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BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH OUR SCHOLARS: SEEKING COUNSEL TO COMMUNITY LEADERS

Melbourne Muslim Seminary,
Clarissa Aisha Indranada



**PART I: THE NEED AND
IMPORTANCE OF
SCHOLARS**

Introduction

Ulama, or scholars, play a large role in Islamic societies and depending on their specialties have roles such as issuing fatwas, teaching, providing spiritual guidance, overseeing disputes and more (Acharki, 2023). Muslims must establish relationships with our scholars for community and personal growth, to remain grounded in our Islamic identity and to remain disciplined in following the laws of the Shariah.

The importance of scholars has been emphasised since the time of the Prophet (SAW). He states "The learned are the heirs of the Prophets who bequeath neither dinar nor dirham but only that of knowledge; and he who acquires it, has in fact acquired an abundant portion." (Abu Dawud and At-Tirmidhi). This hadith exemplifies the honour and importance that is placed upon our scholars. Scholars held a lot of influence and were deemed as very prestigious (Acharki, 2023; al-Azami, 2023)

Whyte (2022) states "The most dominant religious entity in the formative and classical periods of Islam was the ulama and its institutions." It is important to note that these ulama were separate from the state. These scholars were held to a very high standard and regard, and if they succumbed to worldly pursuits they would be shunned (Acharki, 2023). The scholarly class faltered after colonialism, state-centric reforms and ulama-state alliances (Whytee, 2022). This fall has produced negative consequences in the overall quality of knowledge of Muslims of the current century.

With a growing population of Muslims living in secularist Western states, we must remind ourselves not to get caught up in this Dunya. In post-modernist society we have become increasingly individualistic, steering away from our inherently collectivist fitrah. All Muslims must be aware of this and strive for knowledge throughout their whole lives. It is mentioned in the Qur'an in Surat Al-Baqara Verse 269 that "He grants wisdom to whom He pleases; and he to whom wisdom is granted indeed receives a benefit overflowing; but none will grasp the Message but people of understanding." This employs a reason that Muslims should seek blessings from Allah in the form of knowledge for its benefits are surely substantial.

The Issue in Current Society

Lack of knowledge


Muslims in the West lack knowledge of the deen and shariah sciences, so whilst sources of information such as the Quran and Hadith collections are available at the tips of our fingers, interpreting these texts requires seeking counsel from an alim. The lack of a scholarly class creates communities with greater ignorance which could lead to cultural practices that go against the Shariah (Acharki, 2023).

A lack of understanding of the Arabic language adds additional challenges to seeking knowledge. Many Muslim minorities in the West come from non-Arabic speaking backgrounds or come from a household speaking Arabic dialects. Fusha Arabic can be difficult to learn in general and even more difficult when one tries to learn it by themselves. Not having a solid understanding of Arabic can increase the difficulty of learning about the deen. According to Gok (2014), two Islamic Theology departments in Dutch universities were shut down in part due to their weak Arabic training.

