Article

Australian Muslim Identities and the Question of Intra-Muslim Dialogue

Shaheen Whyte [1,*] and Salih Yucel [1,2]

1   Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, NSW 2795, Australia
2   Faculty of Theology and Philosophy, School of Theology, Australian Catholic University,
    Melbourne, VIC 3002, Australia
*   Correspondence: swhyte@csu.edu.au

Abstract: This paper explores the connection between intra-religious dialogue and Muslim identities in Australia. Drawing on empirical literature and analysis, this article investigates the increasing identification and interplay between Australian Muslims from different sects, sub-sects and faith-based groups of Islam. It argues intra-Muslim dialogue is gaining more noticeability among Australian Muslims working to build civic and inclusive identities. At the same time, the article points to the socio-political, organisational and sectarian issues challenging intra-religious unity between Muslim groups in Australia. To achieve genuine and long-lasting intra-faith relations, the article argues for a need to develop organic, theologically inclusive and contextually grounded articulations of intra-Muslim dialogue in Australia. The article concludes that diverse experiences of identity formation in Australia serve as an impetus for strengthening intra-Muslim relations based on previous success with inter-faith initiatives, as well as intergroup contact with non-Muslims.

Keywords: Australian Muslims; identity; intra-religious dialogue; inter-faith dialogue; Sunni; Shi'a; religious pluralism; diversity; Muslim minorities; sectarianism

1. Introduction

Intra-faith dialogue is unique in the development and cultivation of Muslim religious identities. While there has been sustained commitment and relative success with inter-faith dialogue between Abrahamic faiths in Australia and worldwide, there has been little research and commentary on intra-religious relations between Muslims. In filling this knowledge gap, this paper aims to address the benefits, prospects and challenges of intra-religious dialogue in Australia within a theologically inclusive framework. It aims to address three main points: (1) the religious diversity of Australian Muslims and their self-identification with various Muslim sects and schools of thought; (2) the level of public and informal engagement between different Muslim groups; (3) sectarian and socio-political challenges to intra-religious dialogue, particularly relating to intra-communal tensions and the exclusion of Muslim minorities in peak Muslim organisations.

Despite living in a relatively harmonious multicultural society, sectarian politics and overseas conflicts have sharpened identity politics between Australian Muslims in recent times. Media reports and analysts note the increasing sectarianism between Sunnis and Shi'is in Australia following the 2003 Iraq War, the 2012 Syrian conflict and rise of ISIS (AMWCHR 2015; Shanahan 2014; Hume 2014; Zammit 2013; Olding and Elliot 2013). Fears of a clandestine sectarianism can also be traced to the Saudi exportation of Salafi-Wahhabism in Australian mosques and Islamic schools, which has been criticised for its intolerance of Shi'is and non-Salafi sects (Dorling 2015; Zwartz 2009). While Australian mosques and Muslim congregations have diversified over the last few decades (Underabi 2014), sectarian and politically motivated rivalries continue to surface within peak Islamic bodies and the broader community, resulting in the exclusion of Muslim minority groups (Whyte 2021, pp. 564–65; Yasmeen 2014, p. 29; Yusuf 2014).

Outside of Australia, growing *takfiri* (accusation of unbelief) ideologies have spread in authoritarian and conflict-torn countries in what commentators call a "vocabulary of sectarianism." This reached its apex in Syria when various Sunni and Shi'a groups engaged in a long-term "sectarian dehumanization strategy" as part of a prolonged religious struggle, igniting sectarian rivalries (Zelin and Smyth 2014). Such language is readily invoked and intensified inside Muslim cyber environments as a battleground for intra-religious supremacy (Seigel 2015). Worryingly, the language of sectarianism has grown as a counter-ideological movement against Islam's inherent pluralism and unequivocal stance on religious freedom (see Q2:136; 2:256; 2:262; 2:285; 3:84; 4:163; 10:99; 11:118; 18:29; 16:32; 41:33; 42:13).

