

Isolation vs Integration

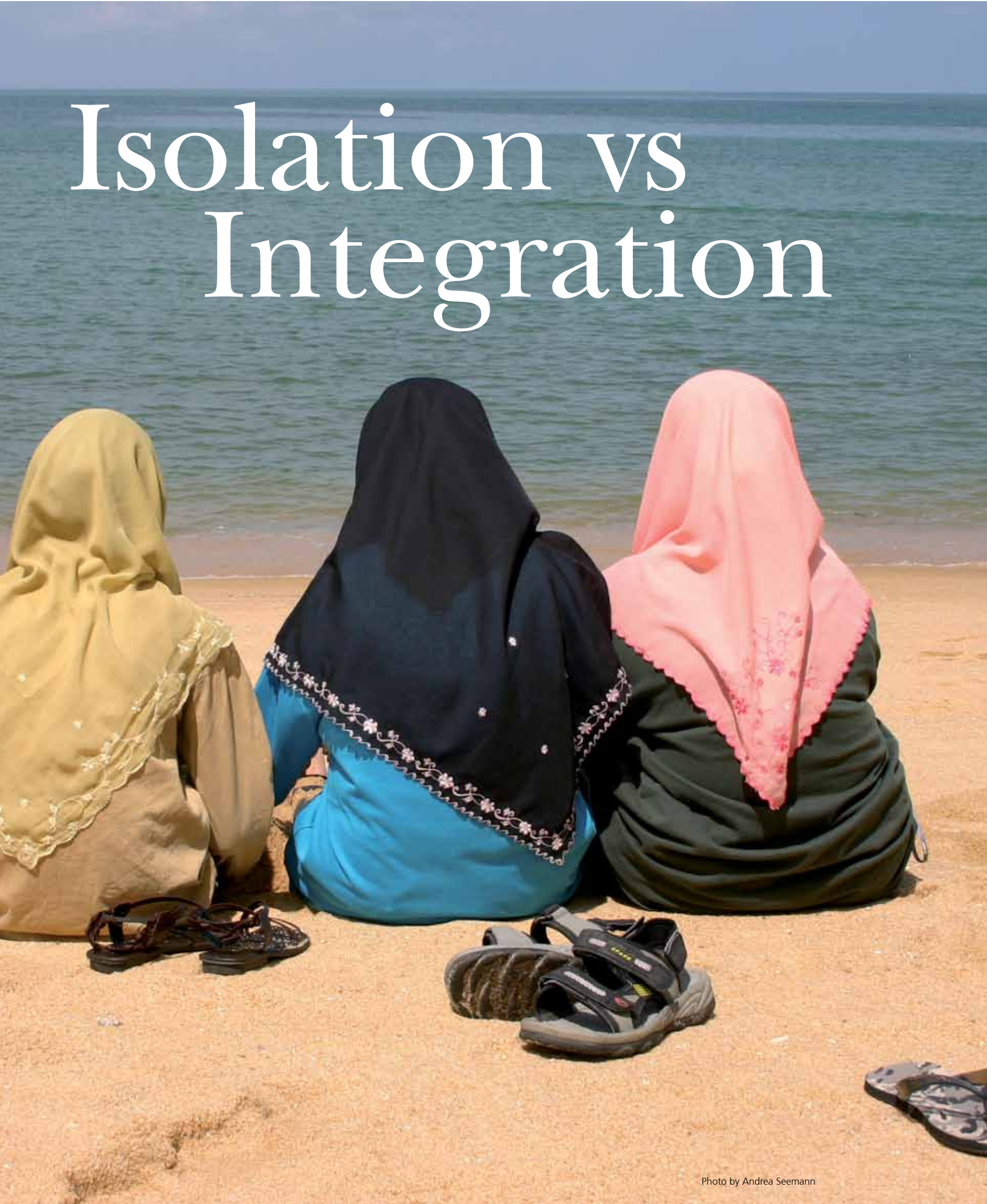


Photo by Andrea Seemann

Five years after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the focus continues to be on the victims of those attacks.

NOORIA MEHRABY writes that people of Islamic faith have been re-traumatised by these events and their coverage in the media.

‘WAR ON TERROR’ Impacts on Muslim refugees re-settling in the West

The trauma and suffering experienced because of terrorist acts in the United States, Madrid and London, have also contributed to a sense of lack of safety and belonging for Muslim people.

