

Interreligious Solidarity in South Africa: Analyzing the Role of the Muslim Community

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ABSTRACT

South Africa has a unique and vibrant interreligious solidarity movement. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the interreligious movement played a significant role in the anti-apartheid struggle via the South African Chapter of the World Conference of Religions for Peace. Since the onset of a non-racial and democratic dispensation in 1994, the interreligious movement forms an integral part of South Africa's burgeoning civil society, attempting to hold the post-apartheid government accountable for its political and moral mandate. This article explores the development of South Africa's interreligious movement with special reference to the role of the Muslim community. It argues that, relative to its small size, the local Muslim community has played a disproportionate role in shaping the history and trajectory of the South African interreligious solidarity movement during the anti-apartheid struggle (1948–1994) and in the contemporary democratic period (1994–2023).

Keywords

interreligious solidarity; Christian-Muslim relations; social justice.

Introduction

The contemporary South African Muslim community is varied and complex. As a constellation of influences from Southeast Asia, South Asia, and, East, West, and North Africa, intermingling with the indigenous Khoi and San, and the growing number of converts from the Xhosa and Zulu tribes, the local Muslim community is diverse and representative of the global Muslim community or *umma*. The local Muslim community constitutes only roughly 3% of a population of nearly 60 million people in South Africa (Isilo 2021). Despite this small number, South African Muslims play a significant role in commanding the forces of production and shaping the politics of the post-apartheid state. During the anti-apartheid struggle, the interreligious

solidarity movement played a significant role, especially through the South African chapter of the World Conference of Religions for Peace (est. 1984). With the coming of non-racial democracy in 1994, this interreligious movement, along with other mainstream faith communities, initially struggled to move from a “theology of resistance” to a “theology of reconstruction” (Omar 2006). In its contemporary phase, however, the interreligious solidarity movement galvanizes many sectors of civil society in the struggle for social justice and human dignity by attempting to hold the post-apartheid government accountable for its political and moral mandate. This paper explores the development of South Africa’s interreligious solidarity movement with special reference to the role of the Muslim community. I examine how religion was used to legitimate the state, as well as the role religion played in the struggle against colonialism and the apartheid system. I contend that, relative to its small size, the local Muslim community played a disproportionate role in shaping the history and trajectory of the South African interreligious solidarity movement during the anti-apartheid struggle and continues to nurture a local solidarity movement for radical social transformation in the democratic dispensation.

This article is divided into four sections. First, I provide a brief overview of the emergence of Islam in South Africa. Through an exploration of interreligious relations, I examine how the local Muslim community emerged in colonial South Africa, exploring religious diversity in the settler colony. Second, taking up the challenges of apartheid control, I analyze the role of Muslims in the anti-apartheid interreligious solidarity movement by investigating Islamic activism in the struggle against apartheid. Third, I examine the role of Muslims in post-apartheid South Africa. Through a “theology of reconstruction” lens, this section argues that some Muslim activists have expanded their role in the struggle for political freedom by challenging economic and social inequalities in the contemporary era. Fourth, I reflect on the disproportionately large public role of Muslims in South African politics. Drawing on examples from the anti-apartheid struggle and the post-apartheid era of nation-building, I argue that the local Muslim community is an “advantageous” marginal community that rises above its limited size and fully engages as conscientious Muslims and responsible global citizens.

Islam in Colonial South Africa

Shortly after the arrival of the first European settlers under Jan van Riebeeck in 1652, the Dutch imported slaves from their outposts and colonies in the Indian Ocean and the Indonesian Archipelago. As a result, Islam in the Cape

colony can be traced back to the Mardykckers arriving from the island of Ambon in 1658 as support for the Dutch colonial regime against the indigenous Khoi and San communities. Later generations of Muslims came as slaves and as a source of cheap labor for the Dutch (Tayob 1999, 3). Among these imported slaves were also political exiles banished to the Cape for resisting colonial rule in their native lands. Many of these slaves and exiles were followers of various Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim traditions. Islam was to become the most widely practiced religion in the slave community on the Cape (Davids 1992, 84). When the Dutch settled on the Cape of Good Hope, the territory fell under the ambit of the Company's Indian Empire, which held that the Calvinist Christianity of the Dutch Reformed Church (hereafter DRC) was the only path to salvation (Davids 1992, 83). The late Cape historian Achmat Davids (d. 1998) documents this history when he quotes the Statutes of India:

That within the town of Batavia no other religion should be exercised, instructed or propagated in private or public, than the Reformed Protestant Church—as doctrine in the public churches of the United Provinces, and that should any other congregation be held or kept, either Christian, heathen or Moor, all the property of such should be forfeited and he be put in Irons, and banished out of (the) Country or punished corporally or with death, according to the circumstances of the case. (Davids 1992, 83)

The Dutch Reformed missionaries enforced a strict degree of religious exclusivism. The early European settlers were Protestant-Calvinists and believed that the indigenous Khoi, San, and Nguni speaking tribes were “wild” and “uncivilized” and in need of “civility” and “salvation” (Chidester 2014). When the Dutch East India Company set up its refreshment station at the Cape, it started to create a settlement in the name of Christ and in the interest of the company (Chidester 1992, 35). The efforts of the DRC missionaries were unsuccessful, owing to local resistance to the missionary schools, with few indigenous and slave communities showing any interest in Christianity. Because the public practice of Islam was forbidden, it was through private local acts that the Muslims and their faith survived. Historians have suggested that it was through home-based, largely Sufi practices, such as *dhikr* circles, that Islam flourished among the marginal social classes of colonial Cape Town. Seraj Hendricks (d. 2020), *shaykh* of the Azawiya mosque community, has argued that Sufism was present in the early Cape despite the absence of a formal Sufi network (*ṭarīqa*). As evidence, he traces a popular closing prayer to Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jīlāni (d. 1166). By focusing on these “folk” practices of Islam in Cape Town, Hendricks demonstrates the

Qādirīyya influence on this *ʿurf*, or local practice, and grounds it in a tradition of practices attentive to the cultivation of the self and community (Hendricks 2005). In this locale, Islam developed discourses and practices under brutal conditions of “enslavement, enforced prostitution, colonial rule, and the fraught post-emancipation period” which culminated in the establishment of apartheid in 1948 (Baderoon 2014, 12). Despite this brutality, Muslims survived, owing to their strong faith commitment and communal bonds.

The British occupation of the Cape a century later (1795) brought religious freedom, allowing non-Calvinist religious traditions to practice more freely. British rule was also accompanied by the arrival of Anglican missionaries representing the London Missionary Society (LMS). The LMS was followed by the entry of American, French, German, and Scandinavian missionaries. In the wake of the many colonial wars that were fought on the Eastern frontier, the power of the traditional chiefdoms was diminished, aiding the efforts of the missionaries. During the War of the Axe in the 1840s, for example, the Glasgow Missionary Society observed that, if chiefly power were broken, “there [was a] brighter prospect for the spreading of the gospel” (Chidester 1992, 41). It was under these conditions that Christianity spread among the indigenous and slave populations of the Cape. The successes of the missionaries continued into the twentieth century.

During the second half of the nineteenth century the British also imported indentured workers from India to work on the sugar plantations on the east coast of Natal. Between 1860 and 1866, over 6,000 immigrants from India were brought to South Africa. These Indian workers largely followed Hindu traditions and primarily spoke Tamil, Hindi, and Telegu. These Indian workers were followed by free traders who brought in spices, many of them Gujrati-speaking Hindus and Muslims. As Dutch settlers (who would eventually form an Afrikaans linguistic and ethnic community) moved toward the interior of the country upon the discovery of gold and diamonds, Indians also moved inland in the pursuit of new opportunities. By 1874, Indians had moved from the Natal coast to the golden city of Johannesburg and its surrounding towns and villages. This movement resulted in the establishment of mosques around the country, shaping the local discursive and political terrain with transnational debates about Islamic comportment (Tayob 1999, 63).

Gabeba Baderoon argues that, during the colonial period, Islam became a communal and spiritual “refuge for enslaved people as well as for indigenous Khoi and San people, who consequently formed a creole slave and indigenous Muslim community of the Cape” (2014, 13). She contends that the local Cape Muslim community had the ability to “absorb people of different

origins,” leaving a “legacy of racial interminability in the South African” Muslim population and its traditions of Islam, a legacy that was undercut by the colonial regimes of the Dutch, British, and later the Afrikaner nationalist apartheid government (Baderoon 2014, 13). Because of this rapid growth and “racial interminability,” the local Muslim population presented a security threat to the colony.

