

# *Modernist Extremism: Camden and the Quranic Society*

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This paper examines the 2007-2008 controversy regarding the proposed construction of a 'Muslim school' outside Camden, NSW, through reference to the values of 'tradition' and 'Modernity'. The Camden controversy provoked substantial public debate on what role 'traditional' Australian perspectives and mores should play in a multicultural society, and the prospects for harmonious relations between Muslim and Christian communities in Australia. This paper argues that prevailing media discourses on the dispute, presenting the school's opponents as sentimental 'traditionalists' without ideological content, unnecessarily simplifies the real issues in dispute. Instead, this paper argues that the 'traditional' values of Camden defended were the values of 'Modernity', as understood within a particular cultural paradigm. The protagonists of the anti-school movement did not solely see themselves as defending 'tradition for tradition's sake'. Rather, opponents of the school drew upon the ideologies of Modernity, with particular reference to Enlightenment perspectives on secularism and religion in the public sphere.

Furthermore, this paper argues that the Camden dispute, and the role of 'culturally-specific Modernity' in the perspectives of the school's proponents and opponents, indicates the subjectivity and non-universality of Modernity. Instead of an 'objective' series of values and methodologies for assessing worth, Modernity must be understood as a philosophical creation of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, and inextricable from Christianity. When integrated into the traditions of a society, Modernity may prove as hostile to 'change' and 'progress' as any other value system. 'Progress' is valued, within Modernity, merely as a means by which non-Modern values and beliefs may be replaced with the secularism, development, and empiricism which characterise Western Modernity.

## **Introduction**

Camden is a town of 50 000, southwest of Sydney. Once centre of John Macarthur's pastoral empire, Camden continues to take pride in its veneer of rural heritage, even as booming housing developments cluster around the town's fringes (Harrington Park, Mount Annan, and Bridgewater) and the lived experience of the townsfolk retreats from the land. The town stubbornly rejects classification as just another Sydney suburb; it is a town apart, claiming to boast 'that rural feel of yesterday, with all the luxuries and conveniences of today' ([www.camden.nsw.gov.au/](http://www.camden.nsw.gov.au/) 2010). The town prides itself on its history, as 'birthplace of Australia's wealth'; *The Australian* has described Camden as 'like a microcosm of Australia before multiculturalism changed its face' (Wilson 2009).

Camden seldom makes the news. The town itself is strongly conservative; even as Labor won the state electorate of Camden with 54% TPP in 2007, the booth of Camden overwhelmingly supported the Coalition ([www.elections.nsw.gov.au](http://www.elections.nsw.gov.au) 2010). More affluent than the Australian average, the town is prosperous, peaceful, and dull ([www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au) 2010). Yet contrary to its reputation for quiet, sleepy conservatism, Camden made international news in 2008.

Lot 1 DP 579345 is a 15-hectare cattle pasture of little intrinsic significance. It stands on the corner of Burragorang and Cawdor Roads, across the street from Camden High, which is itself just outside the town. In 2007, the plot was purchased by the Quranic Society, who sought Council permission to build a school on the site.

The Quranic Society are not fundamentalists. Their organisers, two brothers, are a butcher and a suburban imam; the Society has ties to the Tablighi Jamaat, a reclusive, non-violent, non-controversial missionary group. The planned school, 'Camden College', would have adhered to the NSW state curriculum (Neighbour 2009a), teaching religious and secular subjects in conjunction just as a comparable Catholic or Anglican school might. Although there are few Muslim families in the area (less than 400 (Neighbour 2009b)), the rural location was praised by the Quranic Society on quintessentially Australian grounds: that to expose the students to rural life and a peaceful, farming atmosphere would be 'best for the children' (*Camden Advertiser*, 17 Oct. 2007), removing them from a supposedly harmful suburban environment in favour of idyllic (non-urban, non-modern) farmland. The school's spokesman, Jeremy Bingham, even tried to seize upon jingoism in his public statements: 'This is a school intended to be a school for Aussie kids... [W]e won't be surprised if a number of parents who are not Muslim want their kids to go there.' (Kruger 2007)

Despite all this, the school was met with savage and unrelenting opposition by local residents. Camden Council received 3042 submissions opposing the school, against a mere 23 in favour (Wilson 2008). Rallies against the proposal were organised by the Camden Macarthur Residents Group, attended by thousands of Camden residents. The cause was seized upon by ambitious politicians; MLC Fred Nile used the controversy to promote his proposal for a moratorium on Muslim immigration (Marks 2008).

Finally, in an incident attracting worldwide condemnation, from the *South China Morning News* to the London *Independent*, two pigs' heads impaled on stakes were placed on the Lot on November 28, 2007, presumably to render the site unfit for Muslim use. One of the heads was draped in an Australian flag (Kruger 2007).

