XcYa2h.*

Mapping Social Cohesion in Australia

[The Scanlon Foundation](https://www.scanlonfoundation.org/), which has measured social cohesion since 2007, released its latest report in November 2024. The index measures social cohesion in the areas of worth, social justice and inclusion, acceptance, belonging, and political participation. Author Dr James O'Donnell from Australian National University said social cohesion had been declining up to 2023, particularly with cost-of-living pressures. The report found the decline is driven by economic and housing concerns, rather than opposition to diversity, with 85 per cent of people agreeing that multiculturalism has been good for Australia. The report also signalled less positive attitudes towards religion, across all major faith groups. The proportion who felt at least 'somewhat positive' towards Christians, for example, fell from 42 per cent in 2023 to 37 per cent in 2024. One-third of Australians now report they have a somewhat or very negative attitude towards Muslims, up seven points from 2023, and negative attitudes towards Jewish people have increased from nine per cent to 13 per cent in the past year. There were similar declines across all other faith groups including attitudes towards Buddhists (from 50 per cent at least 'somewhat positive' in 2023 to 44 per cent in 2024); Hindus and Sikhs (both 33 per cent in 2023 to 26 per cent in 2024). "But over the last 12 months at least, and despite all of the challenges we've faced, lots of our indicators have been pretty stable. [...] Support for multiculturalism and our diversity is still a great strength for Australia," O'Donnell said. *For full report see bit.ly/3QphdTq. Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/4b7EC5b.*



Women leaders of Abrahamic Faiths Convene First Interreligious Forum in UAE

On 15-16 November 2024, the Dubai Forum convened 65 women leaders from more than a dozen countries to build public awareness about the benefits of collaboration among the Abrahamic faiths. Continuing the work of the Abraham Accords, the event included sponsors such as Combat Antisemitism Movement, Women Choice, and Global Christian Relief. Seeking to elevate women's voices, the media and panels expressed the importance of coexistence and mutual

understanding in the workplace. The Abraham Women's Alliance (AWA) is a division of Empower Women Media founded by Shirin Taber and Astrid Hajjar (pictured). This was the first-ever civil society led interfaith event in Dubai to showcase Jewish, Muslim and Christian women influencers.

Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/4qTSbpZ.

Christians and Muslims: What We Hope to Become

Vatican message for the month of Ramadan and Eid Al-Fitr 1446 AH/2025 AD

Dear Muslim brothers and sisters,

From the Vatican, 6 March 2025

At the beginning of the month of Ramadan, the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue offer you its warmest greetings and friendship. This time of fasting, prayer and sharing is a privileged opportunity to draw closer to God and be renewed in the fundamental values of religion, compassion and solidarity. This year, Ramadan largely coincides with Lent, which for Christians is a period of fasting, supplication and conversion to Christ. This proximity in the spiritual calendar offers us a unique opportunity to walk side-by-side, Christians and Muslims, in a common process of purification, prayer and charity. For us Catholics, it is a joy to share this time with you, for it reminds us that we are all pilgrims on this earth, and that we are all seeking to live better lives. This year, we wish to reflect with you not only on what we can do together to live better lives, but above all on what we want to *become* together, as Christians and Muslims, in a world in search of hope. Do we want to be simple co-workers for a better world, or genuine brothers and sisters, bearing common witness to God's friendship with all humanity?

More than simply a month of fasting, Ramadan appears to us Catholics as a school of inner transformation. By abstaining from food and drink, Muslims learn to control their desires and turn to what is essential. This time of spiritual discipline is an invitation to cultivate piety, the virtue that brings one closer to God and opens the heart to others. As you know, in the Christian tradition, the holy season of Lent invites us to follow a similar path: through fasting, prayer and almsgiving we seek to purify our hearts and refocus on the One who guides and directs our lives. These spiritual practices, though expressed differently, remind us that faith is not merely about outward expressions, but a path of inner conversion.

In a world marked by injustice, conflict and uncertainty about the future, our common vocation involves much more than similar spiritual practices. Our world is thirsting for fraternity and genuine dialogue. Together, Muslims and Christians can bear witness to this hope, in the conviction that friendship is possible despite the burden of history and ideologies that promote exclusion. Hope is no mere optimism: it is a virtue rooted in faith in God, the Merciful, our Creator. For you, dear Muslim friends, hope is nourished by trust in divine mercy, which forgives and guides. For us Christians, it is grounded in the certainty that God's love is stronger than all trials and obstacles.

