Fulfilling Information Needs of New Muslims: Trends and Challenges

Habsah Abdul Rahman and Roslina Othman

Library, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia; Department of Library and Information Science, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

ABSRACT

The wave of Islamic awareness is sweeping across nations and continents even though there is much sabotage and propaganda against the Faith. Muslims are now excited with this development and have responded with a corresponding rate of information provision, bringing about a proliferation of Islamic information. These information sources produced sometimes may or may not be appropriate for consumption if not addressed according to specific needs.

Wilson (2000) observed that systems designers seem to be asking how people are using information instead of seeking to determine what the individual's or organization's information needs are. Since the concern of information needs as a discipline is within the field of librarianship he suggested the application of consumer behaviour research, marketing psychology and other disciplines that focus on the user. In line with this focus, the adoption of Wilson's Information Behaviour Model (1981) would be appropriate in addressing issues of information needs of new Muslims. Information providers and *daees* would thus need to be concerned with specific needs in the course of preparing, packaging and promoting appropriate Islamic information in the course of da'wah.

The objective of this study is to investige the perceived impact of information sources about Islam consulted by new Muslims (converts). In doing so, it must be coupled with an understanding of converts information needs. This study would then be able to see how far the information provided and consulted has fulfilled the consumer's needs.

In realizing an ideal information provision in tandem with current trends librarians must work together with systems personnel as well as Islamic scholars to ensure that information provided is correct, suitable and appealing to new Muslims. This is not a straight forward effort but one that would face a number of challenges. Cooperation and networking efforts amongst relevant organisations and authorities are also important elements in the fruition of this mission.

Keywords: Converts, Da'wah, Information, Muslims, and Needs.

Introduction

"Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious; for your Lord Knows Best who have strayed from His Path, and who are truly guided." Al-Quran 16:125.

We have amongst our societies many who are not yet Muslims regardless which part of the world we are in. There is much opportunity in sharing Islam with them if only we are patient and persevere. Not only are the opportunities vast but great rewards from Allah awaits us.

Research Background

The wave of Islamic awareness is sweeping across nations and continents even though there is much sabotage and propaganda against the Faith. Muslims are now excited with this development and have responded with a corresponding rate of information provision, bringing about a proliferation of Islamic information. These information sources produced sometimes may or may not be appropriate for consumption if not addressed according to specific needs.

Muslim converts who depend on information sources to learn and practice Islam face difficulty in identifying basic and fundamental materials because they are inundated with the proliferation of such sources. Aini Ibrahim (1995), observed that the lack of appropriate learning materials as one of the problems confronted by new Muslims because available materials address audiences that are already Muslims. Likewise, another difficulty is as Roald (2004) found that new Muslims tend to be confused when they encounter multiciplity of Islamic views. In searching for Truth they prefer to refer to pure sources rather than the many cultural expressions which born Muslims term Islam.

Amongst the issues in relation to searching for information about Islam is as (Young, 2000) quoted. "You are the one who will probably have to drive matters forward and investigate things for yourself..., it's even hard to get useful information and practical help when you do want it".[1] This is probably due to situations whereby academics tend to be lost in their own world of writings where only academicians understand one another in their high echelons of literary expressions (Carl Ernst, 2010). In response to these issues, this research hopes to contribute to the suggestion that "further research has to look into areas of information needs of converts in obtaining useful information" (Young 2000).

It is in addressing appropriate needs of new Muslims that the information provider face challenges. Providing information in the language sought and the appropriate level of understanding is in itself a big challenge to begin with. As understanding of Islam is a universal need, available information is found in almost all written languages of the world.

When providing information (Wilson, 1997) emphasised those considerations for information consumers must be taken into account. Literature reviewed has reflected that not much have been researched and discussed on information needs from the perspective of new Muslims. Of common interest were studies on information behaviours and needs of various other categories of users such as

---

[1] Young, Michael.(2000). Frustrations of a Muslim convert. *Islam for today*. Retrieved from http://www.islamfortoday.com/frustrations.htm

students, academic staff, researchers and the general public. As the wave to know more about Islam gets stronger, there is greater demand for information products and resources.