The lack of receptiveness in improving intra-Muslim relations correlates with studies indicating a "dialogue deficit" in the Muslim world. Krause et al. (2019) attribute the dialogue deficit to the lack of recognition of intra-sectarian issues, scepticism towards intra-faith dialogue as a "Western Christian innovation" and an undersupply of robust civil society institutions to effectively facilitate Sunni–Shi'a dialogue. A further obstacle inhibiting intra-Muslim dialogue is entrenched in the blasphemy laws enforced by authoritarian regimes in Muslim-majority countries, which punish and suppress religious and ethnic minorities for religious and political dissent (Kuru 2020; Khan 2019, p. 26; Saeed and Saeed 2017, p. 101). While defenders of anti-blasphemy laws allege that they protect religious belief and practice, they do the opposite in denying freedom of speech and expression (Amnesty International 2016).

Despite the challenges of sectarianism, a strong cohort of Muslim theorists and educators have advocated for religious pluralism and intra-Muslim dialogue (Saeed 2019; Sachedina 2010; Duderija 2010; Kamali 2009; Shafiq and Abu-Nimer 2007; Engineer 2007; Afsaruddin 2007). Raimundo Panikkar, a Catholic Priest and scholar of intra-faith dialogue, emphasises the need for mutual understanding and pluralism within religions. He argues intra-religious dialogue does not aim for "uniform unity or a reduction of all the pluralistic variety of Man into one single religion, system, ideology, or tradition" (Panikkar 1999, p. 10). Adis Duderija (2010) similarly argues against the imposition of a particular orthodoxy on Muslims for intra-religious dialogue to prosper. He writes:

> A call for intra-Muslim dialogue is therefore not a call for imposition of any interpretational hegemony or a push for 'orthodoxy' and 'orthopraxis'. On contrary a call for intra-Muslim dialogue is based upon the absolute need to facilitate dialogue between various contemporary Muslim schools of thought and build bridges of better understanding between them based on the universal values of mutual respect and dignity.

Duderija makes an important point about the interpretational hegemony or push for orthodoxy or "true Islam." This is evident in the way some Muslim groups weaponise proselytisation (*da'wa*) as a religio-political summons to compete and claim dominion over rivalling schools of thought (Kuiper 2021, p. 78).[1] A genuine dialogue, on the other hand, does not try to convert or persuade participants to follow a particular faith or sect (Shafiq and Abu-Nimer 2007, p. xvi; Engineer 2002, p. 2).[2] As seen with interfaith initiatives, religious participants draw on overarching Abrahamic beliefs to instill commonality and mutual understanding between participants. Intra-faith conversations, by contrast, tend to be overshadowed with polemics, past grievances and preconceived ideas of the "other"—whether it be theologically, historically or politically motivated. As Shafiq and Abu-Nimer (2007, pp. 49–50) note, inter-faith and intra-Muslim dialogue can be enhanced with proper etiquette, good manners and conflict resolution techniques grounded in the Islamic tradition.

This paper aims to address the theological roots of intra-religious dialogue in Islam. It identifies key concepts relating to ethnic, religious, intellectual and cultural diversity, as well as Qur'anic and Prophetic instructions encouraging mutual kindness (*tasamuh*), pluralism and the right to disagreement (*ikhtilaf*). This is followed by a methodological background and justification for the study of intra-religious dialogue in Australia. The

article dissects Australia's intra-Muslim diversity and efforts to engage in intra-religious dialogue, as well as the socio-political and communal challenges it faces in the context of sectarian and organisational exclusion of Muslim minorities in peak Islamic bodies in Australia.