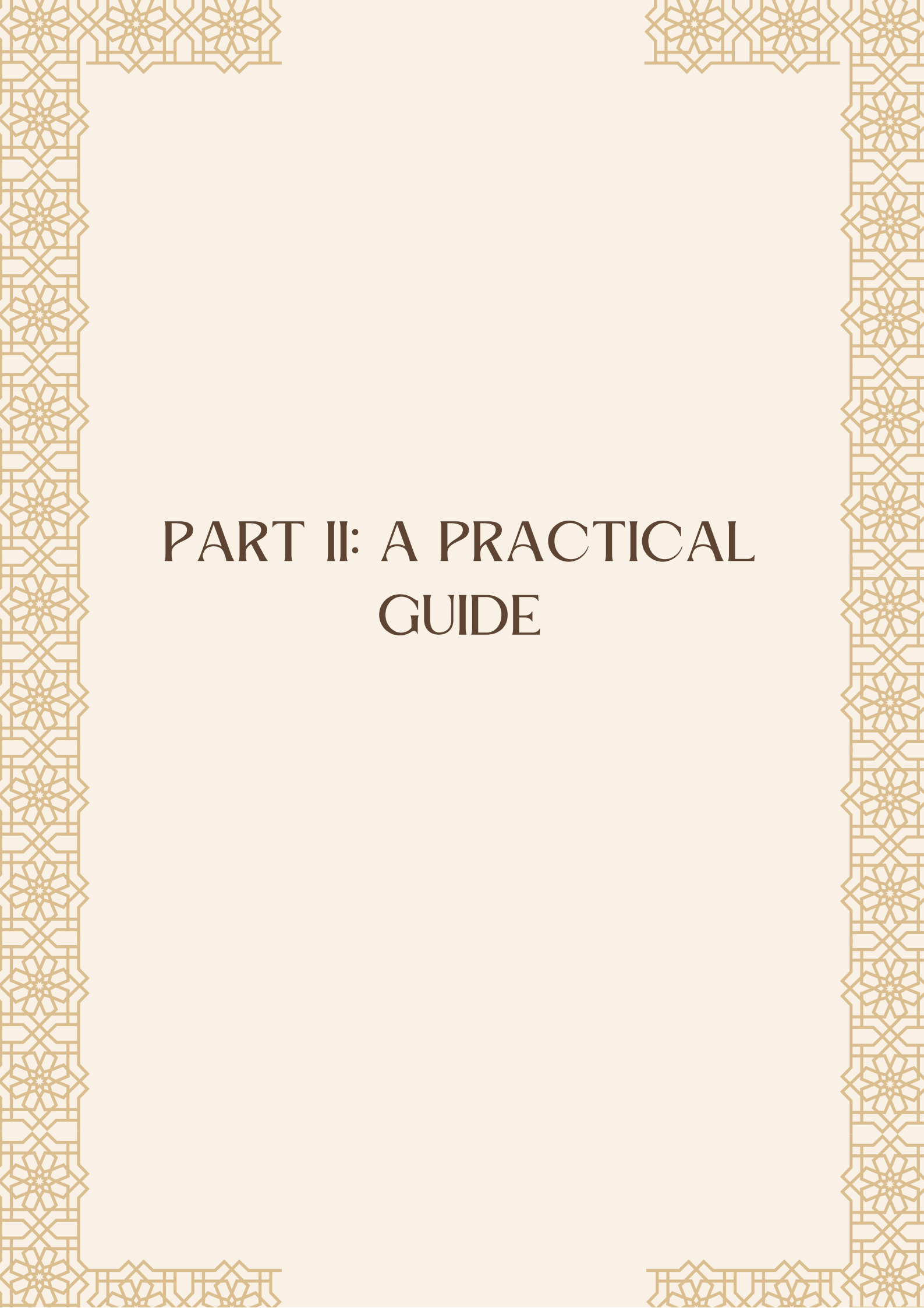
Digital Age

The internet has allowed the layman to access a wealth of knowledge. There are many Islamic websites seeking to inform Muslims about fiqh, aqeedah and tasawwuf. Along with websites, many institutions have published online courses so that Muslims can access teachers who may reside on the other side of the globe, or do courses at their own pace allowing for a work-life-learning balance. Whilst the internet has its benefits, it also has its disadvantages.

The internet is vast and saturated, this causes decentralisation of knowledge. Using the internet for fatwas based on personal circumstances also allows for the person seeking answers to impart their own biases into the search and follow the advice that they deem as most suitable for themselves. Many may get their fiqh rulings from the wrong madhab or abandon madhabs altogether for pure convenience. This has coined terms such as “fatwa shopping” or “inter-madhab surfing” (Whyte, 2022).

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Meanwhile, these fatwas may not account for the specific situations, customs or cultural context the individual resides (Whyte, 2022). It is difficult for a layman to navigate the complexities of legal pluralism. This can become an issue if Muslims, who have become their own muftis, are unable to find the answers they seek and in their own unknowledgeable judgment find solutions that do not follow the laws of the Shariah (Yilmaz, 2005). The learning background of the people giving these fatwas online is also unclear and whether they have learnt about the specific topic at hand such as jurisprudence, spirituality etc. from trusted sources cannot always be verified.



PART II: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

What can we begin with?

