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Factors Influencing Australian Muslims' Attitudes toward Christian-Muslim Dialogue: The Case of Sunni Muslims of Adelaide and Uniting Church Christians

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Abstract: Since the implementation of a multicultural policy in the 1970s, religious diversity in Australia has increased. Research has demonstrated that intergroup contact is essential for managing diverse multicultural societies. This is because, given the right conditions, intergroup contact will reduce prejudice and build trust between groups. Given the importance of intergroup contact, policy makers and researchers have identified interfaith dialogue's importance to the success of multicultural societies. However, there is very limited research that explores interfaith dialogue from the perspectives of adherents, in this case Christians and Muslims in the Australian context. This paper focuses on interfaith dialogue between Christians of the Uniting Church and Sunni Muslims of Adelaide, South Australia. It explores the factors that influence participants' attitudes towards engaging in interfaith dialogue. Using a grounded theory methodology, the study involved seventeen (17) mixed gender Muslim participants over the age of eighteen, including everyday adherents and religious leaders. Some of the key findings demonstrate that theological perspectives and notions of multicultural citizenship are positive drivers for dialogue; Islamophobia and dehumanization of Muslims were inhibitors.

Keywords: Sunni; Adelaide; interfaith dialogue; intergroup contact; dehumanization; Islamophobia

1. Introduction

Australia is 'one of the most multicultural countries in the world, and home to the world's oldest continuing culture and home to 25 million people from almost 200 countries' (DFAT 2020). In the 1970s, the Australian government, as a nation building exercise, introduced a multicultural social policy. This signaled a shift away from its historical position of assimilation, to one that welcomed and supported cultural diversity. Subsequent Australian governments understood and conceptualized multiculturalism differently, thus:

> The 1980s and early 1990s, under the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, were the high point of official multiculturalism. By the later 1990s and onwards, especially under the coalition government of John Howard (1996–2007) and, later, that of Tony Abbott (2013–2015), official multiculturalism was wound back and supplanted by neoliberal practices. (Stratton 2020)

The multicultural diversity is highlighted by the fact that over 300 different languages are being spoken in Australian homes (ABS 2017). In 2018, 85 per cent of Australians agreed that multiculturalism has been good for Australia (Markus 2018, p. 64), but anxieties around cultural diversity still arise in the public space. The emergence of the right-wing populist One Nation political party and the 2005 Cronulla race riots are examples of this. These, combined with the terrorist events of 9/11, the Bali bombings and other somewhat similar tragic events created a political shift away from discussion of 'multiculturalism' to

a focus on 'Australian values'.[1] Chisari (2018, p. 41) argues the political rhetoric around Australian values have evolved since the events of 9/11 in a way to suggest they are 'Western values', which are supposedly inconsistent with Islam. In Australia, as in many Western countries, the main cause of reaction against multiculturalism is related to concerns around Muslims (Moran 2017, p. 6). Critics argue that multiculturalism's ability to allow for Islamic institutions conflict with 'Western' values (cited by Duderija and Rane 2019, p. 78).

A parliamentary committee inquiry into the role of multiculturalism in Australia, which held public submissions and hearings across the country, highlighted some groups were opposed to Muslim inclusion (Moran 2017, pp. 272–79). Submissions from some evangelical and Christian lobby groups such as the Endeavor Forum, Saltshakers, Family Council of Victoria, and the Christian Democratic Party, argued that Islam was incompatible with Australia's Christian-based democracy. Research has shown mainstream Australian Christians prefer to be socially distanced from Muslims, with "a large percentage wanting Muslims to be kept out of the country altogether" (Bouma 2012, p. 56).

1.1. Intergroup Contact

Under 'specified conditions', the ability for positive intergroup contact to reduce prejudice and promote higher degrees of racial and ethnic tolerance has been well documented (Vezzali and Stathi 2017, p. 2). Furthermore, "it is not only important to know that contact reduces prejudice but also to understand how we can make this happen. In other words, intergroup contact theory should also specify how contact should be practically implemented to improve intergroup relations" (Vezzali and Stathi 2020).

The necessity to promote positive intergroup contact is well recognized by policy makers in diverse multicultural societies (Camilleri 2017, p. 9). Despite this, what has received less focus, is the factors that allow or inhibit this type of contact to happen, particularly when this involves religious groups. This paper aims to contribute to this lesser-known aspect of intergroup contact.

1.2. British Protestantism to Religious Diversity

From the time of white settlement, the Australian religious landscape had been dominated by British Protestantism (Bouma 2016, p. 73). However, with the gradual decline of its influence, and new waves of immigrants meant Australia has become more religiously diverse (Bouma et al. 2022, p. 8). Whilst Christianity no longer holds the dominant place it once did, it remains the largest religious grouping in the country. Whilst the Muslim population in Australia is still relatively small (for example, the 2022 census indicated 813,392 Australians were Muslim, which represents 3.2 percent of the total population), it is now the second largest religion, with the expectation that with immigration it will continue to grow. Australian Muslims are diverse ethically, politically, linguistically, and indeed in their religious orientations. The largest two Muslim traditions are the Sunni (who are the majority 85%) and the Shia (15%). Given the heterogeneity of the Australian Muslim communities, any generalizations will be problematic. Thus, the focus of this paper is on the Sunni community of Adelaide, South Australia.

