ESSENTIALISING ISLAM: MULTICULTURALISM AND ISLAMIC POLITICS IN NEW ZEALAND

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Introduction

Over the last two years a number of incidents have brought the attention of the general public to the existence of a small but significant Muslim community in New Zealand. Disputes among Muslims concerning appropriate practice of their religion in New Zealand and the control of Islamic institutions have spilled over into the popular media, indicating a degree of concern with these issues beyond the borders of the Muslim community. An argument over the control of the Al Noor mosque in Christchurch led to warnings in the popular press of alleged links to terrorism and Islamic extremism among some factions within the Muslim community (*The Christchurch Press*, 24 October 2003, 'Terror Link Warning', p.A1). More recently an ongoing dispute concerning *halal* certification for New Zealand's lucrative trade in meat with the Middle East has again seen internal wrangling among the Muslim community become a matter for wider popular concern (*The Christchurch Press*, 15 September 2004, 'Mosque and Meat Divided Muslims', p. A15).

Debate over the opinions of New Zealand Muslims and those who claimed to represent them rose to the fore in discussion over the voting record of New Zealand's only Muslim MP on two controversial pieces of legislation, the Prostitution Reform Act 2003 and The Civil Union Act 2004 (*The New Zealand Herald*, 9 July 2004, 'Muslim MP Explains his No-vote to Community').[2] The appropriate degree of engagement between government institutions and Muslims was also vigorously contested during a dispute concerning the establishment of a prayer room (frequently referred to in the

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[2] All references to *The New Zealand Herald* are from the on-line edition: http://www.nzherald.co.nz.

popular press as a 'mosque') at a state high school; and during a legal debate regarding the suitability of two female Muslim witnesses giving testimony in court with their faces concealed by a *burqa* (*The New Zealand Herald*, 4 November 2003, 'Controversial Mosque Opens'; *The New Zealand Herald,* 16 August 2004, 'Row Over Veils Disrupts Court Hearing').

Incidents of organised racist attacks on Muslims have shown that Islam's profile in New Zealand has become high enough to attract the attention of a more repellent section of New Zealand society (*The New Zealand Herald*, 28 September 2004, 'Pork Sent in Mail to Muslims'). By the same token, in the last election campaign those politicians who habitually prey upon xenophobic fears for their support expanded their target from the 'usual suspects' of Asians and Pacific Islanders to include Muslims as potential 'threats to national security' (*The New Zealand Herald,* 29 July 2005, 'Peters Warns of Muslim Serpents'; *The New Zealand Herald,* 11 August 2005, 'Peters Claims Muslim Group Funding Radical').

While these incidents have little direct relationship with each other, and are of limited significance in themselves, they are indicative of a rise in the importance of Islam in public life in New Zealand. Such matters as appropriate dress in Islam, Islamic attitudes to prostitution and sexuality, and the correct manner of *halal* slaughter are no longer the subject of obscure theological debate, but instead have a small but significantly concrete effect on the lives of a wide section of the New Zealand public. Islam is now being deployed as part of a political discourse, aimed at assuming or disputing positions of authority and control over organisations and strategic assets, which impact on general public life in New Zealand. In this sense it is appropriate to talk of the emergence of a nascent form of Islamic politics in this country.

On the face of it, the emergence of any form of public political role for Islam in New Zealand society would seem highly unlikely. New Zealand is a highly secularised society, possibly one of the most secularised in the world (Kolig 2000:231). Mainstream politicians make few if any appeals to religion in political discussions, and religious organisations generally have little voice in formal or informal public debate. Despite this, a form of Islamic politics is emerging in this country. The complex interrelationship of Islam, the personal and communal interpretations and actions of its practitioners, and the way in which these actions are conceptualised by non-Muslims is creating a political role for the religion, albeit a role which is bounded and contested. While this form of politics is somewhat limited in scale and significance, Islam in New Zealand now matters in political terms.

The conflation of Islam with a form of essential ethnic identity, and the use of related Muslim stereotypes by those seeking to capitalise on xenophobic fears, while constituting a type of political role for Islam, does not represent a particularly unusual phenomenon. While it is socially

significant, and has an impact on both individual Muslims and on Islam in New Zealand, it has more to do with the politics of racism in New Zealand society, with Muslims serving as the latest in a long line of targets, rather than with any particular feature of Islam or the Muslim community. Of more interest is the way in which differing understandings of Islam are being deployed by Muslims in political discourses within the Muslim community, and how these are perceived by New Zealand society in general. The growing significance of this form of Islamic politics in New Zealand offers an accurate understanding of the Muslim community, and of the specific issues within this community that have taken on an Islamic dimension, and which have some importance for society as a whole. However, such an understanding is proving problematic, due to both the complex nature of the political process related to Islam, and the way in which ethno-religious difference is conceptualised and understood in New Zealand society.

The Muslim community is internally extremely diverse, incorporating individuals from a wide range of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, often with very different understandings of Islam stemming from this diversity (see Shepard's essay in this volume and Shepard 2002 for an overview of the composition of the New Zealand Muslim community). Accordingly, the way in which Islam is used in political discourse is influenced by a broad range of culturally specific approaches to the religion, individual interpretations, and by the wider social, economic and political systems of New Zealand society. While this complexity may in itself prove a barrier to understanding the nature of Islamic politics, and indeed the various understandings of Islam in New Zealand society, a more significant problem is the way in which ethno-religious difference from the implicit 'norm' of New Zealand society is conceptualised.

New Zealand society is currently wrestling with rapidly increasing cultural diversity within its population, and is doing so using a somewhat ill-defined version of the ideological system of multiculturalism, which has emerged over the past twenty years in a number of countries with ethnic European majorities.[3] This system is arguably serving to limit severely the possible understandings of Islamic politics by essentialising Islam as a monolithic and an ahistorical entity, differentiating only between 'tolerable' aspects of the religion that are to be encouraged, and 'intolerable' aspects that are to be suppressed. This refusal to engage with the complex and dynamic nature of Islam results in a systematic misunderstanding of the particular political disputes that are occurring within the Muslim community in New

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[3] As noted below, the reasons why non-Western societies with high degrees of cultural diversity are excluded from the debate over multiculturalism, except in the form of extreme negative examples such as the genocide in Rwanda, is an interesting question that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Zealand—a misunderstanding that could potentially have important consequences for New Zealand society as a whole.

In this essay I will examine the way in which the concept of multiculturalism is distorting the understanding of the political role of Islam in internal disputes within the Muslim community. This will involve a critical analysis of the ideology of multiculturalism, both in general and in its particular manifestation in New Zealand; and a detailed examination, within the context of this analysis, of two major internal disputes within the Muslim community in Christchurch.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is a fairly ill-defined and nebulous idea, and its manifestations in various countries display a great deal of variation, dependent on the particulars of the society in question (Vincent 2003:43; Grillo 1998:193-194). As noted, multiculturalism has been a highly controversial and contested discourse in all its manifestations; and as such has been a central issue in the debate about the nature of modern societies being transformed by globalisation (Brah 1996:227).

