

'Right the wrong': the RMIT University Muslim Prayer Room Campaign 2008-2009

Liam Ward and Katie Wood

During 2008 and 2009, Muslims at RMIT University in Melbourne ran a successful and important campaign for the return of dedicated Muslim Prayer Rooms on campus. Because the campaign's central demand was for a religious space, much of the left dismissed the movement outright or even supported University management. This raises serious questions concerning the Australia left's clarity about racism.

On Friday 18th September 2009, the RMIT Islamic Society (RMITIS) announced victory in its 18-month campaign for the reinstatement of dedicated Muslim prayer rooms on the University's Melbourne city campus. In a statement to members and supporters, the RMITIS leadership explained that:

our campaign against RMIT to 'Right the Wrong and return the Muslim prayer rooms' has achieved its purpose and our protest has come to an end.

The unassuming tone of the statement concealed the bitterly fought nature of the campaign, although it concluded: 'if the need arises to, "Right the wrong and return the prayer rooms" in the future we will always stand up for our right'.¹

This student campaign was the longest for decades and ended with an all-too-rare victory. Those standing up to demand their rights were from one of the most vilified and oppressed groups in contemporary Australia, and were essentially fighting for the very right to *be*

1 RMIT Islamic Society *Muslim prayer room update* RMITIS Forums, <http://forums.rmitis.org.au/index.php?topic=1732.0>, 19 September 2009, accessed 15 December 2009.

Muslims, to be allowed to fulfil their religious obligations on campus. The campaign's significance was certainly not lost on the participants, who in private conversation often expressed sentiment along the lines of 'we are the first Muslims to stand up for ourselves in years'.

In the context both of a persistent decline in student activism over several years, and the anti-Muslim bigotry of the 'war on terror', this was a significant victory against one of the country's most hard-headed University managements. The campaign's success showed the importance of activism, of mass disobedience, of pushing a campaign outwards, rather than focusing on negotiations and lobbying behind closed doors. It was also a timely victory for Muslims beyond RMIT University, and provided an example of the close working relationships that socialists can forge with oppressed and marginalised groups.

The campaign also highlighted dangerous weaknesses in much of the left's understanding of anti-Muslim racism. Despite the racist and even violent nature of those lined up against RMITIS, such weaknesses led some to dismiss the campaign and others to come down altogether on the wrong side. Given that Islamophobia justifies Western imperialism and creates domestic scapegoats for capitalism's problems, clarity about it and commitment to defend Muslims' religious and democratic rights are important. As recent events in France show, a failure to understand Islamophobia can turn even self-identified Marxists into apologists for the anti-Muslim vitriol that is today a mainstay of Western ruling class propaganda.²

The authors of this article participated in the Prayer Room campaign from its earliest days as members of Socialist Alternative and accepted an RMITIS invitation to speak at the 'Return the Prayer Room' rally on 23 March 2009. At the Eid feast in September 2009, RMITIS presented them with certificates of appreciation for their support in the campaign.

The campaign

In late 2007, RMIT University's dedicated Muslim prayer facility that had stood for almost fifteen years was demolished to make way for new offices. As promised, RMIT built replacement men's and women's prayer rooms inside the campus Spiritual Centre. The two new rooms each had ablution facilities and a kitchenette. Scripture from the Qur'an adorned the walls. The whole facility was purpose-built. Indeed, the architect provided RMITIS with extensive documentation including 'instructions from RMIT entitled: "Relocation of the Muslim Prayer Facilities from Building 9 Level 4 to Building 11"; and "subsequent documents, drawings, emails, etc headed 'Dedicated Islamic Prayer Facility'"

2 For an insightful summary of Islamophobia on the French left, see the discussion between Middle Eastern socialist Dalal and French socialist John Mullen: *Anti-capitalism, elections and the Muslim headscarf*, <http://www.sa.org.au/international/2580-anti-capitalism-elections-and-the-muslim-headscarf>, 12 February 2010, accessed 17 February 2010.