2. Theological Roots of Intra-Faith Dialogue in Islam

Muslim theologians argue that Islam is a universal religion that addresses all humankind. Yet, they also admit divergence between human beings, including within the Muslim communities themselves. When the related Qur'anic verses, Sunna and scholarly interpretations are examined, it is clear Islam inherits a Qur'anic epistemology that promotes dialogue between its believers and non-Muslims (Saeed 2019; Sachedina 2010; Kamali 2009; Afsaruddin 2007). *Kalam* (speech) is an attribute of God for communicating or engaging in dialogue with His creations. Thus, God sent prophets and holy scriptures to communicate with human beings (5:48). God also created the ability to speak in human nature as a virtue or gift. Accordingly, God created humankind into tribes and families so they "come to know the other" (49:13). Abou El Fadl (2007, p. 281) interprets this verse as an "ethical imperative to strive to create the necessary moral and material conditions in which people can come to love one another." Said Nursi (2001, p. 380) similarly claims that being divided into groups, tribes and nations encourages "mutual acquaintance and mutual assistance," rather than "antipathy and mutual hostility."

Islam's universalism and intra-religious diversity are embedded in the notion of *tawhid* (oneness of God). Through *tawhid*, Muslims are invited to connect themselves and each other via God's Divine Names and attributes (Nursi 2001). The inter-connectedness of God's Divine Names establishes social and spiritual bonds that transcend worldly, ideological and cultural barriers. Muslims can find unity within "Divine names such as my Creator, Inventor, Fashioner, Provider, Sustainer, Forgiver, Giver of Life, The Reckoner, The Guide ... (Nursi 1997, p. 313)." Muslims also share a deep reverence for their sacred scriptures, the Qur'an and Sunna (traditions of the Prophet); ritualistic practices, such as the *shahada* (testimony of the faith); daily prayer; fasting; hajj; and zakat. Within this theocentric worldview, all humans are equal before God, regardless of their racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, geographic or socio-economic backgrounds (17:70; 49:13; 2:30).

From an intra-faith perspective, the Qur'an and Sunna promote unity, diversity and collaboration between Muslims in all aspects of life. Both sacred texts model the notion of an *umma* (community of faith) (3: 110). Such a community is analogous to the human body in the Islamic tradition (Al-Bukhari n.d.). Given that the whole body is connected and all limbs support each other for the continuation of life, all Muslims need to connect and support each other for a socially and spiritually healthy society. For this to work, Muslim inter-relationships need to embrace pluralism. Mohammad Hashim Kamali (2009, p. 35) argues that the Qur'an and actions of the Prophet "attest Islam's affirmative stance on pluralism." This is not merely limited to religious pluralism, but also encompasses ethno-lingual, cultural, legal and political pluralism. For this reason, engaging in dialogue between Muslims is not only a recommendation, but a communal obligation (*fard kifayah*) to peacefully co-exist as "God's viceroys on earth" (Abou El Fadl 2007, p. 281).

Islam is full of epithets emphasising the unity of human beings. In many Qur'anic verses God proclaims, "O humankind" or "O who you believe." By such a calling, God honours humanity and believers. This is reflected famously by the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661), who declared people are of two types: "a person is either your brother in faith, or your equal in creation" (Tabataba'i 1980). The notion of humanity extends to the unity forged with the first human being sent to earth, the Prophet Adam. The Qur'an honours humans as "the children of Adam (17:70)." This unity is also explained in a hadith (Prophetic narration) which declares: "All of the people are the children of Adam, and Adam was created from dust" (Al-Tirmidhi).[3] The Qur'an, moreover, enjoins all Muslims as brothers (9:10). Major traditional, opinion-based, Sufi and linguistic classical Qur'anic exegetes highlight the importance of brotherhood from

spiritual, social, juristic and political angles. For some, Islamic brotherhood is superior to the fraternity of parenthood because of its eternity in the next world. Others compare it to being siblings from the same parents (Al-Tabari 2000; Al-Razi 1999; Al-Qurtubi 2006; Ibn Kathir 1988; Al-Qushayri n.d.; Al-Zamakhshari 1986). This can also be referred to as inter-sibling dialogue.