As an explicit official government policy, multiculturalism first emerged in Canada in the 1970s in response to a complex variety of issues, including demands for greater autonomy or independence by Francophone Canadians; assertions of indigenous rights by various first-nations groups; and political pressure from migrants for explicit recognition of their own cultural traditions in their new country (Mackey 1999:70). In addition to this, multiculturalism came to play an important role in the creation of national identity in Canada. The conception of the nation as being composed of a unique, multicultural society, embracing the related value of tolerance, became an emblem of national identity, which could serve to distinguish Canada from both the United States and various European countries, at least for the Anglophone majority (Bonnett 2000:63). From Canada, government policies of multiculturalism, either *de jure* or *de facto*, spread to a number of countries, principally the United States, Australia, Great Britain and, somewhat belatedly and in an ambiguous form, New Zealand.[4] In each of these countries multiculturalism took on a unique form and character, as part

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[4] It is interesting to note that virtually all of the considerable discussion of modern multiculturalism centres on these Anglophone nations, occasionally including other European nations. A large number of nations in the developing world, while lacking policies formally identified as multiculturalism, deal with far more complex and balanced inter-ethnic relationships than are generally found in the West, but are excluded from this debate; and are typically only raised as negative examples, such as in the case of the genocide in Rwanda.

of the particular social and political processes within each of these societies. While policies of multiculturalism and the ideologies that sustain them vary considerably in these settings, we may identify several key ideas generally associated with this ideology that will be useful in understanding its influence on the emergence of Islamic politics in New Zealand.

Multiculturalism permits the maintenance of cultural difference of ethnic minorities within the state, in explicit contrast to the assimilative ideal formerly associated with the nation-state. Rather than requiring assimilation into the mainstream culture, and the repression and denial of cultural difference, multiculturalism purports to allow and encourage the different cultural features of ethnic minorities, while extending to them the full rights of citizenship of the state (Grillo 1998:176). In a related manner, it is generally regarded as both natural and desirable that recognised culturally distinct groups should generate civil society organisations to represent their legitimate[5] culturally specific concerns. The state is seen as having an obligation to engage with these groups or at least to hear their concerns (Alwall 2002:76-77). Thus multiculturalism encourages ethnic groups to maintain a distinctive identity and engage in the politics of recognition within a single society. In this way particular ethnic identities may be preserved, while common citizenship provides a countervailing identity that unites the different groups in a common polity (Kivisto 2002:36).

To understand why an implicit policy of multiculturalism should affect the role of an internally ethnically diverse religion, such as Islam, in New Zealand, it is necessary briefly to explore a more critical understanding of multiculturalism, and the way in which Islam is perceived in New Zealand society.

Multiculturalism has been a highly controversial discourse in all of the settings in which it is found. Much of the debate over multicultural policies and their social implications has typically been framed in terms of general support from a tolerant and liberal left, and opposition from the political right over fears of the undermining of social cohesion and the destruction of pre-existing social values (Brah 1996:227-228).

At the same time however there has been a pointed and coherent intellectual examination of multiculturalism, from outside of this liberal and conservative theatre of opposition, that has been highly critical of the ideologies underlying this policy initiative (May 1999:11). Rather than as a manifestation of benign tolerance, multiculturalism may be seen fundamentally as being a way in which to conceptualise and control difference in an overarching framework based upon rational liberal values

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[5] Although what is and is not 'legitimate' is highly problematic, and disputes over the boundaries of cultural legitimacy are a common feature of most forms of Western multiculturalism.

(Parekh 2000:81).

Previously nation-states, such as New Zealand, attempted to suppress cultural difference in their populations, actively trying to assimilate minority ethnic groups and denying the existence of cultural minorities. Multiculturalism on the other hand may be seen as providing a method for dealing with a degree of divergence in the ethnic make-up of the population, in a social environment where formal and informal constraints on the actions of the state make such resolute suppression untenable. Rather than refusing to acknowledge the existence of minorities, and attempting to suppress significant cultural difference, multiculturalism provides a system whereby cultural difference may be explicitly conceptualised, and relations between the majority culture and minority ethnic groups can be constructed based upon this conceptualisation. As Parekh notes: 'The term "multicultural" refers to the fact of cultural diversity, the term "multiculturalism" to a normative response to that fact' (quoted in Kivisto 2002:36). It can in effect be seen simply as a more sophisticated model of social control than the nation-state model it seeks to replace (Bonnett 2000:107).

Current manifestations of multiculturalism are based upon an implicit norm, from which individuals may diverge in certain limited ways, with the power to control this divergence resting largely in the hands of members of this dominant 'normal' group (Gunew 2004:16-17). Instead of being suppressed as illegitimate, difference is *managed* through the construction of a system of categories to which individuals and groups may be assigned, and relationships may be constructed between them. Minorities are expected to conform to the values of the *de facto* normal group, except in the limited areas in which they are allowed to differ. The power to define, limit and tolerate difference in this system lies in the hands of the majority and is essentially imposed on those who are seen as outside this group (Mackey 1999:70). In this way, state multiculturalism may be seen as being based on the same assimilative presumptions as the nation-state model they seek to replace, only manifested in a more refined and subtle manner.

The concept of culture in this system is used as a device for the categorisation and control of individuals and groups outside of the *de facto* norm. Cultural difference is conceived of as resting in a number of defined and recognised groups, distinguished from one another by 'cultural' features. This is quite a different understanding of the concept of culture from that used in the social sciences, and particularly by Anthropology, which can be seen as the original progenitor of the modern use of this idea (Kuper 2000). Anthropological understandings of culture are, in their broadest sense, conceptual tools for the understanding of human societies and the actions of individuals within them. To be useful in this role, conceptions of culture must be historically located and embedded within the wider social, economic and political systems of the particular society in which they are found; and

sophisticated enough to explain cultural change, hybridisation and individual agency. In contrast, 'culture', under multiculturalism, functions as a mechanism to assign individuals and groups to particular officially designated categories, in order to manage and control the extent of divergence from the norm. Culture is reduced to a system of reified, essentialised ethnic categories, whose function is to normalise social action rather than understand it. Culture is presented as sui generis, ethnicity is equated with culture and both become bounded cultural objects in a static and undifferentiated conception of cultural identity allied to the notion of separate, discrete, incommensurate cultures (see May 1999:12). Because of this essentialisation, and its separation of the population into distinct, immutable cultural groups, multiculturalism has been criticised as essentially being a representation of the ideological form of racism that institutionalises ethnic and cultural difference (Hewitt 2005:147).

Not only are conceptions of culture static, monolithic and ahistorical, they also define the culture of minorities as being essentially fragmentary, in contrast to the totality of the culture of the norm. The 'core' culture of the country is conceived as being a whole way of life, with the cultures of ethnic minorities allowed to deviate from this norm in a few rigidly defined areas. Thus minority cultures are not seen as a whole way of life in themselves, merely as the fragments of cultures that may supplement the incontestable norm (Mackey 1999:67). Minority cultures are assigned a different mode of existence from the majority culture, and their only legitimate role is to enrich this majority culture with an agreeable cosmopolitanism and safe exoticism (Hage 2000:121). In the United Kingdom, this system has been referred to, somewhat disparagingly, as 'three s' multiculturalism, a multiculturalism of saris, samosas and steel bands (Donald and Rattansi 1992:2). Gunew similarly refers to current manifestations of multiculturalism as parading cultural difference as apolitical ethnic accessories, celebrated in multicultural festivals of costumes, cooking and concerts (Gunew 2004:17).