which included, from the outset, specification of Qur'anic Fan of Verses and Calligraphic panels'.³

But shortly before the rooms were to open, RMIT suddenly declared that they were now multifaith rooms, like the other multifaith rooms in the Spritual Centre. Muslims would not have exclusive use of them or afterhours access. With no way to guarantee that the kitchenettes would remain halal, that Muslims could perform their five daily prayers in the required manner, or that Muslim women would have any place on campus in which they could freely remove their headscarves, the RMIT Islamic Society immediately began to protest.⁴

From the beginning of first semester 2008, the RMITIS maintained a mass boycott of the new facilities. This boycott was central to the campaign, but was accompanied by other actions. For example, leading figures in RMITIS staffed information stalls several times a week near the main campus cafeteria. Within one week, they had collected approximately 1100 signatures on a petition and handed out hundreds of leaflets explaining the situation.⁵ RMITIS posters appeared in small numbers around campus, urging people to write to the Vice Chancellor and call on her to reinstate the Muslim prayer rooms. They also invited people to attend the Friday lunchtime prayers, not as participants but as a show of public support for the campus's Muslims.

The most important action taken by RMITIS was their defiant decision to turn the Friday lunchtime prayers into a form of protest. Every Friday from February 2008 until September 2009, hundreds of Muslim men crammed into Bowen Street to pray together in the busiest thoroughfare of the campus, often under hand-written placards reading 'Give us back our prayer room' and 'RMIT: no longer Muslim-friendly'. Through winter hailstorms and summer heatwaves, they made a public show of defiance. Muslim women also took part in the campaign, joining the boycott and praying in isolated corridors or in the cramped Womyn's Room.

The Islamic Society won support from significant organisations, including: the Mufti of Australia (Fehmi Naji el-Imam), Australian National Imams Council, Islamic Society of Victoria, Muslim Student Association of Victoria, Federation of Muslim Students and Youth, and the Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV). The ICV's Chief Executive Officer wrote directly to RMIT Vice Chancellor Margaret Gardner on 19 March 2008, expressing his shock at RMIT's decision. He explained that RMIT was isolated in its stance; exclusive Muslim prayer rooms were commonplace at universities across Australia, the USA and the UK.⁶

3 RMIT Islamic Society *Briefing on RMIT prayer room* prepared 30 June 2008 for meeting with NTEU.

4 For RMIT Islamic Society statements detailing Islamic requirements and explaining why Muslims at RMIT were aggrieved, see the RMITIS *News* archive at <http://rmitis.org.au/index.php?module=news>

5 RMIT Islamic Society *Briefing on the Muslim prayer rooms crisis: prepared for the Student Union Council meeting* 09 April 2008, electronic copy in the possession of the authors.

6 A scanned copy of this letter is in the possession of the authors..

Support from on-campus organisations came from the Australian Union of Jewish Students, the Christian Student Union, and Socialist Alternative. The contribution made by socialists was mainly focused on broadening the campaign's support base and forcing the University to respond. We collected thousands of signatures on petitions that were submitted to University management. In the process we countered fallacious arguments about secularism as well as the more garden-variety anti-Islamic prejudice. Socialists pursued and won endorsement of the campaign by the National Union of Students (NUS) and the RMIT branch of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU). These endorsements however only came a year into the campaign and were not followed by serious or material support for the campaign by NUS or NTEU. Having these organisation's logos on the petition did prove helpful in legitimising the campaign in the eyes of some who then signed their support. Socialists also managed to have the NTEU RMIT branch office circulate the petition to all union delegates at RMIT, despite hesitations that it might be controversial.