However, as various opinions and conflicts happen between brothers, the same occurs among adherents. This is not because of the sacred text, but due to the ambiguity and contestability surrounding its verses, interpretations, cultural differences between Muslims, as well as competing economic and political interests between various ethnic, nationalistic and sectarian groups. This has resulted in the diversity of opinions, widespread scholarship, conflicting views and, at times, direct confrontation between Muslims. The latter can be seen among the Prophet's companions, the Sunni-Shi'a split, and later Muslim generations embattled in tribal, ethnic and religious conflicts. Differences in religious views and cultural practices, however, are seen as a mercy from God, as God, with all His power could have made everyone the same (16:93). The utilisation, tolerance and facilitation of difference in Islam is known as *ikhtilaf* (the right to disagreement). Kamali (2009, p. 30) argues that *ikhtilaf* is an entrenched feature of Islam, noting that *ikhtilaf al-tanawwu* (disagreement that implies diversity) is considered praiseworthy (*mahmud*) among scholars of Islamic jurisprudence (see Badri 2018; Kamali 2015; Al-Alwani 2011; Ad-Dihlevi 2006).

The reconciliation of different opinions is an important topic in all Islamic disciplines. While Muslims from different tribes, ethnic and cultural groups may differ on orthodoxy and orthopraxy, their ability to contribute ideas, cultural practices, intellectual and artistic feats add to Islam's dynamism and universality. In situations where tension and conflict are apparent, the Qur'an urges believers to reconcile their hearts (*ta'lif al-qulub*). Such reconciliation requires dialogue: " … He united your hearts, so you—by His grace—became brothers … " (3: 103). The word of '*allafa*' is used for uniting the hearts. The lexical meaning of *allafa* is "to be attuned to each other, to be connected and united, to be in harmony with each other" (Wehr 1976, p. 23).

Tensions, nevertheless, around sectarianism remain high. Attempts to address blasphemy, apostasy and puritanical ideologies have been well documented among Muslim scholars advocating for religious freedom (Kuru 2020; Saeed and Saeed 2017; Kamali 2015; Abou El Fadl 2007). The Amman Message (2004) is one major attempt among traditional religious scholars from Sunni and Shi'a schools of thought to prevent declarations of apostasy between Muslims. The Message declares various Sunni, Shi'a, Salafi and Sufi branches of Islam as orthodox, although it does not include other Muslim minority or syncretic groups.

In his book *Reopening Muslim Minds*, Turkish journalist and author Mustafa Akyol urgently calls on Muslims to develop a theology of tolerance. He addresses the tolerance deficit among certain Muslims who see their path as the only right way, or as part of a "saved sect." He writes:

> The remedy to these toxic divisions is not in the endless calls to "unite" all Muslims on "true Islam," the definition of which is the source of tension. The remedy is rather in the Murji'ite [postponement] solution: let all Muslims follow their own traditions and persuasions, "postpone" their unresolved disputes to the afterlife, and respect each other as Ahl al-Qibla [people of the Qibla, or direction of prayer to Mecca]. (Akyol 2021, pp. 221–22)

It is important to note that non-exclusivity in truth does not diminish Islam's universal truths. Rather, calls for tolerance fall under pluralistic notions around accepting difference, freedom of conscience and facilitating healthy dialogue under God's providence. This is supported by various Qur'anic passages instructing Muslims to defeat one's ego, self-interests and group ideology for higher moral and spiritual virtues (4:135; 17:70; 3:59; 4:36).

The moral mechanisms used to guide and safeguard respectful dialogue revolve around emulating Prophetic behaviour, such as demonstrating *adab* (etiquette), *ahklaq* (moral conduct) and *ihsan* (moral excellence). As these principles exist within Islam's

scholarly tradition, they provide a strong theological foundation and precedent for Muslims to successfully engage in intra-faith dialogue.

3. Methodology

The study of intra-religious dialogue in Australia is unique given its diverse demographic and multicultural landscape. Australian Muslims come from 183 different countries, consisting of major ethnic groups from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Bangladesh, Iraq, Turkey, Iran, India and Indonesia (ABS 2016). Australia also inherits Muslims from diverse religious orientations including Sunni, Shi'a, Sufi, Alawi, Alevi, Ahmadiyya, secular and non-denominational Muslims (Chamas and Shelton 2021; El Matrah et al. 2014; Saeed 2003, pp. 2–3). It is hard to determine the exact figures of Muslim religious sects in Australia as there is no official census recording of Muslim denominations. However, most of Australia's largest mosques and congregations identify with Sunni Islam (Underabi 2014).