Objectives of the Study

Seeing the great demand for more information about Islam, the researchers found it crucial to determine the needs of new Muslims as information consumers and the phenomena that they live in so as to provide information in the most satisfactory way possible. This would assist in designing information products that is practical and appealing for a community with specific needs.

The objective of the study is to investige the perceived impact of information sources about Islam consulted by new Muslim (converts). In doing so, it must be coupled with an understanding of converts information needs. This study would then be able to see the how far information provided and consulted have fulfilled the consumers needs.

For the purpose and focus of this paper, the authors have narrowed down to the trends and challenges faced by information providers in fulfilling the information needs of new Muslims in the English language. Before encroaching into the needs, the scenario and environment of which these consumers go through in the course of seeking information must be investigated. This is the first challenge faced as it is not a straight forward affair. Preliminary observations and dealings with related organisations, found that there is no specific framework or module that can provide much needed information. They have yet to enlist products that can be regarded as a standard reference guide for converts. This study therefore seeks to examine the relationship between available information that has been provided and its impact upon converts needs. With this we hope to assess their understanding of Islam based on information products used and determine how far these products have fulfilled their needs.

Trends in Information Behaviour among New Muslims

Experiences of new Muslims in their exposure to Islamic information are varied. It may be a case of face-to-face encounters, coincidences, general awareness workshops, personal advice, web-searches and many more which may be published or unpublished materials. All of these may involve issues of authority. Centres and institutions, which are government and non-governmental, may have influenced and assisted them in having a better understanding of Islam or to be a practicing Muslim according to the correct teachings. However, there have not been studies on these categories of users as to information products provided. What can be deduced so far is based on literature by authors who related their experiences when they were new converts. Preliminary observations and interviews with some new Muslims in Malaysia also provided relevant information on the trends in the Malaysian scenario. They are important sources as a prelude to actual surveys and analysis.

For new Muslims who are Internet savvy, the Internet is without doubt the first point of reference. How far it is useful and effective in the course of Islamic understanding has yet to be studied. Friends and acquaintances may at some point provide assistance for first hand explanation. This may range from very basic to the more fundamental teachings. In-dept understanding would only be possible if friends are students or teachers of Islamic studies. Otherwise, these new Muslims would have to seek an appropriate opportunity to seek much of the unanswered doubts about Islam.

It has become a common scenario that Muslims bring their new brothers and sisters of the Faith to public lectures to listen to topics related to issues on Islam. However, public lectures alone are not the answers to information needs of new Muslims. Lectures may only answer certain specific needs. In certain cases, new Muslims are being loaded with all kinds of literature about Islam which other Muslims provide. This information overload may cause stress because basic understanding in not given and their doubts are not answered. New Muslims then, face information overload. Situations may worsen when inexperienced Muslims (who claim to be *daees*) overlook the basics of *Tauhid* and instruct new Muslim with *Aqidah* and *Syariah*.

Specific guides, information materials, classes, workshops are real answers to information needs. However before these can be provided and recommended, a study must be made on the actual needs so that a corresponding action could be taken. To begin with, these needs must be sought from the respective information seekers or information consumers.

Methodology - Qualitative Research

In studying information needs, this research must reiterate Wilson's opinion that "the experience of need can only be discovered by deduction from behaviour or through the reports of the person in need".[2] Focussed on the information needs of Muslim converts this study seeks to have an in-depth understanding of the perceived impact of information sources about Islam consulted by Muslim converts in Malaysia. As such, a qualitative study would be most appropriate for this investigation. Case studies of converts will be made to investigate their experiences in their process of practising Islam based on information consulted from the various information sources.

Data Collection and Analysis

Questionnaires, observations, field interviews and testimonies will be employed while documents and literature as sources of information on Islam will be analysed. Narrative analysis, observations, and video recordings of converts experiences and testimonies will be undertaken. Thirty Muslim converts will make up the respondents (population) from various categories comprising of the following background:-

a. Muslim converts living in Malaysia.
b. Converts who have converted to Islam not exceeding 10 years.
c. Converts who are conversant and communicate in the English language and depend on English as the medium of instruction.
d. Converts with different levels of education.

