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MUSLIMS IN NEW ZEALAND: 'AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE NATION'?

A review article of:

Erich Kolig, *New Zealand's Muslims and Multiculturalism*, Muslim Minorities, vol. 9, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010, vi + 272 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-17835-9, hardback.

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Given its rapid growth in recent decades, the New Zealand Muslim population will be now be much larger than the 36,072 counted in the 2006 census – perhaps over 50,000. The history of the community has been explored in some detail by William E. Shepard, and its relations with the wider society have been examined in a series of articles by Erich Kolig.¹ Now Kolig, a cultural anthropologist who recently retired from the University of Otago, has published the first academic book on Islam in New Zealand.² This is by no means an introduction to the religion, nor even a profile of the New Zealand community (12) – though the first chapter highlights some of its structures and characteristic features.³ The book is best described, as the title suggests, as a sustained reflection on the issue of multiculturalism with particular reference to Muslims in New Zealand. Many pages of the book only allude to Muslims here, concentrating instead on the theory and practice of multiculturalism as they pertain to Islamic communities generally (for example, 73-85).

Kolig places the subject of Islam in New Zealand within a global context on the grounds that 'New Zealand as a nation is facing very similar issues as the rest of the Western world' (6). In addition to reading international, particularly European, research on the subject, Kolig has spent time over the past decade talking to Muslims – mostly men, because of the gender sensitivities of Muslims (15-16). The author acknowledges that preserving the anonymity of his interlocutors from a small religious community has necessitated 'a level of abstraction that at times seems far removed from real life and the "adrenalin flow" of field work' (16). His informants are not counted and not usually named, but one assumes they are representative of at least the male leadership of organised Islam in New Zealand.

Kolig rightly emphasizes, however, that Muslims do not speak with a single voice and have different perspectives on a range of issues (42-49). As the New Zealand Muslim

1 Kolig edited a special edition of this journal (5/2, 2006) on Islam and Muslims in New Zealand.

2 There is also a short book by Abdullah Drury, *Islam in New Zealand: the First Mosque*, Auckland: Abdullah Drury, 2006.

3 As an introduction to the religion of Islam, C.J. van der Krogt, 'Islam', in *Religions of New Zealanders*, edited by Peter Donovan, pp. 189-208, Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 2nd ed., 1996, remains serviceable.

population grows and diversifies, drawing on an even wider range of nationalities, it will increasingly reflect the divisions within world-wide Islam (36). Growing numbers of Arabs and Somalis in the Christchurch Muslim community led to a controversy in 2003 over the control of the mosque that seemed to reflect not only ethnic and socio-economic differences but also a more purist, even Wahhabi, understanding of Islam than the more moderate perspective that prevails among Muslims of South Asian descent. One may be heartened by the fact that it was moderates themselves who alerted the media, thereby strengthening their own hand and winning the struggle, though the attempt to place the mosque under Saudi control certainly demonstrates that New Zealand Muslims are not shielded from potentially disturbing influences (225-29). The quarrel presented a challenge to the Federation of Islamic Associations in New Zealand (FIANZ), an umbrella organisation uniting the various regional associations, whose efforts to reconcile the competing factions were not appreciated (37). While about half of New Zealand Muslims show no interest in belonging to an organisation, others do not consider FIANZ sufficiently purist (31). Divergent opinions over the precise requirements for *halal* slaughter inspired another dispute in 2004 when the Muslim Association of Canterbury threatened to withdraw support for FIANZ's lucrative *halal* certification business (229-34). Tensions between more liberal South Asian Indian Muslims and more conservative (and perhaps self-important) Arabic-speakers may intensify in the future, for example over whether to observe the birthday of the Prophet (43-44).

Differing understandings of Islam are particularly apparent when discussing the rights and duties of women. In 2004, Muslim spokespeople gave conflicting responses to the stance of a woman who declared that she would rather kill herself than appear unveiled (as a witness) in a law court (206-08). As Kolig (181) observes, 'Despite scriptural protestations of total gender equality, both Quran and Sunna [the exemplary tradition of the Prophet] are replete with numerous examples of asymmetrical gender issues. Unsurprisingly, Islamic doctrine is a reflection of the patriarchal and androcentric social forms traditionally extant in the Middle East.' New Zealand Muslims, as Kolig found, typically reject as un-Islamic misogynistic practices that some cultures or movements such as the Taliban consider essential to Islam (181). Given the huge cultural diversity of the New Zealand Muslim population, however, it would be hazardous to generalise. While apologists play down the significance of texts like Quran 4:34, which asserts male authority over women and permits a man to hit his wife, rigorists can reply that God's law overrides human laws. Kolig (187) cites overseas evidence of wife-beating that is not merely nominal.