Minorities are typically only allowed to deviate from the norm to the extent that they enrich, rather than challenge, the culturally specific values of the majority. The majority sees its cultural values as being universal and hence transcultural in nature. Thus it will allow for cultural variations only in as much as they do not challenge these basic, 'universal' values (Grillo 1998:195). Any such challenge is seen as implicitly rejecting these universal values and hence is deemed to be beyond the articulation of acceptable cultural difference (Horton 2003:25). Failure to accept these limits on multiculturalism is seen as indicative of bad citizenship, disqualifying the miscreant from taking part in 'multicultural' debate (Parekh 2000:89).

Multiculturalism as an ideology, then, has a strong tendency to strictly limit divergence from the *de facto* norm and to essentialise cultural difference, and to do so in a way that is largely controlled by the majority in a

given society. Other cultures are seen as fragmentary supplements to the majority culture, and their proper role is to enrich this majority culture. Any aspects of minority cultures that challenge the values of the majority are suppressed as being beyond the boundaries of acceptable difference. The form of multiculturalism presently developing in New Zealand, while reflecting the unique history and composition of this society, is clearly based upon the same fundamental premise of controlling difference through a process dominated by those who define themselves as the majority.

Multiculturalism in New Zealand

Multiculturalism in New Zealand first became a major issue in the 1980s, and government policy dealing with multiculturalism began to develop in a somewhat ambiguous and *ad hoc* manner in the 1990s (Smith 2005:242). The issue of multiculturalism is considerably complicated by the official policy of biculturalism that has developed out of political dialogue between the state and indigenous Maori. Biculturalism is framed as an equal partnership between Maori and Pakeha, with the latter group seen as an essentially homogenous Anglo-white cultural community, with no room for other partners. A formal policy of multiculturalism, achieved by extending official recognition and limited rights to other minority cultures, would constitute a major challenge to this relationship (Nola 2000:206-207). There is strong concern among Maori that a formal policy of multiculturalism could have the effect of undermining their distinctive relationship with the state as the indigenous people of New Zealand, in effect reducing them to simply one ethnic minority among many. The relatively large population and political power of Maori has so far ensured official support from the government for the position that multiculturalism should be developed through biculturalism. This is however being increasingly contested, as the necessity of dealing with large numbers of people from different cultural backgrounds within New Zealand society grows (Sissons 2005:156-157).

Despite the lack of a clear, official policy of multiculturalism, a number of significant government policies have been implemented which incorporate important aspects of this ideology, and which serve to create a *de facto* multiculturalism within New Zealand—though one which is particularly ambiguous and ill defined. In particular, the 1986 Immigration Policy Review committed the government to encouraging migrants 'to participate fully in New Zealand's multicultural society while being able to maintain valued elements in their own heritage' (Burke 1986:11, quoted from Ho, Cheung, Bedford and Leung 2000). The Review also rejected 'the old notion of assimilation' and noted that 'our society clearly now sees a positive value in diversity and the retention by ethnic minorities of their cultural

heritage' (Burke 1986:48, quoted from Ho, Cheung, Bedford and Leung 2000).

The terms 'multicultural' and 'multiculturalism' litter government documentation and official policy, though little or no attempt is made precisely to define the nature or limits of this multiculturalism. The term is used in general public discourse in a broadly positive manner, sometimes contrasted, but more often juxtaposed, with 'biculturalism', as meaning the tolerance and acceptance of a certain form and degree of cultural difference. This 'difference' is clearly perceived as a deviation from the majority, Anglo-Celtic cultural norm, though it is never explicitly defined as such. The ambiguity, and lack of reflexive understanding, of the term 'multiculturalism' in New Zealand has served to make it particularly superficial, and prey to some of the problematic features of this policy and related ideology found in overseas settings.

As in Canada, multiculturalism in New Zealand is often invoked as part of a mythology of identity of the Anglophone majority, in an attempt to differentiate themselves from the notionally homogenous European societies which had previously served as models for national identity (Mackey 1999:3; Gunew 2004:16). The value of 'tolerance', and a society which is 'enriched' by the presence of a variety of different 'cultures', are promoted as part of the unique nature of New Zealand society.[6] The fact that essentially the same features of multiculturalism are being used to make similar claims to uniqueness, in the very Anglophone-dominated countries that the New Zealand identity is seeking to distinguish itself from, and that New Zealand is simply following them down the multicultural road, is conveniently ignored.

As with other forms of modern state multiculturalism, that found in New Zealand rests upon the construction of reified cultural categories to which individuals may be assigned. The power to define the nature and limits of cultural deviation from the *de facto* norm of the Anglo-Celtic majority rests largely in the hands of this majority. Cultural variation is permitted in order to enrich New Zealand society, and aspects of culture that fail to conform to this limited goal are marginalised or suppressed. European liberal multiculturalism in New Zealand perceives culture to a large extent to be quaint styles of dress, ethnic food and exotic performing arts, preferably displayed in a contextual space outside of daily life, such as a particular 'ethnic' festival. Control over wider daily life is maintained within the framework of the culturally specific values of the ethnic majority (who often bemoan their own lack of 'culture'). Culture is reduced to a form of tamed

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[6] See the entry 'Multicultural New Zealand' from the Government's on-line ' Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand', as a typical example of the mountain of references to multiculturalism in this context:
http://www.teara.govt.nz/NewZealanders/NewZealandPeoples/TheNewZealanders/13/en.

exoticism.   More troublesome culturally-based ideas and practices, which conflict with the cultural values of the dominant culture, are banished beyond the realm of legitimate cultural diversity where they may be suppressed through formal legal and administrative systems, and the informal pressure of public opinion.

While there are strong similarities to ideologies of multiculturalism found overseas, the major difference displayed by the New Zealand variant is its ambiguity and relative weakness.   The lack of a formal policy of multiculturalism, and of related government legislation, means that even the limited permission for non-indigenous minorities to deviate in a controlled manner from the *de facto* norm is not enshrined in law.[7] Consequently, effective deployment of culturally-based rights by such minorities can only be made by appeals to tolerance within the context of the rational-liberal ideology which controls the system, rather than assertions of entitlement. Thus even those concessions that are extended to non-indigenous minorities under New Zealand multiculturalism are not rights, and rely on the continued good-will and tolerance of the dominant majority.   This makes the power differential between different ethnic groups particularly marked, and leaves the discourse on multiculturalism more firmly in the hands of the majority culture than in other nations which subscribe to this ideology. Multiculturalism in New Zealand then, like that of its overseas referents, is fundamentally a system by which growing diversity within the population can be controlled and managed in a single polity, with its principal distinguishing characteristic being the strength of the dominant ethnic group's control over the manner in which this is achieved.