The ability for Christians and Muslims to have ongoing positive intergroup contact, is an important aspect to Australia's ongoing success as a multicultural nation. The paper is structured in the following way: (1) Literature Review, (2) Results, (3) Findings, (4) Discussion, (5) Methodology and (6) Conclusion.

2. Literature Review

In the 1950s social psychologist Gordon Allport developed a hypothesis that intergroup contact, given certain conditions, can promote tolerance and acceptance of others. Since then, decades of research have shown positive intergroup contact reduces prejudicial attitudes by reducing anxiety and being exposed to the other's point of view (Pettigrew et al. 2011). It has also been observed to have a generalizing effect by making people

less prejudiced towards unknown groups. Meleady (2021) demonstrated participants were more motivated to engage in intergroup contact when other members of their group were doing so. Cernat (2019) observed cross-group, friendship, produced greater levels of prejudice reduction than other types of contact. However, Dunn et al. (2016, p. 83) claimed it was the nature of contact that most influenced attitudes towards engaging with others.

Brown and Brown (2011, p. 338) concluded that religious intergroup contact was effective at promoting pluralist attitudes among religious in-groups (followers of the same faith), however less is understood about the impact of religiosity on attitudes towards engaging with religious out-groups. A review of the literature indicates a multitude of factors, assisting and hindering interfaith dialogue. Azumah (2012) highlights among conservative Christians globally, a fear that seeking common ground with other religions will necessitate a 'watering down' of truth claims. DeMarinis (2020) similarly notes among religious followers, a fear of syncretism leading to the abandonment of the 'one true religion'. Bobko et al. (2011) cite instances of groups not wanting to participate in interfaith activities based on the theological differences of salvation. Zia-ul-Haq (2014) raises the negative role geo-politics can play in influencing attitudes. Whilst there are clearly significant challenges facing positive interfaith contact, Ralston (2020) observes the importance of commonalities. For instance, religions often share revelatory challenges concerning secularism, human life, and God's sovereignty. Demiri (2018) noted the significance of 'the common word' initiative that drew on the centrality of loving God and neighbor in Islam and Christianity.

Interfaith dialogue has received much attention from voices within Islam and Christianity in recent decades. From Christians, these voices have emanated through an inclusivist approach to Christian theology, whereas for Islam, it is through a jurisprudential position discerned by scholars and exegetes. For instance, based on the theology God delights in diversity and seeks unity, the Uniting Church in Australia believes all people have the right to religious expression and worship. It understands God calls the Church to engage in conversations with people of other faiths (UCA 2022). In Islam, these voices have been discerned through the Qur'an (and hadith), whereas diversity is an ordained part of the cosmic design (*al-Hujarat*, 49:13). As a foundational text, the Qur'an also contains a clearly defined and respectful framework for engaging in dialogue with Christians (*al-ʿAnkabūt* 29:46).

Current social inclusion research surrounding religiosity in Australia has tended to focus on either Muslim attitude towards radicalization or identity, or, focusing on wider Islamophobic attitudes and the dehumanizing of Islamic communities. For instance, Radford and Hetz (2021) studied how Australian Muslims of Afghan refugee background negotiate multiple identities. Dunn et al. (2016) studied Australian Muslims' views towards diversity and belonging. Dekker (2020) researched Islamophobia in two Australian suburbs with a high concentration of Muslims. Abdalla et al. (2021) exposed the level of dehumanizing of Muslims on social media. Hughes (2021) researched Australians' attitudes to other religions.

Whilst a review of the literature has exposed potential factors assisting or inhibiting Christian-Muslim dialogue internationally, little is understood about the attitudes of Australian Christians and Muslims attitudes toward interfaith dialogue and the factors that may encourage or inhibit it. Hence, the focus of this paper is to explore this gap but for feasibility purposes it will focus on 17 Sunni Muslim participants of Adelaide, South Australia. This paper seeks to answer the following research question: What are the factors that motivate and/or inhibit Sunni Muslims to engage in interfaith dialogue with Uniting Church Christians in Adelaide, South Australia?

3. Results

3.1. Motivating Factors

In this section, a detailed analysis of motivational factors in the views and experience of participants is presented. Coding of participant interviews indicated some deeply foundational themes. Two of these, religious responsibility and citizenship, emerged in the

analysis as factors motivating Muslim participants to engage in Christian-Muslim dialogue. In presenting this data participants have been allocated pseudonyms.