We want, then, to become, together, brothers and sisters in humanity who deeply esteem one another. Our trust in God is a treasure that unites us, far beyond our differences. It reminds us that we are all spiritual, incarnate, beloved creatures, called to live in dignity and mutual respect. What is more, we desire to become guardians of this sacred dignity by rejecting all forms of violence, discrimination and exclusion. This year, as our two spiritual traditions converge in celebrating Ramadan and Lent, we have a unique opportunity to show the world that faith transforms people and societies, and that it is a force for unity and reconciliation.

In a world where "the temptation to build a culture of walls, to raise walls, walls in the heart, walls on the land in order to prevent this encounter with other cultures, with other people" is reappearing (Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 27), our challenge is to build, through dialogue, a common future founded on fraternity. We do not want simply to coexist; we want to live together in sincere and mutual esteem. The values we share, such as justice, compassion and respect for creation, should inspire our actions and relationships, and serve as our compass in constructing bridges rather than walls, defending justice rather than oppression, protecting the environment rather than destroying it. Our faith and its values should help us to be voices that speak out against injustice and indifference, and proclaim the beauty of human diversity.

In this season of Ramadan and the approach of *'Id al-Fitr*, we are happy to share this hope with you. May our prayers, our gestures of solidarity and our efforts for peace be tangible signs of our sincere friendship with you. May this feast be an occasion for fraternal encounters between Muslims and Christians, in which we can celebrate God's goodness. Such simple but profound moments of sharing are seeds of hope that can transform our communities and our world. May our friendship be a refreshing breeze for a world that thirsts for peace and fraternity!

May your fasting and other pious practices during Ramadan and the celebration of *'Id al-Fitr* that concludes it, bring you abundant fruits of peace, hope, brotherhood and joy.

George Jacob Cardinal Koovakad
Prefect

Msgr Indunil Kodithuwakku Jaakaratne Kankanamalage
Secretary

Standing on New Borders

Ron Rolheiser's personal column from his archive remains strikingly relevant

A particularly powerful Gospel story recounts Jesus meeting with a Syro-Phoenician woman. Central to that story is where their encounter takes place. It takes place on the borders of Samaria. For Jesus, Samaria was a foreign territory, both in terms of ethnicity and religion. In his encounter with this woman, he is standing at the edges, the borders, of how he then understood himself religiously.

I believe that this is where we are standing today as Christians, on new borders in terms of relating to other religions, not least to our Islamic brothers and sisters. The single most important agenda item for our churches for the next 50 years will be the issue of relating to other religions, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Indigenous Religions in the Americas and Africa, and various forms, old and new, of Paganism and New Age. We have no choice. The world has become one village, one community, one family, and unless we begin to understand and accept each other more deeply we will never be a world at peace.

Moreover for us, as Christians, the threat of hatred and violence coming from other religions isn't the main reason we are called to understand non-Christian believers more compassionately. The deeper reason is that the God we honour calls us to do that. Our God calls us to recognise and welcome all sincere believers into our hearts as brothers and sisters in faith. Jesus makes this abundantly clear most everywhere in his message, and at times makes it uncomfortably explicit: Who are my brothers and sisters? It is those who hear the word of God and keep it. ... It is not necessarily those who say Lord, Lord, who enter the Kingdom of Heaven but those who do the will of God on earth. Who can deny that many non-Christians do the will of God here on earth?

But what about the extremism, violence, and perverse expressions of religion we frequently see in other religions? Can we really consider these religions as true, given the awful things done in their name?

All religions are to be judged, as Huston Smith submits, by their highest expressions and their saints, not by their perversions. This is true too for Christianity. We hope that others will judge us not by our darkest moments or by the worst acts ever done by Christians in the name of religion, but rather by all the good Christians have done in history and by our saints. We owe that same understanding to other religions, and all of them in their essence and in their best



expressions call us to what's one, good, true, and beautiful – and all of them have produced great saints.

But what of Christ's uniqueness? What about Christ's claim that he is the (only) way, truth, and life and that nobody can come to God except through him? Throughout its 2000-year history, Christian theology has never backed away from the truth and exclusivity of that claim, save for a number of individual theologians whose views have not been accepted by the churches. So how can we view the truth of other religions in the light of Christ's claim that he is the only way to the Father?

