

# Waikato Islamic Studies Review

June 2020, Vol 6, No 1

ISSN 2463-2686



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**

*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

# Waikato Islamic Studies Review

June 2020, Vol 6, No 1

ISSN 2463-2686

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Hamilton, New Zealand

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# Mazharbeg: An Albanian in Exile

## Abdullah Drury

Abdullah Drury is a Research Member with the University of Waikato Islamic Studies Group and Editor of the Waikato Islamic Studies Review and holds a MA(Hons) and MPhil in History. His main research focus is the history of New Zealand's Muslim community; publishing on the topic including regular reviews in *Islam and Muslim-Christian Relations* and *The Muslim World Book Review*.

*This article surveys the biography and career of Mazhar Shukri Krasniqi (1931-2020), the inaugural president of the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand in 1979. Krasniqi was well known amongst the Muslim community but a modest man, and hence not famous. He was the first European Muslim to successfully lead a Muslim organisation in this country. He was also notable because of the involvement he had in the early development of the Halal meat trade. As such, he was the principal leader and a popular personality in the Muslim community from the 1960s until the 1990s. Yet balanced consideration and accounts of his life are barely adequate. His ideas and actions helped shape government policy towards the Muslim minority and Christian-Muslim relations in post-colonial New Zealand.*

### Introduction

Despite the seeming ubiquity of questions concerning Islam and the role of Muslims in New Zealand, scholarship focusing on either the faith or the faithful has informed us surprisingly little about the ongoing changes in the character and identity of this group. This confessional community is not homologous or monolithic, and the intersection of faith and race provides an interesting framework with which to comprehend patterns of migration and settlement, plus the intra-religious diversity of the wider Islamic population. The narrative of Muslims in, or of, New Zealand, is a rich account illustrative of features and propensities both divergent from, and shared with, patterns observed in other Western societies. This essay examines the history of Albanian Muslim immigration from Albania and Yugoslavia, and their settlement in this land between 1950s-2000s via the biography of Mazhar Shukri Krasniqi (1931-2019).

Albanian Muslims, like Balkan Muslims, are in a very peculiar category here: physiologically they are part of the European ethnic majority of New Zealand and yet theologically they adhere to a spiritual tradition closely associated in mainstream

popular imagination with numerous African and Asian minority communities. Over the past sixty years explored here, these curious points have fostered intriguing contrasts and dichotomies that serve to elucidate deeper challenges and issues experienced by the wider Muslim minority. I will study this history by offering an overview of the entire New Zealand Muslim community during this era, in an endeavour to record a more precise impression of the actual socio-economic contribution and presence of Albanian Muslims. In the course of an explication of the career and life of Krasniqi, I will try to examine issues of communal participation and elucidate the lessons surrounding these encounters. The fundamental research question is to decide who precisely these Albanian Muslims were and what role they occupied in the evolution of Islam in New Zealand through this era (when the first Muslim organisational institution was founded, the first mosque constructed, the first Mullah engaged, and so forth.)

Further questions include whether we can correctly depict members of this ethnic minority group as proper ‘Muslims’ when spiritual affiliation serves for many as merely a cultural backdrop, one of many, rather than a living practised religion. The term ‘Albanian Muslim’ is employed elastically to cover Albanian language speaking Muslims from Albania, and the neighboring lands of Kosova, Macedonia and Montenegro. Unless otherwise indicated, I will use the term ‘Albania’ to refer to the current international borders of the republic of Albania (rather than those preceding World War Two.)<sup>1</sup>

### **Overview: The Muslim Community of New Zealand**

According to the March 2013 census there are currently over 45,000 Muslims in New Zealand: around 32,000 live in Auckland and 20,000 identified as Asian. The numbers

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<sup>1</sup> For more, see: Noel Malcom, *Kosovo: A Short History* (London: Macmillan, 1998); Kenneth Morrison and Elizabeth Roberts, *The Sandžak. A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Anton Logoreci, *The Albanians, Europe's Forgotten Survivors* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1977); Miranda Vickers, *The Albanians: A Modern History* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999).

for 'European' Muslims stands at 4353, a small minority of whom are Albanian Muslims.<sup>2</sup> For over six decades, within the Islamic organisations, Albanian Muslim immigrants and refugees have functioned on the margins of the broader Asian Muslim community but have nevertheless contributed to the overall cultural development of the first Muslim organisation and mosque set up and constructed in Auckland.

In July 1950, the 'New Zealand Muslim Association' (NZMA) was established in Auckland. At the time, there were only around 200 Muslims in the entire country (almost all Asian or Indian) and the Muslim Association was the first formal Islamic group in the history of New Zealand.<sup>3</sup> In April 1959 the Association obtained a residential property for use as an Islamic Centre in central Auckland. The following year, Maulana Ahmed Said Musa Patel (1937-2009) from India arrived to serve the community as the first Mullah in New Zealand.<sup>4</sup> In the period 1962-1964, the 'International Muslim Association of New Zealand' was created in Wellington. In 1977 the 'Muslim Association of Canterbury' was formed in Christchurch. In April 1979, Mazhar Krasniqi, was elected inaugural president of the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand (FIANZ), the first national Muslim organisation.<sup>5</sup> Since the 1990s, due to substantial changes in immigration law, the Muslim community in New Zealand has expanded dramatically.<sup>6</sup> In general this minority religious group is exceptionally divergent in character, ethnicity, employment, education and geography. This makes precise generalisations about the developing associations, interactions and

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<sup>2</sup>2013 *QuickStats About culture and identity*, Statistics New Zealand (Wellington, 2014), p.29; Libby Wilson, 'Kiwi Converts among New Zealand's Muslim Community', *Waikato Times* (14 November 2015), p.4; Abdullah Drury, 'Two Centuries on, Muslims foster their fraternal bond', *Indian Newslink*, 1 May 2019, p.16.

<sup>3</sup>New Zealand Population Census 1951, Volume III – Religious Profession, (Wellington, 1953), p. 9; Abdullah Drury, *Islam in New Zealand: The First Mosque* (Christchurch, 2006), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup>Drury, *Islam in New Zealand*, pp. 13-19.

<sup>5</sup>Ainsley Thomson, 'Mazhar Krasniqi', *New Zealand Herald*, 31 December 2002, p. A6; Khan, Zohoor Mohammad, 'Mazhar Shukri Krasniqi', *One Hundred Great Muslim Leaders of the 20th Century* (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 2006), pp. 157-160; Abdyli, Sabit R., *Bijtë e shqipësnetokën e revetëbardha* (Auckland: Universal Print & Management, 2010), pp. 67-70.

<sup>6</sup>*New Zealand Official Yearbook*, 2010, p. 106.

relationships, and the pertinent minutiae of such a diffuse social group, ever more challenging.

There have been two noteworthy waves of Albanian migrants to settle in New Zealand. The first arrived in 1951 on board the *MS Goya* through the auspices of the IRO (International Refugee Organisation, a precursor to the UNHCR) as refugees from Socialism.<sup>7</sup> The second significant group came from Kosova during the late 1990s. In between these dates there was a steady but small trickle of individuals and families. William Shepard reports that most eastern European Muslims were ‘quicker to adopt Kiwi ways, more inclined to marry into the Kiwi community, and more likely to attenuate its Muslim identity.’<sup>8</sup>

### **The First Wave: 1950s Albanian Immigrants and Refugees**

On 1 May 1951, the *MS Goya* arrived in Wellington transporting hundreds of political refugees, including a plethora of Albanian men, from Socialist Europe. From Wellington the refugees were relocated to the Pahiatua camp for six weeks before being sent across the country to assume work placements. When the Department of Internal Affairs conducted a survey on the employment of the *MS Goya* men in 1953 there were over a dozen scattered across New Zealand from Auckland to Invercargill.<sup>9</sup> Eventually most settled in Auckland, however. In 1954 members of the nascent Albanian community gathered in the city to celebrate *Dita e Flamurit* (Day of the flag), the annual Albanian national Independence Day. In an extant photograph several Albanian men – Fadil Katseli, Arif Zeqollari, Petrit Alliu, Qamil Hasani, Shaban Kryeziu, Selahattin Kefali, Mazhar Krasniqi and Bajram Murati – pose inside a hall before the

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Plowman, *Australian Migrant Ships 1946 – 1977* (Dural, N.S.W.: Rosenberg Publishing, 2006), p.36.

<sup>8</sup> William Shepard, ‘The Islamic Contribution: Muslims in New Zealand’, *Religion in New Zealand Society*, (Palmerston North, New Zealand: Dunmore Press, 1985), p. 182.

<sup>9</sup> See: (IA/52/15) or Internal Affairs; Series 52; Reference 15 ‘Immigrant Name List Goya’.

Albanian, British and New Zealand flags. This tableaux tradition would carry on until the present.

On 1 January 1956, the NZMA held the inaugural national 'Muslim Congress' at the Garibaldi Hall on Pitt Street in central Auckland. A new Executive Committee was voted in, with the fixed objective of bringing the Indian and European Muslims together and constructing a mosque as soon as possible. Esup Bhikoo from the Gujarat was elected president, with his brother Abdul Samad Bhikoo and Albanian refugee Petrit Alliu serving as joint secretaries. Ramzi Kosovich, Avdo Musovich, Shaqir Ali Seferi, C. Shekumia and Fadsil Katseli were elected as the Executive Committee.<sup>10</sup> Kosovich and Musovich were Bosnian Muslims. Alliu, Katseli and Seferi were Albanian Muslims.

Petrit Alliu was born in Tirana, the capital of Albania, in 1930. When he was 15 years old Communist partisans seized the city and imposed their brutal dictatorship. Alliu was fortunate enough to have been brought up in an enlightened and forward-thinking family, where learning and education was actively promoted by his parents. Studious, diligent and eager to excel, he was especially known for his language skills (learning English, Italian and Turkish) and as a man of acknowledged intellectual originality and agency. He was also an independent minded student who was prepared to question and explore contemporary political events whilst maintaining a facade of compliance with the Socialist regime. As such he secured a scholarship to study in Soviet Russia.

In September 1948, whilst sailing from Albania through the Bosphorus straits, Alliu jumped ship and swam to Istanbul where he claimed political asylum. There he met Mazhar Krasniqi and they decided to leave for the new world together. Registered as refugees with the IRO, they sailed to New Zealand and at the Pahiatua refugee camp

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<sup>10</sup> 'Muslims plan mosque for city', *Star*, 4 January 1956, p. 5; 'Muslims Raising Funds for a Mosque', *New Zealand Herald*, 4 January 1956, p. 8.



Alliu taught English. Ultimately Alliu relocated to Auckland where he took up residence with fellow Albanians Shaqir Seferi, Mazhar Krasniqi, Shaban Kryeziu and Kemil Fehmi at a boarding house on 87 St Mary's Bay Road, Ponsonby.<sup>11</sup> Together, with other Albanians in Auckland, they created an informal *Lidhjen e Qytetarëve Shqiptarë në Zelandëtë Re* (the League of Albanian Citizens in New Zealand, sometimes simply called the 'Albanian Civic League') with Mazhar Krasniqi as chairman. In April 1992, Alliu returned home for the first time since 1951 and found the country, after several decades of socialism, worse off materially than when he left it.<sup>12</sup>

Fadil Katseli<sup>13</sup> (1926-2010) was labourer from Tirana. In Auckland, Katseli and Alliu played soccer over 1952-1956. Both men were noted for their agility, athleticism and frightening speed.<sup>14</sup> Katseli settled in Mangere. Shaqir Ali Seferi<sup>15</sup> (1926-1984) was an elementary school teacher from Tirana but worked as a chef and business proprietor in Auckland.