Islam and Multiculturalism in New Zealand

As the Muslim population of New Zealand has grown, there has been an increasing tendency, both within the apparatus of state and the general population, to perceive the Muslim community as a distinct group with its own particular cultural features, to be dealt with as a single community under the aegis of multiculturalism. This is significant in that no other religion in the country is treated in such a manner. This includes not only the long-established or newly emergent Christian churches, but also religions associated with recent migrants from cultures outside of the traditional New Zealand mainstream, such as Buddhism and Hinduism.   Islam has been assigned a nature different from that of other religions. It is perceived not as

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[7] In contrast to Maori who, under the official policy of biculturalism, have explicit legal rights as the indigenous people, which they may demand through the legal mechanisms of the state.

a matter of personal faith and belief, but instead as an essential characteristic of its followers, implying a distinct, and largely unitary and ahistorical, way of life. In effect, Islam the religion has been conflated with an essentialised view of culture, to transform Muslims into a single ethnic group under New Zealand multiculturalism. While individuals may have a disputed or context-variable place in this schema, within the system of ethnic difference that New Zealand multiculturalism uses to classify society, the Muslim cultural identity is generally seen as having a real and concrete existence. Why a religious community, which displays such a rich cultural diversity among its followers, has come to be perceived in this manner is an interesting question.

Ultimately, this is related to control. Under New Zealand multiculturalism, Islam has been identified as a force outside of the norms of New Zealand society; and in order to integrate it into this society, it is necessary to objectify it as a single entity. In this way its desirable aspects (from the point of view of the majority in control of this system) may be tolerated, while those characteristics regarded as undesirable can be suppressed. There are, however, any number of ways in which new migrants may be categorised and conceptualised into distinct cultural groups to meet this end. Why Islam has been used in this way is an interesting issue and is related to a number of important aspects of the perception of the Muslim community in New Zealand.

Islam is perceived to be an alien religion, with historically few followers in New Zealand society. In the European tradition that New Zealand has inherited through British colonisation, Islam has been identified as being the essential alien other in a negative relation to a European identity (Zemni 2002:233; Kumar 2002:55; Moreras 2002:53, 61-62). Modern popular cultural portrayals of Muslims continue this perception, particularly in the context of 'the war on terror' that plays out on the television news every night. This encourages a monolithic view of Islam as essentially alien; a view that necessitates its explicit conceptualisation and control in New Zealand society in order that its disruptive tendencies be limited.

A large majority of New Zealand Muslims are immigrants and their descendants, originating from countries with very different cultural traditions either from the European majority or the indigenous Maori and well-established Polynesian minorities in New Zealand society. Muslims encountered by non-Muslim New Zealanders are thus almost entirely members of ethnic groups which are different from those of mainstream New Zealand society. This has undoubtedly contributed to an association of Islam with cultural difference in the minds of many New Zealanders. The characterisation of Islam as an ethnic religion is confirmed by a lived experience, in which the vast majority of Muslims encountered in daily life originate from cultures different from those defined as mainstream in New Zealand society (essentially Europeans and Maori). As Islam has become

associated with a single, distinct, essentialised culture in New Zealand, those not popularly associated with this culture are marginalised or ignored. As one prominent Muslim convert has complained vigorously to me, Islam in New Zealand is constantly dealt with, both by the government and media, as an ethnic issue, in effect rendering him, and other converts, invisible. This is part of the process of essentialising Islam in New Zealand as a distinct group, so that it may be effectively controlled within the system of multiculturalism. Should converts from the European or Maori communities grow to a significant extent, this characterisation will become untenable; but in the present situation, where some 94 per cent of Muslims are described as 'ethnic sector people' (Thompson 1999), it is relatively easy to marginalise converts, who do not fit neatly into this model.

For the majority of New Zealanders a large number of ethnic groups with relatively small populations are easier to conceptualise and relate to as part of a larger Muslim community, rather than grappling with the not inconsiderable cultural complexity that would otherwise be needed to relate to these groups. In order to control Islam effectively within the system of multiculturalism, it is important to subsume smaller groups into wider categories in order to make them easier to conceptualise and relate to. By essentialising a Muslim identity, and reducing the ethnic diversity to a manageable and defined area of difference, control is maintained over integration into New Zealand society.

It is far easier to categorise these individuals and groups from smaller ethnic communities in the single category of 'Muslim' than attempt to conceptualise and relate to them as separate groups. In this way greater control is maintained, and the conceptualisation of Muslims as a single, essentialised cultural group remains unchallenged. Muslims who are able to be associated with other accepted ethnic categories, representing groups deemed significant enough to be explicitly conceptualised and controlled, may have a context-variable cultural identity. South-Asian Muslims, for instance, may emphasise or be assigned other aspects of cultural identity, such as 'Indian' or 'Asian', depending on the situation. This does not seriously challenge the essentialisation of Muslims as having a distinct, monolithic identity, as under these circumstances Muslims are being assigned a different essentialised cultural identity; one in which their religious affiliation is occulted and other essentialised cultural features are emphasised.

The conceptualisation of a Muslim culture and distinct way of life is not entirely arbitrary. Despite major differences in the practice of Islam between Muslim individuals and groups, particularly based on culturally specific understandings of Islam, Islamic orthopraxy and orthodoxy does tend to create common patterns of action, distinct from, and highly visible within, mainstream New Zealand society. Examples of such patterns include *salat*, the celebration of *eid*, fasting during *ramadan,* and the like. These common

distinct patterns, visible in daily life for many New Zealanders, tend to reaffirm the perception of Muslims as a distinct cultural group with a particular way of life. However, the way in which these common patterns of life are conceptualised reduces them to simple, essential, ahistorical cultural features, occulting the wide diversity of understandings of the meanings of these patterns in individual Muslims' lives.

If the idea of a Muslim identity is imposed by the majority on a diverse minority simply to control this minority, we may legitimately question why this minority does not more vocally oppose the categorisation. For their part, many Muslims in New Zealand are willing to accept this conception of a distinct Muslim community, at least to some degree. The currently small population, and relative weakness, of Muslims within New Zealand society in political and economic terms makes it very difficult for them effectively to contest their conceptualisation by mainstream society as a single group, even if they were inclined to do so. Moreover, as this conceptualisation provides Muslims with a degree of social influence that they would otherwise lack, there is positive motivation for accepting this classification. The conceptualisation of the existence of a 'Muslim community' allows Muslim individuals and groups some degree of social influence as a 'legitimate' minority group, whose opinions on a wide range of social issues should be consulted. While this influence is quite weak, it is considerably stronger than that which most individuals or social and ethnic groups within the Muslim community would be able to wield in isolation. Acceptance of the existence of a culturally distinct 'Muslim community' is thus in the best interest of many individuals and groups within this community, at least in certain situations.

In addition to this, Islam itself does provide a significant unifying force for the diverse Muslim population of New Zealand. Islamic ideologies stressing Muslim brotherhood, and the unity of the *umma* over and above cultural and ethnic divisions, have long been an important aspect of the religion. This tendency at least to affirm the desirability of Muslim unity has been accentuated by the complex social forces of globalisation, as individuals and groups have sought an ideological basis on which to relate to a far larger and more complex global society. The mobilisation of the idea of Muslim unity, to create a political force among diverse Muslim minorities, has been a feature of Islamic politics in many Western countries (Lubeck 2002:70-77; Modood 2002:121). Similar ideologies of Muslim unity also seem to be emerging in New Zealand. These ideological conceptions can be seen as providing a strong emic support for the ideal of a Muslim community within New Zealand society.