3.1.1. Shared Human and/or Religious Lineage

Based on participants' views, theology presents as a positive influence on attitudes towards Christian-Muslim dialogue, because of the importance of a shared human and/or religious lineage as defined in the Qur'an (e.g., "Your Lord said to the angels, 'I will create a man from clay. When I have shaped him and breathed from My Spirit into him, bow down before him" [*Saad* 38:71–72]). We provide an extract here from the conclusion of an interview with Muslim leader Hamza, to illustrate how this Qur'anic theme informs his worldview:

> *We are related all the way direct to Adam. Regardless of our race, regardless of our faith as humans, we are all coming from one source. As long as we have one father, we are united, we are one community.*

Hamza's comment draws on the Qur'an's reference to humanity's interconnectedness through the lineage of Adam. In an interview with Kafeel, another Muslim leader, he similarly draws on the Qur'an (e.g., "People, we created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should get to know one another, In God's eyes, the most honored of you are the most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware" [*Al- Hujurat,* 49:13]) as offering guidance to interacting with people of other faiths:

> *The Qur'an made it clear that if God wants you to be one nation and people, he could have done that. From my point of view, I see no difference [between us]. They're all godly religions given by almighty God. [This was done] through the special chosen people, prophets or messengers and the original teaching according to our script of Qur'an and the teaching of the prophet Mohammad, they are all the same. Harmony will receive God's pleasure.*

Bilal similarly drew reference to the Qur'an when asked about his understanding of Christian-Muslim dialogue:

> *As a Muslim my understanding of interfaith dialogue is referring to the Qur'an, our Holy book, God has mentioned us. The reason why he has created us a bit differently. You know, that's what I've understood. And basically, that is a basic test for us. That's the reason he could have made all of us the same. He could have given all of us the same religion, the same faith, the same belief, but he has given us different. Alright, basically as a test tool for us, so that I, how do I interact with you? He has differences are there, but as a human being, we should be interacting. That's what I understood from those verses. And I said, not all these things fit into place, and I should continue and do whatever best I can in this interfaith community.*

In all these comments, it is a theological premise which positively influences these participants' attitudes towards engaging with Christians. For Hamza, it is a Qur'anic reference to the inclusivity of all humanity, of which Christians are a natural part. Kafeel reiterated the religious diversity referenced in the Qur'an as influencing his attitudes towards engaging with Christians. Whereas Bilal understands diversity as a natural part of the cosmological order in which his role, as a Muslim, is clearly defined.

3.1.2. Religion as a Unifying Front against Secularism

Another way theology emerges as a positive influence on Muslim participants is perceiving Christians as co-religionists coming together against the social forces of secularism, which in this context is meant as a term in opposition to belief in an 'ultimate reality' (Taylor 2017, p. 2). An example of this comes from interview with Farzana:

> *I think it's very important because it's belief. It is a belief in opposition to no belief at all. Now the conflict is not between two beliefs, it's not between two religions or two faiths. It's between belief, any belief and no belief at all. So yes, it is very important, I think.*

Similarly, Faisal, a man in his thirties, contextualized Christians as co-religionists within an increasingly secularist society:

For me, when I see a person of faith, particularly Christians in Australia, it's actually very interesting thing because nowadays a lot of people are ascribed to non-faith. So, it's like that person is a rarity. And so, whether you agree with him or not, you kind of identify that at least you are both believers in God. So that's one of the reasons I think about the importance of interfaith dialogue. It is to be able to say, look, they are collaborating and working together on things they agree on. I believe that's very important. You know we can benefit each other in that regard, and we don't have to sort of agree on everything. You know, there's going to be the differences, but we can work with the things that we agree on.

Following on from these comments, Faisal stated, "not enough has been done, I actually believe nothing [has been done in terms of Christian-Muslim dialogue in Adelaide]". In response to this comment, we asked Faisal if he had any suggestions to improve the current lack of dialogue. He replied:

I want to go back to the point I raised earlier in this discussion and that is I don't believe that enough is being done on this point. And that is Christians and Muslims collaborating in addressing some of the propaganda that's been given up by non-faith and atheism. I believe that's an area that Muslims and Christians can definitely collaborate on.

For all these participants, theology was seen as a driving force to engage with Christians. As discussed, it expresses itself in slightly different variations, but theology emerges as a strong motivation for dialogue. Therefore, theology can be seen as a having a positive influence on Muslim participants' attitudes towards Christian-Muslim dialogue.

3.1.3. Multicultural Citizenship

Other foundational themes arising from the initial open coding is *multiculturalism* and *citizenship*. In much the same way as theology, this theme also emerged as a positive influence on interfaith dialogue. As discussed above, in Australia, multiculturalism and citizenship are arguably intrinsically linked. Since the inception of this as a social policy in the 1970s, most Australians have come to support policies of multicultural inclusion (Bouma 2016, p. 76). Some commentators argue it has become a part of the Australian identity (Moran 2017, p. 170). In the analysis of Muslim participants' comments, there appears to be elements of that aspect of 'Australian identity' present.

In the beginning of our interview with Noora, a professional woman in her forties, she indicated an eagerness to engage in interfaith dialogue. When asked about what motivated her to interact with people of other faiths, she began to flag the importance of multiculturalism:

I think the fact that I live in a multi religious multicultural country. The fact that I have friends from all walks of life and all different diverse religious and multicultural backgrounds, I think it just makes it easy to connect with people. So sometimes I'll have questions and they'll have questions. It just opens an openness and understanding of each other and the environment that we live in as well.