Closer to home, the Bali bombings and Cronulla riots have perpetuated this feeling of insecurity. The crisis in Lebanon also compounded these feelings. Together, they have had a significant impact on the psychosocial wellbeing and employment opportunities of Muslims. In addition, Muslims have experienced unprecedented levels of individual racism and systematic discrimination. While I acknowledge the pain inflicted by these events on everyone affected, the focus of this article is on the impact of these events and the ensuing war on terror on Muslims.

People who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as war, imprisonment or torture can be re-traumatised by exposure to events which symbolize their experiences of trauma, such as images of war on television.

After September 11, this secondary traumatisation has affected many refugees. A 2002 study conducted on refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Bosnia and Somalia indicates that post-traumatic stress symptoms were re-activated among many refugees in response to the widely televised images from September 11.

The most common reactions reported were fear, uncertainty and insecurity. The strongest responses were among refugees from Bosnia and Somalia, who were already suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. This may be attributed

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to the more recent exposure of these two groups to atrocities, their Islamic backgrounds and the geographic proximity of their homelands to the Middle East and Afghanistan.

“The impact of September 11 on a group of Afghan refugees holding Temporary Protection Visas has left them extremely helpless and with a pathological sense of shame” Pearl Fernandes, a STARTTS psychologist says. “Their initial response to the event was shock, confusion, disbelief, fear and concern about their safety and personal integrity. This was followed by anger at the perceived injustice and unfairness of the response to September 11. People had been persecuted and dying because of organized violence for years in Afghanistan but suddenly the world was interested. Although most condemned the terrorist attacks,” she added. Fernandes cites one Afghan refugee as saying “One day 5,000 people die, the whole world is shocked. For 23 years innocent Afghans have been killed and not a word is said by anyone”.

Another Afghan refugee while showing his empathy towards the victims said: “We have been at war for 24 years. We are sorry for the people of America and have great sympathy for them, but our poor countrymen and women and devastated homeland shouldn’t pay the price for somebody else’s action. Bin-Laden is not an Afghan; Afghans have never been terrorists.”

The preparations for war and the images of war on television not only brought back many of their traumatic experiences but also created extreme anxiety and hyper-vigilant responses. Muslim refugees no longer assume they will be safe anywhere or at any time.

An Iranian woman, who lost two children during the Iran-Iraq war, tearfully stated “It’s not just watching it on television for me, it is all real”.

An Afghan refugee who lost 61 members of his family during the war in Afghanistan said, “this is killing us slowly, piece by piece, it is worse than the Russian occupation as we did not know the Russians would attack us but now we

Islam is the second largest religion in the world. Muslims account for up to 1.6 billion of the world’s population of which about 20 percent are Arab. It should be noted that not all Muslims are Arab and not all Arabs are Muslim. In fact, the largest population of Muslims are in Indonesia, Pakistan, India and China. Although in the Middle East more than 94 percent of people are Muslim. The Middle East is the birthplace of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

More than 70 percent of the world refugees are Muslims. There are an estimated 16-17 million Muslims living in western countries, of those, six million live in the United States, two million in the United Kingdom, over six million in France, six hundred thousand in Canada and three hundred thousand in Australia.

The word “Islam” means peace and submission to God’s will and a Muslim is one who is safe and sound, at peace in this world and the next. The Arabic word “Salaam”, or peace, is generally used amongst Arab Muslims when they are greeting one another.

Photo by Miguel Ferreira

know what will happen, I do not feel safe in Australia”.

Another Iranian woman, who presented with severe anxiety after the war in Iraq said, “the next target is Iran, my homeland is going to be destroyed, what will happen to my family?”

By contrast some clients disassociated themselves from the world events. They found in avoidance and denial a way of coping with the confronting reality of a war and the potential consequences for their loved ones and their community.

A 16-year-old Afghan was heard to say “I want to cut off myself from the world. I do not want to hear anything about what is happening in Afghanistan”.

Many feel this is a war against Islam. A 70-year-old Afghan refugee considered his silence as a failure to protect his faith saying “God will punish me for not defending Islam.” Another Afghan man said: “This is a war against Islam, we are not terrorists. Islam is a religion of peace.”

Some refugees who previously were not strict Muslims have become so, thereby renewing their wounded spirits. Others are so ashamed of the association that has been made between Islam and terrorism they have stopped practicing altogether, no longer wanting to be targets of racist attacks.

An Iraqi woman said: “I stopped praying and took off my headscarf. I cannot stand being called a terrorist.”

Muslim families are carrying increased psychological stress caused by the ongoing trauma associated with current world events. Family tension and stress can result in interpersonal conflict. This is particularly true among people who are in mixed marriages.