Australian Muslims, like other Muslim minorities in the West, exercise greater constitutional freedoms and civil liberties compared to Muslim-majority states under authoritarian rule (Akyol 2020; Pew Research Center 2012; Mogahed 2006). While Western Muslims have experienced increased forms of discrimination and Islamophobia in the post-9-11 era, their ability to openly identify with their theological denomination remains an important feature of intra-Muslim diversity. Hence, while intra-religious dialogue is integral to Islam's theological outlook, its ability to thrive requires strong civil institutions, democratic freedoms and a communal willingness to actively engage in intra-faith initiatives and platforms. Australia is unique in this respect, as it shares an eclectic mix of Muslims from various religious, ethnic, cultural and inter-generational backgrounds. However, the extent of intra-Muslim dialogue is yet to be tested against any empirical study.

This paper uses primary and secondary Islamic sources, including the Qur'an, Sunna and exegetical works to elucidate a theoretical framework for intra-Muslim dialogue. As religion and identity intersect on various levels, the article adopts a multi-disciplinary approach in examining the communal interactions between Sunni, Shi'a and other minority Muslim groups in Australia, as well as the socio-political, institutional and transnational factors shaping intra-religious interaction. This follows Iner and Yucel's (2015, p. vii) conceptualisation of identity as a complex, multilayered and ongoing process. Muslim identity, as they argue, is shaped and influenced by the "theological, social, political and regional circumstances and discourses" (2015, p. vii). As such, this paper draws on existing empirical and social scientific literature on Muslim identity formation in Australia to investigate existing and future patterns of intra-Muslim dialogue. This includes an analysis of the increasing intra-denominational identification among Australian Muslims and the prospects and challenges hindering intra-Muslim dialogue in Australia. The final section provides a discussion about the findings and recommendations for further research on the topic.

4. Intra-Muslim Diversity in Australia

The cultivation of Muslim identities has undergone extensive research in Australia against the backdrop of migration, assimilation and multicultural policies shaping diverse Muslim communities. These works investigate Australian Muslim experiences of citizenship and belonging, youth identity, inter-faith dialogue and Muslim minority identities (Ali 2020a; Mitha et al. 2020; Atie et al. 2017; Roose and Harris 2015; Iner and Yucel 2015; El Matrah et al. 2014; Schottmann 2013). Literature accumulating in the post-9/11 period has largely engaged with issues of identity formation, for example, the creation of a collective Australian Muslim identity; the challenges of Islamophobia; intergroup contact between Muslims and non-Muslims; and the politics of inclusion and exclusion (Yilmaz et al. 2021; Ali 2020b; Kabir 2020; Abdel-Fattah 2017; Akbarzadeh 2016; Yasmeen 2014; Ozalp and Keskin 2015; Johns et al. 2015; Mansouri et al. 2015; Woodlock 2011).

Earlier studies suggest Australian Muslims did not strongly identify with a particular religious denomination. In a 2001 study of Muslim communities in Australia, Muslim

participants indicated their differences were minor (Bouma et al. 2001, p. 64). They referred to Islamic anecdotes of brotherhood: "we are all part of the one family because we all come from Adam" and "are all equal in front of God". Abdullah Saeed's (2003, pp. 67–78) earlier work on Islam in Australia indicated the same sentiments " . . . there appears to be a tendency on the part of both Shi'is and Sunnis in Australia to narrow their differences and come to a more common view of their identity as Muslims." Muslim relations, rather, after the post-war migration waves, were ethnically orientated as organisations catered for the needs of their respective ethnic groups.

