WITH THE GROWING politics of fear focused on Islam, and the pervasive ‘Othering’ of Muslims both nationally and internationally, this book on the everyday lives, beliefs and practices of Australian Muslims is an important social antidote. Abdullah Saeed, a leading Australian Muslim scholar of Islam, provides us with a readily accessible book that introduces the basics about the religion of Islam, and a short social and cultural history of Muslims in Australia. It explores Islamic religious organisations and leadership in Australia, the diversity of Muslim communities, common stereotypes and misunderstandings about Islam, as well as the difficulties and discrimination Muslims have experienced in Australia. This is a clear, concise, culturally sensitive and diplomatic little book for a general readership.

Muslims are extremely culturally diverse in Australia, coming from more than seventy countries. Their first arrival pre-dated British colonisation of Australia in the shape of Macassan fishermen visiting northern Australia from the mid-eighteenth century. But, importantly, now more than one-third are Australian-born: in other words, they are increasingly becoming a second-generation population.

The first half of the book comprises an introduction to the origins, traditions and development of Islamic civilisation, beginning with the life of the Prophet Mohammed and the formation of the first Muslim Community in the seventh century. It provides a brief history of the Golden Age of Islam, but also points out the religious genealogy that Islam shares with Judaic and Christian prophetic traditions. A brief Islamic ‘annales’ of important ‘political events’ summarises key dates and events in the world history of Muslim political successes and defeats over fourteen centuries. Recent events such as the ‘Second Intifada in Palestine’ and ‘September 11’ provide an insight into the religious and historical perspective Muslims have on current world affairs.

In this introductory section, it would have been useful to draw out the implications of Islam as a ‘revealed’ religious tradition for the development of key political and religious institutions in Islamic history and the emergence of different sects in Islam. For example, the ‘revealed’ and sacred character of the Qur’an as the ‘Word of God’ has made its interpretation a sensitive matter throughout Islamic history. Issues such as the relationship between religious and political authority, the absence of a church-like body in Islam, and the patterns of legal development into particular schools have been strongly shaped by this fundamental issue. It is also one reason why religious renewal movements seeking to return to Islamic origins always have resonance with the faithful, and part of the explanation as to why, in the secularised West, the persistence of Islamic tradition amongst Muslim immigrants is often perceived as culturally incompatible with multiculturalism. While Saeed does address the issues of ‘revelation’, religious interpretation and religious organisation later in the book, he does so without really considering their significance for the development of an Australian Islam and for Australian Muslims.

Saeed presents a concise statement about Islamic beliefs and practices that helps challenge ideas about Islamic rigidity by explaining how different religious rules have different statuses, open to interpretation and derived from cultural differences. He also, usefully, summarises the current divergences in Muslim opinion by identifying different trends in Islam as ‘traditionalist’, ‘neo-modernist’, ‘neo-revivalist’ and ‘liberals’. The relevance of these perspectives is taken up later in the book through an examination of how Muslims go about practising their religion in Australia.

His chapter on ‘life cycles’ points to the continuing importance of family life to Muslim communities in Australia. Here he highlights the central place of religious ritual and routines in bringing to the forefront of daily life and consciousness religious values and belief. These include the celebration of circumcision, puberty and marriage, private and communal prayer, pilgrimage and regular mosque attendance.

The second half of Saeed’s book looks at how Muslims practise their religion in Australia. Certainly the most comprehensive statement yet published, it covers a wide range of issues relating to Muslim life in Australia. However, at times, Saeed misses the opportunity to give an account of precisely how such issues as conflicts between Muslim and other Australian cultures are managed. For example, marriage and divorce are areas in which Muslim expectations based on former cultural and religious practices often conflict with Australian civil law on marriage and divorce. How these are negotiated is part of the unique way Australian Muslims have resolved questions of religious practice. Depending on their religious and sectarian background, there are significant differences in such areas as the obligation to pay dowry (mahr), the division of property, the balance between the interests of the parents versus the children in custody and property settlement, and the gender inequality between men and women in religious law on marriage and divorce: while men and women both have the right to seek divorce, the latter suffer financial penalties if they initiate it, unless they have precluded such in pre-nuptial contracts.

The discussion of religious and community leadership presents a succinct statement about different levels of authority and leadership. Saeed differentiates between non-corporate, corporate and collective religious leadership. This chapter reveals that, despite the establishment of a national body, the Australian Federation of Islamic Communities, there is a high degree of autonomy within different Muslim
ethnic communities. In other words, Australian Muslims have not succeeded in producing a centralised and bureaucratic organisation that presides for all Muslims. In this sense, Australian Muslim communities have largely been home-grown and autonomous, following the pattern of other religious minority communities in Australia. Saeed notes that, even though one Imam was given the title ‘Mufti of Australia’, the extent to which his national leadership status is recognised varies greatly amongst Australian Muslims.

Saeed concludes by tackling two controversial areas: the status of Muslim women in Islam; and racism towards Muslims, especially in the media. Here he explores the status of Muslim women and identifies the traditionalist, liberal and neo-modernist positions in relation to gender inequality, dress requirements and domestic violence. His exploration of racism emphasises the increasing vulnerability of culturally different groups in a globalised world. The chauvinistic ‘nationalist’ responses of Hansonism, the politics around asylum seekers and the global impact of international terrorism after September 11 have exposed Australian Muslims to racism.

Abdullah Saeed has produced a thoughtful, well-written and informative introduction, which should promote a better understanding of the concerns and life of the growing Muslim community in Australia.