Management's response

RMIT University's response to the campaign was consistently dishonest. For example, under pressure from the RMITIS campaign the University sought legal advice, the outcome of which was a document noting RMIT's secular status and citing precedent at the University of Western Sydney (UWS). The author of that document claimed UWS had chosen not to provide dedicated Muslim prayer rooms despite having a large Muslim population:

UWS is a secular university and decided that separate prayer/worship areas would be divisive, so they basically drew some clear lines in the sand, which also dealt with issues such as medical students treating opposite genders.⁷

In fact, as RMITIS quickly pointed out, UWS did provide dedicated Muslim prayer rooms. RMITIS even acquired an official response from UWS, in which a spokesperson for the University wrote:

The University of Western Sydney does provide Muslim prayer rooms as listed on the website. I am not sure where information to the contrary may be coming from but I do hope that you are able to correct these misconceptions amongst students who may be interested in studying at UWS.⁸

Through most of 2008, RMIT management continued to advertise their non-existent 'new' Muslim prayer rooms as a draw-card for full-fee paying international students from Muslim countries. Then, when RMITIS held a successful rally of several hundred people

7 Austrolabe *The RMIT Muslim prayer room issue*, 1 November 2008, <http://austrolabe.com/2008/11/01/the-rmit-muslim-prayer-room-issue/>, accessed 26 April 2010.

8 Austrolabe *The RMIT Muslim prayer room issue*.

on 23 March 2009 around the slogan 'Right the Wrong, Return the Prayer Room', the University released a media statement describing the protest as 'unnecessary' and arguing that the Muslims were unreasonable:

with space at a premium on our City campus, we have bent over backwards to find an amicable solution... Our offers to the Islamic student society have gone more than half-way. RMIT has eight Muslim prayer rooms... Gestures of good faith from the University have been rejected.

The media release also emphasised that the University's Chaplaincy staff includes the Imam of the West Heidelberg Mosque, Riad Galil, implying that he supported the University's stance.⁹

The brazen dishonesty of this media release spurred the RMITIS to call a public forum on 28 April 2009, to rebut the claims. At this forum, RMITIS President Mohamed Elrafihi explained that there were not eight but just *three* Muslim prayer rooms across all RMIT campuses. Two of these rooms were at the far-flung Bundoora campus, while the claimed 'two rooms' at the Tivoli campus were in fact one room, partitioned into two and only returned to the Muslims in an attempt to head-off the March 23 rally. The Tivoli campus was, moreover, due to be decommissioned by 2012. The two rooms supposedly located at the Brunswick campus had *never* been Muslim prayer rooms, but were in fact the campus' sole multi-faith rooms. The room at RMIT Training in Swanston Street was a classroom offered to RMITIS as a concession after a year of protest, which RMITIS understandably rejected given it was again in a building scheduled for demolition and was clearly inferior to the facilities the Muslims had been promised.

As for the suggestion that Riad Galil supported the University, Elrafihi explained this was certainly not the case. In fact, at the campaign's outset Galil had gone on the record as opposing the removal of dedicated Muslim prayer rooms. The Islamic Council of Victoria explicitly noted this fact in their letter to the Vice Chancellor in March 2008.

Recognising racism

When the campaign's demands were debated in online forums such as *Leftwrites*¹⁰ and the *The Religious Write*,¹¹ the catch-cry of 'secularism' was raised with such vigour that you

9 RMIT University *Islamic students' rally unnecessary* RMIT Media Release, 23 March 2009, <http://www.rmit.edu.au/browse/News%20and%20Events%2FNewsroom%2FNews%2F;ID=19gbd61taf0k>, accessed 20 September 2009.

10 See the debate at 'Prayers and protests at RMIT' *Leftwrites* <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/63319/20091009-0215/www.leftwrites.net/indexd59f.html?p=1257#more-1257>, accessed 26 April 2010.

11 Barney Zwartz 'Room wanted' *The Age blogs: the religious write* 25 March 2009, http://blogs.theage.com.au/thereligiouswrite/archives/2009/03/room_wanted.html, accessed 15 December 2009.

would be forgiven for thinking the RMIT Islamic Society was campaigning for the outright fusion of mosque and state.