Since the completion of Kolig's book, the Shakti Community Council has claimed that as many as fifty Muslim and Sikh women, some under the age of consent, are coerced into marriage each year in New Zealand.⁴ These marriages are said to be regarded by their defenders as 'cultural' or 'religious' and are not required to be

4 Shila Nair for Shakti Community Council Inc. Submission to the Justice and Electoral Committee, 3 February 2010, available at http://www.parliament.nz/NR/rdonlyres/5F4E0C20-795F-458B-8568-3B870FB45227/130316/49SCJE_EVI_49DBHOH_PET2988_1_A35122_ShaktiCommunit.pdf. The figure is given in Michael Field, 'Tens forced into marriages', *Sunday Star-Times*, 13 February 2011.

registered; in Shakti's view, they are 'customary' but contrary to the teachings of the religions concerned.⁵ The only way to reconcile these statements is to acknowledge, as an outsider must, that within any religious community there are competing claims about what constitute authentic belief and practice. Unsurprisingly, outraged Muslim and Sikh leaders have vehemently denied Shakti's allegations.⁶ While recognised Muslim leaders expect their co-religionists to conform to New Zealand law, there are five main schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and according to the Ja'fari school, which prevails among Shi'is, a girl as young as nine can marry. More usually, the growth of pubic hair, the onset of menstruation, or pregnancy [sic] are said to indicate legal marriageability.⁷ Shakti's claim that customs unacceptable by New Zealand standards persist within some immigrant communities beyond the purview of organisations like FIANZ needs to be taken seriously.

In discussing New Zealand Muslims, Kolig (61-62) adopts Edward Said's definition of Orientalism as a discourse for exercising power over other cultures. While declaring that it characterises 'the media, public opinion, and political comments' (but no longer academia), he goes on to say that this attitude is tempered by 'post-modernist cultural relativism' and 'its formalized product "political correctness"'. Actually, Said himself did not coin the term Orientalism, but he did re-construe it as a 'prejudicial paradigm' (60). There remain scholars proud to be called Orientalists.⁸ Kolig (62; cf. 216-17) detects Orientalism (in Said's sense) in the media which tend to 'associate Islam with radicalism, militancy, and fanaticism', though 'the treatment of Muslims living in New Zealand is relatively benign and largely informed by religious, ethnic, and racial tolerance'.

There are obvious reasons for such a dual perspective. The Hindu and Buddhist communities in New Zealand raise few if any concerns in contrast to the much smaller Muslim one, and the anxiety is not simply attributable to arbitrary prejudice.⁹ While the annual *hajj*, for example, is regularly reported, most of what Muslims do as Muslims is too routine to attract a significant media audience beyond the occasional television documentary about immigrants or religious communities. By contrast, whatever its underlying ideology, terrorism is newsworthy, and, particularly since 9/11, international news agencies, the sources for most of what is reported in New Zealand, have inevitably given it prominence. Indeed, attracting media attention is an essential part of the rationale behind terrorism – and it works. The real problem here is that the New

5 Shakti Submission, paragraphs 4.6, 5.1, 9.3.

6 Dev Nadkarni, 'And now it's forced, under age marriages!' *Indian Weekender*, 17 February 2011; Venkat Raman, 'Sikhs demand apology from Shakti', *Indian Newslink*, 1 March 2011; Anwar Ghani (FIANZ President), 'Muslims Reject Claim of Underage Marriage', 18 February 2011, available at http://www.fianz.co.nz/pressreleases/marriage_content.php.

7 Laleh Bakhtiar, *Encyclopedia of Islamic Law: a Compendium of the Views of the Major Schools*, Chicago: ABC International Group, distributed by Kazi Publications, 1996, p. 403.

8 Robert Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing: the Orientalists and their Enemies*, London: Allen Lane, 2006, pp. 5-6, 159-60.

9 For a recent discussion, see Douglas Pratt, 'Antipodean Angst: Encountering Islam in New Zealand', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 21/ 4 (2010) 397-407.

Zealand media offer little in-depth background reporting on current events, preferring to focus on celebrity gossip and sensationalism. While this failing is not unique to the portrayal of Islam, it may well stimulate the Islamophobia – ‘the virulent xenophobia directed towards Muslims and abstractly Islam per se’ – that is occasionally expressed in the scare-mongering of politicians and the verbal abuse or even violence of some citizens (Kolig, 64-66, 86).