When she was asked' Do you feel that as a citizen of a multicultural society that's a responsibility?' Her reply was poignant:

[Pause] . . . I think yes. [Pause] . . . I think it's a responsibility on all of us. Because to live in a peaceful society, you have to know and respect most importantly, how others see life, how others see their religion and their faith and how others practice, their religious cultures and behaviors and all that. So, yes thinking about it, I do.

Religious leader Hamza, similarly, raised the issue of multiculturalism as an important factor when discussing the need for Christian-Muslim dialogue: "So, I think it's very important here because people need to understand and learn more about each other because we live in a big multicultural society or multifaith society". This reference to

multiculturalism was also present when Jamal was discussing the need for Christian-Muslim dialogue in Australia:

You would need to understand, especially in Australia that we are in a secular country, that we need to get along with each other no matter what our beliefs or teachings are.

3.2. Inhibiting Factors

In this section, a detailed analysis of inhibiting factors in the views and experience of participants is presented.

3.2.1. Language

The issue of English as a second, or even third language, was identified by several participants as a barrier to interfaith dialogue. The Australian Muslim community is very diverse, whose background originate from 183 different countries, therefore, it comprises extreme language diversity (Diallo 2018). Kafeel, a Muslim leader, whilst discussing the issues inhibiting dialogue points to this as a factor:

Many of us have the difficulty of communication due to the lack of language. Most Imams are not English speaking, or if they are, they are very limited including myself.

When asked, Fatima a woman in her 20s who works for an Islamic organization, about factors most affecting Christian Muslim dialogue? She responded:

The first thing that comes to my mind is language. Most of the Muslims in Adelaide come from a country where they do not really speak much English.

Lateefa, Australian born mother of three adult children responded to this question similarly:

Language is a barrier one hundred percent, because the problem is once you have any sort of little barrier, I think it gets your back up and then you become defensive.

Yasmin, an Australian born woman in her thirties, discussed her previous involvement in Christian-Muslim dialogue. When asked what motivated her, as a Muslim, to engage with Christians, she replied:

I feel like there's some sort of responsibility for me to be part of the solution because I can speak English. I've been given the opportunity to be fairly articulate and with that a responsibility for me to speak, to speak up, to communicate, have conversations. Whether that is in a formal sense or whether that's in the queue at the cash register at the supermarket.

3.2.2. Dehumanization

The feeling of being dehumanized emerged as an inhibiting factor to interfaith dialogue. During interviews with participants, many expressed a strong desire to be recognized as fellow human beings. With some participants this was clearly stated and asserted at the outset of an interview. In the opening discussion with Omar, a religious leader, provides an example of this. After exchanging greetings, pouring tea and the offering of food, Omar started discussing the importance of Christian-Muslim dialogue in Australia. He stated: "It is important to show the Christians and the people of Australia, Muslims are human beings like other people".

During some interviews, the importance of dehumanization as an inhibitor to interfaith dialogue was not immediately apparent. It was during coding that we noticed the frequency of references to 'dehumanization' often indirectly through the use of phrases such as '*common humanity*'. For instance, Fatima stated Christian-Muslim dialogue was needed in Australia to understand each other *human to human.* She followed this with the statement, "we are also human". Similarly, Ahmad felt dialogue is needed "so we can live together as humans". In the following quote Jamal, a professional man in his forties, appeared to speak about this with a tone of exasperation.

As an Australian, just because I happen to have brown skin and be a Muslim, I am no different to anybody else.

Following from this Jamal remarked: "You have to respect that at the end of the day *we're all human* [emphasis added]".

This reference to common humanity can also be observed, although in a much subtler form, in a story Lateefa shared with us. As a mother, she recalled a discussion she had with her young daughter who was concerned, as a Muslim, about difference. Lateefa explained to her daughter:

Yes, we are different, but we're not. We just do different things but we're all pretty much the same. We all like having fun and eating chocolate pudding.

In this, Lateefa can be seen to explain to her daughter, as humans we are the same at the deepest level, the difference is only on the peripheries.

From the above selection of quotes, the reader can get a sense of how the *common humanity* coding emerged, albeit in varied ways but with an observable regularity. When we began to use selective coding and diagramming to explore this, it highlighted an apparent relationship between the desire for their humanity to be recognized, and a complex web of interconnected factors. This included the themes of racism, the media, Islamophobia, terrorism, pejorative historical narratives, geopolitics, and ignorance. The link between these various themes and dehumanization is supported by the assertion maltreatment, such as disrespect, relational slights, and social exclusion lead people to feel their humanity has been undermined (Bastian and Haslam 2010; Zhang et al. 2017). To demonstrate how this link appears in the data, all participants, with the exception of Haider, made reference to Islamophobia impacting their community, and this will be discussed further at length below. Research shows the impact of such social ostracism and its links to dehumanization, as exampled above, are profound. It can affect people's attitudes by undermining their sense of belonging, meaningfulness and self-esteem. It also is shown to increase aggression and reduce pro-social behavior (Bastian and Haslam 2010, p. 107).

Maynard and Benesch (2016) claim dehumanization has been identified with almost all major mass atrocities. Eight months prior to commencing interviewing for this study, an Australian terrorist carried out two mass shootings at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, which led to the killing of fifty-one people inside their mosque. Prior to this attack, the terrorist likened the killing of Muslim children to eradicating a nest of snakes. This he claimed would ensure the line of the enemy would not continue (Abdalla et al. 2021, p. 238). It is precisely this type of dehumanizing which has historically justified the use of violence against groups perceived as a threat (Kteily et al. 2015, p. 901).