The patterns imposed on daily life by Islamic orthopraxy and orthodoxy also encourage a degree of social solidarity in the diverse Muslim population. While understandings of Islamic orthopraxy and orthodoxy may

differ widely between individuals and groups, they do provide the basis for a degree of social solidarity in the face of a mainstream society in which these practices are quite alien. S*alat* and associated ritual space (mosques, prayer houses, etc.), concerns over *halal*, patterns of daily life relating to *eid*, and the observance of *ramadan*, in a society where such practices are little-known or understood, provides a nexus for interrelations between Muslims of different backgrounds and a degree of social solidarity as a minority within what is, for most, a radically different cultural environment. The use of these common elements of Islam as a nexus for an ongoing discourse regarding the construction and contestation of relationships between individuals and groups is, however, very different from the essentialisation of these elements as unchanging features of a Muslim identity.

The problem with the current system of multiculturalism in New Zealand is not that it attempts to create a Muslim identity where no such 'natural' identity exists; after all, all forms of social identity are artificially created and there is strong emic support for such an identity from Muslims themselves. Rather, it is the way in which this identity is characterised as essential, monolithic and ahistorical. While particular common features of Islam may serve as ethnic markers in the creation of a single, discrete Muslim cultural category, in the creation of such a category the vast differences in interpretation given to these ideas, and the related understandings of the world they represent, are ignored. Such a conceptualisation occults the way in which these common features of the religion may be mobilised and deployed as part of individual and group action, in the process transforming the meaning of these elements of Islam. Reducing Islam to a fixed set of immutable characteristics connected to an essential way of life ignores the capacity of individual agency to deploy Islam as part of a wider political discourse. This has the effect of robbing us of the ability to analyse and understand the significance of the deployment of Islam as part of political discourse by Muslims in New Zealand; as well as denying Muslims the power to shape their own understandings of their religion and related ways of life in this country.

Multiculturalism characterises Islam as having a fixed nature, implying a distinct way of life for its followers. Aspects of this nature, which are compatible with the *de facto* norm, are to be tolerated, grafted on to a wider 'normal' New Zealand way of life. Those seen as incompatible are to be suppressed. This falls easily into a characterisation of Muslims as either 'moderates' or 'radicals and fundamentalists'; those willing to adapt to New Zealand society, versus those who insist on a strict, inflexible understanding of Islam, which is at odds with social norms. This leads naturally to a formal and informal policy of suppressing those identified as 'radicals', and supporting the 'moderates'; a policy which should, according to the internal logic of multiculturalism, encourage Muslims to be moderate and create a

form of Islam compatible with New Zealand society. However, in reality Islam's nature is highly contested by Muslims themselves; and different understandings of Islam are strategically deployed by individuals, as part of their ongoing social interactions, and embedded in the wider social, economic and political contexts of society. Religious debates are thus not simply arguments over religious dogma, but rather articulations of social agendas for dealing with the everyday realities of New Zealand life.

It is important to understand this for a number of reasons. Such an understanding helps us to comprehend the true nature of political discourse involving the Muslim community, beyond the simplistic tolerable/intolerable dichotomy associated with multiculturalism. It allows us to appreciate the role of socio-economic factors related to political disputes and also the role of particular individuals; which will ultimately help us judge the validity of such political projects and help shape policy to address effectively the issues raised. It also helps us realise that the future nature of Islam in New Zealand, far from being immutably fixed, is being shaped by the political discourse in which it is now being deployed. The actions of individuals, Muslim and non-Muslim, are currently deciding the future of the religion in New Zealand. If New Zealand wishes to escape the creation of a Muslim minority alienated from mainstream society, and the associated social problems, it is important to understanding the full effects of our actions. This cannot be achieved if we attempt to understand this discourse in terms of the shallow, normative conceptualisations of the current system of multiculturalism.

Islam in Political Discourse

To illustrate the complexities of Islamic politics in New Zealand, let us look at two recent examples of the deployment of Islam in political discourse in Christchurch: the dispute over control of the Masjid Al-Noor, and the *halal* certification process. In both cases we can see a complex political discourse in which different understandings of Islam are being strategically deployed as part of wider social and economic agendas. To understand the true nature of these disputes, and the way in which they are shaping understandings of Islam in this country, it is necessary to understand the dynamic, context-dependent nature of interpretations of Islam among Muslims; an understanding which it would be impossible to obtain from a view based upon simplistic essentialism.[8]

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[8] Data for these accounts were gathered from interviews with key informants in Christchurch in 2004. Because of the continued political sensitivity of the issues involved, I would prefer not to attribute opinions to particular informants and risk causing them any inconvenience for agreeing to talk with me.

On Friday 24 October 2003, Christchurch awoke to find that '… a Saudi Arabian-based charity with claimed links to Al-Qaeda is trying to gain control of Chistchurch's mosque' (*The Christchurch Press*, 24 October 2003, 'Terror Link Warning', p. A1). Credence was given to these claims because they were not from the usual critics of multiculturalism, the political right, but from within the Muslim community itself. Under the headline 'Terror Link Warning', readers were told that the Muslim Association of Canterbury was negotiating the transfer of ownership of the mosque to 'foreign interests', described as being associated with the Saudi-based Al-Haramain Foundation. Two branches of the Foundation, those operating in Somalia and Bosnia, had been identified by several Western governments, including New Zealand's, as being involved in the funding of terrorism. However, no such allegations had been substantiated against the Saudi branch involved in the negotiations over the ownership of the mosque. Several prominent Muslim community members had issued public warnings condemning the transfer of ownership, saying it risked providing 'a channel for importing mayhem and chaos into New Zealand', and that the move would create dangers and a threat to peace in New Zealand society. The story fell nicely into a simplistic understanding of tolerable and intolerable aspects of Islam, typified by Mayor Gary Moore's comments describing the dispute as one between moderates and extremists. While some mention was made of the cultural diversity of the Christchurch Muslim community, little attention was paid to the importance of this in terms of this dispute. Beneath this apparently simple conflict between Islamic extremists and moderates, however, is a complex political discourse, in which different culturally-based understandings of Islam were being mobilised as part of a political dispute over both control of the strategic asset of the mosque and related ideologies for the development of the Muslim community in Christchurch.

Tensions had been developing over the mosque for some time. South-Asian Muslims have historically made up the majority of Christchurch's Muslim community, and have exerted a high degree of influence over the community and its institutions. However, in recent years a small community of Somali and Arab Muslims has become established in the city. Several prominent members of the Arab community, with support from the Somalis, managed to secure effective control of the Muslim Association of Canterbury (MAC) that owns the mosque. This was achieved, despite their relatively small numbers, principally as a result of the greater importance of the mosque, and hence the Association which owns it, in the social lives of the members of this community. Many of the Somalis and Arabs have faced considerable difficulty adjusting to New Zealand society. Unemployment, and related financial hardship, is very high. Their ability to speak English is generally low, which severely limits their ability to relate to wider New Zealand society. Under these circumstances, many gravitate towards the

mosque as 'their space' in a largely foreign social environment. This is in stark contrast to the South-Asian community, which possesses the linguistic, social and economic skills to function effectively in New Zealand society. In the lives of this section of the Muslim community, the mosque, and MAC, plays a far less central role; and, until this crisis, there was a somewhat apathetic attitude towards formal control of the organisation and mosque.

