The Northern Districts Educational Fellowship to study education as a means of addressing cultural misunderstandings of Islam in Australian society travelling to England (Cambridge, Bradford, Birmingham, London) and New York in March/April 2012.

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Signed: Helen Smith  Date: 29/6/12
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With Emeritus Professor David Ford – Director: Faculty of Divinity and Cambridge Interfaith Program, Cambridge University
Introduction – Establishing a context for the Fellowship

My teaching career commenced in 1976, primarily in the areas of English and the Humanities. Eventually many of my interests combined and led me to specialise in Religious Education. While my work both as a teacher and as an advisor to schools has been in the Sydney Catholic Education system, I have also been privileged to work with the NSW Board of Studies in developing the Studies of Religion Syllabus. This course provides students across NSW with the option of studying religious traditions in a manner that is academic, objective and with no reference to personal religious preference. It is a popular course for the Higher School Certificate Examination with the number of students choosing to study Islam increasing steadily over the past ten years.

My personal encounter with Islam began in the late 1990s when I began teaching it as a component of Studies of Religion. Prior to this, like many Australians, I was regrettably ignorant of so much of its cultural and religious heritage. In 2007 I was fortunate to be asked to write a component of the education support materials for the Arts of Islam Exhibition held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. This was the first time that I fully encountered the history and the wealth of knowledge that Islam has given to the world. It is my hope that the Churchill Fellowship will provide a further avenue for advancing the understanding of Islam within Australian society that I have been fortunate to acquire as a result of my career.

I am indebted to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and in particular the Northern Districts Education Centre for providing me with an opportunity that would not otherwise have been possible to visit schools, universities and organisations in England and New York who are charting a path for understanding and a shared vision of the common good. The thirty engagements over the course of six weeks travel have provided me with some of the most intellectually stimulating and challenging insights of my professional life to date.

Many thanks go to my referees for their contributions to and support of my Fellowship application - Mr Lindsay Swan of the NSW Board of Studies and Mr Ross Tarlinton, Headmaster of St Joseph’s College Hunters Hill, Sydney. My special thanks also to Dr Peter Vardy and Charlotte Fowler of Heythrop College, London. I also thank my family for supporting me in this quest as they have done in so many other circumstances. I do not underestimate all that they have done over the years to enable me to pursue my career. Finally I acknowledge my dearest friends without whom the courage to undertake this task might have failed me.

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Executive Summary

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The Northern Districts Educational Fellowship to study education as a means of addressing cultural misunderstandings of Islam in Australian society travelling to England (Cambridge, Bradford, Birmingham, London) and New York.

Highlights: All meetings are listed on p6. Each was outstanding, thus ‘highlights’ are difficult. These include:

- Cambridge Faculty of Divinity – Cambridge Interfaith Program and Cambridge Muslim College
- Newby Primary and Eternal Light Schools, Bradford, England
- Birmingham Faith Leaders Group + Faith Makes a Difference (Birmingham Religious Education Syllabus)
- Islamic Exhibition Centre and school visits Birmingham
- Coexist Foundation and Microbooks (London)
- Three Faiths Forum (London and New York)
- Awareness Foundation (London)
- British Museum – Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam (London)
- Hagop-Kevorkian Centre for Middle Eastern Studies, New York University
- Metropolitan Museum of Art New York – new Islam wing and education centre
- Meeting with Bawa Jain, Secretary-General of the World Council of Religious Leaders (New York)
- Face to Faith school program from the Tony Blair Foundation (viewed in practice in New York)

Recommendations: this report will explore the following areas with respect to their potential for the Australian context:

1. Programs developed by universities including:
   i. Cambridge Interfaith Program and particularly their model for Scriptural Reasoning
   ii. Hagop-Kevorkian Centre NYU – teacher education programs

2. Programs targeting school-based audiences:
   i. Three Faiths Forum – programs for secondary students that engage with representatives of different faiths
   ii. Face to Faith – connecting schools around the world to discuss critical issues via internet conferences
   iii. Faith Makes a Difference – Birmingham Agreed Religious Education Syllabus (used in state/religious schools)
   iv. Islamic Exhibition Centre, Birmingham – a centre where school groups visit to enhance knowledge of Islam

3. Programs supporting adult learning:
   i. Awareness Foundation – assisting Christians to know their faith through a lens on interfaith understanding
   ii. Interfaith Centre of New York - summer seminars for teachers

4. Programs that are culturally based:
   i. Coexist Foundation
   ii. British Museum Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam Exhibition.

Implementation and Dissemination may include:

1. NSW Board of Studies – discussion in relation to current syllabi and sharing of resources with teachers
2. Islamic Scientific Research Association – exploring a resource such as the Birmingham Islamic Exhibition Centre
3. Art Gallery of NSW/similar – exploring the possibility of something akin to the British Museum Hajj exhibition
4. NSW Heads of Religious Education – sharing of learnings/possibility of developing teacher formation programs
5. Media – Sydney Morning Herald, ABC Radio National
6. Guest speaking opportunities: e.g. Association for Studies of Religion (keynote speaker July 2012); Jesuit Australian Education Conference (keynote speaker July 2012)
7. Discussions with universities regarding Fellowship findings with the possibility of developing some of these for Australian circumstances.
Programme – March/April 2012

13 – 17 March: Cambridge UK

- Dr Matthew Tariq Wilkinson: Cambridge Muslim College [http://www.cambridgemuslimcollege.org/]
- Miriam Lorie Cambridge Interfaith Program (CIP), Faculty of Divinity Cambridge University [http://www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/]
- David Ford: Regius Professor of Divinity, Cambridge University; Director of CIP
- Rev Francis Ward & Rev Sarah Coakley (Eds) Fear and Friendship: Anglicans Engaging with Islam

18 – 20 March: Bradford UK

- Michael Latham: Head Teacher Newby Primary School (90% Muslim enrolment) [http://www.newbyprimary.co.uk/]
- Rev Jim Hinton: Near Neighbours (Bradford community cohesion program) [http://www.cuf.org.uk/near-neighbours]
- Head Teachers: Eternal Light School – all boys madrasah (Muslim school)
- Jani Rashid: Head of Diversity and Cohesion, Bradford Department of Community Cohesion [http://www.bradfordschools.net/cccp/]
- Dr Philip Lewis: author of Young, British and Muslim; Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford

20 – 24 March: Birmingham UK

- Jonathan Gurling: Executive Secretary of the Birmingham Faith Leaders’ Group – meeting with leaders of the group at Birmingham Central Mosque [http://www.birminghamfaithleaders.co.uk/]
- Dr Marius Felderhof: Hon Senior Research Fellow University of Birmingham; Director Faith Makes a Difference Birmingham City Agreed Religious Education Curriculum [http://www.faithmakesadifference.co.uk/landing]
- Guy Hordern MBE: Chairman Birmingham City Standing Advisory Committee for Religious Education (SACRE)
- William Ozanne: Education Advisor Archdiocese of Birmingham – visits to St John Wall and St Catherine’s schools.