As British rule continued to consolidate at the Cape, Muslims actively resisted their colonial masters. In the 1880s, Muslims were “prepared to riot for their faith” and publicly engaged in their religious practices (Esack 1988, 474). In the early 1910s, Muslim political action was represented by the establishment of the African Political (later People’s) Organization (APO) under Dr. Abdullah Abdurahman (d. 1940) to protect the political and economic interests of mixed or “Coloured” communities, further wedging this community away from the African Black population (Simone 1994, 212).

The early 1940s saw the emergence of the Anti-Coloured Affairs Department campaign spearheaded by Dr. Cissy Gool (d. 1963) (Esack 1988, 474). Despite their marginal position, Muslims in colonial South Africa developed a rich collative resource of spiritual resilience through their practices of Sufism. As Muslims developed a unique place in the late nineteenth-century South African religious tapestry, they experienced the violence of the following fifty years through the racial politics of the apartheid state. In the next section of this essay, we reflect on the role of Muslims during the anti-apartheid interreligious solidarity movement.

Anti-Apartheid Islamic Activism

After seizing power in 1948, the Afrikaner National Party established the system of racial segregation called apartheid. A prime example of structural violence, the apartheid system institutionalized the oppression and dehumanization of people of color. It legalized racial discrimination, sociopolitical oppression, and economic exploitation. According to David Chidester, under the apartheid system, “violence was everywhere. It was an integral part of the discourses, practices and social formations through which human beings struggled to be human” (2012, 61). Apartheid violence was legitimated through the deployment of religious tradition. The DRC synod interpreted the Bible and Christianity in a way that supported the system of separation (Ngcokovane 1989, Loubser 1987; Moodie 1975). Many other Christian denominations and religious communities succumbed to separatist ideology and began to interpret their religion as supporting the apartheid system or simply remained silent about its immorality. Under the apartheid regime, Muslims were classified as non-White. Based on a separation of “races,” the

machinery continued and adapted Dutch and British colonial regimes. A hallmark of this regime was its system of classification. The subjects of the state were divided into four “racial” groups: White, Indian, Coloured, and African, with further sub-classifications into “ethnic” or language groups. At a conference in 1950, the DRC declared that “separate development” could only be achieved by the “gradual” movement toward the total separation of the White settlers and Black subjects. Entrenching this religio-racial supremacy, the apartheid education policy was labeled Christian National Education and encouraged the exclusion of other religious communities. In 1983, the Afrikaner National Party adopted a new constitution declaring that South Africa was a Christian country. Non-Christian religious communities could acquire limited state support for their activities if they were willing to collaborate in the apartheid project (Chidester 1992).

While most Muslims feared the violent nature of the racist state, some groups justified their political apathy on the basis that the regime allowed for a limited form of religious liberty. This approach to the apartheid state drew on an Islamic legal principle known as *hifz al-din* or the preservation of religion. Sindre Bangstad and Aslam Fataar explain that this led to the

general Muslim community’s relative isolation from broader national political processes (such as active participation in the anti-apartheid struggle) during the apartheid period and uncritical support for the ruling party by ‘*ulamā*’ elites and Muslim middle classes in the post-apartheid period. (2010, 819)

Despite the dominant political lethargy, there were multiple trends of Islamic activism resisting apartheid segregation in solidarity with other oppressed communities in South Africa, such as Black Christians. A key figure in this tradition of bearing witness to justice was Imam Abdullah Haron. With his youthful zeal, charismatic personality, and sense of justice, Haron attracted many Muslim youth, with whom he developed a symbiotic relationship. As he taught his students Islamic theology and praxis, they schooled him in the politics of resistance. Together with his students, Imam Haron developed an early form of an Islamic liberation theology. After his death in apartheid police detention on 27 September, 1969, the imam’s funeral procession, attended by more than 30,000 mourners, was transformed into a ritualized form of political defiance against the apartheid regime by Muslims and non-Muslims (Omar 1987). Muhammad Haron contours the imam’s legacy by showing its interreligious impact. He writes:

Reverend Wrangmore decided to fast for 40 days as a form of protest against the unjust killing of the Imam during the time of the Imam's detention, and more importantly, to request that Prime Minister B. J. Vorster officially open up the case, which had been prematurely closed for "unknown" reasons, and to investigate the actual cause of Haron's death. (2006, 440)

As a demonstration of interreligious solidarity, this act of spiritual activism challenged racial injustice in South Africa by calling for accountability. As Imam Haron became a witness for social justice (*shahid*), his legacy of Islamic activism in the interreligious solidarity movement against apartheid was continued by his students and supporters. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Muslim activists became key members of the national liberation struggle as part of broader anti-apartheid coalitions, such as the Unity Movement and the United Democratic Front, while also belonging to Muslim organizations like the Muslim Youth Movement (est. 1970), the Call of Islam (est. 1980), and Qibla (est. 1980), the three main religiopolitical vehicles for Muslim resistance to apartheid (Esack 1988). Inspired by broader political traditions in the postcolonial world, these three Islamic organizations worked with non-Muslims in their collective struggle against apartheid (Lehmann 2006). Together, these movements articulated an Islamic liberation theology embedded in the socioeconomic fabric of the South African struggle. They argued for a hermeneutic of struggle grounding the expression of theology.

In the broader Black community, many Christians were inspired by the theological witness of Latin American theologians (Walshe 1987). In response to the theological underpinnings of the apartheid state, Black theologians produced the Kairos Document in September 1985, drawing inspiration from the Greek concept of the "kairos moment" as representing an opening in history for hope and transformation (West 2012, 15). Through their development of a theological typology, they critiqued the apartheid state and mainstream Christian denominations for their silence. The Kairos theologians proclaimed that the apartheid leaders had blasphemed against God by creating a "state theology" that abused Christian theological concepts and biblical texts to justify its system of separation (Omar 2021, 13). Regarded as a profound and radical theological text, the Kairos Document rejected the theology of apartheid as "state theology" and called for prophetic witness to the struggle for human dignity and social justice. The Kairos Document not only decried the racist and oppressive system of apartheid heresy but provided South Africans with a crystallized articulation of a South African expression of liberation theology. Inspired by the prophetic theology espoused in the Kairos Document, the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu (d. 2021)

eschewed the “church” or “state” theology of many Christian leaders and called for a Christian witness of social justice.

As a text of liberation, the Kairos Document also inspired the broader interreligious solidarity movement, including such figures as the Christian leader of the United Democratic Front, Dr. Allan Boesak, and Muslim leader Dr. Farid Esack (Omar 2021, 13). A few months after the publication of the Kairos Document, Esack presented “A Muslim Perspective on the Kairos Document” at the annual general meeting of the local World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) chapter. Perhaps the single most important impact of the Kairos Document on the broader Muslim Movement was that of propelling it further along its newfound path of interreligious solidarity extending beyond the boundaries of South Africa and toward globally oppressed communities (West 2012, 5).

As the Cold War came to an end in the late 1980s, the geopolitical positioning of South Africa became precarious. As a bulwark against communism in Africa, the apartheid state was a tolerated exception in the capitalist sphere of influence. At the end of the war, however, apartheid in South Africa lost the political support of the United States (and the United Kingdom) and was forced into a position of negotiation. Some Muslim activists embraced this period (1990–1994) and framed it as a contemporary version of the Peace Treaty of Hudaybiyya, recalling the Prophet Muhammad’s biography (Simone 1994, 226). As the African National Congress (ANC) negotiated a settlement with the Nationalist Party, they jointly formulated an inclusive constitutional democracy Muslims participated in with great success. Despite their marginal status in the Muslim community, The Call of Islam and the Muslim Youth Movement broke away from established tradition and promoted Muslims to the front lines of the national struggle for liberation (Simone 1994, 214). As democracy dawned in the early 1990s, activists shifted their energy and discourses from resistance to reconstruction, and Islamic liberatory discourses and activism adapted and came to gravitate around certain communities around the country: Claremont Main Road Mosque (est. 1854) in Cape Town; Masjid-al Islam in Johannesburg (est. in the 1990s); and the Taking of Islam to the People (est. 2003) initiative in Durban (Esack 1997, 250). In the next section, we examine the role of Muslims in the project of post-Apartheid reconstruction.