### **Mazharbeg**

Mazhar Shukri Krasniqi was born after the *Belle Époque* of European civilisation, in Pristina in 1931. He grew up in a distinguished family that wielded considerable economic and political influence in Kosova. He was opposed to Communism and was arrested by either the Albanian and Yugoslav security agencies at one point or another between 1945 and 1950, especially when he tried to escape the Socialist utopia.<sup>16</sup> After a period, he secured work on a Yugoslav boat and in 1950 he jumped ship in the Turkish port of Izmir. Krasniqi was registered with the IRO as a refugee and arrived in

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<sup>11</sup> Sabit R. Abdyli. *Bijtë e shqipesnëtokën e revetëbardha* (Auckland: Universal Print & Management, 2010), pp.96-97.

<sup>12</sup> Sabit R. Abdyli. *Bijtë e shqipesnëtokën e revetëbardha*, pp.71-75.

<sup>13</sup> More accurately spelt 'Kaceli' in the Albanian language.

<sup>14</sup> Sabit R. Abdyli. *Bijtë e shqipesnëtokën e revetëbardha*, pp.96-97.

<sup>15</sup> More accurately spelt in 'Shakir' in the Albanian language.

<sup>16</sup> For more on Kosova history and Albanian emigration, see: Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History* (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp.285-286.

Wellington on the MS *Goyain* May 1951. He worked on a farm in Gore, Southland, and then at a myriad of jobs across New Zealand before relocating to Auckland.

In 1959 Krasniqi travelled to Melbourne, Australia, and attended some Albanian community events there. On 5 May he spoke at the *Dita e Deshmoreve* (Day of Martyrs) commemorations. On 31 July 1959 he travelled on the T.S.S. *Monowai* from Auckland to Sydney and worked in Australia as a foreman expeditor, using his free time to socialise with Albanians there and give public speeches about the plight of Albanians. On 15 March 1960 he returned to Auckland on the M.V. *Wanganella* and, ever the chimerical joker, set up a restaurant and coffee lounge called “Free Albania” in Panmure. This venue quickly became the focal point for Albanian cultural activity in New Zealand. The front window of the shop featured a gigantic *Flamuri Kombëtar*, the double-headed eagle and the main symbol of Albanian nationalism. This was a remarkable achievement for a young man who had inherited nothing but energy and drive and had arrived in New Zealand as the proverbial impoverished foreign refugee.

Krasniqi became deeply involved in both Albanian community affairs and the New Zealand Muslim Association in the 1960s. The Albanian Civic League served to help maintain ties with prominent personalities in the Albanian diaspora and to publicise the plight of their people. He became firm friends with Avdo Musovich from Montenegro, a Yugoslav territory adjacent to his native Kosova.<sup>17</sup>

Krasniqi was industrious and equally innovative in his thinking and observations, never shying away from pursuing an analytical and systematic approach to any given subject matter, topic or task. In the process, he pleased many people and offended very few. With that said, Krasniqi’s complex role in both the Albanian Civic League and the Muslim Association need to be contextualised: the Albanian and Bosnian Muslims were often more discerning and inquisitive than their brethren from other parts of the

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<sup>17</sup> ‘Lectures and Meetings’, *New Zealand Herald*, 23 December 1955, p. 16.

Islamic world. This was mainly due to their particular social, intellectual and political conditions and legacy. The Balkans was also a multicultural society, the ulema were fewer in numbers (compared to the Indian subcontinent for example), and so the natives had evolved a questioning attitude towards all things socio-political or religious in order to avoid being misled. Krasniqi considered religious studies as essential (*fardayn* in Arabic, mandatory) and so he enrolled his children in Quran classes with Maulana Patel and attended the mosque regularly; he also perceived that the pursuit of philosophical knowledge was a collective obligation (*fard al-kifayah* in Arabic.) In summary, Krasniqi was a modernist who wanted to harmonise religious revelation (*wahy*) with reason (*aql*) and gradually transform Muslim culture and society through human rights and democracy based on moral principles and values; he therefore condemned both the atheism of the Hoxha regime plus traditional religious fanaticism and fatalism.

In 1970 Krasniqi closed the cafe in order to open a kiosk at the Panmure Swimarama. The success of his own business investments and personal economic prosperity allowed him to travel extensively – Australia, the USA, Turkey, Germany, Jordan and Saudi Arabia – in order to energetically and persistently publicise Albanian interests, human rights and democracy. In April 1973 the Albanian-born Mother Teresa visited Wellington and Krasniqi flew down to meet her briefly, on behalf of all Albanians in New Zealand. (In 1993, when she visited Albania, by pure coincidence he was also part of a group that received her there. She recognised him.) Krasniqi was also an early advocate of halal slaughter. He set up an export company in 1974 and successfully exported New Zealand ‘honey, eggs and dairy produce’ to the Middle East and was pivotal in pushing for halal slaughter at New Zealand freezing works throughout the decade.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Warren Berryman and John Draper, ‘Meat Exporters Resist Costly Islamic Crusade’, *National Business Review*, Volume 9, Number 16, 9 May, 1979, p. 1.

Due to his innate wisdom and oratory skills, Krasniqi soon became a popular communal leader. He was elected president of the Muslim Association in 1975 and again in 1987. When delegates from Muslim organisations across New Zealand met over 1978 and 1979 to discuss creating a national body, they were impressed by his skills and ability, his personal piety and retentive memory; on Sunday, 15 April 1979, they unanimously elected him as inaugural president of Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand (FIANZ). Mazhar Shukri Krasniqi was formally appointed the inaugural President of the Islamic Federation.<sup>19</sup> Certainly, Arab documents of the period refer to Krasniqi as the *Rayes* or Commander and this Illyrian exile was perhaps one of the most important figures in New Zealand Islamic history.<sup>20</sup> Over these decades of exile and in the 1990s, Krasniqi met Ibrahim Rugova (1944-2006) – a prominent Kosovar Albanian human rights and political leader – on three occasions. Krasniqi also developed a close association with Joseph DioGuardi (a US politician of Albanian heritage), who helped facilitate a meeting with US president Bill Clinton in 1994 to discuss Albanian affairs in Kosova.

During the 1999 Kosova crisis, Krasniqi and the Albanian Civic League spearheaded a campaign to support Albanian refugees and the event was covered extensively in New Zealand newspapers. Krasniqi undertook media interviews and secured public goodwill for his people. The author Sabit Abdyli reported that upon arriving at the Auckland International Airport, on 29 October 1999, Krasniqi greeted the refugees with a short speech in Albanian. This is worth studying briefly because it reveals both his innate

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<sup>19</sup> Ainsley Thomson, 'Mazhar Krasniqi', *New Zealand Herald*, 31 December 2002, p. A6; Khan, Zohoor Mohammad, 'Mazhar Shukri Krasniqi', *One Hundred Great Muslim Leaders of the 20th Century* (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 2006), pp. 157-160; Abdyli, Sabit R., *Bijtë e shqipesnëtokën e revetëbardha* (Auckland: Universal Print & Management, 2010), pp. 88-90.

<sup>20</sup> Private letter to Mazhar Krasniqi from Muhammad Ali Al-Harakan, Secretary-General, *Rabitah Al-Alam Al-Islami / Muslim World League*, 23 January 1980; Reproduced in: Abdullah Drury, *Islam in New Zealand: The First Mosque* (Christchurch, 2006), p.150; The Arabic term *Rayes* is interesting. This is an ancient and referential title, parallel to president in English, not a Turkish, Albanian or Bosnian designation. Shaykh Muhammad Ali Al-Harakan was no anonymous bureaucrat. In 1974 he had been part of an important team of religious advisors to the Vatican in Rome, sent by the Saudi king Faysal bin Abdul Aziz, in order to participate in inaugural Catholic-Muslim dialogue.

humanity, philosophy, wisdom and style, plus it gives us a glimpse into the reason he was president of the Albanian Civic League for so many decades:

“Ju keni pasur fat ... Zelanda e Re ju garanton të gjitha të drejtat. Këtu sundon ligji ... këtu s’ka të diskriminuar. Ju keni përgjegjësi të dyfishtë, si shqiptarë dhe qytetarë të Zelandës. Këtu do të jeni të respektuar e të mirëpritur ... së bashku do t’i përballojmë të gjitha vështërsitë ....”

("You are lucky ... New Zealand guarantees you all the rights. There is law here ... there is no discrimination here. You have double responsibility, as Albanians and citizens of Zealand. Here you will be respected and welcomed ... together we will overcome all the difficulties .... ")<sup>21</sup>

On 31 December 2002 Krasniqi was awarded the Queens Service Medal (QSM) for public service for his decades of community work for Albanian immigrants and the broader Muslim minority.<sup>22</sup> The following year, a wit in the local Auckland-based Muslim newspaper *Al Mujaddid* nicknamed him ‘Mazharbeg’, a reflection on Skanderbeg – the iconic hero of Albanian nationalism.<sup>23</sup> The Albanian community nicknamed him ‘Baba’ or uncle Mazhar. They organised a park picnic to celebrate the QSM award but also his acumen, bubbling wit and inspirational leadership.<sup>24</sup> Krasniqi brought immigrant Muslim community leadership within the purview of wider public respectability.

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<sup>21</sup>Abdyli, Sabit R., *Bijtë e shqipesnëtokën e revetëbardha* (Auckland: Universal Print & Management, 2010), pp. 69.

<sup>22</sup> ‘The Queen’s Service Medal for Community Service, Q.S.M.’, *New Zealand Gazette*, 10 January 2003, Issue No.2, p. 83.

<sup>23</sup>‘Mazharbeg’, *Al Mujaddid* (21 June 2003 –Rabiul Thani 1424), Volume1, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup>Thomson, Ainsley, ‘Mazhar Krasniqi’, *New Zealand Herald*, 31 December 2002, p. A6; Khan, Zohoor Mohammad, ‘Mazhar Shukri Krasniqi’, *One Hundred Great Muslim Leaders of the 20th Century* (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 2006), pp.157-160; Abdyli, Sabit R., *Bijtë e shqipesnëtokën e revetëbardha* (Auckland: Universal Print & Management, 2010), pp. 67-70.

Interestingly, Mazhar Krasniqi's eldest daughter – Auckland-born Besa – went on to become a prominent Sufi scholar in the Middle East.<sup>25</sup> In Auckland, as a youth, she devoted her energy, talents and wealth to promoting Quranic study and learning activities. As a result, she befriended many prominent Islamic scholars and married one. In 1982 she relocated to Turkey and between 1983 and 1986 she studied Islam further in Egypt. In 1986 she married Sheikh Nuh Ha Mim Keller, an American convert to Islam, and the pair settled in Jordan where they raised a family. Presently she is the most internationally respected Islamic scholar born in Auckland.

On 8 August 2019, Mazhar Shukri Krasniqi died in Australia and was buried the following day. In a prominent obituary in the *New Zealand Herald*, he was praised as a 'great Albanian New Zealander' and lauded for his 'strong leadership.'<sup>26</sup>

### **Albanian Culture and Islam**

The socio-cultural contribution of Krasniqi and the Albanians in New Zealand leads the observer back to the complex subject of Albanian culture and Islam. The Albanian Muslims who came to New Zealand in the twentieth century imported two parallel but competing traditions: a mode of Islam inherited from the Ottoman-Turkish era, and an evolving paradigm of European secularism. Within the Ottoman Empire, Hanafi Islam had reigned as the official state religion for centuries whilst other monotheistic faiths were formally tolerated and afforded specific minority protection. European secularism sought to separate the church and state as entities, but the government also tried to regulate church social relations through various channels and mechanisms. These impulses percolated through and affected the Albanian nation in different ways. In 1912 the Albanians of the Ottoman Empire were divided by the international powers – the majority found themselves inside a new independent state, which started as a kingdom,

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<sup>25</sup> A *Besa* was a semi-sacred Albanian pledge of honour.