Kolig sees occasional evidence of Islamophobia in New Zealand largely as a response to the actions of an unrepresentative but militant minority overseas, which inspires ‘fear of a dangerous potential inherent in “Islam” that he considers, ‘in New Zealand’s case, unfounded’ (86). Of course, discrimination or violence against Muslims is unjustified and unacceptable, but apprehension about the Islamic presence cannot be dismissed as groundless. As Kolig observes, ‘It is an unfortunate truism that Muslim immigrants are considered problematic wherever they form sizeable minorities in Western societies’ (86). Some Muslims in the West have stretched the limits of free expression in angry street demonstrations with book-burning and calls for beheading the alleged enemies of Islam (4). Countries with Muslim minorities have seen with horror and bewilderment that violent *jihadis* can emerge from apparently well-integrated families – and even from non-Muslim backgrounds. Tragedies like the London bombings of 2005 show that a militant version of their religion can attract disillusioned and poorly adjusted young Muslims in the West – though sometimes it is only after the event that the extent of their disaffection is recognised.

Kolig’s (247-51) exploration of the *jihadi* worldview in terms of a transcendent conflict between good and evil that finds much support in the Qur’an is insightful.¹⁰ Though concluding that his Muslim interlocutors assured him that the discussion of militant *jihad* was only of academic interest in New Zealand (251), Kolig is less reassuring elsewhere. It is possible that the apparent absence of radicalized young Muslims in New Zealand reflects the current demography of the local Muslim population (239) – in which case this country may yet experience the problems associated with more established Islamic immigrant communities in which the young face problems of personal identity. While acknowledging that the prospect currently appears remote, Kolig (242) suggests that ‘a younger generation infused with a sense of their Muslimness and the transnationalism that goes with it may seek an outlet to violently express their identity.’ ‘Anecdotally’, Kolig (252) hints, some young Muslims in New Zealand were unsure how to respond to the events of 9/11 though their elders condemned terrorism.

Much of Kolig’s book discusses such international controversies and their reverberations in New Zealand. For example, there is a lengthy account of the Muhammad cartoons published by the Danish *Jyllands Posten* in September 2005 – and

10 This reviewer, however, emphatically disagrees with the author’s (247) suggestion that John Esposito’s *Unholy War* ‘presents a good overview of the subject’ of *jihad* and would contend that Kolig’s dependence on Esposito detracts from his discussion of the topic. See Christopher J. van der Krogt, ‘Jihad without Apologetics’, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 21/2 (2010) 111–26.

subsequently around the world, including several Fairfax newspapers in New Zealand (160-74). As Kolig writes (172), ‘Cocooning Islam against satire and critique is as impossible as protecting Christianity against insult, if not more so. And privileging it in this regard is simply impossible.’ Arguably, the media need to be more aware of Muslim sensibilities than some were six years ago, but Muslims living in the West need ‘to learn to accept or at least tolerate relevant Western values and viewpoints’ (173). It is open to both sides to reduce the distance between them by persuasion rather than force or threat (174). Muslims in New Zealand seem to accept this: the remarkable feature of the anti-cartoon response here was its restraint – including that of the 500-700 Muslims who demonstrated in Queen Street on Sunday 5 February 2006 – especially when contrasted with the calls of violence overseas (213-14).

Muslims themselves, though, are apparently not averse to expressing negative opinions of other people’s religions with a freedom they can only expect if the same freedom is permitted critics of Islam (155). Kolig describes Pope Benedict XVI’s September 2006 Regensburg reference to the militancy of Islam and its Prophet as a ‘gaffe’ (174). Muslims were certainly offended though, again, no-one in New Zealand responded by killing Christians or burning churches (as happened in other parts of the world) even if some were disappointed that FIANZ did not register a protest (177). At the same time, Kolig (115) notes, ‘Muslims are protected by the general ignorance of the wider majority society when they use such derogatory terms as *mushrikun* (idol-worshippers, polytheists) to refer to Christians or generally to other New Zealanders.’