Although members of the same Muslim community, the South-Asian, Somali and Arab Muslims had very different, culturally-based understandings of the religion, and very different socio-economic positions in New Zealand society. There was a strong vein of dissatisfaction among the Arabs and Somalis that their better-off brothers of South-Asian origin did little, either individually or through the various Islamic organisations they controlled, to help their marginalised co-religionists. Individuals were able to forge this tension into an agenda for political action that enabled them to be elected to positions of authority within MAC and to take control of the association. Religion played a key role in this political discourse, as various individuals deployed different understandings of Islam to bolster their claims to legitimacy over control of MAC. The Arab Muslims, who form the political leadership of the Arab and Somali faction, typify South-Asian Islam as being corrupted by cultural practices alien to Islam, in contrast to their own purer understanding of the religion. Accordingly, they claim it is important for them to retain control of MAC in order to propagate and protect the true form of Islam in New Zealand. For their part, prominent members of the South-Asian community regard modern, middle-Eastern understandings of Islam as being tainted with 'Wahhabi fanaticism and extremism'; in contrast to their own 'moderate' interpretation of the religion, which they see as being truer to the spirit of the real Islam. They were then extremely upset to see the mosque fall into the hands of those they considered to be extremists, who were corrupting Islam. Competition over control of the association and its assets was thus related to a complex interplay of religious, cultural and economic factors—which were subsumed into the political agendas of particular individuals.

Having gained control of MAC, the Arab and Somali group faced a number of challenges. Its main political goal was the economic development of its community; though lack of financial and human resources severely limited its ability to achieve this. It also faced the problem of retention of control of the mosque, in the face of increasing opposition from the numerically superior South Asian group, stirred into action by its community leaders against the 'Wahhabi faction' of MAC and the mosque. The plan to transfer ownership to the Saudi charity was intended to remedy both these issues. The pro-Wahhabi Saudi organisation shared a common political view of the illegitimacy of South Asian understandings of Islam with the incumbent leadership of MAC. If it were to gain ownership of the mosque, it

was felt it would allow the current leadership to retain control, removing the challenge from the South-Asian community, whose understanding of Islam was at odds with the Saudi charity.

The Saudi charity also had considerable financial resources at its disposal, but was reluctant to share them with MAC. The reason given for this reluctance was the lack of certainty regarding control of the Association and hence the possibility of conflict a large donation to the association would bring; as well as the possibility of the charity's money ending up being controlled by those it considered to have an incorrect understanding of Islam. The leadership of MAC was convinced that, if the charity were to be given formal control of the mosque and hence any funds donated to the mosque, this objection would be resolved and considerable financial aid would be forthcoming for the economically underdeveloped Arab and Somali communities. The settlement of a group of Afghan Shi'i Muslim refugees in Christchurch proved a catalyst for the plan. Not only did these refugees represent another potential competitor for control of MAC, but also the Saudi organisation viewed Shi'i Islam as a particularly unacceptable form of heresy, and would be even more reluctant to donate money to MAC if there existed a future possibility of the Afghans gaining control of the association.[9]

For the MAC leadership, the plan to transfer ownership of the mosque would not only ensure their own control of the institution, it would also promote what they saw as being the correct form of Islam in New Zealand, and help bring economic development to a particularly impoverished section of the Muslim community. For the South-Asian community, however, this plan was seen as an underhand method of alienating them from their mosque—which had to be prevented. The passing of control of the mosque to a pro-Wahhabi organisation would mean that the mosque, which they saw as a resource for the whole Muslim community in Christchurch, would become hostile to all but the minority in the community, who were in line with its Islamic agenda. They also held deep-seated concerns about Wahhabi Islam, seeing it as an unacceptably severe and fanatical form of the religion, with the potential to promote discord and violence in New Zealand society. The discord those promoting this form of Islam had created in the Christchurch community, by contesting control of MAC, was seen as evidence of this potential. The decision to attack this plan through the media

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[9] The charity had apparently had some experiences in Germany where mosques, which had been the recipients of its largess, became the scene for bitter in-fighting for control in the Muslim community. They singled out Iranian Shi'i as the worst instigators of this conflict, which made MAC leadership see the presence of the Afghani Shi'i in Christchurch as another barrier to receiving funding. Whether this was a genuine reason for the refusal to supply MAC with funds, or simply a face-saving way of refusing MAC's request (as one association member who was privy to the negotiations saw it), is impossible for me to judge.

and thus involve wider New Zealand society was an extremely effective tactical move on the part of the South-Asian community leaders. Paranoia over Islamic violence in New Zealand society at large, stoked by the ongoing war on terror, ensured a blaze of publicity for claims, from within the Muslim community itself, of a connection between New Zealand Muslims and Al Qaeda. Ultimately the deal, which was clearly against the wishes of most Muslims in Christchurch, had to be abandoned under the glare of wider public scrutiny.

In this case we see individuals with different political agendas deploying different understandings of Islam in a political discourse over the right to represent the Muslim community as a whole, and exercise control over that community's assets. Popular understanding of this dispute has characterised it as one between 'moderate' and 'extremist' Muslims; but this is a gross over-simplification of the situation, and one that may have an important effect on the development of Islam in this country. Warnings over links to terrorism coming from within the Muslim community should not simply be taken at face value. Rather they must be understood as part of an ongoing political discourse within the community. It is not that those who issued the warning were being disingenuous; while a certain amount of hyperbole was involved, I have no doubt they genuinely saw the potential influence of a Saudi-based, pro-Wahhabi organisation as a source of conflict and potential violence in New Zealand society. However, we should appreciate that this position is part of a wider political dispute within the New Zealand Muslim community.

Islam is being strategically deployed as part of a complex political discourse involving different cultural understandings of the religion that have historically evolved in different countries overseas. It is being mobilised now to contest control over assets in New Zealand society between groups of individuals with different degrees of economic and social integration into wider New Zealand society. The Somali and Arab communities felt themselves to be marginalised in New Zealand society. In attempting to improve their social position, they found themselves associated with extremism and potential terrorism. Whether one approves of their politics or the nature of their plan, it must be admitted that at no time did it go beyond the normal limits of political action in New Zealand. No violent acts were carried out, planned or threatened. Despite this, this faction found itself, its understanding of Islam, and the political attempt to improve the economic well-being of a marginalised segment of the Muslim community, associated with Islamic extremism and terrorism.