3.2.3. Islamophobia

The factors leading to participants either experiencing or perceiving social ostracism, may be broadly categorized under the heading of Islamophobia. Whereas dehumanizing was seen to negatively essentialize Muslims, 'Islamophobia' emerges from a fear and dread of Muslims and Islamic culture based on prejudice and stereotyping (Hassan et al. 2018, p. 43). In Australia, 247 Islamophobic incidents were reported between January 2018 to December 2019 September 2014 and December 2015 (Iner 2022, p. 20). These ranged from abuse or vilification through to violence towards Muslims going about their daily lives. A recent Australian report into Islamophobia, concluded these reported incidents were just "the tip of the iceberg" (Iner 2022, p. 20).

As noted above, all but one of the Muslim participants, made references to Islamophobia. In some cases, these were stories of themselves, family members or friends being a victim of Islamophobia. In the recounting of these personal stories, an emotional shift in the participant's demeanor was observable. We provide some examples here to give the reader a sense of how being personally impacted by Islamophobia can influence a participant's perception of the social space they inhabit.

Lateefa:

I have a lot of friends that wear hijabs and they've had hijabs ripped off or things thrown at them. So, you become defensive for them.

Jamal:

For an example, in my last job we had a site manager that just started with us. The first thing she said to me when she saw me, she swore and said, 'Oh I don't have to put up with you lot do I?' And I said, 'what do you mean by you lot?' She said, 'you terrorists!'

Whilst these participants discussed Islamophobia directly, all other participants can be identified referencing it indirectly. For example, Nada discussed the pleasure she had engaging with other parents at school. This gave her an opportunity to show "that we are not like the people negatively portrayed". Sawsan, who works as a health professional, spoke about a client telling her "How Muslims are trying to take over the world". Kafeel, a Muslim leader spoke about the benefits of Mosque open days, "people leave feeling better [about Muslims]". Farzana felt international politics were having a negative influence on the way Muslims in Australia were perceived. Kabir (2010, pp. 306–10) notes that following the events of 11 September 2001, there was an immediate and sustained backlash against Muslims in Australia. Islamophobia can lead to sensationalist press coverage about the threat Muslims pose (Kabir 2019, pp. 98–99).

All these examples indicate the participants have an awareness; they are perceived as 'the other'. The regularity of these references to Islamophobia highlights the impact this has on participants' sense of their relationship with the Australian public.

Mainstream Media

During initial coding the issue of the mainstream media arose as a dominant theme. Participants felt the media cast Islam and Muslims in a very negative way, influencing how others perceived them. During the coding process references to the media would usually be in the context of discussing the need for Christian-Muslim dialogue in Australia. Omar, a religious leader in his forties, provides an example of this:

[Christian-Muslim dialogue is] about addressing misinformation. Unfortunately, today people don't read about Islam and Christianity. They're talking just about what they see on the news. I know in some newspapers and some internet you can find a lot of wrong information about Islam and Christianity. We have to show the Christians and the people in Australia, we are human beings like other people. Also, that we have a big respect for other religious people.

In this comment, Omar speaks of the need for his community to be 're-humanized' to counteract the negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the mainstream media. Hamza, another religious leader, made a similar reference when discussing the need for Christian-Muslim dialogue:

In Australia here with my understanding, what I saw is most people don't read they are only fed what the news tells them and with that you will always misjudge other people because you don't see it from their own point of view, but what you are being told, unfortunately. So, I think it's very important here because people need to understand and learn more about each other here because a big multi-cultural society or multifaith society.

There has been considerable research on the issue of the media and its coverage of Islam. Among the many findings, some demonstrate the media has tended to conflate Islam with terrorism (Iner 2022; Kabir 2015; Ewart et al. 2017, p. 148), Australian journalists are largely ignorant about the basic facts of Islam (O'Donnell et al. 2018, p. 4), and essentializing Muslim men as potential threats (Moloney et al. 2013, p. 292).

When asked about the factors affecting Christian Muslim dialogue in Australia, some participants were quick to point to the media. "I think media is the first thing" (Ahmad); "The media is bombarding and spreading a lot of negative news" (Khalid); "[Dialogue is] needed because of the misinformation in the media" (Lateefa); "Elements such as the

media spark feelings of xenophobia and marginalizing" (Faisal); and "There's a higher entity a higher power that's playing a role, which is the media. Those that run the media and they strike fear in a sense of people's hearts" (Jamal). These responses reflect research that found Australian Muslims were "highly critical of news media coverage [about Islam and Muslims]" (Ewart et al. 2017, p. 160). Therefore, it is evident from participants' claims that media's pejorative portrayal of Australian Muslims is seen as a hindrance to Christian-Muslim dialogue.