Trainers and *da'wah* officers from Religious Departments, NGO's and other related organisations and institutions will be under study in order to investigate their impact as information providers to converts. Brochures, guides, reference materials and other literature about Islam will be analysed using Content Analysis.

Content Analysis

Considered as a systematic, rigorous approach to analysing documents, content analysis provide methods to identify intentions, biases, prejudices and oversights of authors, publishers or others responsible for the content of materials. According to Nuendorf (2002), the objective of content analysis is usually to identify that person's perspective on the topic. According to White and Marsh (2006), coding schemes may use and rely on those that already have been devised by other researchers. The documents to be analysed will be those collected from the organisations, institutions and departments that distribute them for the reference and consumption of Muslim converts. For purposes of data analysis, NVIVO will be used with the assistance of people who are experienced in running the analysis using the software.

Pilot Study

A pilot study will be undertaken to look into the feasibility of undertaking this study. Three Muslim converts will first be identified for this purpose with questionnaires and interviews. The pilot study

will also try to seek ask them to relate some of their experiences in relation to seeking information from brochures received from the various sources..

Challenges in Sampling

Before this study can progress, the consumers to be studied must first be identified. New Muslims are unique as they hail from various religious, cultural, and social backgrounds. These backgrounds are the initial challenges because generally, the environment that these new Muslims live in can be antagonistic towards their new found Faith (Islam). Beginning with that, it would mean that new Muslims will be very cautious in disclosing their new faith to people around them. Therefore, identifying them is a difficult task while getting them involved with the study is an additional challenge. For a study of this nature, tact, secrecy and gaining confidence of the respondent is vital in the progression of the study. As such respondents of this study will include local citizens, foreigners and ex-patriates who in the course of their stay in the country have been given *Hidayah* to embrace the Faith.

Analysing User Needs: A Great Challenge

"At the root of the problem of information-seeking behaviour is the concept of *information need*, which has proved intractable for the reason advanced by Wilson in 1981; that is, *need* is a subjective experience which occurs only in the mind of the person in need and, consequently, is not directly accessible to an observer.
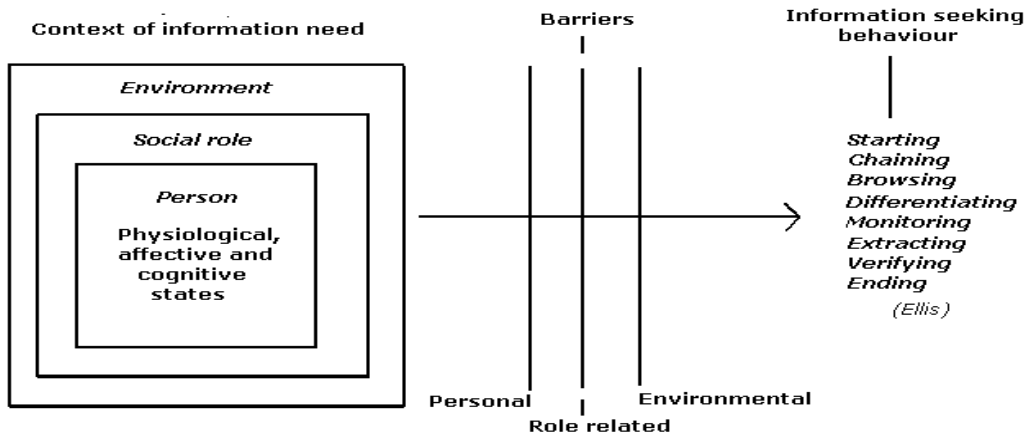

Figure 1- Wilson's information-seeking behaviour model, 1981

The Information Behaviour Model which is a person-centred model, identified three specific needs, which are, "cognitive", "affective" and "physiological" (Wilson, 2000). This study have adapted Wilson's model above by adding "spiritual" as a necessary need because this study is about converts understanding and practice of the Islamic Faith. Whereby, faith is a spiritual subject. This is a relevant and crucial need when the study is about a person's understanding and fulfilling his / her role as a new Muslim. The elements of his model that looks into the situation that give rise to needs, that is, "the PERSON performing a ROLE in an ENVIRONMENT"[3]. Translated into this study, it would

---

[3] Wilson, T.D.(1977). Information behaviour, an interdisciplinary perspective. Retrieved from http://informationr.net/tdw/publ/infbehav/chap2.html.

be the NEW MUSLIM as a LEARNER of Islam in an ENVIRONMENT of Muslims and non-Muslims who may be the motivators or barriers to fulfilling the person's information needs.