<sup>26</sup> Kurt Beyer, 'Kaumatua' of Muslims in NZ dies aged 87', *New Zealand Herald*, 22 August 2019, p.A19.

then became a republic, then became a kingdom again, before a Socialist dictatorship was established in 1945 (ruled under the guise of a republic).

Albanians outside the republic fared worse. Many Albanians found themselves inside the kingdom of Serbia, later Yugoslavia. The state-secularism initiated during this period was always strained and after World War Two it was simply manipulated by two Communist regimes for inefficient ideological objectives until 1990. In New Zealand, Albanian Muslim immigrants met a society that was confusingly Protestant-Christian in heritage but one that was equally secular in orientation and trajectory; but moreover, a society where no single church had any specific legal privileges or status.<sup>27</sup> To some extent, the participation and presence of Albanian Muslims in the embryonic Islamic organisations was influenced by all three of these impulses (Ottoman Islam, European secularism and New Zealand secularism).

Albanian Islam proffers numerous inimitable lessons here. Ottoman Islam arrived in the Balkans with the invading Ottoman military and in terms of theology, institutions, ulema, rituals and jurisprudence, maintained their broad-minded and inclusive customs and interpretations. For five hundred years it was associated with the religion of the social and political elite. The mass conversion of many Albanians to Islam meant that they preserved many localised pre-Islamic customs, traditions and values. Above all, Albanian Islam maintained a highly tolerant attitude towards members of other faith traditions. Albanian Muslims survived the notorious insecurity and violence of World Wars One and Two by cultivating both the core instructions and universal customs of Islam (charity and honesty), plus their cultural comprehension of the religion. Modern Albanian manifestations of identity prompted a downplaying of religious differences in favour of greater appreciation of the variant confessional practices. The state secular

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<sup>27</sup> No one single confession has maintained the affiliation of more than 50% of the population since the 1850s but the Church of England has dominated most cultural practices and traditions.

project of the Communists aimed specifically to foster an ethnic identity that would embrace all Albanians irrespective of faith.

For instance, the Albanian immigrant Mevlit Dzaferi became the face of moderate Islam in Auckland – briefly – in the 2000s. Dzaferi and his wife Alema arrived in 1969 and settled in Belmont, on the North Shore. A polite, humble and generous man, who was equally a devout and meticulous Muslim, he operated a fish and chip takeaways in Devonport with his wife from 1975 to the early 1990s. A regular at the North Shore Islamic Centre, Mevlit Dzaferi attended a large interfaith rally for social solidarity in 2005 when Christians and Muslims marched together from the Ponsonby mosque to Aotea Square (the city centre) in the aftermath of the night-time vandalism attacks on some Auckland mosques, which followed upon the July London bombings. His photograph and a caption appeared prominently in the principle Auckland newspaper article. He was quoted:

Christians, Muslims, all religions are the same. If you read the Koran, or the Bible, it never teaches you to kill people. If you give me a million dollars to damage a church or mosque, I would not do it. It is somebody who is lost, sick, that can do such a thing.<sup>28</sup>

This interview is worth briefly elucidating as it reveals several interesting points here. By highlighting and addressing these issues, Dzaferi was modestly instructing both Christians and Muslims on the pluralistic teachings of Islam; he was loudly reminding folk that which the Ottoman administration had assumed quietly for centuries. Effectively, he was preaching a gentler doctrine of reconciliation, maintaining that every religious community has its own path and way of worship; as a European Muslim immigrant, his ideas and thought on religious and social issues were informed and underpinned by a need to reconcile their multiple identities as Albanian Muslims in a

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<sup>28</sup> Errol Kiong, 'Hundreds rally for interfaith harmony', *New Zealand Herald*, 25 July 2005, p.A2.



secular New Zealand. Nothing in his interview suggested that he wanted to convert people to his religion. He wished simply to demonstrate that the orthodox doctrines of Islam forbade murder, persecution and violence. In his contribution to the spiritual activities of the North Shore, Mevlit was known for his versatile character, sound logic and deep philosophy; he was not a facile speaker but expressed himself with clarity and vigour.

It should be remembered that not all the post-war Albanians arrived on the MS *Goya* and many had little connection to the Islamic organisations.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has illustrated the positive attitude and contribution of Albanian Muslims in terms of integration into New Zealand society, predicated on the explicit tradition of Islam as an accessible and tolerant religion. However, it is obvious that more research is needed. The aim was to examine the history of Albanian Muslim immigration from eastern Europe to New Zealand between the 1950s and the 2000s through a close elucidation of the biography of one such immigrant. Cultural Muslims such as the Albanians are in a curious category as they belong both to the Islamic faith, a minority religion mostly associated with Asian and African immigrants, and at the same time to the European racial majority.

Together, these points have formed remarkable contrasts that lay bare some of the challenges and issues experienced by the broader Muslim minority in this country. The eastern European Muslims brought with them two idiosyncratic traditions: a type of Islam embraced during the Ottoman period, plus a developing European secularism paradigm whereby the church and state were nominally separated but state legislation regulated a prickly relationship between the two. In New Zealand, Albanian Muslims encountered a largely Protestant-Christian society that followed secular laws where no

church had any particular prescribed role or position of privilege. The conduct of the Albanian Muslim immigrants has been influenced by all three impulses.

Today, Albanian Muslims in New Zealand are in some respects a useful example of the broader immigrant Muslim experience. Albanian Muslim immigrants and refugees did not hail from one particular social caste or class, nor did they confine themselves to any one line of work once here. The Albanian Muslims who came to this country did not originate in one village, town or region. Although ultimately most gathered in Auckland for economic reasons, they did not limit themselves to settling down in one particular street or suburb together with other Albanians. There was no Albanian colony inside New Zealand comparable to the German speaking Bohemians at Puhoi for instance. Although a few members of one family may have immigrated to New Zealand, there was no noticeable chain migration. Linguistic diversity among Albanians permeated the entire community, with bilingualism being the norm rather than the exception.

This diversity and linguistic mixing in New Zealand made it easy for Albanians to integrate and difficult to distinguish from Pakeha at the grassroots street level. Albanians simply did not live their daily lives in socially isolated groups. Individual Albanians partook in the affairs of numerous Muslim organisations and clearly the ‘relatively moderate Islam of European provenance (Albanian and Bosnian) ... made a lasting impression.’<sup>29</sup> There is also evidence of individuals creating, fostering and negotiating their own personal, familial or group definition of Islam and Muslim identity according to their own comprehension, education and needs. Above all, the biographies of Krasniqi and other Albanian Muslims remind us that integrity and moral charisma can be recognised and honoured by folk from different faiths and on different sides of the planet.

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<sup>29</sup> Erich Kolig, *New Zealand's Muslims and Multiculturalism*, Leiden: Brill, 2009, p.23.

This paper has illustrated the positive attitude and contribution of Albanian Muslims in terms of integration into New Zealand society, predicated on their explicit tradition of Islam as an accessible and tolerant religion.

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# Muslim Author Response to 9/11 Fiction

## Kim Worthington and Somayyeh Ghaffari

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*Living in a western country in which Islamophobia is rife is very difficult for young Muslims since not only are they under attack by the dominant culture, but they are also often perceived as a threat to its well-being: if not radicalised and fundamentalist, they are thought to have the potential to become so. After 9/11, the subsequent "War on Terror," and other terror attacks across the globe in the name of radical Islam, exacerbated the racial and religious profiling of Muslims living in the West. In the popular, media-fuelled imagination all Muslim men are potential terrorists; all Muslim women are victims of abusive fathers, husbands and brothers. In the last two decades (Western) "immigrant fiction" (fiction about immigrants or by immigrants) has become increasingly politicalised. A large body of novels, written by westerners, focus on the events of 9/11 and its aftermath, for example: John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) and Sherman Alexie's *Flight* (2007). Many of these novels portray Muslims in stereotypical terms that reinforce existing western prejudices or offer only a narrow and misleading portrayal of Islam. In recent years, a number of Muslim writers, living in the West, have begun to respond to these limited representations in fiction that is often focused on radicalised protagonists. Examples include Laleh Khadivi's *A Good Country* (2017), Kamila Shamsi's *Home Fire* (2017), Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways* (2019), Mahir Guven's *Older Brother* (2019) and Hassan Ghedi Santur's *The Youth of God* (2019). While these works certainly don't advocate for or glorify terrorism, they tend to offer more nuanced portrayals of their Muslim characters. Importantly, they expose the damaging effects of ongoing discrimination and of immigrant family life that is fraught with intergenerational conflict and tension.*

### **Introduction**

The unthinkable terror attacks of 9/11 and other terror attacks across the globe in the name of radical Islam, exacerbated the racial and religious profiling of Muslims living in the West. In the popular, media-fuelled imagination all Muslim men are potential terrorists; all Muslim women are victims of abusive fathers, husbands and brothers. A large body of novels, written by westerners, focus on the events of 9/11

and its aftermath, for example: John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) and Sherman Alexie's *Flight* (2007). Many of these novels portray Muslims in stereotypical terms that reinforce existing western prejudices or offer only a narrow and misleading portrayal of Islam. In recent years, a number of Muslim writers, living in the West, have begun to respond to these limited representations in fiction that is often focused on radicalised protagonists. Examples include Laleh Khadivi's *A Good Country* (2017), Kamila Shamsi's *Home Fire* (2017), Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways* (2019), Mahir Guven's *Older Brother* (2019) and Hassan Ghedi Santur's *The Youth of God* (2019). While these works certainly don't advocate for or glorify terrorism, they tend to offer more nuanced portrayals of their Muslim characters. This paper aims to discuss how Muslims are portrayed in post 9/11 fiction penned by the western authors and how the Muslim authors have responded to it.

### **Western Muslims' experiences of 9/11**

Muslims, living in the West, have experienced increased discrimination in the post-9/11 era, and many are subjected to racial profiling and negative representations of their religion in the media and in literature. In this essay we will discuss how Muslims are portrayed in post 9/11 fiction penned by the western authors and how the Muslim authors have responded to it.

According to Stephen Sheehi, "Arab and Muslim Americans have lived in fear in the years following 9/11". He comments on the "mass hysteria, violence, harassment and Muslim and Arab baiting [that occurred] in the aftermath of 9/11".<sup>1</sup> According to research undertaken by Eric D. Gould and Esteban F. Klor, hate crimes reported

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Sheehi, *Islamophobia : The Ideological Campaign against Muslims* (Clarity Press, 2011), n.p.

against Muslims in the U.S. rose from 28 incidents in 2000 to 481 in 2001.<sup>2</sup> Sheehi continues:

Unfortunately, far too many, indeed a majority, of Muslim and Arab Americans have some story of prejudice, bigotry and ignorance. Many narratives convey the trials, tribulations, self-criticism and humor arising from growing up Arab or Muslim in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Sheehi goes on to argue that while the events of 9/11 may have been the catalyst for open and virulent “Muslim baiting,” underlying prejudice existed against Arab/Muslims in the U.S. long before this.<sup>4</sup> Nadine Naber likewise asserts that “the aftermath of September 11 consolidated the racial category of ‘Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim’ as a signifier of non-white Otherness”.<sup>5</sup> Minoo Moallem makes a similar point:

In the wake of the horrific events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, ‘Islamic fundamentalism,’ a discourse which had been decades in the making, has finally come into its own. The representation of Islamic fundamentalism in the West is deeply influenced by the general radicalization of Muslims in a neo-racist idiom which has its roots in cultural essentialism and a conventional Eurocentric notion of ‘people without history.’ Islamic fundamentalism has become a generic signifier used to constantly single out the Muslim Other, its irrational, morally inferior and barbaric masculinity and its passive, victimized and submissive femininity.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Eric D. Gould and Esteban F. Klor, "The Long-Run Effect of 9/11: Terrorism, Backlash, and the Assimilation of Muslim Immigrants in the West," *The Economic Journal* 126, no. 597 (2014): n.p.