A simplistic understanding of Islam as a unitary, essentialised identity, which recognises only tolerable and intolerable aspects of the religion, is not capable of informing an effective understanding of the political use of Islam as described here. This is important, as the view such a conceptual model of

Islam informs is tending to marginalise further a segment of the Muslim community that already feels economically and socially disadvantaged. This runs the danger of turning a segment of the Islamic community into an underclass, which feels alienated from the rest of New Zealand society, and feels no solidarity with it, thus creating a raft of social problems. We should also note that, while it may have been an effective tactical device for resolving this particular issue, the stirring up of fear of Islamic extremism by segments of the New Zealand Muslim community will be counter-productive in the long term. The majority of New Zealand society has at best a fragmentary and essentialised understanding of Islam at best. Associating Islam with terrorism to settle internal political disputes in the Muslim community appeals to existing prejudices, and runs the serious risk of strengthening such prejudices against all Muslims in the country, regardless of ethnic origin or their understanding of Islam.

Another serious dispute within the Christchurch Muslim community came to national attention some months after this incident, in August 2004. This time it involved the certification of meat as *halal*. Meat exports to the Islamic world at the time were worth in excess of NZ$200 million, and the market was regarded as possessing significant potential for growth. In order to supply meat to this market, however, it was essential that it be certified as *halal* by a credible Islamic authority, to satisfy the demands of the receiving nations. The Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand (FIANZ), as the main national Muslim organisation in the country, had taken on this role in co-operation with the Meat Industry Association (MIA), a trade association which represents major New Zealand meat processors, marketers and exporters.

Under this agreement, FIANZ monitors the slaughter process, both through contact with *halal* slaughtermen employed by the various meat companies and its own *halal* supervisors, and certifies meat in terms of meeting the appropriate criteria as *halal*. The fees it receives from the various meat-processing companies for this service represent the main source of revenue for FIANZ, and the *halal* meat export market is large enough to be seen as a major economic asset for New Zealand as a whole. Accordingly, when the Muslim Association of Canterbury (MAC), one of the seven component associations of FIANZ, announced that it was withdrawing its support for FIANZ's *halal* certification, alleging that non-*halal* meat was being certified as *halal*, it created a major sensation (*The Christchurch Press*, 15 September 2004, 'Mosque and Meat Divided Muslims', p.A15). Questioning the validity of the certification process was seen as undermining international confidence in the conformity of New Zealand meat to *halal* standards, endangering the lucrative *halal* meat export market.

At the centre of MAC's public objection was the allegation that slaughtermen were not allowed time to perform regular prayers during

working hours, thus rendering the meat from the animals they killed non-*halal*. MAC claimed that FIANZ was turning a blind eye to this practice out of a desire not to rock the boat and endanger the considerable fees it received for certification. Both FIANZ and MIA vigorously disputed this allegation. While they admitted that previously there had been a problem with some slaughtermen's contracts, denying them time to pray, they insisted this problem had been resolved; and both claimed that they had had no prior knowledge of the complaints that MAC was raising. Although somewhat reticent to comment in the media, many Muslims close to FIANZ regarded MAC's allegations as nothing but a cynical attempt to capture more of the fees for *halal* certification, and possibly to set itself up as the sole certifying authority for the South Island meat industry. By undermining public confidence in FIANZ *halal* certification, MAC could force FIANZ to provide it with a greater share of the profits; or it could establish its own certifying authority for meat processors in its geographic area. Money and prestige, rather than legitimate concerns over *halal* standards, were seen as the main cause of MAC's objections.

For most non-Muslim New Zealanders this dispute seemed extremely confused and murky, and was generally understood through a simplified 'extremist' versus 'moderate' conceptualisation. One side was seen as insisting on a 'strict' form of *halal*, while the other had a more 'moderate' view, which allowed a more flexible approach to *halal*. A closer examination of this dispute reveals the complex and dynamic nature of Islam in New Zealand. Different understandings of Islam, developed in different cultural contexts, have been integrated into socio-economic issues within New Zealand society, allowing their strategic deployment by individuals and groups in political discourse involving control of important assets. Such discourse is ultimately helping to shape interrelationships in the Muslim community; relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim New Zealanders; and ultimately the nature of Islam in this country.

At the root of this dispute is a genuine religious difference over understandings of the requirements of *halal*. Among the Somali and Arab communities, for meat to be considered *halal*, the slaughtermen must perform all the *salat* at the appropriate time of the day. Among the various South-Asian communities, however, understandings of *halal* (and indeed obligations to perform the *salat*) are considerably more flexible. The occasional omission of a prayer; praying after the appointed time to make up for a missed prayer; or one individual praying on behalf of a larger group are all regarded by many members of this community as perfectly valid forms of Islamic practice. Accordingly, they do not regard the failure of all slaughtermen on a particular killing chain to pray at the officially prescribed time as endangering the *halal* status of the meat produced.

In New Zealand society, this different understanding of the requirements of *halal* has become embedded in the relationship between different ethnic groups within the Muslim community. Somali Muslims in Christchurch, for the most part, have a relatively low economic standing. Made up principally of refugees and their children, this group has relatively few marketable skills; a poor ability to communicate in English; a high level of poverty; and only limited interaction with New Zealanders outside of the Muslim community. In contrast, South-Asian Muslims are generally far more affluent than the Somalis, and possess a wider range of skills relevant to economic life in New Zealand, including a generally high level of English-language ability. On that basis, employment as *halal* slaughtermen is one of the few skilled occupations that the Somalis are able to perform in New Zealand. Accordingly, it is a very important occupation for them in terms of both economics and social status. Somali experience at New Zealand meat-processing plants has not been a happy one, however. Somali slaughtermen, with generally poor English-language ability, experience some difficulty in communicating effectively with management. Moreover, there are major differences in style of communication between Somali and the New Zealand norm, which makes the Somalis seem curt to the point of rudeness, arrogant and aggressive to many European and Maori New Zealanders. This, coupled with their insistence on always performing prayers at the required time, regardless of the work situation, has led the supervisors and management of many meat-processing companies to view them as extremely problematic and unco-operative employees.

In marked contrast, Muslim slaughtermen of other ethnic backgrounds are seen to be far more flexible and 'reasonable' by the meat companies. South or South-East Asian Muslim slaughtermen—many of the latter foreign employees on working visas rather than permanent residents or citizens of New Zealand—are also employed in New Zealand meat-processing plants. They generally have far higher levels of English-language ability, and their style of communication with co-workers and supervisors appears far more polite and deferential by New Zealand cultural norms. Furthermore, they have far less exacting understandings of the requirements of *halal* slaughter, particularly with regard to prayer. They regard it as perfectly legitimate to delay prayer if they are very busy; move prayer times to regular break times; have one slaughterer pray on behalf of a larger group; or miss a particular prayer altogether should the circumstances require it. FIANZ, which is dominated by South-Asian Muslims with similar understandings of the requirements of *halal* with regard to prayer, is happy to certify the meat produced in these conditions as *halal*. This is in no way a less strict or exacting enforcement of the standards of *halal* than that desired by the Somalis; rather it reflects a different understanding of what those standards actually are.