In addition concerns about the safety of family members caught in the war, as well as pressure to provide financial support to them, are sources of stress for Muslim families, especially those from the Middle East.

Racism and discrimination

There is a greater likelihood of re-traumatisation in situations where individuals and communities also experience racism and discrimination.

The situation for Muslims living in Australia and other Western cultures has become further complicated by the unhelpful and distorted association of terrorism and violence with the words Islam and Muslim.

September 11 evoked fear and confusion in mainstream Australian society. Many people stereotyped all Muslims as terrorists or as unable or unwilling to fit into Western society.

They blamed Muslims for the events and tried to differentiate themselves from those of the Islamic faith.

This occurs in the sporting world, for example Alan Jones commenting that a Muslim cricket player was a terrorist. The letter pages of some Australian papers are close to vitriolic about Muslims. In political circles criticism of Muslims has become

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commonplace, Christian leaders are also quick to point to the apparent failings of Islam and its followers.

Some people have formed a negative view about many Muslim communities because they perceive them to be involved in acts of terrorism. They are frightened of having Muslim people in their society at all. Others express their sympathy and support.

The anger, resentment, labelling, distancing, and blaming have been expressed in various ways. It has become common to hear reports of stigmatization, fear, rejection, harassment and discrimination towards Muslims.

Mosques have been burnt and vandalised, headscarves pulled from women and

Muslim children rejected by their peers at school. An Australian born 13-year-old girl of Afghan refugee parents, who was rejected by her peers said: “My friend does not want to talk with me any more as she thinks I am related to Bin-Laden”.

Some were called Osama or Taliban, while others were labelled as terrorists. These attitudes compounds the difficulties associated with attempts to gain their cultural identity.

Muslim youth born or raised in Australia suffered additional discrimination after the Cronulla riots when more than 100 people from both parties were arrested and charged with assault, riot and affray.

Some lost their jobs, while others can never have a professional career because of their criminal records. Most of the young men from both sides regret their involvement in this one-off event, but face a life-long scar.

Media influence was identified as a major provoking factor. For most Muslims and non-Muslims their decision to get involved was based on emotion.

Refugees who are nominal Muslims,

or those who are practicing religions other than Islam, still suffered from racism due to their so-called “Middle-Eastern appearance”.

A 25-year-old Iraqi security guard was instructed by his employer “Do not allow entry to the club of people who look like you”.

Psychologists G Newman and Davidahizar wrote in the *International Nursing Review* that since the attacks on New York and Washington DC in September 2001 increased racial and religious hostility has left people of Middle-Eastern or Muslim appearance fearful.

A significant number of Afghan and Iraqi refugees are targeted. This is despite these groups having fled from persecu-

tion from the very same regimes that are opposed by the west for their support of terrorism, such as the Taliban and Saddam Hussein.

The discrimination is based on their nationalities and religious beliefs. A Hazara (Afghan persecuted by the Taliban) refugee said: "We were the ones that suffered enormously during the Taliban regime, yet wherever we go people think we are terrorists."

A Kurdish Iraqi man whose sister and her children are missing since the recent war in Iraq said: "We Kurds were victims of Saddam Hussein but we are also paying the price now".

The "border protection legislation" introduced soon after September 11 left Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) holders feeling further humiliated and discriminated against.

A Hazara TPV holder expressed his frustration by saying: "How many terrorists would take the risk of putting their lives in the hands of smugglers and throwing themselves in the ocean?"

The more recent "terrorism protection legislation" that allows people to be detained without trial left Muslim families feeling horrified and unsafe. They are extremely anxious about their children.

For most it is a reminder of the situations they thought they had left behind, where they felt helpless and powerless, unable to protect their children.

A 45-year-old Afghan woman whose two sons were taken by the communist regime and never returned home said "I am shaking inside, I lost my sleep, I think the same thing might happen to my living son here in Australia".

Some Muslim communities in Australia have felt moments of helplessness and hopelessness. At times it seems there is no way out. "It is a permanent scar on our reputation, wherever we go people think we are terrorists," an elderly Afghan man in a STARTTS' group said.

Muslim communities are diverse, particularly those from Middle-Eastern backgrounds. They are fragmented along the lines of nationality, ethnicity, religion, language and politics. Despite their differ-

ences they are united in their response to the crisis, holding support groups, social gatherings and specific religious ceremonies.

Community members felt great sympathy for the civilians who were caught in the war on terror as well as the war in Lebanon. In order to support them they are collecting money, clothes and food.

Although a minority of groups use Islam to justify their extreme ideas and acts of terrorism, they do not represent Islam. Nor are they supported by the vast majority of Muslims.