<sup>3</sup> Sheehi, *Islamophobia : The Ideological Campaign against Muslims*, n.p.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Nadine Naber, "Introduction: Arab Americans and U.S. Racial Formations," in *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, ed. Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber (Syracuse University Press: 2008), 38.

<sup>6</sup> Minoo Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister. Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (University of California Press, 2005), 8.

After 9/11, the subsequent “War on Terror” and other terror attacks across the globe in the name of radical Islam only exacerbated this racial and religious profiling: in the popular, media-fuelled imagination all Muslim men are potential terrorists; all Muslim women are victims of abusive fathers, husbands and brothers. Such sentiments were (and still are) not only felt and articulated in the U.S., but in many other western nations. Living in a western country in which Islamophobia is rife is very difficult for young Muslims since not only are they under attack by the dominant culture, but they are also often perceived as a threat to its well-being: if not radicalised and fundamentalist, they are thought to have the potential to become so.

### **Authors’ response to 9/11 fiction**

In the last two decades, since the events of 9/11, the concerns of the (Western) “immigrant novel” have become far more politicalised. A large body of novels focused on the events of that fateful day and its aftermath have been written by westerners. According to Mohammad Safeer Awan:

Representations of September 11 as a moment of global change became the 'ideological lynchpin' of the war on terror, a 'rhetorical construction' that promoted the idea of America as a victim and a defender of freedom, not only in its official discourse but also in the vast cultural production ranging from Hollywood films to the pop fiction and even photography.<sup>7</sup>

Some of the notable (western) novels about 9/11 include Frédéric Beigbeder’s *Window on the World* (2003), Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005), Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), Ken Kalfus’ *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), John Updike’s *Terrorist* (2006), Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007),

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<sup>7</sup> Muhammad Safeer Awan, "Global Terror and the Rise of Xenophobia/Islamophobia: An Analysis of American Cultural Production since September 11," *Islamic Studies* 49, no. 4 (2010): 522.



Sherman Alexie's *Flight* (2007) and Joseph O' Neill's *Netherland* (2008). Awan believes that American authors like Don DeLillo, John Updike and Sherman Alexie portray and reinforce violent images of Islam/ Muslims in their 9/11 fiction.<sup>8</sup> Margaret Scanlan is rather more nuanced, suggesting that although authors like DeLillo and Updike, in particular, are at pains to suggest that the Islamic terrorist is a human being with whom we may have some sympathy, none of these writers create a context large enough to include ordinary (i.e. not extremist) Muslims and other people with differing political and religious perspectives.<sup>9</sup> This idea is also expressed by many Muslim readers of such fiction. Seyed Mohammad Marandi and Zeinab Ghasemi Tari, for example, in an essay on Updike's *Terrorist* and DeLillo's *Falling Man*, state that because both authors have a reputation for authenticity among their readers and critics, this increases the credibility of their representations. They criticise the novels for providing a misleading and unjust portrayal of Muslim characters and Islam. They argue that these writers "try to insinuate ... that the Holy Quran is the source of Muslim's wrong doings and a book which advises women's mistreatment."<sup>10</sup> They continue:

In *Terrorist* Updike often selects verses and chapters of the Quran based on his denigrating purposes and without contextualization, ignores the fact that to correctly interpret the Quran requires the knowledge of when and under what circumstances different verses were revealed to the Prophet Mohammad.<sup>11</sup>

Hossein Pirnajmuddin and Abbasali Borhan also criticise DeLillo's and Updike's narratives because they believe that in their work:

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 523.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Scanlan, "Migrating from Terror: The Postcolonial Novel after September 11," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46, no. 3-4 (2010): 267.

<sup>10</sup> Seyed Mohammad Marandi and Zeinab Ghasemi Tari, "Orientalist Feminism; Representation of Muslim Women in Two American Novels: *Terrorist* and *Falling Man*," *International Journal of Women's Research* 1, no. 2 (2012): 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 15.

Without giving a clear picture of their social life, the narrator merely depicts Muslims as ... living in a utopian land— “the land of the free”—in which everybody is equally entitled to the right of absolute liberty. While enjoying the benefits of American civilization, these ungrateful Muslims, take up arms against it and vehemently seek its fall and destruction.<sup>12</sup>

It has been widely suggested that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), written by Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid, was the first mainstream novel in English to counter the America-centric nature of 9/11 fiction.<sup>13</sup> According to Tufail Muhammad Chandio, Hamid’s novel raises questions about the Muslim immigrant protagonist’s national and cultural identity crisis in the face of religious profiling and discrimination, suspicion, marginalization, physical or verbal assault and stereotyping of Muslims in the wake of the attacks.<sup>14</sup> Since the publication of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, other Muslim/immigrant authors have similarly taken to literature (written in English) to not only portray the demonisation of Muslims in the West but also to defend Islam and portray a positive image of the religion. Fadda-Conrey believes that:

The period following September 2001 did not only generate a need on the part of Arab Americans and Muslim-Americans to deflect the terrorism and fanaticism charges targeting them, but has made it important for Arab-American poets, fiction writers, journalists, and essayists to point out the historical injustices that fellow Arabs in the Middle East had been subjected to by US foreign policy.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Hossein Pirnajmuddin and Abbasali Borhan, "'Writing Back' to Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*," *Journal of International Social Research* 4, no. 18 (2011): 122.

<sup>13</sup> We refer to Hamid as Pakistani as he was born and raised in Pakistan. However he lived in the USA and the UK for at least two decades and undertook his tertiary education in the USA.

<sup>14</sup> Tufail Muhammad Chandio, "The Reluctant Fundamentalist: Negotiating Post-9/11 Muslim Identity," *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies* 4, no. 3 (2017): 64.

<sup>15</sup> Carol N. Fadda-Conrey, "Writing Arab-American Identity Post 9/11," *Al-raida*, no. 118-119 (2007): 59.

Many Arab-American authors have tried to give voice to their community in their work and announce that they, too, have been affected by the fanatical acts of the 9/11 terrorists. Arab and Muslim American writers have tried to respond to stereotypes like “the Faceless Veiled Arab Woman” or “the Islamic Terrorist” by writing their own versions of what it means to be Arab, Arab-American, or Muslim living in a U.S. that, after 9/11, has become increasingly hostile toward them. Such an approach ultimately seeks to enable Arab-Americans to achieve the autonomy needed to define and explore their plural identities in their pursuit of agency. Naomi Shihab Nye, an Arab-American poet shortly after the September 11, 2001, wrote a letter called “To Any Would-Be Terrorists” in which she directly speaks to those responsible for the 9/11 attacks and says:

Not only did your colleagues kill thousands of innocent, international people in those buildings and scar their families forever, they wounded a huge community of people in the Middle East, in the United States and all over the world. If that's what they wanted to do, please know the mission was a terrible success, and you can stop now.<sup>16</sup>

She then goes on to say how difficult it is to be a Muslim living in America, how this terrorist attack has affected every Muslim-American, and concludes by stating that “it will be peace, not violence, that fixes things”.<sup>17</sup>

Anisa Ather defines “Muslim writers” as “a vast category of Muslims inclusive of secular authors on the one hand, and religiously motivated authors on the other”<sup>18</sup>, and she quotes Claire Chambers as saying that this group is producing “some of the most

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<sup>16</sup> Naomi Shihab Nye, "Letter from Naomi Shihab Nye, Arab-American Poet: To Any Would-Be Terrorists," <http://islam.uga.edu/shihabnye.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Anisa Ather, "Why Are British Muslims Writing? Interviews with Three British Muslim Memoir Writers" (Cardiff University, 2013), 6.

interesting fiction [and nonfiction] in the UK today”.<sup>19</sup> Robin Yassin-Kassab in his weblog *qunfuz* believes that it is important for Muslim authors to be heard because:

Heard voices empower. Voices heard through novels also work against ignorance, because novels, unlike the BBC, humanise. They deal in characters instead of abstractions, and raise questions, and so provide the human texture which the most well-intentioned news media cannot.<sup>20</sup>

Ather believes that since 9/11 and 7/7 writing by Muslims has gained in importance , and Muslim authors have tried to use this genre to rewrite the ‘terrorist’ identity with which Muslims are so often associated. This includes more carefully contextualised narratives of (immigrant) radicalisation.

Les Pickers reports that as of December 2015, approximately 30,000 fighters from at least 85 countries had joined ISIS. Grey Myre’s detailed recent report [published 5 February 2018] asserts that an estimated 300 Americans have attempted to join ISIS, which accounts for about one percent of foreign fighters.<sup>21</sup> Although only a very small number of westerners have actually been radicalised, a disproportionate number of characters in immigrant fiction, in the fiction written both by western and immigrant authors, become radicalised and either commit terror attacks within their adopted country or leave to join jihadist groups in places like Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq. Some examples of these so-called “radicalisation narratives,” a body of contemporary fiction dominated by the figure of the (often second-generation) disaffected Muslim-immigrant-turned-jihadist are: Ed Hussain’s *The Islamist: Why I Became an Islamic Fundamentalist: What I Saw Inside, and Why I Left* (a memoir) (2007), Sunjeev Sahota’s *Ours are the Streets* (2011), Laleh Khadivi’s *A Good Country* (2017), Kamila Shamsi’s *Home Fire* (2017), Fatima Bhutto’s *The Runaways* (2019), Mahir

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Robin Yassin-Kassab to qunfuz, 2009, <http://qunfuz.blogspot.com/2009/05/muslim-writer.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Greg Myre, "Americans in Isis: Some 300 Tried to Join, 12 Have Returned to U.S.," *npr* 2018, n.p.

Guven's *Older Brother* (2019) and Hassan Ghedi Santur's *The Youth of God* (2019). All of these works were written by immigrants now living in the West (or who have returned to their homeland after a significant period of time living in the West).

Jago Morrison, in "Jihadi Fiction: Radicalisation Narratives in the Contemporary Novel," cites the FBI Counterterrorism Division's handbook "The Radicalization Process: From Conversion to Jihad" which outlines the four stages ("preradicalisation, identification, indoctrination, and action") that young men and women go through to become radicalised, and he goes on to say that this approach to the psychological modelling of potential terrorists is reflected in a surprising amount of post-9/11 writing. Morrison discusses Ed Husain's *The Islamist*: in which the protagonist goes from impressionable young Muslim to Hizb ut-Tahrir activist—only a step away from becoming a violent jihadi. He says that as in the FBI's account:

The young person's journey into Islamism is framed in this text, almost entirely in terms of a teenager's naiveté and desire for special status, while the worsening political climate, including rising Islamophobia and Western tolerance and sponsorship of mass violence against Muslims, are for the most part peripheral.<sup>22</sup>

In *The Runaways* Bhutto explores why someone might join the war against the West. In an interview released by her publisher, Penguin, she was asked: "Your characters are all young and feel alienation in different ways, so they dice with extremism. Was it important to you to humanise them?" She answers that her job as a novelist is to observe and portray people and not to indict them.<sup>23</sup> She goes on to say that people, wherever they are and whoever they are, want to belong, to be respected,

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<sup>22</sup> Jago Morrison, "Jihadi Fiction: Radicalisation Narratives in the Contemporary Novel," *Textual Practice* 31, no. 3 (2017): 570.