Toward an Inclusive Theology of Reconstruction

The African National Congress (ANC) assumed political power in April 1994. After the violent end to the system of segregation, the post-apartheid government opted for a “cooperative model” by defining its nature as secular

to promote religious pluralism and engage religious actors in common goals (Omar 2006, 283). Considering South Africa's rich religious demography and the influence of interreligious solidarity on the anti-apartheid culture, the ANC opted to work with religious actors and institutions. For example, after his election, Nelson Mandela (d. 2013) visited a church, a mosque, and a synagogue to underline his government's commitment to religious pluralism (Esack 1997, 223). In June 1997, he addressed an interreligious consultation for religious leaders, calling on them to lead the moral reconstruction of the emerging democratic nation:

The transformation of our country requires the greatest possible cooperation between religions and political bodies, critically and wisely serving our people together. Neither political nor religious objectives can be achieved in isolation. They are held in a creative tension with common commitments. We are partners in the building of our society. (Quoted in Omar 2006, 284)

When President Mandela was inaugurated, the proceedings were opened by the interfaith prayers from at least four different religious traditions. After losing much of its political motivation, intellectual vitality, and support base, the interreligious solidarity movement grasped at identifying a new political agenda for social transformation. Elsewhere (Omar 2006) I have argued that the interreligious movement also struggled to make the transition from a "theology of resistance" to a "theology of reconstruction" that builds an inclusive national political culture for the "wretched of the earth" (Fanon 1963).

As democracy matured, however, and the postcolonial challenges of corruption, cronyism, and state violence worsened, civil society regained its vitality. In this phase, the interreligious solidarity movement attended to the ghosts haunting the postcolonial nation and slowing down its human development (Omar 2006, 286). Decolonial theorists have called this phenomenon the ghost of coloniality: this apparition influences the relations of power and shapes discourses and practices of domination, curtailing the full expression of former colonial subjects. Santiago Slabodsky, for example, explains that coloniality is based on "the patterns of domination that were developed during colonial times and that continue to reproduce themselves beyond formal colonialism. In other words, it is the construction of racial hierarchies set in the sixteenth century that helped to define, for example, blackness by its 'lack' (of soul, religion, history, civilization, development, etc.)" (2017, 31). The interreligious solidarity movement along with other South African civil society formations struggled to attend to the stubborn

legacy of coloniality. It was also unable to move beyond “extrinsic motivations” to “intrinsic reasons from within faith commitments for promoting good relations with people of other religions” (Omar 2006).

Despite these various challenges, during South Africa’s democratic dispensation (1994–2021), Muslims have attempted to work with religious others for the common good. While their numbers have remained small, South Africa’s Muslim communities have unpretentiously offered solutions challenging various issues of poverty, gender-based violence, and environmental destruction. Through a reframing of Islamic liberation theology, these communities have embraced a project of reconstruction to exorcise the hauntings of colonialism. One such institution is the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town.

Through an intersectional approach to theological ethics, this mosque community draws on the ethical traditions of the past in conversation with the “signs on the horizon” (Q 41:53), or the sociopolitical context, to form an orientation called “critical traditionalism.” As the sixth oldest mosque in the country, the Claremont Main Road Mosque has a complex history. Founded by a descendant of an early pioneer of Islam, the mosque was built on donated land by a prosperous mason and coachman named Slamdien (n.d.). For the first century of its operation, the mosque was under the spiritual custodianship of the Abderoef family. They were finally removed from administrative and family control after a protracted battle in the apartheid court system that lasted from 1964 to 1977, culminating in a judgment calling for the mosque to be operated by the board and not the Abderoef family (Gamieldien 2004, 40–43). The mosque was thus liberated from family-based authoritarian leadership and moved toward a more open and inclusive governance ethic of consultation, or *shūrā*. Five pillars ground its praxis: 1) Interfaith Solidarity, 2) Gender Justice, 3) Jihad Against Poverty, 4) Environmental Justice, and 5) Youth Empowerment (Gamieldien 2004, 53–89).