There are ways to make establishing relationships with scholars easier. The best place to begin is by living near other Muslims so that people can be encouraged to uphold their Islamic values better. Living in ethnically dense communities has the additional advantage of being protective of individuals' mental health (Bécares et al., 2017). Where there is a high Muslim population, there is also more:

- Mosques
 - This allows families to connect with knowledgeable leaders and increase Islamic identities amongst Muslim youth. Many mosques run halaqas, youth programs and weekend madrasahs which will benefit families.
 - According to Doi (1987) mosques should be utilised more as centres for a wide range of Islamic activities as it may be more difficult to set up religious institutions compared to Muslim-majority countries.
- Muslim-owned businesses
 - Muslim families can support both the local economy and other Muslim families whilst contributing to the further development of the community.
- Islamic schools
 - Islamic schools can teach children the rules of Shariah in a more systematic way than a mosque might. It normalises being surrounded by Muslims and increases the sense of community in children. Islamic schools are also often the only schools in the West that offer Arabic in their language curriculum.
- Learning opportunities
 - Areas with high Muslim populations will have more accessible organisations that may offer tajweed lessons, Arabic courses for beginners, and the such.
- Scholars
 - Most importantly
 - Leading scholars at mosques in Muslim-dense areas would have studied overseas. Whilst there are institutions and universities within Australia that teach Islamic Studies in a formal way, it is not quite developed enough to produce imams.

Inward Manners in Seeking Knowledge

Remember to approach seeking knowledge with *adaab* (manners).

1. Set your intention correctly

Islam puts an emphasis on setting correct intentions. Doing an act of reward for the sake of anyone but Allah would promptly negate its reward.

The first of Imam Nanawi's collection of 40 Hadith is about intentions. It states "Actions are according to intentions, and everyone will get what was intended. Whoever migrates with an intention for Allah and His messenger, the migration will be for the sake of Allah and His Messenger. And whoever migrates for worldly gain or to marry a woman, then his migration will be for the sake of whatever he migrated for." (Bukhari and Muslim)

Imam Nanawi comments on this hadith saying that actions are one-third intention. Hence when seeking knowledge it is always important to remember whom you are seeking knowledge for and to continually renew your intentions throughout your journey.

2. Be consistent

The best actions are those that are consistent. Every Muslim should make a habit of seeking knowledge as it is a lifelong journey. Lally et al. (2010) states that habits can range from 18 to 254 days to form. Thus, wherever you fall in the range consistency in seeking knowledge is essential for success.

The Prophet (SAW) says that "The most beloved of deeds to Allah are those that are most consistent, even if it is small." (Bukhari)

3. Ask a lot of questions

It is the student's responsibility to ensure that their understanding of their teacher is correct. This can be made sure of by asking questions. Asking questions reinforces knowledge and fills in any gaps that may have been present.

Rasulullah (SAW) stated, "Why did they not ask if they did not know? Verily, the cure of ignorance is asking" (Abu Dawud). This was in relation to an incident where a man had died because he performed ghusl whilst he was wounded under the advice of men who lacked solid judgement.

Allah also says in Surah An-Nahl Verse 43 "ask those who know if you do not know".

Context of Melbourne

The Australian Bureau of Statistics runs a national census every five years. The census records the religious backgrounds of every individual residing in Australia and this data is available to access by the public. The following graphs present the top 19 Victorian electoral divisions with the highest percentages and the number of Muslim residents.

Figure 1. Percentage of residents that identify as Muslim in each state electoral division