<sup>23</sup> Fatima Bhutto, "Fatima Bhutto on Radicalisation: We Need to Understand Rather Than Condemn," [www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2019/mar/fatima-bhutto-interview-on-understanding-radicalisation/](http://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2019/mar/fatima-bhutto-interview-on-understanding-radicalisation/).

to be loved and cared for. She says that when you don't offer a sizeable portion of your population a vision for their future and when they feel excluded from a collective narrative, they will look elsewhere for a vision and a place to belong.<sup>24</sup> Hassan Ghedi Santur, author of *The Youth of God* (2019), makes a similar point in an interview with Ashly July. He claims that he was curious to know why the son of a Somali immigrant, who has never been to Somalia, would become radicalised. He explains:

I was working backwards and trying to find potential answers for why something like that would happen. A lot of the stories had one particular theme that was running through them: a sense of alienation, a sense of feeling like they don't fit in, they don't belong. That sense of alienation makes the idea of finding a home—sometimes a literal home and sometimes an emotional home—quite attractive to these young men. It can give them a sense of identity and a sense of belonging in the world.<sup>25</sup>

The young Muslim protagonists in fictions like those of Bhutto and Santur struggle to find a “home” and to feel “at home”. These characters feel doubly “unhomed” — they struggle to belong within their immediate family and in wider (western) society. The difficulties they face, intergenerational and intra-societal, are portrayed with a nuance and care that is lacking, we believe, in many post-9/11 novels featuring Muslim characters or protagonists, written by native Western authors.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we believe that fiction written by Muslim immigrant authors, that portray radicalised second-generation protagonists tend to pay extended attention to

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ashly July, "Why Hassan Ghedi Santur Wrote a Novel About the Radicalization of a Young Muslim Man," *CBC* 3 October 2019.

the cumulative, if often mundane effects of discrimination, misunderstanding, and the long-lasting effects of an almost impossible attempt to “fit in.” Such works portray complicated, individual human beings and families torn between cultural and religious loyalties in ways that complicate and undermine fear-confirming narratives of Muslim fanatical terrorism. They counter the all-too-simple trope of the ‘angry young Muslim becomes terrorist’ that appears in many fictions written by Western authors. This repeated trope is potentially very damaging because it risks sensationalisation and may reconfirm western stereotypes. It is important to study the portrayal, by Muslim immigrant novelists, of more complex and multi-faceted individual ‘radicalised youths’ in their familial environments and to explore them as ‘human beings’ rather than ‘terrorists.’

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# Sharī‘ah Debates and Constitutional Development in Nigeria

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*This study examines the Sharī‘ah debates and constitutional development in Nigeria. It briefly highlights the ongoing controversy and the history of the issue from the pre-colonial to post-colonial periods with the insight into various debates on the impact on various Nigerian constitutions since independence in 1960. The findings shows that all Nigerian constitutions have sufficient provisions to justify the constitutionality of Sharī‘ah. It also reveals that antagonism to the constitutionality of Sharī‘ah legal system has emanated from Islamophobia which is based on their perceived Islamisation of Nigeria. The study therefore recommends that adherents of other faiths should request the government to include their respective religious law into the constitution of the country, and that all confessional traditions should learn how to tolerate and accommodate one another in order to give room to national integration and restructuring.*

### Introduction

Debates over the *Sharī‘ah* have generated a lot of public controversy in Nigeria and polarized opinion, challenging the national unity and integration of Nigeria as a polity. Despite the fact that the *Sharī‘ah* legal system had a long history in Nigeria dating before the pre-colonial period, it was undermined during the colonial protectorate era by efforts to subjugate it to the Western legal system. As a result of this development, they opted for another option, namely the limitation of *Sharī‘ah* legal jurisdiction to the personal and private matters of the people (*Ahwalu’sh-Shakhsiyyah*). This development on the status of *Sharī‘ah* within the legal system of the country preoccupied the minds of Nigerian Muslims after the independence of the country in 1960. This development led to a lot of hotly debated constitutional debates

on the precise role of *Sharī'ah* legal system. Out of these debates, those of 1978 generated more tension as it attracted both commendable and condemnable responses from the adherents of various religious groups. In this paper we seek to study these various *Sharī'ah* debates and their impact on constitutional development in the legal system of Nigeria and the popular reactions of the differing faith communities.

### **Conceptual Clarification of Key Terms**

The term “*Sharī'ah*” is an Arabic word emerged from the root verb “*Shara'ca*” which means he introduced, enacted, prescribed, made or legislated law.<sup>1</sup> Literally, *Sharī'ah* means a waterhole, drinking place, approach to a water hole or a path leading to water. Technically, it is a revealed and divine canonical law of Islam.<sup>2</sup> In the legal context of the term, *Sharī'ah* is a detailed code of conduct and canon regarding the ways and modes of worship and the rules to judge between right and wrong in all spheres of human life.<sup>3</sup> The term “Islamization” is derived from the verb “Islamize” which means ‘to convert to Islam or ‘to bring the influence of Islam on something’. With this understanding, Islamization could be defined as a process through which the private and public affairs of the people in a particular geographical location be subjected to the principle of Islam or be brought under the influence of Islam.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Sharī'ah Legal System within the Nigerian Historical Perspective**

The *Sharī'ah* legal system predates the advent of British colonial government in the geographical area now known as Nigeria. The administrations of Kanem-Bornu, Hausaland, the Sokoto Caliphate and some Yoruba kingdoms have all utilized the *Sharī'ah* in their both private and public affairs. The best example in this regard was

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<sup>1</sup> Cowan, J.M. *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, (New York: Spoken Language Services, 1976), p.465.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 466.

<sup>3</sup> Moshood, A. “*Sharī'ah* and English Law: Some Basic Differences” in S.K. Rashid (ed.). *Sharī'ah Social Changes and Indiscipline in Nigeria*. (Lagos: Islamic Publication Bureau, 1987), p.66.

<sup>4</sup> Kreski, J & Jordan, L.L., *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, (New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Incorporation, 1994), p.755.

the ruler of Kanem Borno, Mai Humme Jilm who reigned between 1075 and 1086 C.E and implemented *Sharī'ah* as an official legal system and Islam as a state religion. He formulated a legal framework predicated on the Shariah that was popularly called '*Mune*'. This ruler established the Islamic judiciary in his cabinet and then invited and appointed several Islamic clerics from the North Africa to serve as judges in *Sharī'ah* courts of law, teachers, secretaries and administrators. During the reign of another outstanding ruler in Kanem-Borno, Dunama II, who reigned between 1221 and 1259 C.E., Kanem-Borno established educational relations with Cairo and Tunisia where students were sent to learn *Sharī'ah* law.<sup>5</sup> In the same way, Mai Idris Aloomo who reigned between 1570 and 1602 C.E. separated the administration of judiciary from the executive by taking legal decisions out of the hands of political chiefs and setting up of *Sharī'ah* courts of law to dispense justice.<sup>6</sup> This functioned in Kanem-Borno empire before the advent of Royal Niger Company (RNC) in 1851 when the then Shehu of Borno, Umar Ibn Muhammad Al-Amin Al-Kanemi signed the diplomatic treaty with the British colonial government.<sup>7</sup>

Islam arrived in the Hausaland in the fourteenth century of Christian era through commercial activities of North Africa Berbers and Wangarawa traders. In Kano, during the reign of Muhammad Rumfa who reigned between 1463 and 1499 C.E, *Sharī'ah* legal system become firmly rooted as various Islamic disciplines in Islamic law were taught in different places in the city. Due to the zeal of this king for the *Sharī'ah* , al-Maghili, a famous itinerant Islamic scholar, was invited to write a book which would guide his Islamic government on *Sharī'ah* political framework.<sup>8</sup> Ibn Batutta, another popular Islamic scholar, also confirmed that the *Sharī'ah* legal system had been practiced in some parts of western Sudan presently known as

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<sup>5</sup> Kani, A.M. *The Intellectual Origin of Sokoto Jihad*, (Ibadan: Iman Publications, 1984), p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Quadri, Y.A. "The Survival of *Sharī'ah* in Multi-Faith Nigeria" in Muhibbu-din, M.A (ed.), *Journal of the Nigeria Association of Teachers of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, Volume 7, (Lagos State University, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Imam, Y.O. "Application of *Sharī'ah* in Nigeria's Third Republic" (2005), p.9.

<sup>8</sup> Abdullah, U.Y. *Islam in Africa*, (Ijebu-Ode: Shebiotimo Publications, 1998), pp.100-101.

Northern Nigeria. Despite the widespread implementation of the *Sharī'ah* in the Hausaland, some provincial rulers persisted in patronizing traditional religions for some time. This ended during the reign of Uthman Ibn Fudi around the 1800s, in a campaign that later led to the formation of Sokoto Caliphate. This regime, under the able leadership of Muhammad Bello in Sokoto and Abdullah Ibn Fudi in Gwandu, ushered in the full application of the *Sharī'ah* legal system across the whole Northern Nigeria until the colonial occupation of the caliphate in 1903 C.E.<sup>9</sup>

In the area presently known as South-Western Nigeria, (Yorubaland), the *Sharī'ah* legal system was applied under some Yoruba kings in Ede, Iwo and Ikirun during the reign of King Habib Olagunju in 1856, King Muhammad Lamuye in 1859 and King Oyewole in the late nineteenth century respectively until the advent of colonial government in 1920.<sup>10</sup> Some Yoruba Muslims in towns such as Epe, Ibadan and Ijebu-Ode demanded the retention of *Sharī'ah* courts of law in their domain to cater for domestic issues such as marriage, divorce and inheritance. This request was ignored by the colonial government. The colonial government had *ab initio* given the impression to some rulers and subjects that they would not tamper with the *Sharī'ah* legal system in the area of their jurisdiction but the reverse was the case.<sup>11</sup> Before they left Nigeria in 1960, they reduced the *Sharī'ah* legal system to the penal code in the then would-be Nigerian constitution.

### **Impact of Sharī'ah Debates on Constitutional Development in Nigeria**

The first *Sharī'ah* debate on Nigerian Constitutional development was initiated by non-Muslims in Nigeria. This spirited dialogue took place during the 1957 London Constitutional Conference where some non-Muslims delegates moved a motion that the

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<sup>9</sup> Akintola, I.L. "Democracy, Secularism and *Sharī'ah*: A Crisis of Ideological cum legislative Identity in Nigeria," in Muhibbu-din, M.A, (ed.), *Journal of the Nigeria Association of Teachers of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, Volume 7, (Lagos: Lagos State University, 2004), p. 56.

<sup>10</sup> Makinde, A.K. "A Study of *Sharī'ah* and its Application in Oyo and Osun States: Preliminary Findings," paper presented at the Postgraduate Seminar, Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, Nigeria, University of Ibadan (2004), p.10.

<sup>11</sup> Oladimeji, L.F. "An Appraisal of the Place of *Sharī'ah* in the Nigerian Constitution". in Muhibbu-din, M.A (ed.) *Sharī'ah in a Multi-Faith Nigeria*. (Lagos: Lagos State University, 2005), p.26.

*Sharī'ah* legal system should be removed from the draft constitution of Nigeria. Their fear was that the non-Muslims would be subjugated and marginalized in the country if the *Sharī'ah* legal system continued to be in the constitution.<sup>12</sup> As a result of this development, the colonial government set up a panel of jurists of national and international repute to codify *Sharī'ah* legal system into the Penal Code of 1958. This Penal Code was passed into law by the Northern House of Assembly in 1959 and it came into force on Nigerian Independence Day: 1<sup>st</sup> October 1960.<sup>13</sup>

In 1963, there was a provision for a *Sharī'ah* Court of Appeal in the 1963 Republican Constitution in Nigeria. Its scope of jurisdiction was featured in Section 11 of the *Sharī'ah* Court of Appeal Law Cap 49, 78 and 122 law of Northern Regional part of Nigeria in which it is clearly stated that this law was meant for the Muslim citizens of that area only.<sup>14</sup> This constitutional column was re-featured in Chapter VII, Section 261 of Amended Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria of 2011 which postulates that there shall be *Sharī'ah* Court of Appeal for the hearing of appeal from native courts in respect of cases involving questions regarding Muslim personal law.