Indeed, the literature Muslims distribute in this country (often with a Saudi *imprimatur*) blithely expresses views that are a serious affront to the faith of other religious communities. One booklet declares, ‘With the coming of the Prophet Muhammad matters were put in their proper perspective. The pure Judaism of Moses was reinstated, and Christianity was cleansed of Paulinism. Both were recast in their original imperishable mould of Islam.’¹¹ Lest there be any doubt about the standard Islamic view of Judaism and Christianity, a translation of the Qur’an distributed gratis in New Zealand contains explanatory footnotes derived from traditional sources. Where the opening *sura* refers to those who have merited divine anger, readers are informed that this includes the Jews; further on, those who have gone ‘astray’ are said to include the Christians.¹²

In interfaith contexts, such polemical perspectives are typically set aside (113-14). Thus Kolig (112) observes that when Professor Abdullah Saeed of Melbourne addressed the Dunedin Abrahamic Interfaith Group and the University Chaplaincy in September 2007, he avoided controversial issues. Indeed, contrary to the annotations of

11 Ali Muhsin, *Let the Bible Speak*, Islamic Da’wah and Guidance Center: Dammam, Saudi Arabia [originally written in 1995 but subsequently re-formatted and reprinted], p. 64. My copy has been stamped by the Auckland Islamic Resource Centre in Mount Roskill, whose provocative email address, Islam3000nz@yahoo.com, seems no longer to be in use.

12 Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, *Translation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur’an in the English Language*, Madinah: King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur’an, nd; pp. 1-2.

the Hilali-Khan translation just cited, Saeed denied that the Qur'an condemns 'all Jews or all Christians, or the Jewish faith or Christian faith as such'.¹³ A scholar of the Qur'an himself, Saeed did not mention the Qur'an's many polemical passages, such as those rejecting the Christian notion that God has begotten a son, and he characterised Islamic 'exclusivism' as a post-qur'anic development.¹⁴ Saeed argued for a 'progressive' form of Islam that promotes peace and pluralism rather than fanaticism. Such a version of Islam, intellectually grounded in a selective reading of the Qur'an and other historic sources (just as every version of every great religion is undergirded by a particular reading of its sources) is clearly in competition with more traditional views both in New Zealand and in the rest of the world.

That is one good reason why public efforts to promote religious harmony do not focus on doctrine or even religious practice so much as the business of getting along together. When Helen Clark's thoroughly secular Labour Government (1999-2008) promoted inter-religious understanding it was 'solely motivated by a utilitarian, if well-meaning, desire to engender social cohesion' (111). Clark participated in the Third Annual Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue, which was held at Waitangi in May 2007— though not all Muslims viewed the event favourably (115-20). Co-operation between the Clark government and FIANZ was also demonstrated in 2006 when President Javed Khan was awarded a Queen's Service Medal, in the wake of the Danish cartoons affair. It was explained that he had been 'the voice of calm and reason on behalf of the country's 23,000 Muslims in a time of outrage for them and peril for meat exports to the Middle East'.¹⁵

There are some gaps and imprecisions in Kolig's account. In explaining the diversity of New Zealand Islam, he refers to the Ahmadis 'who, as rumour has it, are also represented here' (45). New Zealand Ahmadis held their 22nd annual convention in Manukau in January 2011.¹⁶ In April 2010, the movement published a partial translation of the Qur'an in te reo Māori (the Kuranu Tapu).¹⁷ A representative told me there are 300 Ahmadis in Auckland and that they have good relations with other Muslims.¹⁸ As Kolig (45) notes, though, most would reject the Ahmadis' claim to be Muslims at all, accusing them of acknowledging another prophet after Muhammad.

Kolig gives a brief discussion (40) of *da'wa* (broadly, mission to both Muslims and others) and *tabligh* (a revivalist technique aimed at Muslims themselves through

13 Abdullah Saeed, 'Towards a more inclusive view of the religious "other": a Muslim perspective', lecture given 5 September 2007, available at <http://www.dunedininterfaith.net.nz/lecture07.php>.

14 See, for example, Qur'an 2:116; 5:14-18; 6:100-01; 39:3-4; 112:3.

15 'Queen's Birthday Honours: Javed Khan', *New Zealand Herald*, 5 June 2006.

16 Ahmadiyya Muslim Community New Zealand, press release dated 14 January 2011 available at <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/AK1101/S00249/hundreds-of-muslims-gather-in-manukau.htm>.

17 Yvonne Tahana, 'Koran's message of unity shared in te reo translation', *New Zealand Herald*, 15 April 2010; 'Qur'an translated into te Reo', *ibid.*, 17 April 2010.