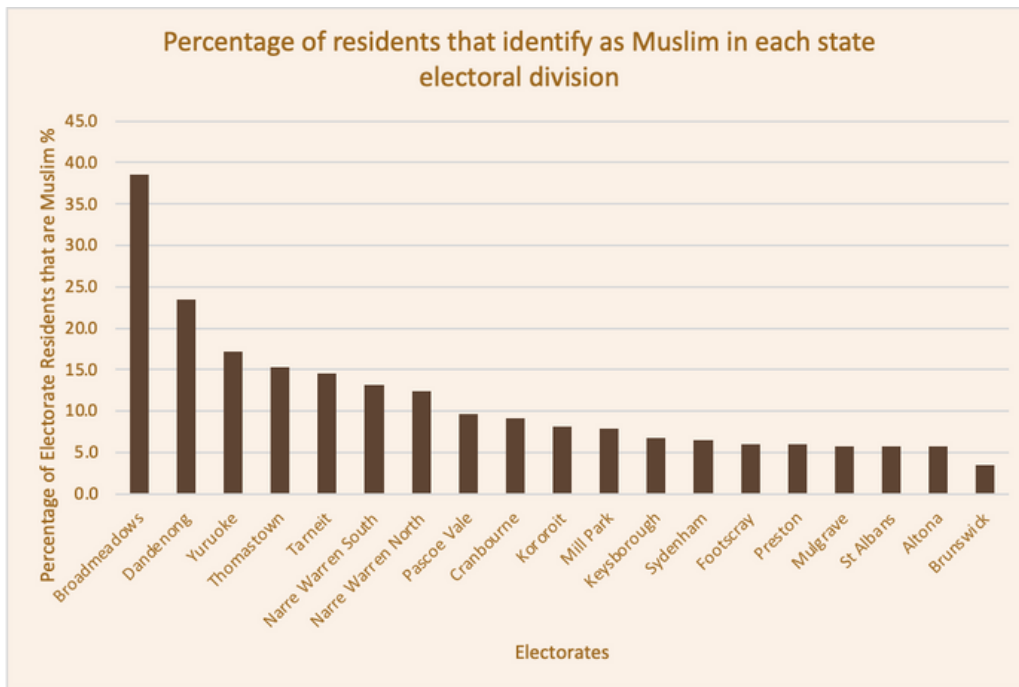
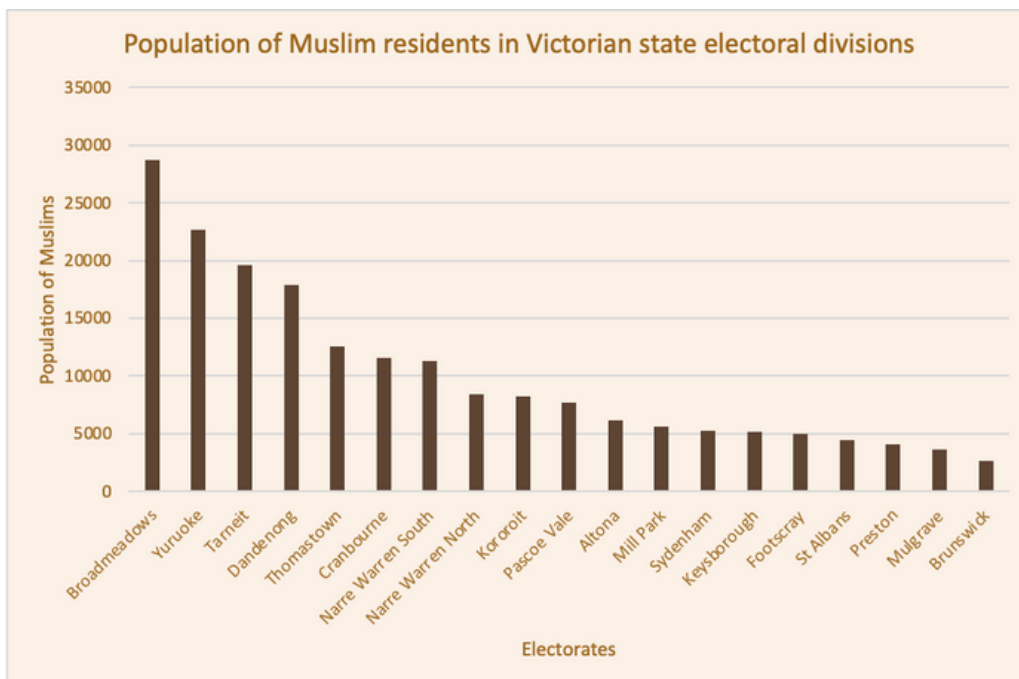