Figure 2 below relates the research framework in seeking answers to the research questions.
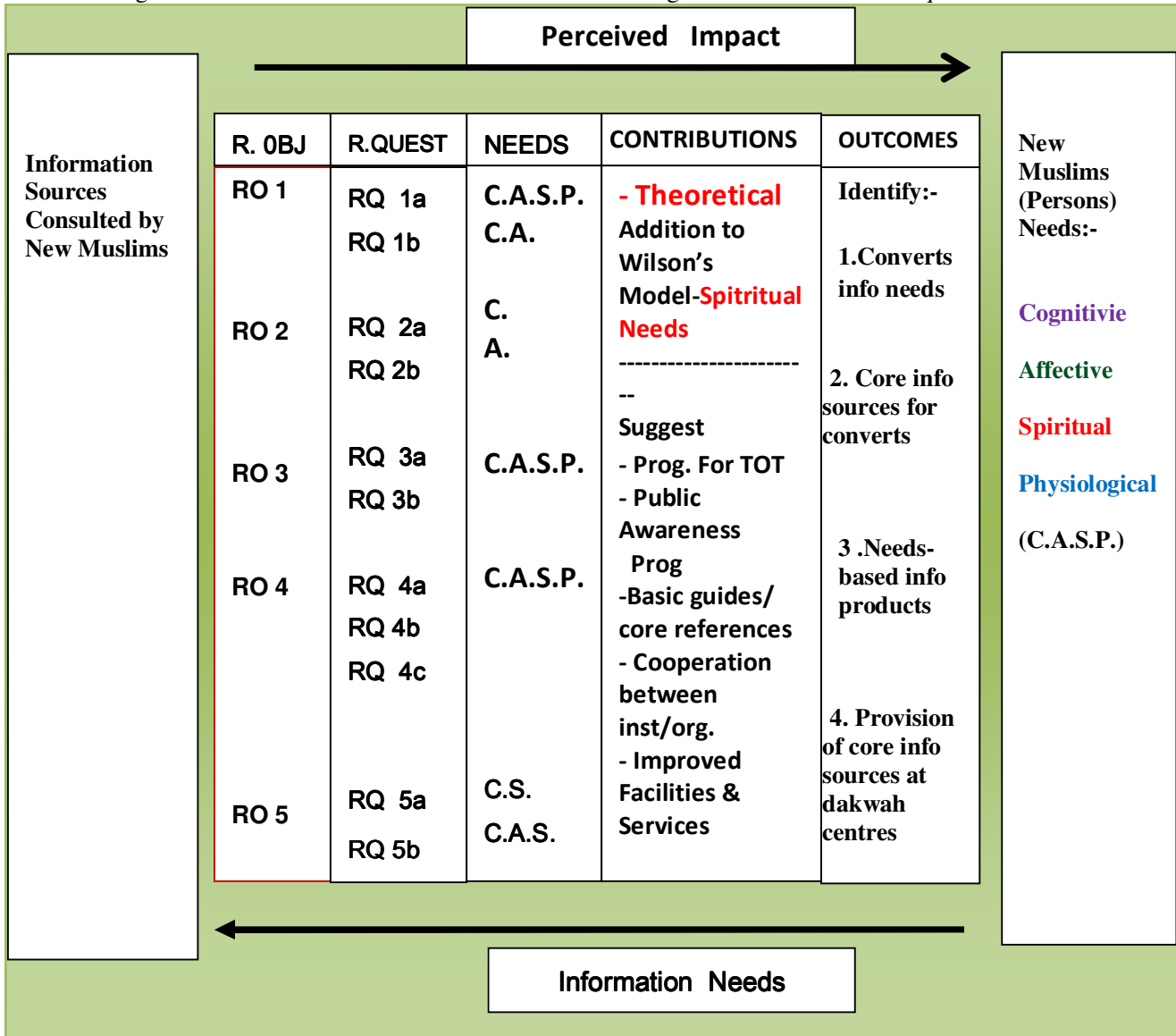
			Perceived Impact		
Information Sources Consulted by New Muslims	**R. 0BJ**	**R.QUEST**	**NEEDS**	**CONTRIBUTIONS**	**OUTCOMES**	**New Muslims (Persons) Needs:-**