24 March – 7 April: London UK

- Ririko Suzuki: Prince’s School of Traditional Arts [http://www.psta.org.uk/]
- James Kidner: Coexist Foundation [http://www.coexistfoundation.net/]
- Westminster Cathedral School [http://www.choirschool.com/]
- Tirath Virdee: Microbooks [http://www.microbooks.org/]
- Stephen Shashoua and Sara Quested: Three Faiths Forum (3ff) [http://www.3ff.org.uk/]
- Rev Robin Griffin-Jones: Master of the Temple Church [http://www.templechurch.com/]

7 – 18 April: New York City USA

- Greta Scharnweber: Hagop Kevorkian Centre New York University (NYU) [http://neareaststudies.as.nyu.edu/page/home]
- Bawa Jain: Secretary General of the World Council of Religious Leaders [http://www.millenniumpeacesummit.com/]
- Cara Ryan: Intercultural Forum (newly formed associate of 3FF – as per London visit)
- Mary Kate Blain Office of the Superintendent of Schools Archdiocese of New York [http://www.adnyeducation.org/]
- Khadija Jean: Principal of the Islamic Cultural Centre School NY [http://www.regis-nyc.org/]
- Dr Henry Goldschmidt The Interfaith Centre of New York [http://interfaithcenter.org/]
- Bawa Jain: Secretary General of the World Council of Religious Leaders [http://www.millenniumpeacesummit.com/]
- Cara Ryan: Intercultural Forum (newly formed associate of 3FF – as per London visit)
- Mary Kate Blain Office of the Superintendent of Schools Archdiocese of New York [http://www.adnyeducation.org/]
- Khadija Jean: Principal of the Islamic Cultural Centre School NY [http://www.regis-nyc.org/]
- Mary Katherine Sheena: Regis High School NY [http://www.regis-nyc.org]
The Australian setting for education in relation to Islam

The potential for Australia to engage with new and stimulating ways of seeing the world was augmented by the ending of the White Australia Policy in 1973. The abolition of what was an essentially discriminatory policy resulted in increased migration from Asia and the Middle East. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2011 24.6% of Australia’s population was born overseas and 43.1% of people have at least one overseas-born parent. There can be no negating the benefits of this expansion of cultural traditions, nor can the intolerance towards aspects of these traditions by some sectors of the population be denied or ignored.

Since 9/11 some of our most maligned residents are those who are often bundled under the umbrella terms of ‘Islam’ or ‘Muslim’. Those who stereotype such groups show little understanding of the diversity that exists within them, or more significantly, of the contribution they have made to the development of humanity and indeed Australia in recent decades. As with so many other areas of misunderstanding between peoples, fear of what is deemed to be ‘different’ is often the major contributing factor to such negative stereotyping.

In addition to the 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre, incidents such as the Bali Bombings of 2002 and the 7/7 attacks in London have become primary sources of ‘information’ in respect to Islam for the Western audience. The subsequent media portrayal of Islam has rarely been sympathetic to the tradition as a whole. I met with two Muslim mothers in Bradford and this is how one of them, Nighat, described what life is like: “99.99% of Muslims just want to live in peace and be happy like everyone else. I grew up in Bradford but it’s much harder for my kids growing up then it was for me. People call out things to them like, ‘get out Pakki’ or ‘get out Bin Laden’. We hate what the terrorists do like everyone else. How can we let people know that? No one listens to us.”

This is a lament that I heard many times in my travels – it is a lament echoed in Australia.

I do not underestimate the complexity of the cultural issues that underpin this study. A comment from Dr Phil Lewis, author of Young, British and Muslim, has stayed with me: ‘the most difficult thing is how to walk a path through romanticising and demonising Islam.’ While it is not my intention to do the former, the rationale for this Fellowship is in respect to how education can address misunderstandings of Islam in Australian society. Subsequently the focus of this report is on exemplar programs that are seeking understanding of Islam and engagement with Muslim communities in order that people of all faiths and none can work together for the common good – a mantra that was repeated throughout England and in New York.

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3 Department of Immigration and Citizenship: http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/08abolition.htm Retrieved 14/4/12
5 Nighat Khan, community worker and mother of students at Newby Primary School, Bradford. Interviewed at school on 19/3/12
6 Dr Phil Lewis, Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford. Interviewed in Bradford 20/3/12
Acknowledgment of Australian Exemplars of Inter-faith Dialogue

Outstanding work in relation to interfaith dialogue has been present in Australia for many years. Organisations such as the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations\(^7\) have worked consistently with education organisations and government authorities to promote a greater understanding of Islam. Recently excellent educational leadership has been given through programs offered by ISRA – The Islamic Sciences and Research Academy Australia.\(^8\) Similarly, the Affinity Intercultural Foundation which was founded in 2000 to: ‘meet the needs of the Muslim community in interacting with the greater society along with the needs of the general public to increase its awareness of the Muslim community, its religion and culture’\(^9\) is also doing exceptional work. Organisations such as the National Council of Churches of Australia and the Council of Christians and Jews have also worked to advance the understanding of the positive contribution that all religious traditions are able to make to social cohesion. These are but a few examples of the initiatives that are already in place in Australia to ensure that shared values of religious traditions are promoted to the public. Sadly, these outstanding programs rarely receive recognition particularly in the popular media.

The focus of this report examines models that could further enhance programs such as these. It also explores the potential for engagement with internationally recognised organisations and educational enterprises that have the potential to make further significant contributions to dialogue and understanding in the Australian context. These findings will be discussed using the model which follows on the next page.

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A Model for Expressing the Findings of this Fellowship

It is a complex task to attempt to summarise the learnings from over 30 meetings into a succinct report that both explains the content of these interactions and proposes possibilities for their translation into a range of educational and cultural environments in Australia. To this end the following four-component model will be used to share findings as opposed to a chronological delivery of what occurred during my Fellowship travel. It must be emphasised that it is possible for considerable overlap to occur between each of the components.

- Programs developed by universities
- Programs that are culturally and community-based
- Education to enhance the understanding of Islam
- Programs targeting school-based audiences
- Programs supporting adult learning

Many of the guiding principles that underpin this report developed as a result of my meeting with Mr Bawa Jain, the Secretary-General of the World Council of Religious Leaders (WCRL) in New York. WCRL was established as one of the goals of the Millennium Peace Summit and was officially launched in 2002. It serves as a resource for the United Nations offering the wisdom of religious leadership in the resolution of global conflict.