In 1972, a judicial conference was organized in Lagos, Nigeria, after which a communique was released. The seventeenth item of their communique stated that a Federal *Sharī'ah* Court of Appeal should be established as the final court of appeal with respect to Islamic law cases.<sup>15</sup> The military government of the late General Murtala R. Muhammed took a cue from the resolution of the above-mentioned communique in 1975 when he directed that both Federal Court of Appeal and Federal *Sharī'ah* Court of Appeal be established at the federal level. This development was later left for the 1975/76

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<sup>12</sup> Jamiu, S.M. "Colonial Impact on the Application of the *Sharī'ah* in Nigeria," (2001), p.27.

<sup>13</sup> Abdul-Salam, H.A. "A Brief Appraisal of Islamic Law (*Sharī'ah*) in Nigeria," *Journal of the Nigerian Association of Teachers of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, Volume 6, Number 1, (Kano: Bayero University, 2001), p.37.

<sup>14</sup> Rashid, S.K. *Islamic Law in Nigeria: Application and Teaching*, (Lagos: Islamic Publication Bureau, 1988), pp.224-233.

<sup>15</sup> Adegoke, K.A. "*Sharī'ah* Issue in the Contemporary Nigeria 1979-2003," in Muhibu-ddin, M.A & Sanni, A.O (eds). *Transformation in Arabic and Islamic Studies. Studies in Memory Musa Ali Ajetunmobi*, (Nigeria: University of Ilorin, 2009 (Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria: Shebiotimo Publications), p.111.

*Sharī'ah* debate at the Constituent Assembly where the draft of the Nigerian constitution was to be considered by the Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) set up by the Murtala Muhammed military administration in 1975. The committee concluded their decision after the assassination of General Murtala R. Muhammed in a mutiny coup of 1976.<sup>16</sup>

Their report was submitted to the immediate military Head of State, General Olusegun Obasanjo, on 14<sup>th</sup> September 1976. This report gave room for the establishment of a Federal *Sharī'ah* Court of Appeal and a State *Sharī'ah* Court of Appeal which should consist of a Grand-*Mufti*, a Deputy Grand-*Mufti* and not less than three *Qadi* (*Sharī'ah* Court Judge) as may be described by or under the legislative arm of the government.<sup>17</sup> It should be mentioned at this point that this Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) was chaired by Chief F.R.A. Williams, a Senior Advocate of Nigeria and a Nigerian legal luminary of international repute. Apart from this, the committee was composed of Muslims and non-Muslims from different parts of the country.<sup>18</sup>

After the submission of the report of the Constitution Drafting Committee, the issue was passed to the Constituent Assembly for deliberation before passing it into law under the Nigerian Constitution. In the Constituent Assembly, the issue became a hot-debated topic as it divided the house into two groups, pro-*Sharī'ah* and anti-*Sharī'ah*. After this hullabaloo in the Constituent Assembly concerning the constitutional recognition of Federal and State *Sharī'ah* Courts of Appeal, the bill was later passed into law in order to avert the crisis between Muslims and people of other faiths in Nigeria.<sup>19</sup> By this, both the Federal and State Courts of Appeal were given a column in the Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria of 1979 that a *Sharī'ah* Court of Appeal could be established by any

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<sup>16</sup> Abdul-Wahab, T.A. *Application of Shari'ah in Southern Nigeria: The Hoax, The Truth*. (Ibadan: Al-Furqaan Publishers, 2006), p.6.

<sup>17</sup> Adegoke, K.A. "Sharī'ah Issue in the Contemporary Nigeria 1979-2003," (2009), p.112.

<sup>18</sup> Jamiu, S.M. "Colonial Impact on the Application of the *Sharī'ah* in Nigeria," (2001), p.28.

<sup>19</sup> Abdul-Wahab, T.A. *Application of Shari'ah in Southern Nigeria* (Shaki:Al Furqaan Publishers, 2006), p. 7.

State of the Federation which made a request for one or both of the Courts of Appeal. The Column of the 1979 Nigeria constitution concerning the establishment of both Federal and State *Sharī'ah* Courts of Appeal has featured in the successive Nigerian Constitutions of 1999 and 2011.

It was within this broad framework that some states of the federation in the three geo-political zones of Northern Nigeria decided, at the beginning of twenty-first century, to establish a State *Sharī'ah* Court and a State *Sharī'ah* Court of Appeal to replace the State Area and Magistrate Court and the State Court of Appeal respectively. This was initiated by the Zamfara State of Nigeria on 27<sup>th</sup> October 1999 under the governorship of Alhaj Ahmad Sani Yerima. This initiative measure of the Zamfara State served as a wake-up for other Northern States in the federation as they supported the decision of Zamfara State and also embarked on the same measure one after the other.<sup>20</sup> Out of the three geo-political zones in the Southern part of Nigeria, it was only south-western geo-political zone which voiced their support for the introduction of *Sharī'ah* jurisdiction in the Northern geo-political zones and also show their interest of embarking on the same measure, the intention which was turned down by south-western governors.

Presently the *Sharī'ah* Court of Appeal (Federal and State) has not been established in any part of South-Western geo-political zones - despite the constitutional provision of this right and the large Muslim population in the area. As the south-western governors ruled out the official adoption of the *Sharī'ah* legal system in their states, some Muslim organizations in those states set up an independent *Sharī'ah* Arbitration Panel in 2002 at Ibadan, Osogbo, Abeokuta, Akure and Lagos in which the private Islamic matters, such as land dispute, marriage, divorce, inheritance, imamship *et. cetera*, were mutually settled

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<sup>20</sup> Adegoke, K.A. "Introduction of *Sharī'ah* in the Northern Nigeria: Religious and Political Dimensions. *Ilorin Researcher*, Volume 4, (Ilorin: University of Ilorin, 2003), p.15.

in accordance with *Sharī'ah* legal system.<sup>21</sup> These courts were operated by some independent scholars of Islam who were graduates of *Sharī'ah* from the Arabic and Islamic nations. Several cases have been presented to some of these independent *Sharī'ah* Arbitration Panels by the Muslims and there are encouraging reports that some of these cases have been mutually and amicably settled.

### **Debates on the Constitutionality of the Sharī'ah Among Non-Muslims in Nigeria**

Non-Muslims, represented under the umbrella of various faith associations and other religious bodies, vehemently articulated against the *Sharī'ah* as a result of their impressions that:

- (i) *Sharī'ah* debates would eventually pave way to the Islamization of Nigeria in order to become Islamic State,
- (ii) accommodation of *Sharī'ah* debates in the Constituent Assembly is an act of giving preferential treatment and undue favouritism to the side of Muslims in Nigeria at the expense of other religious bodies, and this is in contrary to the multi-religious and pluralistic status of the country.
- (iii) Nigerian Muslims can hide under this *Sharī'ah* Debates to oppress and marginalize the non-Muslims in Nigeria.
- (iv) *Sharī'ah* debates in the Constituent Assembly would lead to a dual legal system in Nigeria and this development would strain the economy.
- (v) Islam is merely a religion like Christianity or any other traditional religion, and therefore should not be made to have a say in the public life of the people which the *Sharī'ah* debates want to bring up.<sup>22</sup>

The reaction of non-Muslims towards the *Sharī'ah* debates threatened national unity and integration. This was showcased in the *Sharī'ah* debate which took place between 1975 and 1978 in the Constituent Assembly in preparation for 1979 Nigerian Constitution. Non-Muslims did not hide their feelings in attacking any attempt to institute the *Sharī'ah* legal system in Nigerian constitution. A series of lectures, seminars and symposia were

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<sup>21</sup> Ismaila, B.R. "A Preliminary Study on the Independent *Sharī'ah* Arbitration Panel, Ibadan, Oyo State (2002-2009)," in Adesewo, M.A, *et. al* (eds) *National Association for the Study of Religions and Education*. (Oyo: Federal College of Education, 2009), pp.506-507.

<sup>22</sup> Opeloye, M.O. "Religious Factor in Nigerian Politics: Implication for Christian-Muslim Relations in Nigeria". *Journal of Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Volume 10, Number 2 (1989), pp.357-358.



organized by the various associations of some religious bodies in Nigeria in which the Non-Muslims voiced out their opposition to the institution of *Sharī'ah* legal system in Nigerian constitution.<sup>23</sup>

Such efforts revealed the full extent of the genuine fears of non-Muslims and also their intentions to physically resist government decisions even when they contradicted the basic premises of democracy (one man, one vote). This position was behind the employment of religious violence in the opposition to the institution of the *Sharī'ah* legal system in the Nigerian 1979 and 1999 constitutions. It is not out of tune to assert that all civil and tribal violence in Nigeria up till 1999 are insignificant if compared to the nature, scope, sophistication and globalised character of the violence that followed the signing into the law the Bill establishing the penal aspect of *Sharī'ah* in Zamfara State of Nigeria. The series of inter-religious violence that followed the declaration of *Sharī'ah* law in Zamfara States of Nigeria is highly remarkable in Nigerian societies in terms of human and material losses.<sup>24</sup> Opeloye, a renowned scholar and professor of Islamic Studies at Lagos State University, reacted that this negative development might have been averted if the Non-Muslims could have tried to understand the view points of the Muslims on *Sharī'ah* debates<sup>25</sup>

### **Debates on the Constitutionality of the Sharī'ah Among Muslims in Nigeria**

The *Sharī'ah* debates between 1957 and 1978 had a wider territorial appeal among the Nigerian Muslims as they attested the fact that Islamic law is part and parcel of Muslim communal identity and applied to Muslims only. As a result of this development, the Nigerian Muslims stressed that there was no amount of politicization and misrepresentation of the *Sharī'ah* debates by the Non-Muslims in Nigeria that would deter

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<sup>23</sup> Abdul-Salam, H.A. "A Brief Appraisal of Islamic Law (*Sharī'ah*) in Nigeria," (2001), p.37.

<sup>24</sup> Sanni, A.O. "Terror in the Name of God and the Society: The Nigerian Youth and the Economy of Violence". *Journal of Oriental and African Studies*, Volume 17, Number 2 (2008), p.94.

<sup>25</sup> Opeloye, M.O. "Religious Factor in Nigerian Politics," (1989), p.359.

them from the pursuit of their constitutional right and religious freedom in the country as stated in Section 38 (1) of 1999 Nigeria Constitution which says:

Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom (either alone, or in community, with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance. (Amended Constitution, 2011)

They, therefore, suspected the hullabaloo of the non-Muslim members of the Nigerian Constituent Assembly on *Sharī'ah* to be a symptom of unnecessary islamophobia and religious intolerance so as to pave way for the Christianisation of people. Opeloye reacted that the establishment of *Sharī'ah* courts cannot change a country into Islamic state as alleged by critics. It should be pointed that there are *Sharī'ah* courts in some African countries like Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia and Gambia, still, they are not Islamic states.<sup>26</sup> The Islamisation of the country through *Sharī'ah* courts is unfeasible due to the constitutional provision of Nigeria that no government shall adopt a state religion. Opeloye further stressed further that operating *Sharī'ah* and common law legal systems in Nigeria need not cause economic wastefulness as this has become a universal practice in some parts of the world such as in Britain where English and Scot laws are operating *parri-passu*, in Egypt where the Coptic, *Sharī'ah* and common law courts are also in operation simultaneously. It is the heterogeneous nature of the country concerned that demands this arrangement.

The Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria in the Northern Zone reacted to the opposition of non-Muslims in Nigeria to the success of the *Sharī'ah* debates when they staged the first public peaceful demonstration under the leadership of Ibrahim Zakzaky of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and Aminuddin Abubakar of Bayero University, Kano outside the campus on 4<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> August, 1980 respectively. Ibrahim Al-Zakyzaky was the Amir of Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria of

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<sup>26</sup> Opeloye, M.O. "Religious Factor in Nigerian Politics" (1989), p.360.

Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria. Presently, he is the leader of the Twelver Shi'ite movement in Nigeria popularly known as The Islamic Movement of Nigeria which has been outlawed by Buhari government administration. The main objective of this demonstration was to express the Muslim opinion and to launch a more robust campaign for the recognition of *Sharī'ah* as a national law.<sup>27</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In this study I examined the various debates on the *Sharī'ah* legal system and its implications on constitutional development in Nigeria, vis-à-vis the reactions of non-Muslims and Muslims in Nigeria. The findings of this study show that all Nigerian constitutions contain sufficient provisions to justify the constitutionality of the *Sharī'ah* in Nigeria for the Muslims. Furthermore, non-Muslim antagonism to the constitutionality of *Sharī'ah* legal system emanated from Islamophobia which was predicated on a perceived Islamisation of Nigeria. As a result of these findings, the study recommends that the misconception of some non-Muslims on the constitutionality of the *Sharī'ah* should be addressed by the Nigerian government. Adherents of other faiths in Nigeria should request the government to include their respective religious law into the constitution of the country; the regime could establish the religious-based courts where the legal system of other non-Islamic faiths would be represented. Finally, all faith groups in Nigeria should learn how to tolerate and accommodate one another in order to promote national integration and restructuring.

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<sup>27</sup> Sanni, A.O. "Terror in the Name of God and the Society" (2008), p.95.

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# **New Zealand's Response to the March 15th Terror Attack: A Practical Compassion Beyond Thoughts and Prayers**

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Dr Mortaza Shams holds a PhD in Studies in Religion from University of Waikato and is a researcher at the Centre for Social Justice of Anglican Action and a co-founder of and Research Member with the University of Waikato Islamic Studies Group. Mortaza's research interests include the role of religion in political violence, religion and social justice, Interfaith and trans-faith dialogue as well as religion and identity. He was the convener for the 2015 International Conference on "Islam and its Relations with Others" and directed the research project *Oil and Holy War* publishing a book (2010) and co-authoring another book (2014) on this topic. His other publications include, "Ummah: Community of Virtues or a Non-Genetic Global Tribe" (2015), "Islamic Faith and the Question of Suicide Terrorism" (2016) and "Ummah vs Citizenship: Multi-Religious Societies and the Question of Clash of Loyalties with Focus on Muslims of New Zealand", and a book chapter in *Religious Encounters in Transcultural Society* (2018).

*It is not unusual for small but vocal groups try to talk on behalf of a whole nation claiming how much the nation loves or hates others. This othering would usually vary based on what is deemed to be at stake. Nonetheless, ethnic and cultural minorities are usually the main and fixed target of such otherisation. It seems the New Zealand nation found within the 15 March incidents an opportunity to go around the middleman and speak for itself. That was the final word that put an end to a long and ongoing doubt on inclusivity of the nation when it comes to certain minorities. The idea that the only way to integrate into mainstream was to assimilate one's identity, was rejected in many different ways in its dealing with the incidents. While the government and the media were quite effectual in getting the message through, it was actually the nation that owned the message exclusively.*

## **Introduction**

In the early afternoon on Friday 15 March 2019, a gunman attacked two mosques in the city of Christchurch in the South Island of New Zealand; killing 51 worshippers. Mass murdering about 0.1% of the whole New Zealand Muslim population of around 50,000 in their most sacred place of worship in one of the most blessedly peaceful countries might seem to be the least anticipated matter. However, the reality is that the outcome was even more surprising. Farid Ahmed from Christchurch, whose wife was killed in the incident, summarized the upshot of the incidents as: "One hate was

replaced with millions of loves”.<sup>1</sup> New Zealanders, from all walks of life, responded to the incidents in a way that even astonished themselves. Neither the wider society, nor politicians or the media showed the slightest approbation to the atrocity committed against Muslim worshipers. Nothing that could be preyed on by those likeminded supremacists who were supposed to take on the situation and drive the gap further to the extent that it turns into an irreparable division in society. To the contrary, and maybe for the first time in a long time, the incident attracted a lot of support, empathy and sympathy for the Muslim community. A Muslim woman talking to Jacinda Ardern, when the New Zealand Prime Minister visited a Mosques in Dunedin, put the experience into some very strong words: “I have never felt New Zealand home like this before”<sup>2</sup> pointing to the way that the nation supported the Muslim community after the Christchurch terror attacks. To shed light on the bigger picture, hereunder I cover the main manifestations of such support at governmental, media and societal levels.

### **New Zealand government: Example par excellence of moral leadership in a tragedy**

The response of the New Zealand government, led by its Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, to the March 15<sup>th</sup> incidents astounded many experts. Prime Minister Ardern was on her way to the site of a new school in New Plymouth when the shooting began. “They [the targeted community] are us” was the message that was conveyed in the first speech Ardern gave to the media at Devon Hotel at 4:20pm on the same day. The Muslim community was called ‘us’ and this message featured in almost all governmental responses to the incidents. Furthermore, in the same day of 15 March

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Leask, One hate replaced with millions of loves, *NZ Herald* September 15, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Zane Small, “Dunedin Muslim’s ‘astounding message’ to Jacinda Ardern about New Zealand after Christchurch attack”, *Newshub*, March 27, 2019, <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2019/03/dunedin-muslim-s-astounding-message-to-jacinda-ardern-about-new-zealand-after-christchurch-attack.html>

the Prime Minister was clear that the tragedy could "only be described as a terrorist attack".<sup>3</sup>

Within hours Ardern was in Christchurch to meet survivors and the bereaved.

Wearing a headscarf, she mourned with them at a refuge centre established at Hagley College. In addition, the government, in an impressively quick response, put a ban on military style weapons that were used in the assault. In these three ways of rejecting any 'otherisation' of the targeted community, calling the attacks as acts of 'terrorism' and finally, as Ardern put it, changing laws to "make sure that it's covering off all that we have seen and experienced since the 15th of March,"<sup>4</sup> the New Zealand government stripped the attacks of any legitimacy. This latter move made job of those extremists who were ready to support the attacks indirectly through raising 'buts and ifs', extremely difficult. The government and politicians in opposition parties gave confidence to the targeted community that they were fully protected. Above all, the government established a Royal Commission of inquiry into the failings of the various security agencies after the Christchurch attack.<sup>5</sup> This suggests the authorities were prepared to expose internal institutional shortcomings if necessary, in order to prevent similar incidents from taking place in future. This was a quite unorthodox stance when it comes to protecting the rights of a very small minority.

Each of the above were quite bold actions undertaken by the New Zealand government if compared with similar situations in other corners of the world. While the New Zealand government and politicians could use different excuses to evade making such decisive stands, they resisted all the temptations and showed unequivocal support for the targeted community. It is why their work was widely

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<sup>3</sup> Zane Small, "One week on: A timeline of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's Christchurch terror attack response", *Newshub*, March 22, 2019, <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2019/03/one-week-on-a-timeline-of-prime-minister-jacinda-ardern-s-christchurch-terror-attack-response.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2019/03/dunedin-muslim-s-astounding-message-to-jacinda-ardern-about-new-zealand-after-christchurch-attack.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2019/03/jacinda-ardern-announces-royal-commission-into-security-agencies-after-christchurch-attack.html>



praised not only by the Muslim community of New Zealand and the Islamic world, but also by people around the globe. One of the most touching responses to such genuine, deep and unconditional support was to call the Prime Minister ‘Sister’ by the Muslim community: "We call her [Jacinda Ardern] 'Sister' now. She is our sister."<sup>6</sup> A portrait of the New Zealand Prime Minister wearing a hijab was projected onto the world's tallest building in Dubai in a show of regard.<sup>7</sup> The response of the New Zealand government, and especially the Prime Minister, was admired internationally. For some experts, the reason why Ardern had such a widespread impact on millions of people around the world was because she responded in such a genuinely human manner, a way that allowed compassion rather than political calculation to guide her actions.<sup>8</sup> Australian actress, comedian and writer Magda Szubanski used Ardern’s performance to set down a challenge for her country's politicians: “I believe I’ve coined a new term: to ‘Ardern Up’ - meaning to show strength, decency, compassion and true leadership. Aus[tralian] politicians, you really need to ‘Ardern Up’.”<sup>9</sup>

### **New Zealand media: An unexpected hero**

In addition, and parallel to what happens on the ground, to a great extent, it is the media coverage that shapes popular perception of that reality. Based on previous experiences, it is safe to say that if it was in any other corner of the world, it maybe would look quite normal, and even smart, for the local media to mind their own interests and, as a business, take advantage of a highly dramatic situation to promote their brand. To ensure their footprint in the major global media outlets, which would

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<sup>6</sup> Nick O'Malley and Deborah Snow, “Christchurch mosque shooting: A masterclass from New Zealand in responding to terror”, *Stuff*, March 23, 2019. Accessible via:

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/christchurch-shooting/111502558/christchurch-mosque-shooting-a-masterclass-from-new-zealand-in-responding-to-terror>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2019/03/dunedin-muslim-s-astounding-message-to-jacinda-ardern-about-new-zealand-after-christchurch-attack.html?amp\\_js\\_v=0.1&usqp=mq331AQECAEoAQ==](https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2019/03/dunedin-muslim-s-astounding-message-to-jacinda-ardern-about-new-zealand-after-christchurch-attack.html?amp_js_v=0.1&usqp=mq331AQECAEoAQ==)

<sup>8</sup> Chris Marshall, “Jacinda Ardern’s ‘pitch perfect’ leadership was no performance,”

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/christchurch-shooting/111873366/jacinda-arderns-pitch-perfect-leadership-was-no-performance>

<sup>9</sup> World reacts to New Zealand's new gun laws after Christchurch terror attacks, *Stuff*, Mar 21, 2019. from <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/christchurch-shooting/111465565/world-reacts-to-new-zealands-new-gun-laws-after-christchurch-terror-attacks>

serve their fame and their business, the New Zealand media could simply cover and echo what was seen as 'hot news'. Not playing the most exemplary role in portraying the Muslim community of New Zealand prior to the March 15 incidents, such a stance would not surprise many. Despite all the temptations and previous precedents, the New Zealand media however chose a very different and maturely responsible path. As will be explained briefly hereunder, the role of the New Zealand media was so significant that it deserves allocation of a separate section to it in this paper.

We know that terrorism is as much about propaganda as it is about ideology. In addition to harming people in an attack, the larger goal of terrorism is to “publicise and aggrandise their actions”<sup>10</sup> which in turn helps them with the dual purpose of marketing their ideology and recruiting supporters.<sup>11</sup> In open democracies such as New Zealand, trust and confidence in governments is not a blank check handed to politicians to use at their whim. In established democracies free flow of information is guaranteed by both law and the established traditions. In such open environments countering an unpleasant narrative –in this case the terrorist one- is far beyond the government’s solo capability. Media in open societies might not only give a dismissive shrug to any demand from the government but might even join “poking fun at earnest government efforts”<sup>12</sup> if they decide to. The New Zealand media not only did not play a selfish negative role but surprisingly played the role of a trustable bridge. This was done by connecting the three main triangles of the equation; namely the wider society, the targeted community and the government. Any delay in, let alone problematic, relay of these three players’ messages could lead to devastating consequences. Such delay could help the message of the perpetrator to overshadow the rest and sit atop the public arena.