Christian theology (certainly this is true for Roman Catholic theology) has always accepted and proactively taught that the Mystery of Christ is much larger than what can be observed in the visible, historical enfolding of Christianity and the Christian churches in history. Christ is larger than our churches and operates too outside of our churches. He is still telling the church what Jesus once told his mother: "I must be about my Father's business."

Formerly we expressed this by affirming that the Body of Christ, the full body of believers, has both a visible and invisible element. In explicit, baptised believers we see the visible Body of Christ. However at the same time we acknowledge that there are countless others who for all kinds of inculpable reasons have not been explicitly baptised and do not profess an explicit faith in Christ, but who by the goodness of their hearts and actions must be considered as kin to us in the faith.

This may come as a surprise to some but, in fact, the dogmatic teaching of the Roman Catholic Church is that sincere persons in other religions can be saved without becoming Christians, and to teach the contrary is heresy. The God whom Jesus incarnated wills the salvation of all people and is not indifferent to the sincere faith of billions of people throughout thousands of years. We dishonor our faith when we teach anything different. All of us are God's children.

Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/3XjLCGe.

Statement on Recent Hate Crimes in Australia

Human Rights Law releases statement condemning antisemitic hate crimes

Human Rights Watch, Jewish Council of Australia, Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, Australian National Imams Council, Human Rights Law Centre and Amnesty International condemn a recent spate of antisemitic hate crimes in Australia. The antisemitic attacks include the [January 21 arson attack](#) and spray-painting of antisemitic graffiti of a childcare centre in Maroubra which is located near a Jewish school and synagogue; [attacks](#) on the former home in Sydney of a prominent Jewish individual which involved the destruction of cars with fire and antisemitic graffiti; and the vandalism of [two Sydney synagogues](#) in one week which were both graffitied with swastikas.

These attacks follow a year of escalating hate crimes on the Jewish community and on the Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian communities in Australia. Over the past 15 months Islamophobic, anti-Arab, anti-Palestinian and antisemitic hate crimes include [racist anti-Arab graffiti](#) in Sydney; the planting of a [homemade bomb](#) in front of a Sydney home which was flying the Palestinian flag; the [setting alight](#) of a truck bearing the Palestinian flag which belonged to a man of Palestinian heritage in Melbourne; and the [firebombing of Melbourne's Adass Israel synagogue](#). These forms of racism also include politicians denying the seriousness of Islamophobia and media reports using racist language.

While these attacks and racist incidents should be abhorrent to all Australians, they are particularly frightening to the country's Jewish, Islamic, Arab and Palestinian communities. All people have a right to freely practice their religion and express their political views without fear of violence, racial discrimination, hatred and vilification.

Acts of Islamophobia, antisemitism and anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab racism prevent Muslim, Jewish, Arab and Palestinian people from being able to freely practice their religion and culture and equally enjoy their human rights.

Political leaders should condemn recent hate crimes and acts of discrimination. However, they should not seek to politicise racist attacks for political gain. Nor should political leaders cause further community division or vilification in their response to attacks.

Human
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JEWISH COUNCIL
AUSTRALIA



Australian Federation
of Islamic Councils

Human rights protections should not devolve into a game of political point scoring. Media also has a role to play in responsible reporting and avoiding language that vilifies anyone based on their religion or ethnic background. As highlighted by the Australian Human Rights Commission's recently released National Anti-Racism Framework (see opposite page), it is important to recognise both the interconnectedness and difference between various forms of racism and to adopt a coherent and principled anti-racism approach.

These recent hate crimes underscore the need for Australian governments to support anti-racism community initiatives, as well as education and community dialogue to combat prejudice and promote understanding. The Commission has highlighted that data on racism in Australia is limited, inconsistent across jurisdictions, and often ad-hoc. Comprehensive data on hate crimes helps inform governments of the need to protect people faced with discrimination.

We call on governments at all levels in Australia to support anti-racism community initiatives, as well as education and community dialogue to address acts of antisemitism, Islamophobia, and anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian racism in Australia.

Any proposed legislation responding to recent acts of hate crimes will involve debates about freedom of religion, speech, association and assembly. We urge governments to consult with human rights experts and affected communities, and ensure that any restrictions on rights are legitimate, necessary and proportionate.