In particular Bawa Jain provided examples of how the religious leadership that is rarely reported by mainstream media often works behind the scenes to promote harmony and diminish, at least to some extent, international tensions. A primary example that he cited was that of Pope John Paul II who worked tirelessly to avoid the second Iraq war stating that ‘War is not always inevitable. War is always a defeat for humanity’. It is Mr Jain’s belief that it was because of the intervention of John Paul II that Middle Eastern leaders did not in fact see this

10 http://www.millenniumpeacesummit.com/ Retrieved 30/5/12
11 http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/War/Iraq-war-Jesuit-Curia.html Retrieved 30/5/12
invasion as a battle between Islam and Christianity, but rather as a political dispute. John Paul II’s words and actions were viewed as being in stark contrast to those of President George W Bush in his speech filled with religious imagery on 16 September 2001 including reference to the war as a ‘crusade’.  

Amidst his many insights, Bawa Jain offered the following principles that as mentioned have come to define the hopes that underpin this Fellowship:

- ‘How can children be educated to see religion as a source of harmony and not division?’
- ‘Approximately 90% of the world can be identified as having some form of religious expression – imagine this world if every person of ‘faith’, no matter how minimal, became a diplomat for peace.’
- ‘Don’t be afraid to become involved. We don’t lose by seeking to understand – we have so much to learn from each other.’

**Acknowledgment of all those who contributed to my learning in Cambridge, Bradford, Birmingham, London and New York**

Page 5 of this report names many persons who may not be overtly referred to in its content. Each meeting added its own dimension to the overall learning represented in this document. I am grateful not just for the time given to assist my research, but for the spirit in which this was done at each and every encounter.

Rev Jim Hinton the minister to St Stephen’s Anglican Parish is one such person. I met him as part of an outstanding day organised by Michael Latham, Principal of Newby Primary School, Bradford. Jim’s congregation numbers about 50, however, his ministry to the broader parish which is now mainly Muslim is inspirational in addressing the social fallout of high unemployment resulting partly from the decline in the textile industry.

The mosaic (left) was created by all those who share St Stephen’s regardless of their faith to represent its place and role in the lives of people of the area. Jim stated:

> *'If the Church isn’t here for the marginalised it’s in the wrong place. Church is at its best when it’s meeting the marginal, the messed up. Our task is to provide opportunities for others to blossom’*

Bradford 19/3/12

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13 Bawa Jain, Secretary-General of the World Council of Religious Leaders Interviewed at Columbia University, New York 8/4/12
Report: Main body using the four-component model

Programs Developed by Universities

I. Hagop Kevorkian Centre for Middle Eastern Studies New York University

One of the crucial learnings of my travel was the potential for greater connections between universities and the school system in respect to teaching and learning about Islam. In retrospect my own work in relation to the development of materials to support Studies of Religion has generally been done in isolation from university programs. Greta Scharnweber of the Hagop Kevorkian Centre of New York University made the following comment which I think should be foundational to concepts that may be developed locally from this Fellowship. She stated: ‘What works in respect to education programs is when you connect scholarly information (as developed by universities) with working teachers who are ideally not working in a void – they are connected to other teachers who have shared similar experiences such as our Saturday teacher seminars’.

The Saturday seminar program contributes to the hours that teachers are required to complete for professional development and in 2012 included topics such as: ‘Islam, Art and the Museum’, ‘A is for Arab: Stereotypes in U.S. Popular Culture’ and ‘Spotlight on Syria’. This is an approach that I believe could be developed in Australia.

In addition to this the Centre leads study tours for teachers to the Middle East. While these would not be accessible to large numbers of participants, they are exemplars of one approach to greater understanding between peoples. Such a program took eleven K-12 teachers from NYCs Friends Seminary (Quaker school) to Jordan, Israel and Palestine in March 2011. The tour was: The Politics of Water – A Study tour of the Jordan Rift Valley. The ingenuity of this program is that it used an environmental issue to examine the broader social, cultural and religious complexities of this part of the world. Comments from participating teachers included:

- “To experience firsthand the devastatingly obvious discrepancy of such as basic human need as that of water made clear the imbalance of power and rights in the Middle East.” Ben Grades K-4, 7-8 Science Teacher
- “Every now and then I was calmed by the passionate students we met, all hungry for change. An eleventh grader from King’s Academy in Jordan retold a story about the first time he met with Israeli and Palestinian students to discuss water issues. ‘That day we met the enemy. And the enemy was ignorance. People really don’t know the other side and that is what gives you a starting point.’” Deanna Grades 5-12 Teacher.

As a result of this program these teachers then took a group of their own students to the Middle East to participate in a similar experience. While such study tours have limited application, the focus of this example in a

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14 Greta Scharnweber, Associate Director & Outreach Coordinator, Hagop Kevorkian Centre NYU. Interviewed 9/4/12
15 Hagop Kevorkian Centre Review 2010/2011 pp16-18
scientific/environmental framework that then became the springboard for deeper appreciation of faith traditions has merit as a way of developing meaningful dialogue in respect to culture and religious diversity.

II. Faculty of Divinity Cambridge University – The Cambridge Interfaith Program (CIP)

Cambridge was the first place that I visited on my Fellowship and in many ways it opened doors to understanding between the Abrahamic faiths in particular that I had not previously encountered. One of these is that of ‘Scriptural Reasoning’ (SR) explained by CIP as:

*Scriptural Reasoning is the communal practice of reading sacred scriptures, in small groups, together. Normally the passages of scripture chosen are Jewish, Christian and Muslim and are linked together by a particular issue, theme, story or image. When read together in this way participants – or “reasoners” - have found that astonishing, powerful and, at times, quite surprising, new conversations and relationships may open up. Although this practice has its origin in a University setting, and is generating considerable theoretical interest, it is also now becoming a "civic practice" whereby people of different faiths (currently still mainly Jews, Christians and Muslims), engage with their holy scripture and with each other as neighbours and fellow citizens. It is proving transformative, though not always easy.*

It would be my hope to enter into dialogue with Christian, Jewish and Muslim colleagues to explore the possibility of establishing forums for SR in Australia. There would be potential for teachers and students to participate in such opportunities for scholarly dialogue. This could also be developed through tertiary providers and in some community settings.

Members of the CIP team have also done training with prison chaplains who are using SR to lead processes which assist prisoners not only to interact with each other but to engage with their own faith, often for the first time in their lives. Again there would be potential for exploring this in Australia through chaplaincy programs.