Whereas earlier research indicates Australian Muslims did not identify strongly with their religious affiliations or sect, more recent research suggests otherwise. Whyte's (2021) study on Australian Muslims saw 81% of respondents identifying as Sunni, 10% identified as Shi'a, 7% as non-denominational Muslims and 2% as "other." A small portion of participants identified as Ahmadiyya, Alawite and Sufi in the other category. Likewise, Rane et al.'s (2020) survey findings indicate most Muslims identify as "Sunni" (63.6%), followed by a large cohort that answered, "just Muslim" (34.0%). Other responses included Hanafi (18.0%), Ahl Sunnah wal Jamaa (12.6%), Shafi'i (6.7%), Sufi (6.5%), progressive (5.2%), Shi'a (4.1%) and Salafi (2.8%). Similarly, Yilmaz et al.'s (2021, p. 6) study on Young Australian Muslims and intergroup contact surveyed 64 Muslim participants with 46 identifying as Sunni, 12 as Shi'a (Jafari) and 6 as non-denominational Muslims. Apart from identifying with broader sects, these findings show an increase in sub-sect identification and intra-denominational diversity.

It would be a mistake to assume the increasing denominational identification among Australian Muslims as purely political or sectarian, especially when many Muslims inherit theological outlooks from their familial, intellectual and cultural upbringings. Another contributing factor to the increasing identification with different streams of Islamic thought is the level of comfort Australian Muslims have in expressing their religious identities in safe democratic environments. This is supported by research that shows how intercultural contact between Muslims and non-Muslims reduces prejudice against Islam (Yilmaz et al. 2021; Mansouri and Vergani 2018). At the same time, it would be naïve to suggest sectarian and ideological politics do not play a role in determining intra-religious relations, or at the very least, limiting intra-religious interaction.

5. Intra-Muslim Relations in Australia

Intra-Muslim relations in Australia can be traced to the migration, cultural ties and intermarriages formed between Muslims from different ethnic and kinship groups. On a socio-religious level, the interaction between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims was frequent prior to the 1980s, as many Shi'as attended Sunni mosques for prayer (Bouma et al. 2001, p. 63). While most mosques in Australia are non-sectarian, the migration and settlement of Muslims in the post-war period witnessed the development of ethnic and sectarian enclaves with strong ties to mosques and Islamic centres. Jan Ali (2020a, p. 55), for example, notes how the ethnic formation of civic Muslim bodies isolated them from each other, resulting in "limited to no inter- or intra-communal interaction." Ali refers to the Sunni and Shi'a Lebanese communities that have had separate community organisations, as well as Turkish Sunni Muslims who have run separate mosques with little intra-communal engagement.

Ethnic affiliations among Muslim migrants were advantageous to some degree as Muslims could effectively mobilise to establish religious organisations within their own communities. This did not thwart efforts by Muslim leaders from different cultural groups to establish the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC), Australia's first peak multi-ethnic Islamic organisation (Saeed 2003, p. 139). AFIC (2020) was founded in 1964 as an umbrella group and remains a predominately Sunni organisation. AFIC's (2011) main objectives are to articulate Australian Muslim interests in areas of social policy, political advocacy and administrative support through its local and state councils. However, AFIC's (2011) constitution draws clear distinctions between certain Muslim minority groups. For

example, AFIC (2011) explicitly excludes Ahmadis from its membership, while its position on syncretic Muslim groups like the Alawites and Alevis remains absent.

AFIC has come under scrutiny for its lack of inclusivity and leadership from Sunni and Shi'a members of the community. For many Shi'as, AFIC did not provide adequate services to their congregations. Mohammad Taha Al-Salami (2017, p. 143), a member of the Shi'a community in Australia, argues that in the past, many Shi'a scholars had to consult AFIC to receive any legal documents or recognition, or to apply to become a registered marriage celebrant, which in many cases was rejected. This, in large part, along with Australia's growing Muslim population, has led to the establishment of various peak Islamic bodies, mosques and Muslim civil society groups with their own services and administrative centres to cater for their respective congregations (Amath 2014, pp. 100–2; Underabi 2014).

