

# INTRODUCTION: Islam and inter/intra-religious relations in Asia

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Asia is a region of exceptional religious diversity, with many Muslim groups figuring prominently in that diversity. With more than [50 percent of the global Muslim population expected to live in Asia by 2050](#)—indeed, with respect to Muslim population, four of the top five states will be in Asia (namely India, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Bangladesh)—understanding the past, present, and future of religious relations in Asia is a matter of increasing importance.

Amongst Muslims in Asia, legal and theological debates about religious ‘others’ are common. Those debates routinely touch on ‘others’ who self-identify as non-Muslim, but they also consider people who see themselves as Muslim in different ways. Muslim leaders, scholars, and intellectuals are grappling with debates regarding religious others. Some argue for a more inclusivist approach; others stress an exclusivist approach. This edition of *Melbourne Asia Review* explores several different contexts involved in these debates.

A significant obstacle to harmonious relations between Muslims and those who self-identify as non-Muslim often involves legal or theological positions, based on religious texts or their interpretation, that discourage constructive engagement with non-Muslims or portray them in a negative light. Like many religious traditions, Islam is not unfamiliar with such exclusivist teachings, including restrictions on the public manifestation of non-Islamic religious beliefs or practices, dhimmi status and

a special jizya tax for non-Muslims, prohibitions on Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men, different criminal procedures and rules of evidence for Muslims and non-Muslims, and other forms of inequality. Many of these positions developed during the formative centuries of Islam (seventh to ninth centuries CE) and continued in many cases until the modern period.

Despite growing emphasis on norms of equality, non-discrimination, and freedom of religion, such positions remain influential in Islamic theological and legal thinking at least in some societies, with continuing social and political ramifications in Asia. Exclusivist positions are often used in contemporary debates involving Muslims and people of other faiths as well as those who may be described as 'differently Muslim'. In fact, such exclusivist ideas are not confined to Muslims: as [Shakira Hussain](#) points out, Hindu-majoritarian activists in India have used 'cow-protection' legislation and vigilante attacks on beef eaters to discriminate against Indian Muslims.

In his article on the resurgence of religion in the public and political life of many Asian countries, including Indonesia, [Azyumardi Azra](#) argues that there is a need for religious authorities to work on positive interreligious relations and, where necessary, reinterpret religious ideas inherited from the past that are likely to cause tension and conflict with people of other faiths. For him, Islamic concepts such as jihad can be misused by some Muslims, leading to significant problems with people of other faiths. Turning to Singapore, [Paul Hedges](#) examines how colonial and Western forms of Islamophobia play a role in the ways that Muslims are perceived and how this may pose challenges for relations between Muslims and others there.

Interfaith dialogue is often seen as an important tool that may facilitate better interreligious understanding. [Trish Prentice](#) provides an overview of how Muslim Australians have been engaging with people of other faiths in Australia using interfaith dialogue, highlighting the key players and the contexts in which this engagement takes place. With a specific focus on Australian imams, [Husnia Underabi](#) also explores how imams' sermons actively encourage Muslims to deepen their engagement with people of other faiths.

Supporting positive relations between Muslims and people of other faiths may at times require Muslim scholars to rethink some key ideas within the Islamic tradition that are likely to function as obstacles to such relations. In their article, for instance, [Ali Akbar and Abdullah Saeed](#) present examples of how contemporary Muslim scholars argue for a theologically inclusivist view of Jews and Christians. For this kind of rethinking to take place in a more effective way, there is a need to seek inspiration from historical precedents. [Halim Rane](#)'s article explores the importance of Prophet Mohammed's covenants with people of other faiths as a basis for developing positive interreligious relations today.

Tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims, however, also sit alongside *intra*-religious tensions that focus on the correct interpretation of Islam or the most acceptable forms of Muslim conduct: *which* form of Muslim belief or practice should be seen as properly 'Islamic'? Again, both inclusivist and exclusivist approaches figure prominently in these debates.

Intra-Muslim debates involving allegations of heresy, religious deviance, blasphemy, or religious provocation are historically common. [Adis Duderija](#), for instance, points to a body of pre-modern 'heresiography' alongside a recent increase in sectarian conflicts across the Muslim world. From individuals and community groups to political parties and state institutions, competing Muslim perspectives that reference a similar set of Muslim texts and traditions still raise difficult questions about rival claims to Muslim 'authenticity', the scope of Muslim interpretive 'autonomy', and the reach of government 'authority' in matters pertaining to religion.

In this edition of *Melbourne Asia Review*, this pattern of intra-Muslim debate is explored in depth. [Hamza Surbuland](#), for example, explores the ways in which scholars and ideologues associated with the creation and later consolidation of Pakistan articulated competing 'inclusivist' and 'exclusivist' approaches to religious others. He notes that a deeper understanding of these contrasting approaches can help to unpack some of the views developed by Pakistan's ex-Prime Minister, Imran Khan. [Jeffrey Redding](#) goes on to show how powerfully 'inclusivist' legislation

regarding transgender people in Pakistan generated more ‘exclusivist’ claims in litigation before Pakistan’s Federal Shariat Court. In fact, covering both Pakistan and Bangladesh, [Imran Ahmed](#) (Pakistan) and [Mubashar Hasan](#) (Bangladesh) show how an increasingly exclusivist trend affecting relations with religious others has shaped the experience of both Muslim and non-Muslim minorities.

This focus on an expanding exclusivist trends also figures prominently in the work of [Maila Stivens](#) (Malaysia) and [Haroun Rahimi](#) (Afghanistan). Stivens charts the ways in which matrilineal customs (*adat perpitah*) in Malaysia have rubbed up against, and occasionally resisted, forms of (patrilineal) Muslim religious homogenisation. Rahimi notes that, since August 2021, the Afghan Taliban’s exclusivist focus on the Hanafi school of Sunni law has prompted concern from Shi’i clerics. Turning to the Maldives, however, [Shamsul Falaah](#) provides a contrasting view. Specifically, Falaah notes that an historical pattern emphasising the Shafi’i school of Sunni law has recently given way to a more inclusivist approach in which other Sunni schools may be recognised.

In Bangladesh, the political environment is said to involve a struggle between ‘religion’ (Islam) and ‘secularism’. But [Mubashar Hasan and Matthew Nelson](#) note that some of the most important barriers facing religious opposition groups in their tussle with the increasingly authoritarian regime of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina involve *intra*-religious tensions—in this case, between modern ‘Islamist’ and traditional madrasa-based groups. The exclusivist view of each group vis-à-vis the other has undermined their push against Hasina.

Across the Muslim world, the persistent influence of exclusivist positions has prompted some Muslim theologians and intellectuals to argue for a more inclusivist approach. Arguing that traditional positions should evolve, these leaders have begun to challenge positions that reject more inclusivist norms and values. They argue that Muslim understandings of the Qur’an, as well as early legal and theological positions, are not fixed. Islam’s social code, they maintain, needs ‘constant reflection and adaptation.’

Growing Muslim populations around the world, including in Asia, mean that a deeper understanding of Muslim ideas and practices pertaining to inter- and intra-religious relations is a matter of enormous academic and geopolitical importance. Increasingly, the dynamics of inter- and intra-religious conflict and harmony in Asia have attracted the attention of scholars, government officials, and citizens alike. This edition of MAR seeks to advance a deeper understanding of key issues pertaining to Islam and inter/intra-religious relations in Asia.

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*Image: A building in Singapore's Little India. Credit: [digitalpimp/Flickr](#).*