The meat processing companies are faced with two groups of employees with different understandings of *halal*—one of which is generally seen as difficult to manage and unco-operative, and the other as far more flexible and easier to manage—and naturally favour the latter over the former. The Somalis' stricter understanding of the requirements of *halal* is generally seen by meat-processing companies as another example of their unco-operativeness, since its other Muslim employees, and the official certifying authority, are easier to deal with. Accordingly, there have been many instances where Somali slaughtermen have been disciplined, or have failed to have their contracts renewed.

The Somalis saw themselves as being persecuted for insisting on a proper standard for *halal* slaughter, and were unhappy with FIANZ for not supporting them. They regarded this as an instance of the wealthier South-Asian Muslims failing to support their less economically developed brothers, and believed that FIANZ was compromising on *halal* standards for financial gain. They were also unhappy with FIANZ for failing to make an issue of the employment of South-East Asian slaughtermen on short-term working visas over permanent residents or citizens of New Zealand. This vein of dissatisfaction was tapped by several of the ethnic Arab Muslims who had succeeded in wresting control of MAC from the South-Asian community, and who used it to present a political challenge to FIANZ over control of the *halal* certification process. If they had succeeded, they would have been able to insist on what they considered to be a proper *halal* standard; to capture the wealth and prestige associated with the *halal* certification process; and to be in a position to improve the economic well-being of their supporters by ensuring their employment.[10]

In the end the dispute was effectively deflated while never being fully resolved. Political pressure both from FIANZ and the wider New Zealand polity forced MAC to stop, at least publicly, condemning the *halal* certification process in the media; and formal provisions for prayer were included in *halal* slaughtermen's contracts as a result of negotiations between FIANZ and the MIA. This defused the issue underlying the political challenge by MAC. Leading figures in MAC responded by founding The New Zealand *Halal* Slaughtermen Union, a legally incorporated union group, whose main focus is protecting the rights of New Zealand *halal* slaughtermen, particularly with regard to the right of prayer, and protection

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[10] As I understand it, one of the plans articulated by MAC was the eventual construction of their own meat-processing plant, to take partial control not only of the *halal* certification process, but also of the *halal* export business itself. Given the lack of both the funds to build this plant, and the necessary skills to run such a business in competition with the established meat-processing industry, this project was extremely unrealistic. I am unsure if it was a genuine, if somewhat naïve, plan or simply a political device to rally backing by offering greater rewards to supporters.

from foreign competition.   In this way, they continue to articulate their political agenda and the concerns of their supporters, but through a union and within the legal framework of normal industrial relations in New Zealand— rather than attacking the *halal* certification process itself.

Combining a religious dispute over the correct nature of Islam with a sense of grievance stemming from ethnic and socio-economic tensions, the political leaders of MAC created a political project that allowed them to generate a support-base with which to challenge the established Islamic structures in New Zealand society; and to attempt to take at least partial control of one of the key assets of the Muslim community, *halal* certification. In the process, they altered the nature of the relationship between various segments of the Muslim community; perceptions of Islam within a wide segment of the New Zealand population; and the debate over the nature of the religion in New Zealand. Tensions between the Somali, Arab and South-Asian communities, brought to a head by the dispute, have never been fully resolved and continue to be a source of friction and conflict among New Zealand Muslims. Debates over the correct practice of Islam in New Zealand are often caught up in this dispute. As an example, a rule requiring members to celebrate the *milad*[11] passed by the South Auckland Muslim Association at the time of the *halal* dispute, was seen as an attack on the Arabs and Somalis, for most of whom the celebration of the *milad* is seen as *bidah*,[12] hence illegitimate. I have no doubt that many other positions with regard to the proper practice of Islam in New Zealand are being similarly influenced by this dispute.

A simplified, essentialist approach to the understanding of Islam in New Zealand, such as that associated with the current form of multiculturalism, is incapable of understanding the subtleties of this dispute and hence its wider influence in New Zealand society. An essentialist understanding of Islam and related standards of *halal* tends to occult genuine differences between Muslims over religious interpretation; and reduces this dispute to disagreements between moderates, who are willing to adapt to New Zealand society, and radicals, who will not. This is a serious misunderstanding of the various positions involved, and would be of little use in reaching a deeper understanding of the causes of this dispute and its effects on the Muslim community and Islam in New Zealand society. The South and South-East Asian Muslims were not being more flexible or compromising on what they saw as the proper *halal* standard, and would be upset if anyone suggested this was the case. They simply have a different interpretation of the requirements of *halal* from the Somali and Arab Muslims; an

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[11] The birthday of the Prophet Muhammad.

[12] A religious innovation, as opposed to the original form of Islam practised by the Prophet Muhammad.

interpretation which fits more easily into the meat-processing companies' standard operating practices.

Even a more sophisticated essentialist approach, which recognises the different culturally-based understandings of Islam, but fails to realise how these understandings interact with socio-economic conditions in New Zealand society and the political agendas of individuals, would fail to recognise the importance of the ongoing discourse, of which this dispute is a part, for the transformation of Islam in New Zealand. This was not only a dispute between Muslims from different countries and with different understandings of *halal*, it was an articulation of a political agenda based on economic inequality and related social tensions.

In occulting the wider cultural, social and economic contexts to which the politics of Islam is related in this country, and the role of individual agency in articulating this Islamic political discourse, New Zealand society is in effect reducing an extremely complex and dynamic political process to a simple confrontation between moderates and extremists within an unchanging religious tradition of fixed nature. This is problematic, in that it prevents us from understanding the wider cultural, social and economic tensions underlying these disputes and taking effective action to address them. By refusing to acknowledge the socio-economic and cultural factors in the politics of Islam, we run the risk of exacerbating the wider social tensions that are associated with Islamic political discourse. Far from encouraging a more moderate form of Islam, by blindly supporting one side over the other we risk the creation of a marginalised sub-group within the Muslim community that could easily give rise to a host of social problems; potentially even the violent Islamic movements which mainstream New Zealand society is seeking to avoid. This is extremely undesirable, both for the sub-groups involved and for New Zealand society in general. Even if we do not agree with the political agendas and methods of individual actors deploying Islam in political discourse, we must acknowledge the cultural, social and economic issues that allow them to garner support for their political projects. Only then may we attempt to address these issues, in order to prevent the creation of simmering resentments and tensions that could cause serious social problems for New Zealand.

Equally problematic, the essentialisation of Islam under multiculturalism ignores the role of Islamic political discourse in shaping the adaptation of Islam to modern New Zealand society. As a world religion, Islam has adapted itself to a wide range of different cultures and societies in its 1300-year history; and it is, in part, this ability to integrate into a host of different cultural and social systems that has made it into a major religious tradition in the world today. As we have seen, the political discourse surrounding Islam in this country is helping to shape the understandings of the religion in New Zealand for both Muslim and non-Muslim alike. By

attributing a fixed, essential nature to the religion, we are denying ourselves the ability to take an active part in this process, and help integrate Islam and its followers into the mainstream of New Zealand society. Such integration can only be achieved through dialogue between the parties involved. Multiculturalism, with the majority simply imposing a fixed identity on Muslims, effectively curtails such a dialogue. Only through active engagement with Muslims and other minorities, rather than the simple imposition by the majority of a fixed, limited role in society, can we hope to achieve a truly stable and equitable multicultural nation.

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