As organisations committed to the protection and promotion of human rights, we are ready to work with governments and communities to ensure that all Australians can live free from hate, and with dignity and respect. Access the statement at bit.ly/4iee1pj.

- Also released is a pledge for deeper interfaith cooperation by the International Council of Christian and Jews: see bit.ly/3Xhg9op.

National Plan to Combat Racism Released

National Anti-Racism Framework deals with historical legacy of racism

The Australian Human Rights Commission launched the [National Anti-racism Framework](#) in November. The 10-year road map includes 63 recommendations acknowledging the ongoing impact of colonialism on First Nations people and the persistent racism that minority communities experience.

This framework is a major policy document that will complement and strengthen the Racial Discrimination Act. To date, Australia has not had a national approach to addressing racism. This framework promises to deal with this historical legacy of racism against Indigenous people, as well as its contemporary manifestations.

Anti-racism underpins the new approach. This means it aspires to more than simply “not being racist”. Rather, anti-racism involves identifying, challenging and dismantling racism at the individual, structural and institutional levels. It outlines plans from a whole-of-society approach rooted in human rights. Indeed, one of its key recommendations is a national human rights act to lay the legislative foundations for such interventions.

The document identifies seven priority areas, including: legal protection and reform, workplaces, education, justice, media, health, and data. This acknowledges the widespread nature of racism.

The framework recommends legal reforms to include minimum requirements to counter discrimination. This includes embedding First Nations cultural safety across sectors. It also includes recommendations for the education system to implement cultural safety and anti-racism reforms, and for workplaces to develop and implement various internal anti-racism strategies. One such suggestion is mandatory cultural safety and anti-racism training for all workers, including parliamentarians.



The plan involves strategies for recruiting and retaining staff from First Nations and other minority groups in leadership and senior roles. It also calls for media to adopt guidelines based on an anti-racist approach to reporting. As leaders, parliamentarians and staff should adhere to a zero-tolerance approach to racism.

The framework recommends that the government establish a National Anti-racism Taskforce to develop separate implementation plans. One of these would focus on First Nations people; the other on the general population. Race Discrimination Commissioner Giridharan Sivaraman says the national plan must be centred on First Nations people, because “there can be no racial justice in this country without racial justice for First Nations peoples”. It therefore emphasises the importance of truth-telling and self-determination as crucial features of meaningful anti-racism action.

The anti-racism framework comes at a time of intensifying hate speech and exclusionary nationalism. Disinformation, misinformation and identity politics are fanning the flames of racism across Australia. The Diversity Council Australia reports that 59% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced discrimination in workplaces. In addition, the 2024 Scanlon Foundation Mapping Social Cohesion survey reveals that 17% of Australian adults reported experiencing discrimination based on skin colour, ethnic origin or religion over the past year. Compounding this is the amplification of racism in key institutions. Since its founding, Australia has grappled with systemic racism in its institutions and structures, leading to poor outcomes for those affected.

Yet acknowledging and confronting the painful colonial history and its enduring legacy continues to be a significant challenge. The evidence from various studies shows systemic racism in Australia is mounting. The urgency of a coordinated approach across society has never been clearer. If fully implemented, these recommendations have the potential for transformative change in Australia. With robust monitoring and evaluation, anti-racism initiatives would be more effective at tackling entrenched racism. This will require sustained political will, meaningful action and a commitment to dismantling structures that perpetuate inequality. Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/4hO1XLE.

- For a new resource supporting Action Against Islamophobia in Australia, see bit.ly/4hWTWEEd.

- For Pope Francis' homage to the Hindu leader who denounced caste discrimination, see bit.ly/4kkazeu.

Muslim Women's Path for Liberation

An essay by Fairuziana Humam, PhD student, University of Miami, Florida

Muslim women around the world are navigating the dual-edged sword of external scrutiny and restrictive norms within our own communities. In the United States, Muslim women who wear a veil, often called *hijab*, are 40% less likely to get job interviews or risk losing life-changing opportunities, such as [competing in athletics championships](#), than their non-hijab-wearing counterparts, despite equal qualifications. Meanwhile, in a Muslim-majority country like Malaysia, Muslim women who choose not to veil often face harsh judgments and discrimination, branded as disobedient and lesser Muslims, with their identity shaped by the stigma of failing to meet religious expectations and the potential shame brought to their families, particularly in rural communities.