Similar criticisms have been directed towards other peak Islamic bodies in Australia. Despite holding the largest membership of imams in the country, the Australian National Imams Council (ANIC) excludes members outside of Sunni Islam. This notwithstanding, a growing number of Sunni, Shi'a and Ahmadiyya leaders have shown a desire to establish inclusive ecumenical councils (Whyte 2021, pp. 565–66). Survey results from Whyte's (2021, p. 565) study indicate that nearly half (48.6%) of respondents agree there is a need for greater representation of Shi'a sheikhs and minority groups in peak Islamic organisations. At the same time, 30.5% of respondents were unsure or neutral, while 20.8% disagreed. This highlights a certain tension or reluctance among Muslims to establish multi-denominational organisations. Several participants attributed this to the theological and logistical issues between different Muslim sects, and their wish to acquire institutional autonomy. Others, meanwhile, argued for the need of Sunni, Shi'a and Ahmadiyya Muslims to "work together" and identify "neutral platforms" to speak to each other (Whyte 2021, pp. 565–66).

There has been intra-religious interaction between Sunnis and Shi'is at organisational and clerical levels. For example, in 2017, members of the Islamic Council of Victoria attended the launch of the Islamic Shia Council of Victoria (ISCV) to express their support for the new organisation (Edwards 2018, p. 90). Likewise, in 2018, ISCV (2018) met with the Victorian Board of Imams to promote unity between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims (Whyte 2021, p. 566). A further sign of solidarity occurred in 2017, when several Sunni and Shi'a groups denounced the Adelaide-based fringe Shi'a cleric, Imam Tawhidi, for inflaming sectarian tensions (Adcock 2017; Patton 2019; Mackey 2019). Australian Muslims, in this respect, are acutely aware of the dangers of sectarianism, particularly given that many Muslims have fled from overseas sectarian violence.

Other attempts to promote inter-sectarian diversity have occurred among civil society organisations, such as the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights (AMWCHR). In 2015, AMWCHR organised a range of activities and workshops to promote Muslim sectarian diversity between Alawi, Alevi and Sunni Muslims. The program reached out to young Muslims, including Alevi Kurds and Iraqi Shi'is. AMWCHR's (2015, p. 10) evaluation report, titled "Speaking Across the Sectarian Divide", identified several achievements through its dialogue initiatives, including increased community capacity to deal with inter-sectarian conflict, raising awareness of sectarian diversity and creating networking opportunities between Alawi, Alevi and Sunni youth. AMWCHR's project provides a solid blueprint for future intra-faith initiatives among different generations, community members and national stakeholders.

Whether such efforts have turned into long-lasting and genuine interactive and organisational inclusion remains to be seen. There are small signs however of intra-communal dialogue. For example, anecdotal evidence shows there has been inclusion of Shi'a students in some Sunni-populated faith-based Muslims schools in Sydney and Melbourne. Leaders form Sunni and Shi'a mosques have also invited each other for Eid gatherings during Ramadan. In the academic sphere, there is a greater awareness of reaching out to under-represented Muslim groups to increase representation. However, as noted above, more needs to be done at communal and organisational levels to set examples for future Muslim generations to follow.

6. Discussion: Advancing Intra-Muslim Dialogue

Preliminary research on intra-religious dialogue in Australia reveals both strengths and weaknesses to achieving meaningful dialogue. Australian Muslims have demonstrated immense resilience as minorities to engage with Australians from different faiths and non-religious backgrounds, especially in the context of Islamophobia. It is no surprise that intra-religious dialogue is often left on the backburner, given Australian Muslims have invested significant resources into countering Islamophobia, negative media representation and communal unrest following the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. However, what this paper has demonstrated is that Muslims from different backgrounds are becoming increasingly inter-connected and mindful of their shared and common interests. Studies with diverse sample groups of Muslims indicate they are united on various issues relating to equality, social justice, human rights, environmental sustainability and a communal resolve to fight Islamophobia (Rane et al. 2020, p. 22).