**Meeting with Professor David Ford** - Regius Professor of Divinity, Cambridge University; Director of CIP

In a wide-ranging interaction with Professor Ford including an evening lecture on ‘The Future of the University’, he raised many issues not just in relation to learning about and for Islam, but also in respect to the purpose of higher education – again topical in the current Australian context. He said: *Universities should be places that fundamentally change people but surveys show that 75% of students choose subjects for a job while only 24% choose subjects because they love them. Students need to find a passion …* 17 I was also privileged to attend a lecture given by Professor Ford on a significant document issued by international Muslim scholars in 2007: ‘A

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17 Professor David Ford, lecture on ‘The Future of the University’ at Michaelhouse, Cambridge 15/3/12
While some Year 12 students in NSW study this text, the majority of Australians would be unaware of its existence and the significance of it originating in Islam as a way forward for dialogue and common understanding with Christians and Jews. The common ‘Word’ in the document refers to scripture and the shared belief in one God. Professor Ford argues that it provides a platform for the Abrahamic faiths to:

- ‘think afresh about the foundations of their convictions and explore how a common journey is different to a common ground
- relate to each other from the heart of their love of faith before God
- gratefully acknowledge that differences between Muslims and Christians are real
- seek the common good in the way of God.’

In quoting Archbishop Rowan Williams, Professor Ford acknowledged that A Common Word was ‘an extraordinarily courageous gift (and that) the Muslim community did not know how it would be responded to.’ In terms of this Fellowship it will be advantageous to explore further avenues for teachers and students at all levels to explore this document as well as the possibility of interfaith engagement along the lines of SR.

A Muscat Manifesto

The Manifesto was a lecture given by Professor Ford in Oman at the invitation of HE Shaykh Abdullah bin Mohammed Al Salmi, Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs in the Sultanate of Oman. I quote from the lecture entitled: Seeking the Wisdom of God: A triple dynamic

‘My theme in this lecture is seeking the wisdom we need for living in our time, which according to Muslim, Christian and Jewish calendars is the fifteenth, twenty-first and fifty-eight centuries. There are many rich traditions in our world, among which I will focus on these three, whose members together make up around half of the world’s population.’

I would contend that documents such as this need to be brought to the attention of those who are pursuing areas of inter-faith understanding. Similarly the Muslim response to Professor Ford’s lecture by Aref Ali Nayed entitled Growing Ecologies of Peace, Compassion and Blessing not only act as stimulus for understanding of Islam but again point to the shared concerns of the modern world referred to the in the projects of the Hagop-Kevorkian Centre’s Middle East education programs as a means for exploring commonalities between faiths.

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18 http://www.acommonword.com/ Retrieved 24/6/12
19 Professor David Ford, lecture given at the Cambridge Faculty of Divinity 15/3/12
20 ibid
Other ideas for enhancing understanding of Islam in the Australian context from the Cambridge Faculty of Divinity include:

- The Cambridge Inter-faith Summer School which brings together students from Islamic, Christian and Jewish backgrounds for a three-week programme of immersion in inter-faith education and encounter.²³
- An online inter-faith dialogue which is a digital project to develop dialogues between Muslims, Christians and Jews in partnership with technology company Meedan and the Coexist Foundation.²⁴
- Art and Faith exhibition – reflecting sacred text in art as the medium for dialogue.

**III. Cambridge Muslim College (CMC)**

This was the first meeting that I held on my Fellowship journey where I met with Dr Matthew Tariq Wilkinson and the students of the College. CMC aims to equip young Muslims to make a significant contribution to the future through an ‘academic approach (that) integrates both traditional Islamic and Western scholarship in a critical and rigorous manner, not to treat them as parallel, separate elements. It draws on Islam’s long history of conviviality and adaptation in minority situations, and adds to it by facilitating the entrenchment of a dynamic, open and engaged Muslim community in Britain.’²⁵

A significant project of the College in relation to the British learning framework is the *Curriculum for Cohesion*.²⁶ As part of a national curriculum review the College is making submissions as to how aspects of Muslim history can be incorporated into the curriculum to facilitate understanding of history as being broader than the European ‘slant’ that has often been the case in Western society. My own learning from being associated with the exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW is that most of Australians would be ignorant of the wealth of this history. Dr Wilkinson alerted me to an excellent resource that I will be sharing in educational forums: *1001 Inventions*²⁷ which is both an online resource but was also a travelling exhibition in the UK. Such an exhibition would be highly beneficial for expanding an awareness of Islam’s contribution to science, the arts, philosophy and history to all Australian citizens.

In addition to the learning gained in relation to aspects of the NSW Studies of Religion Syllabus, I would hope to share the potential for a project such as the Cambridge Muslim College with Muslim colleagues in Sydney with the view to a the potential for such an enterprise to one day be developed in our own circumstance.

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Programs targeting school-based audiences

I. University of Birmingham – Birmingham City Agreed Religious Education Syllabus

My visit to the University of Birmingham highlighted a major difference that exists between the Australian education sector and that of our British counterparts in respect to learning about religion. Unlike our own context, students in Britain will, to a greater or lesser extent, spend time learning about different faiths – although there is an option to ‘opt out.’ This can be done in a secular learning environment in a similar way that Australian students study any humanities subject such as history or geography. As such each local area authority in Britain is charged with having a SACRE – Standing Advisory Committee for Religious Education. While a similar circumstance is unlikely in Australia, the work led by Dr Marius Felderhof and his colleagues at the University of Birmingham has developed an outstanding program for exploring religion entitled Faith Makes a Difference based on an approach defined as the 24 Dispositions – including such topic areas as caring for others, being fair, living by rules and so on.

In launching the syllabus the leaders of the program stated: ‘In Religious Education the deepest values of human life are shared and discussed.’ This is a belief that rings true for me. I would hope to share this resource as a way of learning about Islam (and other faiths) with a range of bodies including the NSW Board of Studies, religious forums and entities such as the St James Ethics Centre which has been charged with developing alternative programs for NSW State Schools to those offered through special, i.e. traditional, religious education providers.

II. Faith to Faith – Tony Blair Faith Foundation

On 18 April 2012 I was able to observe a Face to Faith online conference between the students of Regis High School in New York City and those of Monterey High School in Mexico. The Tony Blair Foundation describes this program as: Face to Faith is our innovative schools programme for 12-17 year olds, which is active in 18 countries and growing. Face to Faith connects students worldwide via a secure website where they interact. The programme features facilitated videoconferences where students discuss global issues from a variety of faith and belief perspectives. Through Face to Faith, students gain the dialogue skills required to prevent conflict by breaking down religious and cultural stereotypes.