3.2.4. Fear of Community Members Losing Their Religion

Paul Knitter (2009) once described the relationship between Christianity and Islam in terms of sibling rivalries. A rivalry which at times has produced significant conflict over influence and power. Given this historically tumultuous rivalry, it is of little surprise the issue of fear emerged as a factor in this study. This extract from an interview with Ahmad, a man in his twenties who has been involved in facilitating interfaith initiatives, illustrates this:

> *Creating that opportunity for people to actually engage in communication is very important. So, something as simple as that, just having opportunities and that's where the fear factor comes because it removes those opportunities.*

During this analysis, the data highlighted fear had a singular focus for Muslim participants. This was shown to be a fear of community members losing their religion. Such a fear is not uncommon among religious minorities. Shafiq (2009, p. 262) noted people from minority faiths "are often afraid of being influenced or even afraid of missionary activities leading to losing members of their group".

In my interview with Fatima, a woman in her twenties, she discussed how working for an Islamic organization had given her opportunities for dialoguing with Christians. I provide an extract of this discussion here to illustrate how these experiences have allayed her fear of engaging with Christians:

> *If I'm not [working] here, I don't even know that dialogue exists. If I'm just part of the community, I would see the Christian as different, we are different. So, it's like I'm drawing the line between me and them. In terms of communication, I very much do not want to communicate because inside my mind, the only thing is 'they are trying to convert me'. That's it! So, I need to run away every time. So, more needs to be done to correct that mindset.*

Faisal, a man in his thirties, similarly raised the issue of fear as an inhibiting factor for members of his community. When I asked him why he thought people were fearful, he replied:

> *I know that some Muslims might be afraid of having dialogue with a Christian based on the fact that it might cause them doubt in their faith. But that's my personal take on it.*

Hamza, a religious leader, spoke how the experience of some refugees, can make their respective ethnic communities view engaging with Christians as a threat to their religion:

> *There are some people that are afraid of losing their religion. I've seen people from West Africa who came to Australia and within the first two years they become Christians. All Muslims [and] they became Christians.*

What is evident in Fatima, Faisal and Hamza's comments, is engaging with Christians has the potential to undermine the faith of Muslims.

3.2.5. Leadership, Culture and Islamic Jurisprudence's Position on Interfaith Dialogue

The issue of religious leadership, as a possible inhibiting factor for interfaith dialogue, was also a common theme.

There was a consensus among participants that religious leaders need to take the initiative to stimulate dialogue. Given the frequency of references to religious leaders, we sought to understand how this may have impacted Muslim attitudes to engaging in

dialogue with Christians. In the following extract from my interview with Muslim leader Kafeel, he links the role of leaders to addressing uncertainty:

> *The top needs to take the role of leadership and then pass it on to their congregation. About the importance of it, what are the benefits of these dialogues and then it will push the congregation to be part of it. And if they have any concern, if they have any questions, they can raise it within their own congregation freely and that could be discussed from within and then come up with the right explanation.*

Jamal, on the other hand, stated that Muslim community members are uncertain about the Islamic position on dialogue with Christians, and that religious leaders need to address this issue to alleviate these concerns:

> *As much as it pains me to say this, it has to come from the heads because unfortunately people these days they're like sheep. And I know this from certain people. If their Iman doesn't do something, they won't do it. That's my opinion.*

Both Kafeel and Jamal's comments reflect the general view of most Muslim participants that religious leaders need to take an active role in supporting Christian-Muslim dialogue. It is worth noting all Muslim leaders we interviewed spoke of the importance of engaging in interfaith dialogue. Despite this, there was a consensus among participants that leadership in this area is lacking.

The Influence of Diversity within a Western Cultural Space

As identified above, the Australian Muslim community consists of people coming from 183 different countries. As such there is significant diversity in terms of language, ethnicity, and cultural practices. The ability of Islam to find common expression within such diversity has been due to its historical ability to respect and adapt to local cultures (Abd-Allah 2009, p. 2). This is not to suggest there is an unconditional acceptance of local cultures, Islamic jurists appraise local practices through the norms of Islamic law. It is these rulings that arguably give rise to a type of Islamic culture within a broader culture (Kabir 2020, p. 4). Expressions of this can be observed in terms of dress codes or dietary requirements. Rather than imposing a cultural hegemony, Islam is conceived as 'a way of living' within the host culture (Faris and Abdalla 2018, p. 82). This can be most observed in terms of dietary requirements, prohibition of alcohol or dress codes. Farzana, a professional woman in her forties, points to aspects of this 'way of living', as an inhibiting factor for her when engaging with Christians:

> *There are many things that we cannot do. And so that is the limit. You can't go beyond that. That is one of the factors and that is the main thing. Yes, we cannot go to the places and some of the activities that they can. There are things we cannot allow our children or us to do. Those are limits.*

In an interview with religious leader Omar, he raised the issue of different cultural expressions of Islam. This he signaled can be an issue for Muslim migrants coming to Australia used to more culturally conservative expressions of Islam.

> *So, we have a lot of immigrants coming from countries outside Australia. They see Muslims, the ladies here, they don't wear hijab, but they are Muslim. Sometimes they say but its compulsory to wear hijab.*

As this statement highlights, the exposure to different expressions of an Islamic 'way of living', is seen as confronting for some.