This essay examines why a small town reacted with such vociferous fury to such an innocuous proposal. It is tempting to present the Camden conflict as a clash of traditionalism and Modernity: conservative, parochial, Christian residents resisting multiculturalism, urbanisation, and the town's increasing alienation from rural values and the land. This, however, oversimplifies the ideological dynamic. Frequently, residents presented (and indeed regarded) themselves not as defending tradition but as defending *Modernity*: secularism, feminism, non-violence and tolerance were often at the forefront of residents' stated concerns, with the town's history of acceptance and generosity seen as under threat from perceived 'Islamic extremism'. Muslims represented not the uncertain new society, but rather the rejected old world: the school's proponents, not the residents, were considered intolerant fundamentalists seeking to inject their religious values into public debate.

The purpose of this paper is to determine whether 'tradition' and 'Modernity' are necessarily opposed, or, rather, whether 'Modernity' is merely a Western construct, derived from a particular context and from particular cultural values, and may itself form the 'traditions' of a given society, as suspicious of change and reform as any other set of values.

### **How Can Modernity Relate to Tradition?**

'Modernity' does not mean 'the present'. 'Modernity', as we understand it, is primarily the product of British, French, and German thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Enlightenment, shaped by their unique political and religious contexts. It represents a broader ideological outlook, based upon values of objectivity, rational inquiry, individual autonomy, freedom of conscience, and

the secular rejection of established ‘customs’; Modernity’s subsequent emphasis upon development, urbanisation, and ‘progress’ merely derives from a value system where only quantifiable gains are considered ‘objectively’ valuable. Although ‘Modernity’ makes a claim to universality (as a doctrine of rational ‘humanism’ removed from any particular context), it denies the claims of ‘plural’ perspectives, which challenge the unspoken assumptions underlying Modernity’s seeming objectivity. Indeed, the central tenet of Modernity is the empirical, quantifiable universe, capable of deduction and measurement through human reason and observation. Kant’s ‘*sapere aude!*’, the primacy of one’s own understanding and capacity for reasoning, is an apt ‘motto of [the] Enlightenment’ (Kant 1784), and hence of Modernity (heir to the priorities and worldview of the Enlightenment). In such a universe, the only role for perception and subjectivity is to confuse ‘objective’ truths.

Modernity has hence long implied ‘secularism’, given the inherently non-empirical nature of religion. The relationship between ‘secularism’ and ‘tolerance’ has, however, long been subject to dispute. In France, policies of laicite prioritise defence of the secular state over individual rights to worship (Astier 2004). In the United States, by contrast, the politics of an ostensibly-secular state enjoying constitutional guarantees of separation of church and state are, in practice, dominated by religious controversies over abortion, stem cell research, and LGBT rights.

‘Modernity’ is hence not fixed, or independent from ‘tradition’ (defined broadly as the prioritisation of customs, religious values, established ways of thinking, and ‘community’ over Modernity’s focus on new ideas, rational inquiry, and ‘individuality’). In France, cultural and historical characteristics create an ‘intolerant secularism’, whereas the United States has (in the main) tolerated diversity of religious opinions and their influence upon government at the expense of political independence from religion. As such, the traditions of a society create its own interpretation of ‘Modernity’.

Similarly, ‘tradition’ does not necessarily imply opposition to Modernity; tradition is merely defined by its preservation of existing social mores. As defined by Burke, a due respect for tradition requires ‘a politic caution, a guarded circumspection, a moral rather than a complexional timidity’, not disqualifying the possibility of reform but stipulating that any reform should itself seek to preserve the existing order (Burke 1790). The values of ‘Modernity’ form part of Australia’s cultural inheritance, the ‘existing order’: the defence of such values may hence be both ‘traditionalist’ and ‘modernist’, given that there is no necessary connotation between ‘Modernity’ (reason, empiricism, and secularism) and ‘progress’ (defined by opposition to established ideals).

As such, in Camden, while opposition to the proposed school drew upon the traditionalism of the community, Modernist values played a significant role in inciting opposition to the school. ‘Modernism’, as understood in the context of Camden, has proven highly conservative, intolerant, and aggressive in its defence of the cultural privileges available to certain groups by virtue of their self-defined ‘Modernity’.