Typical of comments on the liberal blog *The Religious Write* were statements such as these:

A university such as RMIT is a secular institution and as such should not be obliged to provide any religious facilities at all. For anyone.

... If moslems [sic] wish to pray 5 times a day then they should do it in their heads, in the privacy of their own home or in facilities the group has provided for itself. It is not necessary for them to flaunt their piety and be humbly ostentatious about it.¹²

No one is being physically assaulted, there is no systematic campaign against islamic [sic] students at RMIT, but the students (and allied parasites) have made a loud and focussed demand to get their way from a secular institution... the students too are being bloody unreasonable [sic]. Maybe thaey [sic] should simply shove off to some other institution!!¹³

Why should a secular society give in to such intolerant and shrill demands?¹⁴

By contrast, the discussion on the leftwing blog *Leftwrities* was less hostile, save for a few comments by rightwing stirrers. However, even in this context a number of contributors took as their starting point the conviction that religion itself is the problem, often leading to reactionary conclusions and implicit calls for forced assimilation:

Interfaith rooms have the potential to cut across prejudices that arise from exclusion and socialists should be looking towards inclusion rather than separation. Socialists that pander towards religious organisations that promote exclusion in the spiritual process are socialists that indirectly pander to all degrees of discrimination.

12 Ross (username) forum comment, 'Room wanted' *The Age blogs: the religious write* 26 March 2009, http://blogs.theage.com.au/thereligiouswrite/archives/2009/03/room_wanted.html?page=fullpage#comments, accessed 26 April 2010.

13 journeyman (username) forum comment, 'Room wanted' *The Age blogs: the religious write* 2 April 2009, http://blogs.theage.com.au/thereligiouswrite/archives/2009/03/room_wanted.html?page=fullpage#comments, accessed 26 April 2010.

14 journeyman (username) forum comment, 'Room wanted' *The Age blogs: the religious write* 16 April 2009, http://blogs.theage.com.au/thereligiouswrite/archives/2009/03/room_wanted.html?page=fullpage#comments, accessed 26 April 2010.

It's true that Muslims cop more racism, sexism and discrimination than any other domination [sic] in this country. The best way to counteract this is by ensuring that Muslims are included rather than excluded within in [sic] the confines of the mainstream of society.¹⁵

In fact, the demand and the politics of the issue were clear-cut.

RMIT sells itself as a multicultural educational hub with strong links to South East Asia. But this high-profile and extremely profitable company (in 2008, RMIT reported a consolidated surplus of \$70.9 million),¹⁶ decided in the midst of the 'war-on-terror' and its attendant anti-Muslim hysteria, that the University could get away with removing facilities that Muslim students and staff had enjoyed for some 15 years.

When Muslims at RMIT overcame initial hesitations and uncertainty, and took the courageous decision to stand up for themselves, they were subjected to relentless abuse, encouraged by innuendo and accusations from RMIT management. During the campaign Muslim women were verbally abused, racially and sexually,¹⁷ and Muslims were stubbornly harassed by at least one known fascist—RMIT at one point 'thanked' him for his opinion.¹⁸

The political question was stark: are you on the side of Muslims defending the right to practice their faith in the face of hostility and hysteria, or are you on the side of University management?

The issue of racial oppression should not be a matter of confusion for people who regard oppression as a feature of class society, defend freedom of religion as a basic democratic demand, and understand the central role of anti-Muslim racism for contemporary US and Australian imperialism. But even the state-sponsored Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) opposed RMIT's actions more consistently than did some of the left. In a 2008 report to the United Nations High Commission on Human Rights (UNHCHR), HREOC called for a 'rejection of racism in its widest forms' and singled out RMIT for special condemnation:

Structural discrimination can continue to appear at unlikely times and in vehement ways as, for example, was recently illustrated at Melbourne's

15 andrew calleja (username) 'Prayers and protests at RMIT' *Leftwrites* 16 March 2009, <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/63319/20091009-0215/www.leftwrites.net/indexd59f.html?p=1257#more-1257>, accessed 26 April 2010.