Yet, what is often overlooked is the full humanity of each Muslim woman with diverse stories. This essay calls for recognising Muslim women's humanity and shifting the focus from scrutinising our choices to challenging the systems and institutions that often perpetuate these struggles. As a Muslim hijabi woman who has lived nearly equal parts of my life in both Muslim majority and minority contexts, I call for a more inclusive understanding of what it means to be a Muslim woman beyond the confines of stereotypes and societal expectations that often reduce us to symbols rather than embracing our full, complex identities.

A world (not) built for Muslim women

Addressing the challenges requires a closer examination of their root causes. Muslim women, along with other women of color are perceived as the "Others". Western feminist ideas cannot fully address the issues Muslim women face because they fail to value the importance of faith in us and instead portray the Muslim world as uniformly patriarchal, ignoring that [patriarchy exists in the Western world as well](#).

The experiences of Muslim women are far more nuanced and cannot be limited to the lens of social, cultural, and religion. Following 9/11, visibly Muslim women have often felt the burden of having to explain themselves, justify their choices, and appear in public as a visible representation of Islam, and synonymous with representing the entire religion. This burden is compounded by gendered Islamophobia, often stemming from a lack of understanding of the [meaning of the hijab veiling](#), especially in contexts where Muslims are marginalised, such as in the United States. Meanwhile, in Muslim-majority countries like Turkey, Muslim women who veil find themselves caught



between secular and religious expectations that limit their activism and social participation, forcing them to choose sides despite embracing feminist values grounded in Islamic principles.

While change and action are required, speaking up comes at a cost. Criticising issues within our own Muslim communities may be [weaponised by the Western world](#) to justify further intervention or further perpetuate the harmful impact of "missions" [to save Muslim women](#). On the other hand, speaking out against Islamophobia can [risk of backlash](#) from the Western community. As a result, Muslim women are frequently silenced, trapped between these opposing forces, which further diminish our agency.

A liberated world for Muslim women

Muslim women deserve to live without their identity and faith being questioned, whether in the West or within the Muslim world. Practicing religion is a fundamental source of well-being for believers. For most Muslim women, it is an integral part of their personal and collective identity. Building an inclusive world for Muslim women requires dismantling Islamophobia and exclusion, not burdening us to thrive in hostile environments. Muslim women globally are already challenging societal expectations, such as in Egypt, where they enter traditionally male-dominated spaces like mosques, or in Indonesia, where women religious scholars advocate to strengthen the social justice principles within Islamic interpretations.

Numerous studies have examined the mental health impact of discrimination against Muslim women. What is urgent is normalising Muslim women's self-determination and educating those who misunderstand or weaponise religion to discriminate. A liberated world shifts from scrutinising Muslim women's choices or forcing them into predefined categories to recognising our humanity and right to self-determination. Please challenge and question the structures and systems that seek to limit our choices so Muslim women are not merely symbols in someone else's narrative but fully recognised as complex, resilient individuals.

Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/4hMvsNU.

Coming Events

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

March 2025

- 01** Ramadan begins (Islam)
- 03** Great Lent Begins (Orthodox Christian)
- 05** Ash Wednesday, Lenten fast begins (Western Christian)
- 08** International Women's Day, internationalwomensday.com
- 19** Bridge Day, thesydneystatement.org.au
- 21** International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, un.org/en/observances/end-racism-day
- 21** Harmony Day, harmony.gov.au
- 25** Feast of the Annunciation (Christian)
- 27** Laylat al-Qadr – The Night of Destiny/Power (Islam)
- 30** Eid al-Fitr – The feast marking the end of Ramadan (tbc) (Islam)

April 2025

- 05** International Golden Rule Day, bit.ly/48Btomt
- 13** Palm Sunday (Western/Catholic Christian)
- 18** Good Friday (Western/Catholic Christian and Coptic/Orthodox Christian)
- 19** Easter Saturday (Western/Catholic Christian)
- 20** Easter Sunday, Resurrection of Jesus Christ (Western/Catholic Christian and Coptic/Orthodox Christian)
- 22** Earth Day, earthday.org

May 2025

- 16** International Day of Living Together in Peace, un.org/en/observances/living-in-peace-day
- 27-03 June** National Reconciliation Week, reconciliation.org.au

June 2025

- 05** World Environment Day, worldenvironmentday.global
- 06** Eid al-Adha (The Feast of Sacrifice) (Islam)



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