In fact, by and large, Muslims condemned these terrorist acts. Muslims themselves have been among the victims of those attacks. For instance, 12 Afghans lost their lives on September 11 while, a 21-year-old Pakistani girl, was among several Muslims who were killed in the London bombings.

STARTTS holistic approach

STARTTS has provided a multilevel intervention for the refugees directly affected by the "war on terror", such as Afghans and Iraqis, as well as refugees who have been indirectly affected.

The holistic approach includes individual support, group intervention, working with schools, community consultation, education campaigns and training for service providers.

Muslims are most likely to seek assistance from family, close friends, a community member or a trusted Iman or scholar.

While a Muslim therapist would be closer to the client's reality many Islamic clients accept non-Muslim therapists, generally of the same gender as themselves.

On an individual counselling level, creating a sense of safety is crucial. This allows clients to freely express their feelings and talk about their worries and concerns.

Confidentiality is the most important element of safety for Muslim clients and

helps the therapist to establish trust and a rapport with them.

In this environment, their symptoms can be normalized and their feelings validated. It is important for a therapist to be impartial and open-minded. The therapist's non-judgemental attitude will reassure Muslim clients and enable them to explore matters which they might not otherwise talk about.

Following the attacks and their aftermath we found that some clients made frequent visits to STARTTS regardless of appointment times, "I can not find anywhere else but STARTTS to talk about my feelings," said an Afghan man.

On the other hand, some clients became so paralyzed that they stopped coming to seek assistance: "I don't want to move out of my home I am completely immobilized and numb," said a Kurdish Iraqi woman.

Spirituality and religious beliefs have been a common coping mechanism for many Muslims. The divine decrees in Islamic beliefs help them to think that everything is in the "hands of God". In these helpless circumstances nothing can help but trusting God and returning to Him.

"When I pray to God to save my family I get some relief, everything is in his hands," said an Afghan woman. It is also important for the therapist to value their religious beliefs and cultural norms.

In many Islamic cultures, religion plays a significant role in everyday practice. It is therefore difficult to practice psychotherapy without considering their cultural and religious values.

In addition, some cognitive approaches such as relaxation techniques, breathing exercises and positive thinking helps some clients to reduce their anxiety.

One useful intervention is to explore with clients the impact of television images on them and to encourage them to turn off "the box" to avoid exposure to mediated conflict.

Clients responded variously: Some followed the advice while others found it difficult to do so; "turning off the television is like turning off the world," said

an Iraqi woman. "My family is in the fire, how could I switch off the television? my heart is burning along with them," said an Afghan man.

Clients have also been encouraged to connect with their own community and resource network.

In addition to individual therapy, group interventions are provided. With some Muslim communities such as Afghans, group interventions seem to be more effective during crisis times. However, for some communities where the levels of mistrust and community fragmentation are high it is not practical.

One-off support groups as well as short-term group interventions have been conducted at schools with significant positive effects.

Other interventions include community consultation, continuous contact and support, training for school staff and other service-providers and an education campaign.

All STARTTS' interventions emphasise impartiality and neutrality. In addition Muslim communities themselves have become a valuable source of support for clients.

Addressing the various levels of clients' psychological and social systems has provided crucial support for them during difficult times. A holistic approach combined with impartiality and neutrality has helped us achieve this.

In addition to the support provided through STARTTS and its coalition sister services throughout Australia, I believe it is time for all of us, as Australian citizens, clinicians and health professionals to participate in an education campaign to increase awareness about Muslims, so they are no longer confused with terrorists.

I believe that by taking a small step we can make a big difference. Let's NOT be silent.

Nooria Mehraby a refugee herself is a senior clinician who has more than 18 years work experience with refugees and has been employed by STARTTS since 1995. Nooria has presented papers at a number of national and international conferences and is the author of many publications (including two textbook chapters) on cross-cultural counselling, working with children and issues affecting refugees. ■

Islam is based on five practices:

- **Bearing witness that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.**
- **Establishing regular prayer (most pray five times a day)**
- **Fasting for the whole month of Ramadan, unless ill or frail**
- **Giving charity regularly (Zakat),**
- **Pilgrimage to Mecca (Haj) once in a lifetime if one can afford it.**

There are two denominations of Islam:

- **The Sunni (traditionalists): At about 85 percent the Sunni comprise the largest branch of Islam and are usually considered traditionalist or orthodox.**
- **The Shiites (sectarians): comprise 15 percent of Muslims and live mainly in Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Pakistan, Lebanon and Oman.**