16 RMIT University *shaping the future: annual report 2008* <http://mams.rmit.edu.au/jmhi5vx7z1hu.pdf>, accessed 15 Dec 2009.

17 Reports of sexual harassment of Muslim women praying in corridors was a catalyst for the rally on 23 March 2009, as indicated in the RMIT's announcement on 9 March 2009. <http://rmitis.org.au/index.php?module=news&id=87>, accessed 15 December 2009.

18 Barney Zwartz 'Muslims 'mised' on prayer room' *Age* 25 April 2009, <http://www.theage.com.au/national/muslims-mised-on-prayer-room-20090424-ai4r.html> accessed 15 December 2009.

RMIT University, which refused to provide the appropriate prayer facilities that were promoted in its literature to overseas fee-paying students.¹⁹

While some like HREOC recognised the racist aspect of the issue, one of the problems highlighted by the campaign was the pervasive idea that Islamophobia cannot be regarded as racism, since Islam is a religion not a 'race'. For example, in his blog coverage of the rally, *The Age* journalist Barney Zwartz (who gave generally positive coverage to the campaign) attacked socialists for even raising the issue of racism:

Then there's the Socialist Alternative who charged that the university was indulging in a cynical and opportunistic racist attack. It seems to me that this itself is a racist claim, because it assumes that Muslims are all dark-skinned 'others' identifiable on ethnic grounds. It was a lazy, stupid and outrageous claim.²⁰

Zwartz's comment belies a worrying misconception about the nature of racism. Leaving aside for a moment the simple fact that the overwhelming majority of Muslims at RMIT are indeed international students and decidedly 'non-white', the fact is that racism has *always* involved vague categories. Racism is discrimination against a group allegedly defined by qualities that are held to be inherent. A comparison can be made with the anti-Irish racism fostered by the English and Australian ruling classes to uphold the imperialist domination of Ireland and foster sectarian divisions in the working classes of these countries. This often took the form of hostility to Catholicism. Racism justified by bogus biology is largely discredited and viewed as unacceptable today. Racist discourse now often invokes 'incompatible cultures' and the like, but still functions the same way, with the same oppressive consequences. Today's anti-Muslim racism involves laws and state repression that target Muslims, it involves propaganda that ascribes inherently hostile characteristics to Muslims *as a group*, and has its roots in the material interests of Western imperialism.

The cynical and opportunist nature of RMIT's actions are best highlighted by posing the question: why didn't they tried to remove the prayer rooms before 2008? Their actions came in the same year as the racist campaigns in Camden and the Gold Coast, where non-Muslim residents riled up by local politicians and radio shock-jocks, mobilised in opposition to Islamic Schools. The campaign in Camden was particularly vicious. Local Muslims one morning found the site defiled by two severed pigheads on stakes draped in

19 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission *Combating the defamation of religions: a report of the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights* 4 July 2008, <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/partnerships/religiousdefamation/index.html>, accessed 15 December 2009.

20 Barney Zwartz 'Room wanted'.

the Australian flag.²¹ RMIT's move also came just two years after the anti-Arab, anti-Muslim riot that terrorised Cronulla in December 2005 and just one year after a gunman opened fire into the crowded Mirabooka Mosque in Western Australia during Ramadan Prayers.

The weight of anti-Muslim racism in RMIT's actions is starkly demonstrated by comments contained in an email that RMITIS obtained under the Freedom of Information Act. In this email, a senior RMIT employee closely associated with the University's senior management, claimed to have taken offence to the Arabic script on the prayer room walls, describing it as 'Muslims sending messages to each other'.²² The script in question was in fact a selection of quotes from the Prophet extolling the virtues of education.