The online video conference between the two schools which was scheduled to last for one hour was extended by 30 minutes. The students shared on a range of social issues. In particular those from Monterey spoke repeatedly

28 Dr Marius Felderhof, Senior Research Fellow Department of Theology and Religion University of Birmingham interviewed 21/3/12
29 The 24 Dispositions can be accessed at http://www.faithmakesadifference.co.uk/content/24-dispositions Retrieved 30/5/12
31 St James Ethics Centre http://www.ethics.org.au/ Retrieved 30/5/12
of the drugs, police corruption, the fear that impedes their community and their hopes that through education they could contribute to a more just society in the future. While this particular encounter did not relate to an understanding of Islam as the topic of this report, there are many examples where schools around the world do relate to each other in this context. A student from Regis reflected on how his faith is impelling him to think more deeply in respect to understanding the role of religion in community cohesion. He said: ‘My faith helps me to gain a sense of community. The reason for this may have begun in my Catholic faith because of my parents but now the ‘why’ is through the Tony Blair Faith Foundation and regarding the program at Regis I have re-evaluated myself and my religion. More than just beliefs I know that I am part of something. My community.}\(^{33}\)

While there is at least one school in Australia (in Wollongong) currently participating in the Tony Blair Face to Faith to Face program, the potential for greater engagement seems unlimited. As a vehicle for understanding people of differing faiths as well as encouraging making a positive contribution to society it provides one model that will appeal to many young people of the digital age. As all resources are supplied to assist teachers in participating in this international dialogue I would be keen to promote it in all possible forums.

**III. Three Faiths Forum – 3FF**

‘3FF builds understanding and lasting relationships between people of all faiths and beliefs. We run education, engagement and action programmes that bring diverse communities together. Our main focus is in the UK, but we also work internationally to create new models for intercultural cooperation, particularly in the EU, USA and the Middle East. Our work involves teachers, students and young professionals, faith organisations, artists and galleries, political leaders in Parliament and upcoming leaders still at university.\(^{34}\)

In my meeting with the leaders of 3FF I was impressed by the diversity and structure of their programs including those where trained volunteers of differing religious traditions facilitate education workshops in schools (public and religious). The process for selecting the volunteers is quite rigorous to ensure that they are the ‘right’ people for such a task. One of the programs offered by 3FF that I believe would have particular application in Australia is titled *Tools for Triologue*. In a similar way to which the Cambridge Interfaith Program has been developing Scriptural Reasoning, *Tools for Triologue* uses sacred text as the means for, ‘students (to) engage with extracts from the Abrahamic scriptures (Tanakh, Bible and Qur’an) under the guidance of Muslim, Christian and Jewish facilitators. Together we will consider similarities, differences and what these teachings mean to people living in Britain today.

3FF offers a variety of themes for schools to choose from when opting for this program. These are:

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\(^{33}\) Student from Regis High School New York participating in Face to Faith video conference 18/5/12  
\(^{34}\) Overview of Three Faiths Foundation [http://www.3ff.org.uk/about-us/](http://www.3ff.org.uk/about-us/) Retrieved 18/5/12
Through this workshop students will:

- Deepen their learning about Judaism, Christianity & Islam by engaging directly with scriptural extracts, and people from those belief traditions
- Read sacred texts with "insider" guidance, seeing how they are interpreted, applied and lived out in people’s daily lives
- Have the opportunity to ask (often controversial!) questions in a safe space
- Explore how to create positive relations between people of different beliefs.  

In addition to the school programs such as that cited, 3FF also runs programs for university students, arts and culture events and also an innovative Middle East program using Scriptural Reasoning in a hospital context training Jewish, Christian and Muslim student doctors and nurses to be more culturally and religiously aware of each other’s background to facilitate harmonious working relations.

3FF London has also been instrumental in establishing an associate branch known as the Intercultural Forum in New York. While in New York I was able to meet with Cara Ryan who is one of the leaders of this project. I am eager to explore the potential for this innovative style of engagement between faiths and Islam in particular, to be brought to Australia because of its potential to contribute to understanding and social harmony.

IV. The Islamic Experience Exhibition – Birmingham

While in Birmingham I was fortunate to accompany a Year 3 class from a Catholic school on an excursion to this excellent exhibition. As an aside each class from this school, including Kindergarten, were visiting a place of worship/venue from a religious expression other than Catholic as part of a week dedicated to interfaith dialogue. I was able to be present at the school when each class presented its learnings from their study during the week – it was very impressive to witness the level of their knowledge and understanding. This in itself is a step further than many activities that currently take place in Australia around such events as ‘Harmony Day’.

35 http://www.threefaithsforum.org.uk/ Retrieved 18/5/12
36 http://www.islamic-exhibition.org/ Retrieved 16/6/12
The Islamic Experience Exhibition is of an excellent quality and each of the five sections is presented by a highly skilled Muslim woman who fully engaged the class I was accompanying. All presenters have done a certificate course in Hospitality as part of their own training in cultural sensitivity when presenting to people of other and/or no particular faith. Dynamic visual resources such as those seen in the photo below have been developed for each of the sections of the exhibition which are:

- The Five Pillars
- Faith and History
- Islam and Science
- Family Life
- Activities

Programs are offered at differing levels depending on the grade of students visiting the Centre.

There would be considerable value in developing a similar concept particularly in Sydney given its Muslim population. The potential for some form of touring exhibition would also be worth exploring and I will discuss this with colleagues at the Islamic Sciences and Research Academy (ISRA). The visual resources developed by the Centre would be transferrable to an Australian context and are available for purchase.

V. Tirath Virdee of Microbooks

I was fortunate to meet Tirath in London through James Kidner at Coexist. His desire to contribute to the 'common good' of humanity through greater understanding of religious diversity was tangible. The resources that he has produced, including the Understanding Faiths series in conjunction with the Coexist Foundation, will hopefully be finding their way 'Down Under' in the near future. These are excellent tools for Australian classroom teachers to tap into when assisting their students to have a greater understanding and appreciation of Islam.37

Programs supporting adult learning

While the programs already referred to support adult learning in many ways, there were some encounters during my Fellowship that targeted adult audiences beyond those who are solely in the education sector.

I. The Awareness Foundation - London

I met Fr Nadim Nassar the Director of the Awareness Foundation by chance at a special Hajj exhibition event organised by Coexist (Hajj to follow). A brief description of the work of Awareness from their website provides the best introduction:. Fr Nadim is an Anglican priest from Syria who is using both his religious and cultural backgrounds as a path to understanding religious diversity and dialogue with Islam.