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<sup>10</sup> Jacinta Carroll, “Dignity, inclusiveness and the power to change: the aftermath of the Christchurch attack,” *The Strategist*, Mar 20, 2019, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, from <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/dignity-inclusiveness-and-the-power-to-change-the-aftermath-of-the-christchurch-attack/>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Terrorists usually come out with a very large fist of graphic violence and bang on the table to make a deafening noise and dominate the conversation by pushing the majority, which is of a different view to them, towards the margins of passivity.<sup>13</sup> Theoretically, the media could play a dual role of helping terrorists (through active support or empathetic unresponsiveness), or alternatively confronting them by educating the population and repairing the gaps created by violence by promoting a message of solidarity and community. In the case of the 15 March terror attacks, a great volume of evidence demonstrates that New Zealand media was actively and unequivocally opposed to the agenda of the terrorist. In the battle with the terrorist over information the New Zealand media, despite the lack of previous experience and the abruptness of the situation, came out surprisingly with minimum flaws. Without hesitation, the media followed the lead of the relevant authorities to ensure that the attacker was not given the platform to dictate the trend of the flow of information. While, on paper, the terrorist had succeeded in the first phase of his operation, the media denied the attacker any opportunity to dictate the message on the day, being fully aware of the power of the narrative.<sup>14</sup> Rather, with the help, if not leadership, of the mainstream New Zealand media, the attacker failed in propagandising his agenda. This left much of the public arena open for another narrative to lead the day; that of a “welcoming New Zealand, home to those who were attacked and hurting with them.”<sup>15</sup> No doubt the gruesomeness of the incidents succeeded in catching the public’s attention. However, with the exceptional role that the New Zealand media played, the incidents generated empathy and support for the targeted community and raised a spirit of solidarity among the nation. This was contrary to objectives of the attacks in sowing discord and division.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

The New Zealand media refused to be distracted by tempting and self-serving irresponsible journalism and focused on educating people. It is the credit that leading counter-terrorism expert, Jacinta Carroll, gives to the New Zealand media when evaluating their performance after the 15/3 incidents:

Research on countering terrorist narratives and countering violent extremism has identified ongoing issues in trying to get meaningful and timely information out to the right audiences. ... [in New Zealand after the 15/3 terror attacks] despite the demands of the 24/7 rolling news cycle, much of the commentary—including from some of the more outspoken media personalities—has stressed caution in speculating about what was going on, and started healthy discussions about the possible links between simplistic public debates about issues and the global manifestation of political extremism, including violence.<sup>16</sup>

In this way the New Zealand media denied the ultimately desired ‘propaganda value of the attack’ from the terrorist. This not only prevented the perpetrator from actualizing his plan but, much more importantly, opened a new path in countering racially and ideologically charged violent extremism. The Paris Christchurch Call summit, where heads of the main social media giants and the world leaders sat together to find effective ways in stopping terrorism on social media, was only one and –hopefully- the beginning of many fruits of a more responsible approach by the media towards hate mongering led by the example of the New Zealand media in denying ‘oxygen’ to extreme views, as the Australian opposition leader Bill Shorten puts it.<sup>17</sup> Having the, not so much constructive, history of the New Zealand media in

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

their dealing with the Muslim community prior to the 15 March incidents in mind, the New Zealand media's response to the incident was surprisingly mature and inspiring. Not only did the New Zealand media decline to exacerbate social gaps but actively played a positive role in bringing people closer together. The New Zealand media successfully ignored the adrenaline rush and resisted against being carried away by the temptation of 'hot news' and therefore stayed focused on what mattered. For that; it is safe to call the New Zealand media an unexpected hero in the aftermath of the terror attacks.

### **A nation speaking up**

It is not unusual for small but vocal groups to try to talk on behalf of a whole nation claiming how much a nation loves or hates others. This othering usually would vary based on what is deemed to be at stake. Nonetheless, ethnic and cultural minorities are often the main, fixed target of such otherisation. It seems New Zealand found in the March 15 incidents an opportunity to speak for itself; signaling an end to ongoing doubt over inclusivity of the nation when it comes to minorities. The idea that integration means assimilation of one's own identity appears to have been rejected by the nation in dealing with the 15 March incidents. While the government and the media were quite effectual in getting the message through, it was the nation which owned the message. Despite all the credit that goes to the former two for doing a thorough job, the ownership of the message solely belongs to the latter.

Within just two days of the 15 March massacre, New Zealanders from all walks of life voluntarily donated more than \$5 million for the support of the victims and their families; around \$1 per person for the country's total population. This generosity was accompanied by even more touching outpourings of grief and solidarity.<sup>18</sup> In addition

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<sup>18</sup> Douglas Pratt, "Mosque shooter no ideological Einstein" in *Ideas Room*, Newsroom, March 18, 2019, <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/@ideasroom/2019/03/18/493097/mosque-shooter-no-ideological-einstein>

to showering the Islamic centres around the country with flowers and messages of support, tens of thousands of Kiwis attended vigils in almost all of the main New Zealand cities as well as some cities around the world with a notable Kiwi population. At 1.30pm 22 March 2019 an Islamic call to prayer was sound on television and radio as well as at many workplaces around the country. Two minutes' silence was marked 1.30pm until 1.32pm the same day and Church bells were tolled at 3pm. A Muslim worshiper speaking at the prayer service a week after the massacre, gestured at the thousands of New Zealanders who had gathered at Hagley Park in solidarity with the slain, echoes the way that the community was surprised by the depth and magnitude of such overwhelming support by Kiwis. Pointing to the message of kindness, unity and love offered by the nation through different means during a week after the incidents, the worshiper cannot hide his amazement: “We had no idea it [the nation’s response] would be like this”.<sup>19</sup>

**New Zealand’s response: A political masterclass, beginning of a new era, or a resurfacing of compassion?**

The response of the New Zealand public to the incidents was so clear and strong that even the most skeptical of persons could not deny its grandeur. However, like any other message, the New Zealand response to the above incidents might get interpreted in a way inconsistent to the nature of that response. The reaction of the New Zealand public to the incident could be interpreted in three ways: a well-played political performance by the New Zealand government, an overnight change in the nation’s attitude towards minorities due to the incidents, or a resurfacing of a deeper compassion. While the first interpretation might start with a seemingly positive focus on the extraordinary performance of the New Zealand Prime Minister, one that

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<sup>19</sup> Nick O'Malley and Deborah Snow, “Christchurch mosque shooting: A masterclass from New Zealand in responding to terror”, *Stuff*, March 23, 2019. Accessible via: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/christchurch-shooting/111502558/christchurch-mosque-shooting-a-masterclass-from-new-zealand-in-responding-to-terror>

generated excitement among both the mainstream population and minorities towards her, this may simply convey the wrong message. That would suggest the response was merely a well calculated and politically motivated performance to serve certain interests rather than indicating anything deep and lasting. For this interpretation ‘the sky remains the same as ever’. The second interpretation goes to the opposite extreme by claiming a fundamental change overnight in the whole nation’s attitude towards minorities because of the incidents. A single incident being responsible for a fundamental social change again is too good to be true. The third interpretation, which this paper supports, argues that the New Zealand response to the incidents did not create anything new that was not already there beforehand. It simply resurfaced the true peaceful, inclusive and welcoming nature of the New Zealand society. A nature which was intentionally ignored by those who reject diversity.

In the aftermath of the 15 March terror attacks, the focus, and to a great extent justly, has been on the moral leadership of the New Zealand Prime Minister. Ardern has been, not only locally but also globally, praised for being a “beacon of hope for a new kind of political leadership”<sup>20</sup> in a time of crisis. This crisis had the potential to become a divisive force. However, such a consensus of opinion rapidly fades away as soon as the source for such leadership is searched. While some experts understand and explain Ardern’s work as smart politics, others see it as humanity. From the very beginning some experts were quick in suggesting that the New Zealand government’s reaction to the incidents, and Ardern’s performance in particular, could be better explained through strategic pragmatism than compassion. Such Machiavellian pragmatism was supposed to serve three main objectives. First; to ensure that the division the gunman sought to sow between New Zealand Muslims and the greater community does not take hold. Second; to head off the potential for a culture war inside the country. A war

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<sup>20</sup> Chris Marshall, “Jacinda Ardern’s ‘pitch perfect’ leadership was no performance,” <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/christchurch-shooting/111873366/jacinda-arderns-pitch-perfect-leadership-was-no-performance>

in which some elements of the political left seek to identify racism in New Zealand society as the cause of the attack and sections of the right using it to impugn immigration or the Islamic community itself. Third; by positioning New Zealand itself as the victim of the attack as well as its Muslim community, and by demonstrating unity with that community, reducing the potential for revenge attacks.<sup>21</sup>

While the positive outcomes above could be attributed to the way that the New Zealand government dealt with the incidents, reducing such a response to a calibrated political performance is an unjust assessment of the motivation underlying such a compassionate reaction. The “rare combination of the right words and the right actions”<sup>22</sup>, despite its tempting attraction, is far from being explanatory to such a “compassionate poise.”<sup>23</sup> When it comes to explaining the intentions behind her actions, the words of Jacinda Ardern are more valid than the suppositions of others. While Ardern could humbly accept, or at least happily stay silent if not actively encourage, such praises of being a “commanding figure of ... strength, [and] a textbook example to other world leaders about how to respond in the face of mass casualty terrorist attacks”<sup>24</sup> and harvest the political gains, she denied such calculations altogether. Ardern insisted that she never really thought about how she should conduct herself at the time. In one interview, she batted away any suggestion that she had shown great leadership, saying instead she had simply shown humanity.<sup>25</sup> “You need to remove some of the politics sometimes and just think about humanity. That's all.” Ardern asserted.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Nick O'Malley and Deborah Snow, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> Jacinta Carroll, *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> Nesrine Malik, “With respect: how Jacinda Ardern showed the world what a leader should be,” *The Guardian*, March 28, 2019, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/28/with-respect-how-jacinda-ardern-showed-the-world-what-a-leader-should-be>

<sup>24</sup> Nick O'Malley and Deborah Snow, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/christchurch-shooting/111873366/jacinda-arderns-pitch-perfect-leadership-was-no-performance>

<sup>26</sup> “What Jacinda Ardern wrote in the minutes after Christchurch mosque terror attacks revealed”, *New Zealand Herald*, April 16, 2019, [https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=12219986](https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12219986)



## **Conclusion**

Seeing the New Zealand's compassionate support of the Muslim community after the 15 March incidents, as an overnight change in people's attitude is not an adequate explanation. While showing a short and minimal pity towards those who are seen as others might be understandable, what New Zealanders did could only arise from a deep sense of unity. Such a unity could not emerge out of the blue overnight. Kiwis going way beyond their comfort zone and learning about the Muslim community, protecting their places of worship, donating significant amounts of money to support the affected families, even many Kiwi women putting on the hijab to make Muslim women who wear their faith to feel safe, and more importantly thousands of Kiwis joining in events and gatherings for weeks, could not come out of a transient feeling of pity.

If neither the political acumen nor a sudden change of attitude can be explanatory, then what explains such a remarkable response that has impressed so many people around the world? Knowing where the source of such reaction was located, provides us with a better chance of understanding it. The reality is that if the response was merely a matter of Machiavellian politics then the conclusion could not be that hopeful. As we know, it is not unusual to for politicians to move away from a policy or action as soon as the designated goal is served. If those who claim such a performance was calculated to serve the previously mentioned purposes are right, then it is not something to base a long term and foundational inter-cultural relations on. Of course, such a response being rooted in an ephemeral feeling of pity could not be more encouraging. However, if the action was rooted in true humanity then the surrounding environment is as important as the individual acting within it. As long as such environment exists it is safe to expect similar reaction from whoever exercises within it.

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