So RMIT's behaviour was clearly racist and cynical. But more important was the response of the organised left. On the *Leftwrites* blog, around the RMIT Student Union (RMITSU) and the RMIT branch of the National Tertiary Education Union, both dominated by the left, many responded to the issue by echoing the anti-Muslim propaganda of our ruling class. As members of these organisations, we participated in many arguments about the prayer room issue. When we challenged the President of RMITSU to explain why he never attended the Friday prayers despite claiming to support the campaign, he claimed to feel 'uncomfortable' there due to the gender segregation. When we pushed for the NTEU to support the campaign, the Branch President attempted to argue that it was a non-issue, and 'just a Sunni versus Shia thing'. Declaring themselves for 'secularism' many proceeded to imply that Muslims were particularly backward and, of course, sexist.

In fact, the dispute had a particularly hard impact on Muslim women. Many reported feeling unwelcome in the Student Union Womyn's Room, despite the support given by the Womyn's Officer to the campaign. As Zwartz pointed out in his blog, some Muslim women even ceased praying there because non-Muslim women harassed them for wearing the hijab.²³ In an online forum, one Muslim RMIT student explained why she left the Womyn's Room:

The Women's Room is exclusionary towards hijabis (as are most second-wave Western feminists). I don't want to be patronised as a brain-washed victim of a patriarchal religion (as they believe I am) everytime I need somewhere to relax, unwind and pray.²⁴

21 Alicia Bowie 'Pigs heads staked at Islamic school site' *Camden advertiser* 28 November 2007, <http://camden.yourguide.com.au/news/local/news/general/pigs-heads-staked-at-islamic-school-site/509903.aspx>, accessed 10 August 2008.

22 Recounted verbally by RMITIS President, Mohamed Elrafihi, at a public forum, Kaleide Theatre RMIT University, 28 April 2009.

23 Barney Zwartz 'Room wanted'

24 Umm Yasmin forum comment *On the RMIT prayer room issue* Austrolabe, 19 May 2008, <http://austrolabe.com/2008/05/18/on-the-rmit-prayer-room-issue/#comment-88455>, accessed 15 December 2009.

After RMIT's actions and the hostility in the Womyn's Room forced Muslim women to pray in isolated corridors, reports of sexual abuse started emerging. As the RMITIS Women's Vice President Fardowsa Mohamed explained, at least one Muslim woman was so traumatised by her experience that she dropped out of her course and left the country.²⁵

Marxism and religion

Marxists have a long tradition of engaging with the struggles of oppressed religious groups. Engels and Lenin in particular argued that struggles by oppressed minorities can open up a challenge to the state. More generally, Marxists want to win religious workers and students to the fight for socialism. This cannot be done by berating them to be atheists and certainly does not involve demanding they accept attacks on rights or facilities they previously enjoyed. Lenin quoted Engels' argument that 'only the class struggle of the working masses could, by comprehensively drawing the widest strata of the proletariat into conscious and revolutionary social *practice*, really free the oppressed masses from the yoke of religion, whereas to proclaim that war on religion was a political task of the workers' party was just anarchistic phrase-mongering.'²⁶ The Bolsheviks supported religious minorities struggling for rights under the Tsar.²⁷

Defending Muslims from racist attacks is likely to involve defending religious rights within a secular state or institution. We should not hesitate to do so. While secularism is important for Marxists, it must be seen in context. The RMIT Muslim Prayer Room campaign was inspiring. We hope it is only the beginning of a more generalised resistance by Muslims in Australia.

25 Barney Zwartz 'Muslim students accuse RMIT of "bad faith" over prayer centre' *Age* 14 March 2009, <http://www.theage.com.au/national/muslim-students-accuse-rmit-of-bad-faith-over-prayer-centre-20090313-8xy8.html>, accessed 15 December 2009.

26 Vladimir Lenin 'The Attitude of the Workers' Party to Religion', <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1909/may/13.htm>.

27 Dave Crouch 'The Bolsheviks and Islam' *International Socialist Review* issue 280, December 2003, <http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/sr280/crouch.htm>, accessed 15 December 2009.

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