In an interview with religious leader Kafeel, the issue of Western culture, as a threat to Muslim identity, arose when discussing inhibiting factors within his community:

> *The elders sometimes feel we have made a big mistake choosing to come to Australia. They see their children are going out of their control. [By advocating Christian-Muslim dialogue] they might say, okay now you are teaching our children about Christianity. We are protecting and preserving our identity, our children. And you are allowing them to*

become Christian because they see things from one angle only. So, they think learning Christianity means becoming Christian.

Kafeel's comments are suggestive of a siege styled attitude among some older, first-generation Muslims, to protect their culturally styled Islamic identity. To promote engaging with Australian Christians would be seen to further undermine and threaten this. The role of assisting their communities to navigate these cultural infused issues adds another layer of complexity for leaders. In a study of Australian Muslim leaders and social integration, Sohrabi and Farquharson (2015, p. 645) discuss the concept of an emerging Australian Islam. They argue Muslim leaders, by promoting the recognition of an organic Australian experience of Islam, is not succumbing to Western culture. Rather it is an attempt to counter the negative discourse and normalize Islam in the Australian social space.

4. Discussion

This study sought to explore the factors that motivate and/or inhibit Sunni Muslims to engage in interfaith dialogue with Uniting Church Christians in Adelaide, South Australia. In doing so, it solicited the views of seventeen adult Sunni Muslims including leaders and lay people.

The study found that religious motivation (such as participants' theological world-views) was a key motivational factor to engage in interfaith dialogue. This is fundamentally premised on the teachings of the Qur'an and hadith which encourage Muslims to engage with Christians/Jews (or People of the Scriptures) in particular. The teachings of Islam clearly have a powerful impact on the views of our participants by instilling a sense of religious responsibility to engage or agree to the importance of engagement with Christians in interfaith dialogue. This is promising, given the immense pressures Muslims have experienced over the last two decades, which led to feelings of isolation, marginalization, and lack of a sense of belonging. This is demonstrative of a spirit of resilience that draws its strength from the teachings of Islam. Given that intergroup contact can only succeed if the 'right' conditions prevail, Church group must take advantage of the positive influence Islam has on its adherents and engage with them. This engagement can be through formal interfaith dialogues or non-formal events to bring both communities closer.

Participants also believed that the fight against 'secularism' is a motivational factor to engage with people of faith because they see (rightly or wrongly) Christians as co-religionists coming together against the social forces of secularism. This is, perhaps, because Muslim participants see commonalities with fellow Christians on several issues including this one. Of course, Christians are heterogenous and do not see secularism in the same way. This is also true of the Uniting Church and other Muslims. We are not sure what our participants think of secularism or how they view it (we did not ask them to talk about this, but future research could explore this in relation to interfaith dialogue). But the fact that they saw 'secularism' as a motivational factor for interfaith dialogue is consistent with calls for Muslims and Christians to cooperate on social justice issues as articulated in the 'A Common Word' document signed by hundreds of Muslim and Christian scholars, leaders, and intellectuals.

Participants' understanding of, and attitudes toward, multiculturalism was another motivating factor. This is consistent with Dunn et al.'s (2016) findings that Australian Muslims displayed a greater support for diversity than the average Australian. This compatibility of religion and multiculturalism was observed in an Australian study of Muslim citizenship by Roose and Harris (2015, pp. 482–83). This study noted that young Muslims were engaged participatory citizens in a way that was pivotal to the success of a multicultural society. The study claimed, "Islam contributed strongly to the development of a civic mindedness [in the participants] that thrives in the secular multicultural context". Woodlock (2011, p. 400) similarly observed in her research, most Australian born Muslims value the affirming of inclusive attitudes consistent with the values of Australian multiculturalism.

This study highlighted the negative social pressures impacting the Muslim community are significant. These include lack of English proficiency, fear of the 'other' and losing one's faith, Islamophobia, and absence or lack of religious leadership that can encourage interfaith dialogue. Language barriers is not surprising because the majority of Australian Muslims are born overseas and/or English is their second language. It is possible that other Muslim participants who are proficient in English may not find language a barrier to interfaith dialogue. Nevertheless, there would be a substantial Muslim population who may see language as a barrier. This needs to be taken into consideration when designing or planning interfaith activities/events. We know that there is a strong motivation to engage, so language must not be seen as an absolute barrier.

It is not surprising that Islamophobia is seen as a barrier to interfaith dialogue, mainly due to its prevalence and negative impacts (Iner 2022). However, in contrast to Dunn et al.'s (2016) findings that Islamophobia was causing a wariness among some Muslims when interacting with non-Muslims, we found it did not inhibit participants from wanting to engage with Australian Christians. In this case, Islamophobia was seen as an opportunity to engage with non-Muslims to dispel stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. Perhaps participants felt a moral imperative to counter Islamophobia and its consequences through active engagements with the wider Australian society, including interfaith activities. This may be due to the spirit of resilience mentioned above, which is essential for the success of intergroup contact.