‘The Awareness Foundation is an educational, ecumenical and international charity, founded in 2003 in response to the disturbing increase in religious conflict and violence around the world. Our Patron is the Archbishop of Canterbury. We work to help Christians make sense of their faith and culture in the 21st century, and to increase their awareness of their neighbours’ faiths and cultures, so that they can live in a diverse society without fear and without compromising their beliefs. We believe that greater understanding among religions and among peoples will ultimately defeat extremism, and help nurture an environment where people can live together in peace. Courses offered include: Living in a Global Village, The Diversity Code - experiencing God in diversity and Speak Out - how to articulate your faith and why.38

In addition to such courses, the Awareness Foundation provides opportunities for engagement between Eastern and Western Christian and Muslim communities. This includes round table events, pilgrimages to the East and an international conference every three years. The next conference will be held this year in October 2012 in London with a focus on the future of the Middle-East after the Arab Spring.

I believe there is great scope to investigate using the significant resources of the Awareness Foundation programs as a further tool for understanding Islam in Australia. To quote one of its Directors: ‘We need to take the culture of God and apply it to the culture of now.’39

II. Interfaith Centre of New York (ICNY)

I was able to meet with the Director of Education Programs, Dr Henry Goldschmidt, during the final day of my Fellowship and it was a fortuitous ending to the journey. Henry is a cultural anthropologist and the perspective that he brings to interfaith work provided much to ponder in respect to all that I had seen, heard, discussed, and how I might make at least some of it accessible upon my return to Australia.

39 St John Wright, Director of the Awareness Foundation, interviewed in London 6/4/12
The Mission and Methodology Statements from the ICNY define its purpose:

‘The Interfaith Center of New York (ICNY) seeks to make New York City and the world safe for religious differences by increasing respect and mutual understanding among people of different faith, ethnic, and cultural traditions and by fostering cooperation among religious communities and civic organizations to solve common social problems. We define interfaith as the positive awareness of religious diversity, and the intention or actual practice of engaging people of different faiths for the betterment of society as a whole. For our purposes social change is defined as the integrated effect of changing attitudes and social patterns towards other religious communities while at the same time improving the social well-being of one’s own community and the community at large.’

ICNY facilitates a vast range of programs under the main headings of:

- Education (students, teachers, social workers, general public)
- Civic programs (e.g. assisting religious leaders to navigate family courts)
- Domestic violence (training for religious leaders and women)
- Muslim-Catholic initiatives (connecting social services and justice programs)
- Re-entry Family and Faith Circles Support (support for those on parole and young offenders)
- Neighbourhood Leadership Institutes

As is illustrated by this snapshot from ICNY the potential for engaging with and learning about Islam (and other religious traditions) across the full spectrum of social interaction is really unlimited. Dr Goldschmidt words summarise why such engagement is critical today:

‘As an anthropologist your goal is to figure out how people live if you are going to understand them. Too often people teach about religions as if they are just a block of ideas - beliefs, texts ... It is true that you are not going to understand your Muslim neighbour if you don’t know something about Muhammad or the Qur’an or the Five Pillars. But each person is going to live the beliefs of their religion differently. When you get into the terrain of learning about how people live, when you get a nuanced understanding of people’s lives, including their religion, be willing to accept ambiguity.’

Perhaps the question for Australia in light of endless debates over what constitutes ‘Australian culture’ is, ‘are we willing to accept the ambiguity that arises through our religious differences?’

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40 http://interfaithcenter.org/  Retrieved 27/6/12
41 Dr Henry Goldschmidt, Director of Education Programs Interfaith Centre of New York, interviewed at ICNY 17/4/12
I. Coexist Foundation

Coexist is an organisation that is actually integral to each component of the model being used for this report. Its relevance to appreciating religious diversity through cultural forums makes it appropriately situated at this point. James Kidner who coordinates Coexist from London was instrumental in assisting me with many aspects of my Fellowship, particularly the contacts I was able to organise. An overview of the organisation from the website:

‘The Coexist Foundation is a charity which works to promote understanding of Jews, Christians and Muslims through education, dialogue and respect. Coexist is an operational foundation which not only funds projects, but also forges and facilitates new partnerships and programmes, which help people to understand better what it means to be Jewish, Christian or Muslim today. We do this by bringing together an influential network – including government, business, charities, academics and faith leaders - working towards the same objectives as ourselves. We hope this website will give some flavour of how Coexist is working today, and how you might be able to help us in our mission.’

Coexist offers examples of best practice in terms of programs that reach a broad spectrum of the community including modelling of Scriptural Reasoning, panel discussions on topics of popular discourse both in London and venues such as New York University, the Coexist Prize which celebrates ‘unsung hero/ines who are contributing to building bridges between people’, and a range of artistic forums such as exhibitions and film competitions.

Para Daeza - A Three Faiths Garden for the 2013 Chelsea Flower Show

This one example of the creative approaches that Coexist is taking to enhance interfaith understanding illustrates how ‘education’ in respect to Islam could be accessed by the general Australian public. From the website:

‘Coexist will partner with one of the world’s top garden designers, Chris Beardshaw, to create a ‘festival garden’ which we hope to launch at the Chelsea Flower Show in 2013. The Garden will draw on the rich history of faith-inspired gardens while also accommodating the complexity and commonality shared by the three Abrahamic faiths. After Chelsea the Garden will travel around the country for 6 -9 month installations in high profile locations adapting to the locale and leaving a lasting legacy. The Garden will be accompanied by an exhibition telling the story of the relationship between religion and horticulture and an education programme for local schools – who will be invited to create a part of the design.’

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42 http://www.coexistfoundation.net/ Retrieved 26/6/12
43 http://www.coexistfoundation.net/project/50/para-daeza-a-three-faiths-garden.htm Retrieved 26/6/12
In terms of learning about Islam (and other faiths) in an Australian context, a concept such as the garden entry for Chelsea seems to be one that has great merit as something to be considered as a result of this Fellowship. Indeed the establishment of a greater relationship with Coexist would be a welcome addition to the face of interfaith dialogue in this country because of its innovative, multi-dimensional approach to this critical work.

II. The British Museum: Hajj – journey to the heart of Islam

One of the highlights of my Churchill journey was the two visits that I was able to make to this outstanding exhibition held between 26 January and 15 April 2012. Over 140,000 people visited the exhibition which was developed over a considerable timespan in partnership with the King Abdulaziz Public Library Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The enormity of allowing non-Muslims to access understanding of one of the holiest rituals of Islam through a medium such as this exhibition cannot be over-stated.

