

educated that God gave us intelligence to use it to help others and to improve their lives.

What is Indonesia's cultural approach to Islam?

The pre-Islamic culture in Indonesia was already pretty eclectic; it was animism and Hindu-Buddhism. People had a respect for the natural world, which was to them obviously inhabited by spirits that were for you or against you. So they were quite broad in their outlook about what might help you or what mightn't. They were not against taking a bit of this and a bit of that. Indonesian Islam is both practical and pragmatic.

Islam arrived when Muslim traders and merchants, probably first from India and China, came by sea. In those early times, if you travelled to Southeast Asia you had to wait there for six months until the winds changed to take you home. During that six months, the Muslim traders married local girls and joined the community. The leader of a community might convert to Islam if that would improve his commercial networks and status.

What about the status of women in Indonesia?

It's fairly certain that before Islam, Indonesian women had high status and many engaged in trade. Women still handle the household finances. And increasingly women are more highly educated. The cranky old men, who tend to interpret the Qu'ran in a narrow way, are now being met by well-educated Muslim women who are giving them counter arguments about other ways of interpreting controversial passages in the Qur'an. They argue that Islam treats all people the same, that there are differences between men and women and they have different duties but that their functions are equally valid. They are strong together. The women think very carefully about their strategies for working with men like this. And such is the thought that has gone into the programmes that mostly



they leave those meetings with men having learnt a lot and gained some respect for women. There is resistance still in some cases so they agree to disagree. But slowly, the tide is turning, and there is growing support for more sensitive interpretations of the Qur'an.

There doesn't seem to be as big an emphasis on Asian study and languages in Australian schools now as there has been in the past.

During the 1980s, Australians were concerned that the impetus started under the Whitlam era, of direct engagement with Asian countries be continued, especially in schools. I was one of quite a few people who worked with Professor Stephen FitzGerald, Australia's first ambassador to China, to raise awareness about the importance of Asia. I was particularly involved with schools and teachers. It was an incredible lesson for me to see how difficult it is to ask teachers to introduce new subjects into the curriculum if they're not given suitable training and support. I used to meet with teachers' groups and visit schools to discuss what we could do.

There were good outcomes in the late 1980s and through into the 1990s, but when federal and state funding was reduced then drastically cut, numbers fell. In response to that decline some new pilot projects have been tried with good results so I am hoping for better times ahead.

Concerning asylum seekers — are Indonesians stuck in the middle of

other peoples' problems? What do they think the solution might be?

It's a domestic political, financial and social problem. There are camps of people, illegal immigrants, in Indonesia, and townships, part of which house people who aren't in the camps. Indonesian individuals are going into the camps to offer help, especially to children. In the towns there can be resentment of the non-Indonesians who are in competition with locals for employment.

I think Indonesians in general would like the problems to be solved in the home countries, so that people aren't forced to flee. It is a big problem when a country not wealthy itself is forced to take on added challenges that are not of its own making.

Do you have a position on headscarves?

I've talked to Indonesian Muslim women about this. I was curious as to how they made their decisions. People who aren't used to seeing women with all their hair covered find it pretty confronting. Some of the women told me, "well, it's great for a bad hair day!" Other women said they do it to test whether their boyfriends are only interested in them for their looks. Other women do it as an act of rebellion — because nobody else in their family does it, and some do it because they genuinely believe it's a modest way of dressing and that's important to them. I do have to say that Indonesia is now considered a fashion centre for headscarves! Bandung, a wonderful city in the mountains of West Java, is

known as the Paris of the East. Women fly in from all over Southeast Asia to see the latest Muslim fashions. But, it's not necessarily a lifetime choice. I know women who've discarded the headscarf, although I never asked them why they did it. There are many personal answers to the headscarf question. The Qur'an asks that both men and women dress "modestly", and how that manifests itself has a lot to do with the general culture of a place.

My own position is that the way a person dresses is his or her own choice. If it's forced on them, that becomes a human rights issue rather than a women's issue or an Islamic issue.

How would you describe Indonesians in general?

Well, some Indonesians have pick-pocketed me and I've had my handbag stolen in the street. But then I've had four handbags stolen at ANU! Some human beings wherever they are could do with a little reform. In general, I would say that when I smile at an Indonesian, I always get a big smile back — and I can't say that of all countries I've been.

I can chat with an Indonesian, especially a woman, and we just have a good chat. Their sense of humour is incredible, the sense of curiosity about me, my family, what I'm doing, always seems genuine.

One thing that has always impressed me about Indonesian Muslims is their public speaking ability, which is heavily emphasised at school — any age or sex, they can deliver a beautifully-composed, humorous and interesting speech. It's such a gift. That self-confidence is really good to see. They do have an emphasis on languages, the second and third languages are almost always Arabic and English.

I haven't experienced racism, although I've had kids mimicking me because I was so different! But you could expect that of kids anywhere — it's curiosity and fun, not racism. I did experience some hostility from some people, as an Australian rather than as a white person, when we took East Timor's side in its argument with Indonesia.

They have an attitude of share and be shared with — I was once staying in a house and went into my room and the teenagers of the house were trying on my jeans and lipstick! They would expect me to do the same. Their attitude is that what's mine is yours. If I fall sick in Indonesia people do everything they can to look after me. I feel a warmth, and I feel I am accepted and respected as a fellow human.