18 Queries can be directed through the organisation's website: <http://www.ahmadiyya.org.nz/index.php>.

discussion of basic elements of the faith). It is not mentioned, however, despite references to visiting speakers, Indian origins, and regular gatherings, that the Tablighi Jama'at is a huge but very loosely structured international Islamic organisation based in New Delhi since its inception in 1926 and drawing up to two million participants each to its annual assemblies in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Avowedly apolitical though occasionally controversial, its presence in New Zealand merits further exploration.¹⁹

Sayyid Qutb (1906-66) was not a founding member of the Muslim Brotherhood (244): he only joined in the early 1950s, over two decades after its founding. Nor did he ascribe the condition of *jahiliyya* (barbarous ignorance of divine guidance comparable to that of the pre-Islamic Arabs) merely to the West as Kolig implies (53) but also to supposedly Islamic societies like his native Egypt.²⁰ Actually, to the extent that they consider no contemporary society to be genuinely Islamic, Muslims need have no preference for living in a Muslim-majority country. Indeed, some argue that they are freer to practise their religion here than in their home countries (56).

One would expect a prestigious academic publisher like Brill to maintain the highest editorial standards, and the book is well produced, albeit with a rather obscure pink cover image. There is no bibliography, and the index is quite incomplete. Kolig's penchant for unusual abstract nouns like Islamicness (56), Muslimness (238), and especially Muslimhood (6, 14, 35, 50, 74, 125, 236, 241) may be considered a matter of personal style, and even Byzantian (175) is found in larger dictionaries. Imprecise transliterations such as Shi'i rather than Shi'i (44-45), *qiyas* for *qiyas* (126), and *fukuha* for *fuqaha* (127) should have been corrected. It is distracting to be reminded that 'Cultures simply are no[t] stable inert entities' (59), and to learn about young Muslim women 'who presumably have emancipated [themselves] from the blunt coercion of Islamic conservatism' (200) or about 'Muslims themselves, as agencies [agents] of change' (15; cf. 'incidence' for 'incident', 199). 'Descendants' and 'descendents' occur on the same page (22), while *mulid-al-nabi* occurs in the same sentence as the more correct *maulid* (44).

A 2003 statement by FIANZ declared Muslims living here to be 'an integral part of the nation' (254). While the need to make such an assertion reflects the defensiveness occasioned by the events of 9/11 and their aftermath, this is an entirely reasonable aspiration. As Kolig (261-62) notes, however, 'Muslims occupy, and have failed so far to leave, that no man's land between being appreciated as a valued minority, embedded in unquestioned citizenship, and being a suspected and resented group festering in hostile surroundings'. Moreover, 'while the peaceful and relatively harmonious conditions prevailing at this time between the Muslim minority and the wider society can be called exemplary, they are not amenable to projection into the future' (1-2; cf. 6).

19 William Shepard offers a brief discussion in 'New Zealand's Muslims and their Organisations', *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 8/2 (2006) 8-44; see pp. 31-32.

20 Kolig cites William E. Shepard, Sayyid Qutb's Doctrine of *Jahiliyya*, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 35 (2003), 521-45, but see p. 528: 'Although Qutb does not quite name names, he clearly has the Egypt of Gamal Abdel Nasser in mind, as well as other contemporary Muslim countries'.

It is difficult to balance Edward Said's innocuous Muslims-as-victims paradigm with realistic social analysis, and Kolig does not always manage to be consistent. He (140) attributes to 'Orientalist thinking' a 'tendency to perceive Muslims' as more 'integration-resistant' than, for example, East Asians or Pacific Islanders. Kolig goes on to admit, though, that 'The suggestion of highly differentiated forms of citizenship based on distinct cultural differences and the perceptible weakening of loyalty to the nation in the traditional sense renders a certain acuteness to conservative Western thinking'. Six pages later (146; cf. 134), he seems to have persuaded himself of the allegedly Orientalist viewpoint:

New Zealand shows an extraordinary degree of good will by international standards, but some aspects of Islam do reinforce the isolation of Muslims. The main obstacle Western societies in general stumble over when dealing with the integration of Muslim immigrants is that Islam is not a religion in the limited sense of the word, but rather a complete and comprehensive code of life. It is also a culture-producing factor. Through the strong regulative character of the religion, the Islamic world is basically culturally different from the rest of the world and the West in particular.

The solution to this dilemma is offered later in a discussion of the treatment of Muslim women, where Kolig quotes with approval an English view that Muslims living in Western countries must accept that 'Islam can only be followed as a religious faith and not pursued as an all-embracing way of life' (188). For example, while Kolig (142) rejects as 'an impossible dream' the application of Islamic law within Western societies, he admits the possibility of voluntary *sharia* courts with jurisdiction over family matters. Whether that would be acceptable to New Zealanders, and whether it would be enough for all Muslims (110), is yet to be seen. In New Zealand, the debate over Islam and multiculturalism has just begun, and it is to be hoped that a Brill price-tag will not prevent Kolig's book from advancing it.

Biographical note:

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