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Education Matters Column

A bridge over troubled water

Lionel Cranenburgh

The recent riots in Cronulla in New South Wales are a message to all Australians that there is a need to address racial stereotypes created by the media, improve cross-cultural communication and understand our ethnic minorities better in 2006. The riots offered an opportunity for mediators to demonstrate the great flexibility of mediation by using systems that are different to Anglo-American models being used by mediators and trainers in Australia. We need other mediation models if we are to resolve issues within the cultural contexts of ethnic communities.

We used to be such good friends at school – all three of us – and now he's threatening to do me in if I marry his daughter. He says he's going to get her married to a Muslim boy, against her wishes, that the family has arranged.

It was a cry for help from Sunil, an old school chum of mine, that led me to fly from Perth to India to mediate in what was the most challenging experience of my life and one that could so easily have led to tragedy. Sunil, the Hindu editor of a national Indian magazine had fallen in love with his young Muslim assistant editor, Jasmine, and wanted to marry her. Her father was an influential merchant called Ali Khan. The three of us had spent much of our childhood and youth together, playing sport and even getting caned together by the headmaster which had made us even closer friends. I had flown from Perth to attend Ali Khan's wedding more than two decades ago where I was given a place of honour as the bridegroom's best friend.

On the flight over I reflected on the cross-cultural dynamics that I would need to use. I knew that the allocentrics (interests of the group) in the case of Ali would be more important than the interest of the individual. Family would be central and could include grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and close family friends unlike the

Australian nuclear family. I reflected on what John Paul Lederach says in his article, *The Community Board Program*, that the mediator must always be aware of the disputants' frame of reference and how a person interprets the limits and context of the conflict. I also prepared by recognising that mediation would be more culturally acceptable with my Muslim friend if I showed personal involvement, patience and respect for Islamic cultural values.

Instinctively, I realised that if I should fail as an intermediary, real violence was a possibility engulfing the supporters from both sides in a family war of attrition. I realised that because I was well-known to the conflicting parties and families this would be a special qualification highly regarded by them as a mediator. In sunny Australia, this singular qualification would have immediately disqualified me as a mediator.

In other cultures, few know about the Harvard system of mediation or western models of mediation. To enhance the role of the mediator I planned to seek out a Muslim cleric who was a close friend of Ali's family and me. He held high status, had more knowledge of the family and events than I and could advocate options that were in keeping with the Quran and the Hadith (words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad). I knew from many years of associating with Muslim and Hindu friends that the authority to mediate in a conflict depended on family connections, religious merit, prior experience and knowledge of customs and community. The words of the Quran: 'And whatever wrong any human being commits rests upon himself alone; and no bearer of burdens shall be made to bear another's burden' (6:165) served as a beacon in my reflection and preparation.

Before visiting the family, I visited the Muslim cleric and together we discussed several issues pertaining to the connections between Islam



and Christianity. We agreed on many similarities between Islam and Christianity. I also listened with amazement as he logically quoted from the Quran to argue against Western myths about Islam as a 'fundamentalist' religion. In a learned way he explained how women in Christian tradition, as treated in numerous references in the Bible, were regarded as man's property.

This, he said, is dissimilar to the way in which the Quran upholds the equality of humans and the reverent way in which the holy book states that women and men are made from the same soul and 'be you male or female you are members of one another' (3:56). His opinion is supported by Leila Ahmed, Professor of Women's Studies at Harvard Divinity School, who said:

I had to address the issue of prejudice about Islam as much as sexism within Islam. The debate within Islam is a mirror of what is going on in Christianity or Hinduism. If you want to see Islam as violent you can find a violent Islamic history legitimated but you can also find a completely pacifist tradition.

Even without me stating it the cleric seemed to sense why I had flown from Perth. This wise, influential man and scholar was aware of the issues of concern for modern Muslim women and men which was not simply to follow a Western tradition but to implement the rights accorded to women in the Quran which are liberating and which 'enjoy in the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong' (9:71). In cross-cultural relationships with collectivist societies, to which Muslims may belong, mediation needs to be indirect and relationship-oriented. Considerable time is spent on establishing a relationship of trust and this can be missed by Australians who are not used to the relevant cultural context.

The cleric considered options with Ali Khan not only on the basis of the main protagonists but also on the likely impact they would have on groups and the extended family. I accompanied him as we consulted each party, gaining its individual perspectives and seeking a final extended family solution. This communal approach was used by the

cleric to restore harmony, maintain family unity and to save face, life and property for all. I could not help observing that unlike the neutral role accorded the mediator in the Anglo-American or Australian traditions, the cleric was afforded a more evaluative role. He was able to 'tell us what to do' as Ali Khan said and give direction that accorded with the Quran and the values of the extended family or society. He paved the way for reconciliation in which Jasmine and Sunil could get married by showing how Muslim women today were making choices of their own just as Khadija, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad, and other Muslim women did, in the time of the Prophet.

In Perth my study of Muslim history, education, religion, values, cultural diversity and social relationships was done against a backdrop of the Cronulla riots and the fear that history will repeat itself in Sydney or elsewhere if we do not learn lessons from it. The history of the Muslim community in Australia pre-dates the Afghan camel drivers from the Indian sub-continent. According to the 1996 Australian Bureau of Statistics census there are 200,178 Muslims in Australia and over 30 mosques in Sydney alone. There are numerous organisations representing the interests of Muslims including the peak Islamic authority, the Federation of Islamic Councils that includes the Islamic Councils from the states and territories.

There is a strong case for the Australian community to appreciate that the Muslims from Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, America, Saudi Arabia or Fiji cannot be considered clones of one another or stereotyped as one homogenous group. Our Aboriginal community has long since shown us the differences among its communities and, similarly, we can hardly classify our French, German, English or Australian people as being 'all whites'. Would-be cross-cultural community mediators need to take a non-stereotypical view of the variations among the different countries in the way that they treat Muslim women. They should realise that the treatment of Muslim women is not always sanctioned by the Quran and may be a deviation from its



precepts. Nor is it advisable to make a facile assumption about prescribing a Western solution. Rather, as Stanford University Boothe Prize Winner for Excellence in Writing, Saimaj Ashraf, says:

The solution for achieving true freedom, independence and happiness must come from within the teachings of the Prophet, from the depths of the Quran and from the wealth of rich Islamic traditions.

There is a strong case for mediators to be trained within the Muslim community as co-mediators or mediators. Spiritual leaders and elders in the community who are well-versed in the traditions of their families and highly respected in the community are likely to be far more effective than the average Australian mediator with an Anglo-centric focus.

There is a strong need for cross-cultural mediators in the Muslim community to 'speak the same language' metaphorically, be aware of the mediator's role and be aware of Muslim family dynamics and collectivist patterns. It is important to appreciate Muslim history, the Quran's teachings and the family's background and cultural history in Australia.

It is wise to make allowances for the extended family to participate in decisions, consider its worldview and their identification with their culture. In collectivist societies, mediators may have to suggest solutions that are more in keeping with the notions of justice commonly accepted in their

societies and use a more evaluative role rather than imagine that the parties in dispute can resolve the dispute without reference to a wider group.

This, I passionately believe, will be more effective in building 'a bridge over troubled water' with our Muslim community. ❖

Lionel Cranenburgh is a Perth-based mediator and conciliator who has worked with Muslims and Hindus in Perth and internationally and published articles on cultural subjects. He has wide-experience working in Australia and India with cross-cultural communities and can be contacted at lionel@lionelcranenburgh.com.au.

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