Australia is not immune from communal and overseas sectarian tension. Fostering of intra-faith initiatives plays an important role in mitigating sectarian politics, in addition to cultivating organic and civic Muslim identities. However, the move towards intra-religious dialogue needs to come from within, at personal, local and organisational levels, for it to share genuine and long-lasting relationships. The challenges of intra-faith dialogue should not lead to theological deprivation or communal apathy (Yilmaz 2010). The need to merge socio-political realities in Australia with an accessible theological framework is required. The Amman Message, despite its limitations, is one example of opening dialogue through the recognition of Islam's diverse schools of thought. This can be seen at a more local level with a growing number of imams and Muslim leaders highlighting the need to work together on shared platforms to advance Muslim interests. Further enhancement of intra-religious activities can be spearheaded by Muslim community groups, civil society actors and Islamic studies departments at universities well-versed in facilitating inter-faith initiatives. These organisations and leaders can utilize past experiences, existing frameworks and resources to create safe and vibrant spaces for diverse Muslim groups to engage in meaningful dialogue.

A closer look at Islam's sacred sources and exegetical tradition illustrates that there are more theological, scholarly and spiritual bounds that unify Muslims than what separates them. History testifies that Muslims contribute to peace and social harmony when there is mutual communication and understanding between them. This paper proposes the importance of Qur'anic principals and norms emphasising unity, pluralism and difference. It also advocates for deeper dialogue among Muslims to address contextual issues impacting the community based on common interests and values. For this to take place, Australian Muslims must build the courage to inclusively speak with other congregations, including majority and minority groups, to discuss new challenges confronting the community.

7. Conclusions

At present, Australian Muslims have showed the ability to interact with other faith groups and non-Muslim groups. Intra-Muslim relations, on the other hand, have remained limited. Some Australian Muslim organisations have demonstrated their ability to accommodate for the diverse needs of Muslims and are pushing for greater intra-religious tolerance. However, greater communal, grassroots and bottom-up mobilisation is required to promote sustained and genuine dialogue as part of a civil and tolerant Islam.

As this paper has identified, ignoring such a dialogue will deepen sectarian and political divisions and sustain negative stereotyping of the religious "other." This paper argues that intra-religious dialogue is Qur'anically inspired through its universal and theological principles. As far as the practicalities of engaging in dialogue are concerned, Islam inherits overlapping concepts, enabling positive, mutual, holistic and ethical dialogue, which have been successfully embodied in inter-faith initiatives and intergroup contact with non-Muslims. In this respect, it is important Muslims distinguish between the goals of *da'wa* and genuine dialogue. At times, overseas preachers and movements with vested

interests polarise Australian Muslims on political and sectarian issues. These attempts can be mitigated for the betterment of Muslims who want to establish strong and politically conscious communities with the ability to identify sectarian motives.

As argued in this paper, Australian Muslims have negotiated various identities throughout the process of migration, settlement and times of political upheaval. As a minority group, they have achieved success in various dialogue events with diverse audiences, not just among Abrahamic faiths, but also individuals, politicians and media corporations with Islamophobic tendencies. Given their success in these fields, Australian Muslims are well equipped to engage in healthy and robust intra-faith dialogue. To further enhance dialogue, we have proposed a theologically inclusive approach towards promoting intra-religious relations, alongside practical and communal steps to nurture and enhance intra-group contact among Muslims. Further empirical research on intra-religious relations will benefit and enrich the preliminary findings of this paper, particularly with respect to intra-communal interaction, bottom-up mobilisation and the socio-political dynamics of Islamic organisations and Muslim leadership in Australia.

Notes

1　It is important to highlight *da'wa* also helps facilitate intra-religious and inter-faith debate. As Kuiper (2021, p. 12) notes, *da'wa* "served as an important mechanism in catalysing the inter-and intra-religious encounters by which Islam has come to define and constitute itself as a religious tradition".

2　The modernist thinker, Ali Engineer (2002, p. 2) insists that "dialogue is needed rather than *da'wa* or missionary activities" at the present time. He opposes aggressive forms of *da'wa*, and notes that "*da'wa* is desirable only if it does not lead to loss of peace and harmony".

3　(Al-Tirmidhi) Al-Tirmidhi, Hadith. No. 3955. Available online: https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2012/06/28/all-people-children-adam/ (accessed on 1 October 2022).

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