



Praying for a harmonious world free of racism. Photos: AJN file

Jews and Muslims

a common cause

Last weekend, Murdoch University in Perth hosted the National Symposium on Racism. Muslim author **Hanifa Deen**, who addressed the conference, says our two communities must unite to tackle the twin scourges of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism.

WHEN I was attending primary school in the 1950s, most of my girlfriends were Jewish. We had in common our non-Christian minority status and, fortunately for us, the politics of the Middle East had not yet emerged as a stumbling block to personal friendships. At the time, there were no halal butcher shops in Perth and my dad gave our family a dispensation to eat kosher meat, which we bought from Lamotts Kosher Butcher in William Street, across the road from the synagogue and around the corner from the Perth Mosque. I enjoyed visiting Jewish homes for dinner and never having to worry about the dreaded "p" meat in all its processed forms. I also don't recall my friends' fathers ever looking "worse for wear" in an alcohol imbibing sense. I felt very comfortable as if I was visiting "halal" homes where, so to speak, nothing haram (forbidden) was happening.

What else did my school friends and I have in common? Well, we were excused from weekly scripture classes and sat outside on wooden benches giggling in the sun, supposedly reading, secure in the knowledge that we would never be asked to participate in nativity scenes at Christmas time or sing carols – though I admit to often humming along without thinking.

As an adult in the 1980s, I worked with colleagues who "happened" to be Jewish. I don't ever recall discussing religion or Middle East politics with them; other interests united us – migrant workers' rights, human rights and ethnic affairs. Finally, after years of writing turgid prose as a public servant and allowing my irreverent tongue to get me into trouble, I reinvented myself and became a full-time writer.

In 2004, I began writing *The Jihad*

Seminar based on Victoria's first religious hate speech case: the Islamic Council of Victoria versus Catch the Fire Inc. Various Jewish groups joined other faiths in supporting the new religious hate speech legislation. They were unconcerned at the intrusion of secular law into the realm of religion. On the contrary, they appreciated that the neutral secular state had legislated to protect religious minorities. Inevitably, pro-legislation and anti-legislation sides locked horns. Human rights advocates, lawyers, civil libertarians, Evangelical Christians and an assortment of Christian and Jewish interfaith observers flying more liberal colours debated the issues central to this case: freedom of speech versus freedom from vilification in a multicultural, multi-faith society.

After all these years, I was once again sitting next to Jews on benches – court benches this time, not school benches. The loyalty of the Islamic Council's allies (who never missed a session of the hearing) impressed me; the case dragged on for almost six years and ended, more or less, in a stalemate.

The Jews supporting the Muslim complainants displayed an empathy born of experience. Sadly, however, political differences today over Middle East issues blind us to our common interests in combating racism in Australia.

Anti-Muslim sentiment in Australia is partly caused by a fear of terrorism and is exacerbated by the enormous social distance separating Muslims and non-Muslims that makes it all too easy to embrace stereotypes – everything turns into an image and nothing is a thought. The electronic media thrives on women in hijab and men with beards. Recent surveys indicate that the archetypical

fear lurking in many a parent's head is still the same, "I wouldn't want my daughter (or son) to marry one of them." On the other hand, not too many Muslim parents want their own children marrying out!

A few years ago, I attended a Canberra conference where 300 non-Muslims and 30 Muslims came together to exchange views. Three friendly women from Christian backgrounds (whose honesty I appreciate to this day) confided that until the forum, the idea that Muslims possessed a sense of humour had never crossed their minds. They were taken aback at how much "we" smiled and joked. Someone else sought advice about a particular problem troubling her: every morning a woman got on her train wearing hijab, and sat, head buried in a book, looking nervous and very much alone. "I don't know what to do," said the woman. "I don't think she speaks English."

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"Try smiling at her," I answered. She seemed a little nonplussed at my suggestion.

The "annual hijab debate" is one example of the same old tired stories being served up year after year, eliciting the usual public response. Why? A few months ago, approximately 20 Perth journalists were surveyed; not one of them could claim a Muslim friend or acquaintance: never the opportunity to see the human face of Muslims who mow their lawns, want to lose weight, worry about their jobs and mortgages, swap jokes or tell

their children bedtime stories.

Australians seem unaware that Muslims hold different degrees of religious attachment just as Jews do. But the media wants the "authentic Muslim" and there is a plethora of Muslim men willing to stand up and be identified as leaders and authorities. While Muslim women are the subjects of countless books, they are not often listened to, especially if they are non-hijabis (most Australian Muslim women do not wear "the veil" in any of its forms). However, a new generation of strong Muslim women (some covering and some not) is emerging, gaining access to public space and revealing that the single definition of "the Muslim woman" is a myth.

The Jewish community has lived for hundreds of years as a minority in the Diaspora. It takes time to learn the skills of being a minority that has to make itself understood by a majority that wants you to deny your identity and "assimilate" – that old policy that failed miserably in the mid-1900s. It takes time to learn how to liaise effectively with government and local councils. The strategy of denying racists the "oxygen" or publicity they crave by refusing to respond to their provocative commentaries (or graffiti filth) is something understood by Jewish leaders and there are times when Muslim spokespeople should consider this as the wiser course, although I do understand the sense of honour and outrage communities feel.

Most Muslim immigrants come from Muslim majority societies, which has not prepared them for

living as a minority. A younger Australian-born generation will be more adept at finding allies among people of goodwill, subverting Islamic extremism and defusing community tensions.

In the past, through my work with the Human Rights Commission and state ethnic affairs agencies, I came to realise the importance of confronting racism by joining coalitions with a common purpose. While Muslims have many friends in the interfaith movement, I also see a need to return to the secular alliances that were active in the anti-racist campaigns of the previous century. Strategies used in the 1980s are still relevant in combating hate speech in the 21st century; successive governments do not need to go back and reinvent new strategies, but they do need to allocate more funding.

Hate speech needs combating by religious people and irreligious sceptics who should put aside ideological differences in the interests of social justice and human rights. The Murdoch University symposium I attended last week, entitled "Racism Revisited: Anti-racism Leadership and Practice", brought together people willing to do just that.

I look forward to a day when Australians, despite their religious or political differences, can stop believing the worst of each other.

Hanifa Deen is a Melbourne-based award-winning author. Her most recent book, *The Jihad Seminar* (UWA Press), was short-listed for the 2008 Human Rights Commission's Literary Award. Enquiries: www.hanifadeen.com.