Figure 2. Population of Muslim residents in Victorian state electoral divisions

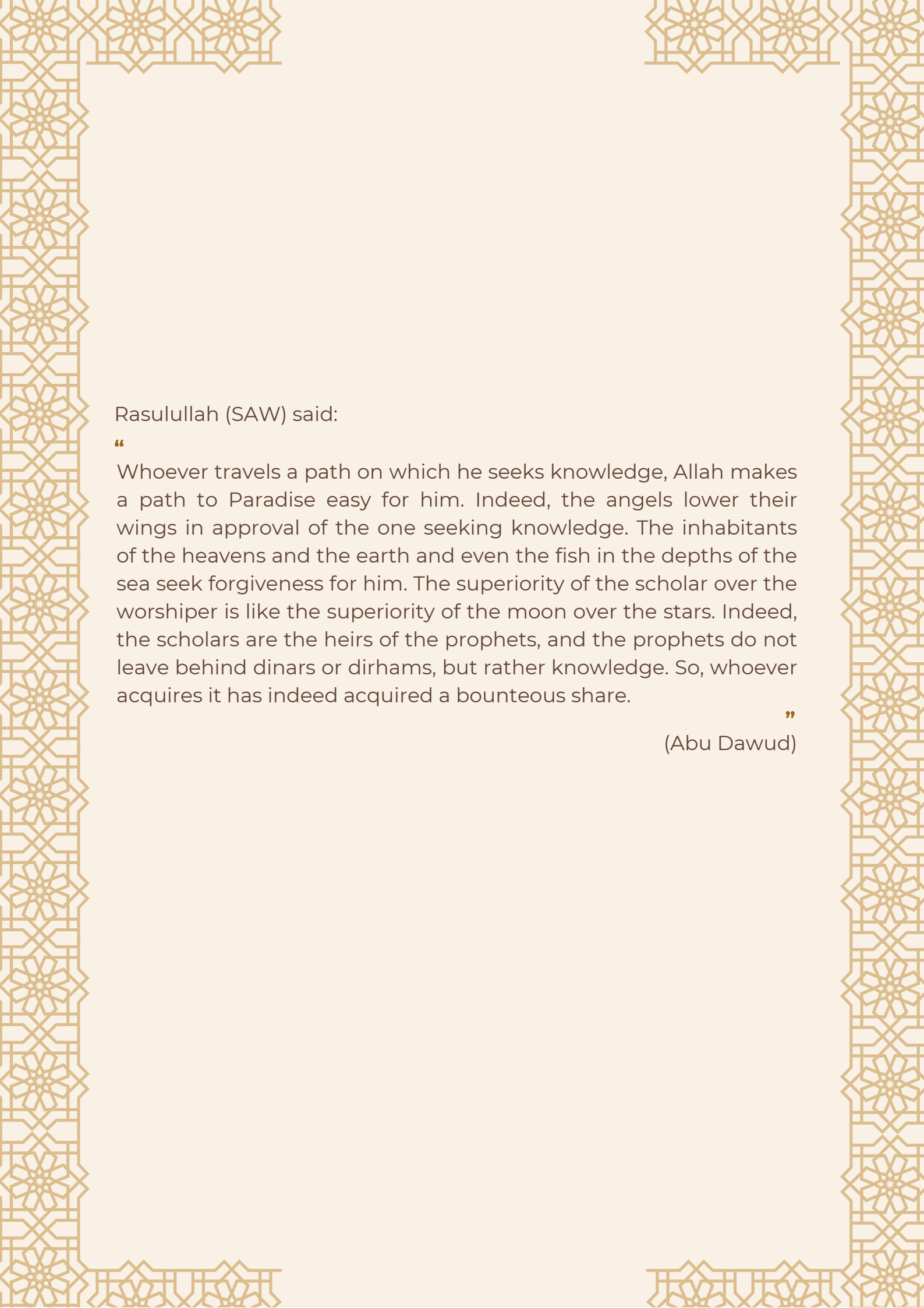


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The 19 electoral divisions were the only electorates with a significant enough Muslim population for the ABS to present in their data summaries. Figures 1 and 2 show that the Broadmeadows electorate has the highest density and population of Muslims. All 19 electorates are in metropolitan Melbourne with 7 situated in the north, 6 in the west and 6 in the south-east. This leaves the south and the east missing from the top 19. However, there are still Muslim communities in those areas. The eastern suburbs have the UMMA Centre, also known as Doncaster Mosque, and the southern suburbs have Huntingdale Mosque.

Conclusion

The importance of the ulama in our communities has been emphasised since the time of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). It is evident however that Muslims of the current century lack knowledge and need to reconnect with our scholars in order to fulfil our duties and escape the dangers of ignorance. This process should be done with care as the digital age adds complexities to seeking knowledge. One should live around other Muslims and approach seeking knowledge with adab.



Rasulullah (SAW) said:

“

Whoever travels a path on which he seeks knowledge, Allah makes a path to Paradise easy for him. Indeed, the angels lower their wings in approval of the one seeking knowledge. The inhabitants of the heavens and the earth and even the fish in the depths of the sea seek forgiveness for him. The superiority of the scholar over the worshiper is like the superiority of the moon over the stars. Indeed, the scholars are the heirs of the prophets, and the prophets do not leave behind dinars or dirhams, but rather knowledge. So, whoever acquires it has indeed acquired a bounteous share.

”

(Abu Dawud)

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