In understanding the role of modernist anti-Muslim advocacy, it is necessary to first consider the broader context of public debate. News coverage of the debate was predominantly unsympathetic to the Camden protesters; a conservative/traditionalist (Camden) v modernist/progressive (Quranic Society) focus was traditionally employed. The *Canberra Times*, in noting the November 28, 2007 desecration of the site, described the use of a pig’s head as ‘a scene straight out of Lord of the Flies’. Kate McCulloch, prominent opponent of

the proposed school, was described as a woman prone to making ‘wild statements’, of ridiculous appearance: ‘wearing a hat festooned with Australian flags’ (*Canberra Times*, 2 Nov. 2008) The effect of such reporting was to present opponents of the school as unenlightened and unsophisticated, while the Quranic Society – assisted by a media-savvy, well-connected spokesperson, former Sydney Lord Mayor Jeremy Bingham – were presented as tolerant and understanding. The *South China Morning Post* quoted Bingham as patronisingly open to the concerns of protesters, positioning their opposition to the project as mere irrational traditionalism: ‘Some people feel fear of everything that's new, and that's a normal part of human nature.’ (Adams 2007)

McCulloch attempted, in her public appearances and statements, to alter media discourses regarding the proposed school, presenting *herself* and her supporters as defenders of Modernity. She denied any claims towards racism, even against Muslims (‘They say I hate Muslims, but I don't... I'm the opposite’), and positioned herself as the ‘true’ defender of tolerance in the debate (‘I want everyone to live in peace.’) (Wilson 2008) The discourses of Modernity were hence appropriated by the school’s opponents, with its supporters cast as defenders of anti-secular, anti-modern traditions.

Throughout the debate, stereotypical interpretations of Islamic orthodoxy on the rights of women were cited to justify opposition to the school. Townspeople objected to what was perceived as greater Islamic influence in the area, given that such influence was seen to correspond with medieval, sexist views. Kate McCulloch piously claimed that ‘I can't stand what's happening to Muslim women’ (Wilson 2008). Leaders of local (Christian) churches argued that Islam is ‘not compatible with broad Australian egalitarian culture’; this raises an implicit utilitarian argument, whereby Muslims were to be denied the exercise of their right to religious freedom in order, according to the school’s opponents, to protect the rights of the majority. McCulloch argued for opposition to the school in order to protect political and religious freedoms: ‘they’ (Muslims) were said to be ‘an oppressive society, they're a dictatorship.’ (*ABC News*, 5 May 2008) The school’s *supporters* were thereby implicitly positioned as religious fundamentalists, hostile to democracy, tolerance, and secularism in Camden.

Throughout the debate, many opponents of the school took efforts to defend themselves against charges of racism – even while the substance of their claims may fairly be described as prejudiced. The *ABC* quoted a resident as stating that his opposition was ‘not for racist [reasons], just all the crime and stuff that other foreign people bring into the town’ (*ABC News*, 5 May 2008). Opposition to the project was frequently phrased not as opposition to Muslims *per se*, but rather to cultural influences from certain suburbs with disproportionate Muslim populations (Wilson 2008). Camden Council, in their submissions opposing the school, noted potential concerns regarding ‘potential malicious damage and anti-social behaviour’, drawing upon discourses affiliating Islam (interpreted as anti-modern and ‘uncivilised’) with violence and a lack of respect for civil society (Bugg 2009).

Such discourses lack statistical support: the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics indicates higher rates of sexual assault, malicious damage, and threatening behaviour in Camden than in, for example, Bankstown-Canterbury. The significance of the comparison to other suburbs is not, however, its factual basis; it is that it provides a convenient means by which opposition to Muslims may be phrased in cultural (modernist), rather than purely racial terms (considered, in the present era, a ‘traditional’ discourse). Despite the evidence, it is a common belief that ‘the crime rate [in Camden] is a lot lower’ (Neighbour 2010); this may indicate that fears of

‘crime’ merely symbolise broader anxieties of displacement, in a town described as ‘fiercely proud of its Anglo heritage’ (Neighbour 2010).

Emil Sremchevitch, opponent of the school, described himself as a supporter of multiculturalism, which he interpreted as being ‘in favour of people that wish to integrate into existing communities’ (Grimm 2008). ‘Tolerance’ was hence regarded, by Camden residents, as an obligation of recent arrivals to Australia: that Muslims were required to ‘respect our way of life’ (*Canberra Times*, 2 Nov. 2008), but with no rights to be respected in turn. ‘Our way of life’ is hence regarded as objectively superior – not merely to be defended because it is ‘traditional’, but rather because those quantities and measures prized by the prevailing worldview (affluence, non-violence, women’s rights) are perceived to be present in greater measure.

### **A Christian Modernity?**

Camden’s ‘Modernity’, and its supposed tolerance, is hence predicated upon ‘tolerance’ and observance of one particular set of values: the conservative Christian mores of the dominant social group. This is not, however, an unusual aberration. ‘Modernity’ has always been far more a product of Western Christianity than an ‘objective’ ideology.

The Hegelian view of history as progress from ‘peoples without history’ (inherently and objectively inferior) towards ‘rule by the many’, associated not with a particular political system deriving from specific cultural factors but as the end result of human progress, has proven influential in shaping the Enlightenment, modernist worldview (Gillen and Ghosh 2006). This worldview assumes that the values of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe are without a temporal foundation, but are instead universal, and posits the superiority of these values across all cultures and for all time.