Dehumanization of Muslims through mainstream media, social media and instances of political rhetoric, emerged as common inhibiting factors for engaging in interfaith dialogue. The dehumanization of Muslims is noted in a study by Abdalla et al. (2021, p. 238) which observed such explicit examples as 'Muslims are incompatible with humankind' on social media. An American study found participants blatantly dehumanized Muslims more than any other ethnic group (Kteily et al. 2015, p. 907). Similarly, a Spanish study found evidence of explicit dehumanization of Muslims (Gómez-Martínez and Moral-Jiménez 2018, p. 224). The dehumanizing of the Muslim community has had real life tragic consequences. The manifesto of the Australian terrorist who killed 51 Muslims whilst they prayed, portrayed Muslims as a subhuman existential threat (Jabri-Markwell 2022, p. 123).

Given Dunn et al.'s (2016, p. 83) claim it is the nature of contact that most influenced attitudes towards engaging with others, it could be anticipated, and rightly so, that the dehumanization of Muslims would have had a significant negative impact on participants' attitudes. In response to this dehumanization, participants spoke of being actively engaged with the broader community. One Muslim leader discussed how he has been involved in open mosque days. He stated this was an opportunity for people from different backgrounds and religions to come and ask questions. "Often, they come with burning questions, such as, what is Jihad? These open mosque days have become annual national event. Described by organizers as an opportunity for breaking down "common misconceptions and stereotypes and counter all types of prejudice". It is possible that the combination of participants' theology of inclusion and engagement coupled with an appreciation of multiculturalism, helped counter the negative impacts of the dehumanization factor. The ability for Muslim migrants to embrace this multicultural vision of being an 'Aussie', was evident in Radford and Hetz (2021) research into Afghan refugees. Dunn et al. (2016, pp. 288–91) similarly found Australians who were Muslim had a strong sense of belonging, despite these negative social pressures. The participants in our research can also be seen to exhibit these tendencies.

Through the decades of development in intergroup contact research, policy makers and other interested parties have come to understand the factors necessary for intergroup contact to be effective at producing positive outcomes. For instance, if people work towards common goals, are co-operative, have equal status and is seen as being sanctioned by relevant authorities, then intergroup contact is generally successful (Pettigrew et al. 2011, p. 273). These findings have usually, with occasional exceptions, been developed from a focus on ethnic or racial intergroup contact. However, people's social identity is not only

defined by their ethnicity or country of origin. Certainly, this paper has demonstrated that religion, in this case Islam, is an important social marker as it offers a sense of positive identity, certainty, belonging and cultural worldview (Zafar and Ross 2015, p. 37) that is conducive to interfaith dialogue.

5. Method

A constructivist grounded theory methodology was used in this study. This approach, rather than seeking to validate or dispute existing theories, aims to generate a theory which is grounded in the data. It does this through a continual process of analysis and refinement (Charmaz 2006, p. 87). As such, it allows the concerns of the participants to emerge as the core issues. It is regarded as being particularly suited to areas of social phenomenon which has attracted little research, such as Christian-Muslim dialogue in Australia (Engward 2013, p. 38).

The study was undertaken during 2019–2020 in Adelaide, South Australia. It involved seventeen (17) Sunni Muslim participants including seven females and ten males. Ages ranged from participants in their mid-twenties through to their early nineties. All participants were either Australian citizens or permanent residents who regularly engaged with the rituals of their faith. Hassan et al. (2015) argues the Christian and Islamic traditions are both ritually rich, therefore the "the frequency and observance of religious rituals is a useful and meaningful indicator of an individual's religiousness or religiosity" (p. 90). The participants were randomly selected through a recruitment process involving social media, advertising at local mosques and snowballing. Semi structured interviews were conducted at various locations including mosques, cafes, participants' homes, and university libraries. During the course of this research, the Covid-19 pandemic reached Australia. This resulted in the final interviews being conducted through video conferencing. Pseudonyms have been used to protect participants' privacy.

6. Limitations

In line with the methodology used (grounded theory), the findings of this research are specific to the participants used in the study. Therefore, the conclusions are not generalizable.

7. Conclusions

This study highlighted the inhibiting and motivational factors toward Christian-Muslim dialogue from the perspectives of Sunni Muslim participants. The inhibiting factors include poor English language proficiency, fear of community members losing their faith, and the impact of dehumanization and Islamophobia. This study also revealed the presence of deeply foundational beliefs, namely religious responsibility, and multicultural citizenship, that can potentially act to counterbalance these inhibiting factors. This research, by highlighting inhibiting and motivating factors towards Christian-Muslim interfaith dialogue, can assist in developing strategies to address factors negatively influencing intergroup contact. In identifying the theological and multicultural beliefs that informed positive attitudes, these can be brought to the fore when constructing social inclusion strategies such as interfaith dialogue. This study was limited by its location and sample size. As such, factors specific to that area could potentially influence results. Therefore, future research in other locations, both with larger Muslim populations and in other areas, would add value to the findings of this research.

Note

1   The official definition of Australian values stated by the Australian Government's Department of Home Affairs is: "Respect for the freedom and dignity of the individual, freedom of religion, commitment to the rule of law, Parliamentary democracy, equality of men and women and a spirit of egalitarianism that embraces mutual respect, tolerance, fair play and compassion for those in need and pursuit of the public good" (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs 2022).

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