Information Sources Consulted by New Muslims	**R. 0BJ**	**R.QUEST**	**NEEDS**	**CONTRIBUTIONS**	**OUTCOMES**	**New Muslims (Persons) Needs:-**
	RO 1	RQ 1a / RQ 1b	C.A.S.P. / C.A.	**- Theoretical Addition to Wilson's Model-Spitritual Needs**	Identify:- 1.Converts info needs	Cognitivie
	RO 2	RQ 2a / RQ 2b	C. A.	----------------------- Suggest - Prog. For TOT - Public Awareness Prog	2. Core info sources for converts	Affective Spiritual Physiological (C.A.S.P.)
	RO 3	RQ 3a / RQ 3b	C.A.S.P.	-Basic guides/ core references	3 .Needs- based info products	
	RO 4	RQ 4a / RQ 4b / RQ 4c	C.A.S.P.	- Cooperation between inst/org. - Improved Facilities & Services	4. Provision of core info sources at dakwah centres	
	RO 5	RQ 5a / RQ 5b	C.S. / C.A.S.			

	Information Needs	

Figure 2.

A Framework to investigate the impact of information sources through the investigation of needs

The framework also shows the research questions in relation to research objectives in identifying new Muslims information needs. This has been summarised with letter initials for the four needs that has been identified namely; C.A.S.P. representing cognitive, affective, spiritual and physiological needs.

Table 1. Research Objectives and Research Questions

	Research Objectives		Research Questions
RO1	To examine how much converts have learned about the fundamentals of Islam through information sources.	RQ 1a	Have the information sources consulted provide a better understanding? **C.A.S.P.**
		RQ 1b	Are they convinced about the Faith after consulting the information sources? **C.A.S.**
RO 2	To identify converts needs for specific types of information.	RQ 2a	What are the topics that they consulted? **C.**
		RQ 2b	What are the different formats that they refer to? **A.**
RO 3	To explore the different stages of information searching process.	RQ 3a	When do they explore about the belief? **C.A.S.P.**
		RQ 3b	Which aspect of the practices do they explore? **C.A.S.P.**
RO 4	To examine if people or organisations constitute an important aspect of information source.	RQ 4a	What are the sources that they refer to? **C.A.S.P.**
		RQ 4b	
		RQ 4c	Who do they refer to when they need further explanations? **C.A.S.P.**
			Which institutions or organizations or institutions do they consult? **C.A.S.P.**
RO 5	To examine if they are satisfied with available information.	RQ 5a	Does the information provided answer their doubts? **C.**
		RQ 5b	Have they ever felt confused? **C.A.S.**
Needs have been categorised as C.A.S.P. that is:- C – Cognitive; A - Affective; S - Spiritual; P – Physiological. Each question will seek answers in relation to the stated needs.			

Expected Outcome

It is hoped that by identifying converts information needs, the appropriate information would be provided. Although there are already available sources, however those sources are not specifically published to meet specific needs. The outcome of this study would be suggestions for improvements in publication contents that incorporate issues faced by converts. This means that a more in-depth approach to writing guides and references would assist the converts in confronting challenges that they may face in their learning process.

Muslim converts in Malaysia hail from various levels of the society. Therefore, the level of understanding and exposure to learning materials and learning environment would be different. In order to be comprehensive and effective this study would seek to identify the different levels of learning capabilities so that a corresponding approach to provision of learning materials would be provided.