As a result, any Modernist attempt to impose ‘separation of church and state’ is weakened from the outset by the fundamental role of Christianity in shaping the mores of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. To some extent, Enlightenment thinkers recognised their religious biases; de Tocqueville attributed the concept of human equality to Christianity (Tocqueville 1835: 439). Grasso attributes the ideals of limited government (whereby the state is limited to restricted secular purposes, rather than articulating a broader worldview) and ‘the exaltation of the individual’ to Christian thought, concluding, in grandiose terms, that ‘the modern quest for freedom originated on the soil of what had been Christendom... shaped in important aspects by Christian beliefs and values’ (Grasso 2006: 303). Cardinal Ratzinger, as he then was, stated that ‘Christian belief has a decisive connection with the motivational forces of the modern age’ (Ratzinger 1990: 38). While ‘liberty’, considered objectively, is by no means a ‘Christian’ principle, its interpretation in Western societies – as ‘liberalism’, implying limited government and the subsequent ‘secular state’ (with the resulting practical exclusion of all religious beliefs, save those which form the basic assumptions of political practice, from the public sphere) – is inextricable from the Christian heritage of Europe. ‘Liberty’ is objective, but ‘liberalism’ – the ideology of Modernism and the Enlightenment – is subjective and particular to one cultural context.

This is not to say, however, that Modernity and traditionalism are inseparable, and that the Enlightenment had no intellectual substance beyond earlier Christian thought, rephrased. Camden’s ‘Modernity’ – its stated beliefs in women’s rights, intellectual pluralism, and tolerance – is undoubtedly a legacy of earlier Modernist challenges (progressive within their

context), within Australia and the West more generally, to traditionalist religious orthodoxies. Australian politics has always borne a strong Modernist tinge; Whitlam's progressive reforms have been described as the triumph of the Modernist tendency in Australian politics (Barrett 1995), while even the conservative party in Australia remains the 'Liberal Party', a recognition of the enduring popularity of Modernist ideas over the discourses of conservatism and hierarchy (Brett 2003).

That such values are so deeply rooted in Australia's political and cultural heritage is, however, the crowning repudiation of Modernity's claims to 'objectivity', or to the notion that Modernity represents a perpetual 'progressive' challenge to existing institutions. When the institutions and traditions of a nation accept, as cardinal principles, the principles of Modernity (secularism, empiricism, political and religious liberty), then 'Modernity' may become as resistant to change, and sceptical of challenges to its own authority, as any other set of values. Although 'Modernity', as originally envisaged by Enlightenment thinkers, challenged the pre-eminent role of Christianity in the Western political sphere, it has not managed to escape Christian influence in the formation of its basic principles. It is hence inherently hostile to any system of beliefs – such as Islam – which fall outside its own limited, anachronistic (European, Christian) worldview.

## **Conclusion**

Lot 1 DP 579345 is a meaningless stretch of land, barren and weed-strewn. Its only value lies in its development potential. Yet where the Quranic Society (and, by and large, the mainstream media) saw the construction of Camden College upon the site as a microcosm for the 'new Australia', with Camden increasingly assimilated by the secular, urban, multicultural Australia – assimilated, that is, into 'their' Modernity – the school's opponents in Camden saw the site itself as an embodiment of 'their own' Modernity, and its potential development as a triumph of traditionalism and reactionary thought over their own 'modern' society.

It is an oversimplification to describe opposition to the school as 'purely' Modernist, just as it is to caricature the school's opponents as blinkered traditionalists. The people of Camden regard themselves not merely as protectors of a town preserving the best aspects of Australia's past, but as heirs to a profoundly 'modern' civilisation – wherein women's rights and conservative Christianity, 'secularism' (that is to say, unchallenged Christianity) and monoculturalism intermingle peacefully. They regard the outside world as not only threatening but profoundly backward, representing – in its crime, religious conflicts, and superstitions – as another, less 'developed' world from which Camden has successfully emerged. Camden's relative affluence is an important factor in this judgement.

Furthermore, their own interpretation of Modernity is by no means incorrect. Camden represents Modernity challenged – with its Eurocentric, Christian-oriented assumptions, predicated upon a world of European cultural hegemony (where all contesting views arise from the same series of cultural prejudices, and can hence be accommodated within dominant discourses), 'confronting' the unexplained, unfamiliar Islamic faith. When confronted with the prospect of 'change' outside the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, European paradigm within which 'Modernity' was formed, Modernity may prove as resistant to challenge, and as prone to manipulation on behalf of existing traditions, as any other value system.

At press, the Lot was alive with the sounds of construction; an Integral Energy power station is under construction nearby, despite a presumably negative effect on the 'rural character' of

the area. Those measures of progress which can be quantified (production and economic progress) will always, within Camden's 'Modernity', take precedence like those which cannot – like tolerance.

### Notes on Contributor

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