Retrieved 20/6/12
My first visit to the Hajj exhibition was at a private function organised by James Kidner of Coexist. Significant religious and civic leaders were invited to view the exhibition as a means of facilitating their understanding of Islam amidst the complexities of modern, multi-cultural British society. My second visit was organised by the British Museum education department where I was able to accompany a Year Three class from a Muslim school that had travelled to London especially for this experience. The first part of their excursion included an interactive dramatic performance that set the scene for students to then enter the exhibition itself. This was an outstanding model of a dynamic teaching and learning process facilitated by Khayaal Theatre Company.

For the exhibition the IT team at the Museum developed an app using digital media to tell the story and engage older students in the journey. This is made possible through a partnership with Samsung who provided the latest phones for the project. Students had to find information and make decisions; sometimes they had to work alone and sometimes they had to work communally. For the latter experiences the phones would connect, for example, in determining the components of a meal during Hajj. I spoke with some of the students and they were completely absorbed with what the exhibition had to teach them about Islam - no doubt because it was using the technology that has become their second language.

Ahmad Mater’s *Magnetism*: a contemporary image that sat alongside treasures from Islam's history to tell the story of Hajj at the British Museum. The image uses time lapse photography to capture the movement of humanity that occurs during Hajj.

I was able to meet with Nicholas Badcott who is the Education Manager for the Schools and Young Audiences Team at the British Museum and as such is the person who had overall responsibility for bringing the online and participatory elements of the exhibition learning resources together. Nicholas shared with me the two over-arching goals of his team in preparing the materials for Hajj:
1. To engage Muslim audiences more fully with the British Museum
2. To improve the understanding of Islam for non-Muslims who visited the exhibition.

The potential for a similar exhibition in Australia

From my observations during two extended visits to the exhibition, the Museum certainly fulfilled these goals. An exhibition such as this would be would be an outstanding resource for the Australian community and I will be exploring avenues to consider how this might be possible. A bonus for any other body which attempts such an encounter with Islam is that the British Museum will be making a package of the intellectual property pertaining to the Hajj available to other venues undertaking similar projects.

III. The Metropolitan Museum of Art New York: Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia

The Blue Mihab from Iran c 1354-55
One of the most significant works in the Met collection
My personal journey with Islam grew exponentially as a result of being able to contribute in a small way to the Arts of Islam exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW. At the time the then Director of the Gallery, Edmund Capon said: ‘The very word Islam casts both light and shadow over our contemporary world. I believe there has never been a greater need for the wealth and imagination of Islamic cultures and artistic heritage to be revealed. The power of art can open our minds.’ The wing at the Met dedicated to the Art of the Arab Lands opened on 1st November 2011 with much the same intent. In addition to spending the best part of a day exploring the collection, I was able to meet with Claire Moore the Assistant Museum Educator, Teacher Programs.

In meeting with Claire she informed me that resources relating to the exhibition will be freely available online to assist teachers anywhere in the world to use the pieces in the exhibition to develop their student’s understanding of Islam. These will be released in September/October 2012. As a result of the new developments in the digital media department at the Met the resources promise to be, ‘more dynamic and easier to search and integrate into teaching programs’ than previous programs developed by the department.

Claire also described the Share Fairs that the Met runs for teachers who have participated in their programs. Essentially teachers are asked to submit a proposal to present a teaching concept they have used based on Met resources. The best proposals are chosen for a day where conference participants can rotate around a showcase of best practise in relation to teaching and learning using the Met resources.

There were two essential learnings from my day with The Art of the Arab Lands:

1. The potential to further use ‘art’ in all its forms to assist a greater understanding of Islam still remains a largely untapped potential in Australia.

2. The possibility of running ‘Share Fair’ style forums for teachers in respect to Islam is something that requires further exploration.

Way In, Way Out
From the series Women of Allah (1994).
Artist: Sherin Neshat (Iranian b1957)
Metropolitan Museum of Art

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67 Claire Moore, Assistant Museum Educator, Teacher Programs, interviewed at the MET, New York 13/4/12
Summary of Report Recommendations

The experience in England and New York confirmed that ‘education as a means of addressing cultural misunderstandings of Islam in Australian society’ is not confined to the classroom, but rather opportunities exist across the full spectrum of social engagement. Following the model developed in this report, these recommendations subsequently diverse options for ‘education’ in relation to Islam in the Australian context.

One over-arching possibility that has developed as a result of the Fellowship is the potential for a central ‘meeting point’ to be developed to coordinate the many interfaith activities that already occur and that with time will grow across Australia. A model for this is currently in the planning in England through the work of Coexist, the Cambridge Interfaith Program, the Three Faiths Foundation and other associated agencies. While details were not revealed during my visit, the concept of a central exhibition space and focal point for dissemination of information relating to interfaith initiatives based in London were alluded to. Such an initiative would require enormous dialogue, planning, financial backing and long-term focus. The concept of bringing together the many large and small initiatives that are occurring in the interfaith world in Australia, particularly between Christians, Muslims and Jews, is indeed one that may hopefully be explored in the near future.

1. University based opportunities:
   a) Explore the potential for learning about and participating in Scriptural Reasoning (per CIP) in educational settings and possibly its application in prison chaplaincy programs as it is occurring in Britain.
   b) Consider adaptation of the CIP online interfaith dialogue and religious leaders retreat programs.
   c) Investigate the potential for developing partnerships between universities and classroom teachers as per the model provided by the Hagop Kevorkian Centre at NYU.
   d) Examine the potential for developing engagement with Muslim educators around the themes of ecology as per the Hagop Kevorkian Centre Middle East tour program and documents such as *A Muscat Manifest* and *Growing Ecologies of Peace, Compassion and Blessing*.
   e) Provide the model of Cambridge Muslim College to Muslim colleagues with a view to considering its adaptability for Muslim students in Australia.

2. School based opportunities:
   a) Disseminate the Birmingham Agreed Religious Education Syllabus based on the *24 Dispositions* with a view to its potential for learning about Islam (and other faith traditions) in both secular and religious school environments.
b) Advertise the Tony Blair Faith Foundation *Face to Faith* program as a dynamic means for students from varying international cultural and religious contexts to interact via video-conferencing in relation to critical contemporary issues.

c) Explore the possibility of establishing centres modelled on the Birmingham Islamic Exhibition Experience for school visits. The potential for a travelling exhibition should also be considered.

d) Share resources focusing on an understanding of Islam such as those currently published and in the process of development through Microbooks and the online *1001 Inventions*. In relation to the latter also explore the potential of the original travelling exhibition being brought to Australia.

e) Examine opportunities for a ‘share fair’ of ideas for teaching and learning about Islam as per the model provided by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

3. **Adult based opportunities:**

a) Disseminate programs developed by the Awareness Foundation with a view to their implementation across a variety of Australian religious communities.

b) Publicize the diverse programs of the Interfaith Centre of New York across as exemplars of grass-roots social interaction within and between faith traditions. The emphasis of the work of this centre on social justice initiatives is a reminder of the common human needs and values shared by religious traditions.