Besides identifying the types of effective guides and training materials for converts this study hopes to suggest that dakwah institutions make these materials readily available at their centres and provide the right materials for the right needs.

From the perspective of *daees*, this study hopes to provide *daees* with a better understanding of converts needs and challenges, thereby providing the appropriate materials based on converts specific needs. There should not be random distribution of guides to converts which has been a practice and a common scenario in many *da'wah* organisations in Malaysia. When specific information sources are provided, both *da'wah* organisations and converts can avoid the unnecessary inundation of information materials for converts use. This means that converts would only be given materials at the right time of need, i.e. there is gradual assimilation of information about Islam so as to avoid confusion and stress on new converts.

In summary, this research hopes to:-

1. Identify converts information needs
2. Identity core information sources for converts
3. Make available needs-based information products
4. Make available core information sources at *dakwah* centres

Conclusion

In realizing an ideal information provision in tandem with current trends librarians must work together with systems personnel as well as Islamic scholars to ensure that information provided is correct, suitable and appealing to new Muslims. This is not a straight forward effort but one that would face a number of challenges. Cooperation and networking efforts amongst relevant organisations and authorities are also important elements in the fruition of this mission. To conclude, the *Hadith* of Prophet Muhammad (saw) gives a reflection of how great working in *da'wah* would be.

> "Some people will come on the Day of Judgement and their *Iman* will be outstanding, its light will shine from their chests and from their right hands. It will be said to them, 'Glad tidings for you today, *Assalamu Alaikum* and goodness for you, enter into it (*Jannah*) forever! So the angels and the Prophets will be jealous of the love of Allah for them".

The Sahabah asked, ' Who are they O Messenger of Allah?' He (saw) replied, "They are not from us and they are not from you. You are my companions but they are my beloved. These will come after you and will find the book (the Qur'an) made redundant by the people, and a Sunnah which has been killed by them. They will grab hold of the book and the Sunnah and revive them. Then, they will read them and teach them (the Qur'an and the Sunnah) to the people and they will experience in that path a punishment more severe and more ugly than what you (O Sahabah) have experienced. Indeed, the Iman of one of them is equivalent to the Iman of forty of you. The Shaheed of one of them is equivalent to forty of your Shuhadaa'. Because you found a helper towards the truth (the Prophet [saw]) and they will find no helper towards the truth. They will be surrounded by tyrant rulers in every place, and they will be in the surroundings of Bayt ul-Maqdis (al-Quds). The Nusrah (victorious material support) of Allah will come to them, and they will have the honour of it on their hands". Then he (saw) said "O Allah give them the Nusrah and make them my close friends in Jannah".

[Musnad al-Imam Ahmad, chain no. 77, Hadith no. 17561]

REFERENCES

Krippendorff, Klaus.(2007).Testing the reliability of content analysis data: What is involved and why. Retrieved from www.asc.upenn.edu/usr/krippendorff/Krippendorff_Alpha.do

Ma, Rosey Wang (n.d.) Chinese Muslims in Malaysia: *History and Development.* Retrieved from http://210.0.141.99/eng/malaysia/ChineseMuslim_in_Malaysia.asp

Norsiah Fauzan. (2009). Introduction to qualitative research methods. Shah Alam: Arah Publications.

Osman Abdullah and Abdul Salam Muhamad Shukri (2010). Muslim converts in Malaysia: the problem of cultural adjustment. Gombak: IIUM Press

Razaleigh bin Muhamat.(2009). Ethnic relationship of Chinese Muslim converts and their Malays counterpart in Malaysia: a historical background. Retrieved from http://www.ulum.nl/ETHNIC.pdf

Robinson, Leith.(2006, September). Why content analysis should be used more in library and information studies research. *Library Student Journal.* Retrieved from http://www.librarystudentjournal.org/index.php/lsj/article/viewArticle/33/34

Wilson, T.D.(1997). Information behaviour, an interdisciplinary perspective Retrieved from http://informationr.net/tdw/publ/infbehav/chap2.html.

Young, Michael.(2000). Frustrations of a Muslim convert. *Islam for today.* Retrieved from http://www.islamfortoday.com/frustrations.htm