4. **Culturally based opportunities:**

a) Priority could be given to exploring the possibility for establishing a formalised affiliate of the Coexist Foundation in Australia. In terms of developing an understanding of not only Islam but between all faith communities this organisation offers a multi-faceted model that is making a positive contribution to social harmony. Its diverse range of educational and cultural initiatives provides opportunities for all sectors of the community to engage in seeking to better understand the ‘differences’ that often promote the ‘divides’ in society, particularly with respect to Islam as referred to on page 6 of this report.

b) The potential of exhibitions such as that at that the British Museum cannot be underestimated in terms of drawing the general public, whether out of inquisitiveness or a genuine desire for knowledge, to discover more about Islam. *Hajj: journey to the heart of Islam* is one such exhibition that should be explored for delivery within Australia, particularly as the British Museum will assist with the provision of planning for all aspects of intellectual property for such an undertaking.

c) In a similar fashion New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art *Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia* provides inspiration for engaging with the heritage and diversity of Islam through a cultural medium. The forthcoming availability of online resources to support this exhibition provides a further opportunity for Australian educators and others to explore Islam’s contribution to the human story.
Dissemination of Findings

The following are some areas for the dissemination of the findings of this report with a view to its recommendations being implemented as appropriate to Australian circumstances. As occurred in developing my overseas program, these initial contacts will hopefully open other doors to extend the scope of sharing.

The educational context:

- NSW Board of Studies: with particular reference to the Studies of Religion Syllabus.
- Association for Studies of Religion: keynote speech to be delivered 22 August 2012.
- The Islamic Sciences and Research Academy of Australia: meeting with Directors to share findings. ISRA is also an affiliate organisation of Charles Sturt University.
- NSW Heads of Religious Education: invitation to present research findings at a State level meeting.
- Universities: develop opportunities to present findings with the view to developing some of these for Australian circumstances. Faculties such as: Education, Social Work, Divinity.
- St James Ethics Centre, Sydney: in relation to their ethics program for NSW primary schools.
- Australian Jesuit Education Conference: keynote speech to be delivered 13 July 2012

The cultural context:

- NSW Art Gallery: meeting with the educational program coordinator regarding the processes that underpin developing an exhibition such as British Museum’s *Hajj: journey to the heart of Islam*. In addition the potential means for utilising the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s *Art of the Arab Land*.
- National Association for the Visual Arts (located in Sydney): contact with a view to exploring how some of the arts programs (such as those developed by Coexist) could be replicated in Australia.
- Prison chaplaincy associations: to share Scriptural Reasoning as it is being used in Britain.

The religious context:

- National Council of Churches of Australia: active in interfaith dialogue as well as Christian ecumenism
- Jewish Christian Muslim Association of Australia (Melbourne)

Media:

- Sydney Morning Herald: journalist contact following 2011 Churchill Fellowship awards
- ABC Radio National: explore avenues for sharing through programs such as The Religion and Ethics Report
Concluding thoughts from religiously diverse Birmingham

Throughout my Fellowship travels I maintained a blog\textsuperscript{48} for family, friends and colleagues to share something of the experiences I was having. The following is the post for the 22\textsuperscript{nd} March 2012. In meeting with Dr Mohammad Naseem, the leader of Birmingham’s largest mosque, the reality of what increasing ‘Islamophobia’ means for the Muslim community wherever they may be in the world was made evident. At the end of the day dialogue must be more than an intellectual pursuit. It is given impetus only when we engage in face to face human encounter examples of which I hope have been further advanced through this report.

6.30pm saw me sitting outside Birmingham Central Mosque - the largest in the city and unique because it is multi-denominational and not owned by any one person or group but rather administered by a board of trustees. The mosque leadership is proud that it is ‘multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-national’ - something that was evident particularly in my tour at the end. I was early, and so there I sat outside the main door as the men of the city came to the mosque for prayer. I am sure that some of them were bemused by my attendance.

Jonathan Gurling who had accompanied me to Birmingham University on Tuesday had also organised this evening’s meeting with two of the members of the Birmingham Faith Leaders Group, in particular Dr Mohammed Naseem who is one of the most prominent leaders in the city's Muslim community. I have been reading some of his reflections in the book that Jonathan had given me on Tuesday, Exploring the Faithful City: A Year in the Work of the Faith Leaders of Birmingham. I had been impressed by Dr Naseem’s insight and breadth of humanity, something which was reinforced and enlarged in our meeting. The other person present at the meeting was Abdul Rashid who is treasurer of both the Faith Leaders Group and the Central Mosque.

Dr Naseem was keen to hear my thoughts on Islamophobia and so began a conversation that went to areas that I had not considered before. In particular, I was struck by the intensity of his question as to why people are so opposed to Islam. He shared his own journey of discovering faith from his time as an agnostic and his wish today that religion, all religions, would contribute more to society in order to address the many values-related issues that face the modern world. There were many ‘magic moments’ in this conversation as he talked about what he described as his ‘road to God’. At its heart was a clear message that religions share a common responsibility:

\begin{quote}

\textsuperscript{48} Personal blog of Fellowship travel: http://churchhillfellowshipeducationforislam.blogspot.com.au/
\end{quote}
'There is a created order in all things which determines how things work. For example, there is a law by which our bodies work, a manual and that law doesn't change. My duty is to understand that law and to make it work. I am responsible, I am created as a vice-regent of creation, I must use my knowledge under God's guidance to do what must be done for the benefit of my fellow human beings. I am a culprit if I disregard the ability that has been given to me.

Man is the foremost enemy of man and every moment of reformation (as in the era of history that we are currently part of) is beset with problems. This life is an evolution and I have to work to make the world better, otherwise I am not doing God's command'

This was an insightful evening where there was an overt presence of wisdom ... if only this simple gathering of four souls could be replicated in the broader community. It concluded with Abdul Rashid taking me to view the mosque which in itself was a privileged experience as I went into the main prayer hall while the men were gathered for the final 8.15pm prayer.

In this little corner of Birmingham, it was obvious that although it is a city familiar with the unrest generated by the bigotry of groups such as the English Defence League, it truly is deserving of the title 'the Faithful City' and we can learn much from it.

With Dr Mohammad Naseem and Abdul Rashid at the Birmingham Central Mosque