Taking up the gender activism of the broader anti-apartheid movement, the Claremont Main Road Mosque has committed itself as a Muslim institution to the struggle for gender justice, or gender jihad, alongside other faith communities. To combat the structural nature of androcentrism, the mosque presents an inclusive religious anthropology through the cultivation of virtues (Qurʾān 33:35). As both men and women have the potential to cultivate virtues, human beings have equal social responsibility to establish the good and prohibit the immoral (Qurʾān 9:71). Despite its ideal of gender egalitarianism, the mosque community navigates a neo-traditional South African community that holds on to patriarchal sociocultural mores (Gqola 2016) and sexist interpretations of the religion and culture (Shaikh 2003).

The mosque congregation has attempted to subvert the broader culture of gender-based violence in South Africa by exposing the workings of “toxic masculinity,” which is pervasive and provides religious legitimation for the domination of women, gender minorities, poor communities, and the natural environment (Shaikh 2021, 95). By standing in solidarity with women, the mosque engages in an interreligious movement for social transformation. Through its NGO support, cultivation of women’s leadership, and program of gender-inclusive theology, the mosque balances its commitment to gender justice within the context of wider sensibilities and mores. As the mosque congregation navigates its gender politics in dialogue with the community, it has expounded its solidarity to those on the economic margins by challenging neoliberalism in everyday South African life.

Neoliberal precarity has caused poverty to be normalized in South Africa. In response, the Claremont Mosque launched a campaign called the Jihad Against Poverty. Through its Islamic-inspired critique of wealth accumulation, the mosque community identifies the root malaise of the country’s economic problems in its capitulation to neoliberalism through its embrace in 1996 of Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) over the developmentalist Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP). Exacerbating the economic legacies of apartheid, GEAR followed a model of “trickle-down economics” that further entrenched colonial patterns of exploitation and created new classes of marginalization. These conditions have been particularly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic which gave rise to a kleptocratic oligarchy leeching the state of its resources. Through its material succor and political comradeship, the mosque attempts to move beyond its middle-class privilege by standing in solidarity with those in the trenches of the struggle. To move away from benevolent charity and to acts of radical solidarity, the mosque community defines poverty broadly as encompassing the lack of basic human needs. Through projects of literacy campaigns, sanitation drives, food support, and grassroots NGO assistance, the mosque attempts to break the cycle of neoliberal precarity in the city of Cape Town by advocating for a new inclusive political economy. Because Muslims partner with marginalized communities, most of whom do not subscribe to their Islamic faith, they demonstrate a post-apartheid interreligious theology of reconstruction.

Expanding the scope of an inclusive theology of reconstruction, the Claremont Main Road Mosque has also expressed solidarity with the natural environment. South Africans have, like many others in the Global South, experienced the brunt of the earth’s ecological destruction. For instance, the Western Cape has recently come out of a drought that started in 2015 and ended in 2020. The province of KwaZulu-Natal recently experienced

violent floods that killed more than 50 people. In the Eastern Cape the capital city of Gqeberha faced a “Day Zero” on which the city threatened to cut off water for more than half of its population, showing the severity of their water crisis. From 2014 to 2018, the Muslims for Eco-Justice project was established at the mosque in partnership with an interfaith network, the Southern African Faith Communities’ Environment Institute (SAFCEI). Through creating sustainable guides for mosque committees, theological resources for imams, and pedagogical materials for *madāris*, the Muslims for Eco-Justice project started to cultivate a grassroots strategy of sustainable change. As a faith community committed to the cultivation of a sustainable world for all, especially the poor and marginalized, Muslims for Eco-Justice links environmental justice to the larger goal of being a conscientious Muslim and a responsible global citizen. By cultivating a “green theology,” the mosque congregation attempts to expand its commitment to social justice by respecting and preserving the resources of the earth. Through this form of interreligious solidarity, the Claremont Mosque presents an Islamic ethic of environmentalism promoting ethical stewardship (*khilāfa*). Through their active engagement with the theological politics of interreligious solidarity, this small community is slowly shaping the contours of the reconstruction project. In the next section, I discuss the critical role of Muslims in the formation and campaigns of the most recent iteration of the vibrant South African interreligious solidarity movement, namely, the Cape Flats Interfaith Declaration.

The Cape Flats Interfaith Declaration

Violence has become normalized in post-apartheid South Africa. Many communities in South Africa face the precarity of a harsh social reality, from poverty to gender-based violence and gangsterism. Emerging from brutal histories of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid, the social fabric of South African society aggravates the lived experiences of social marginality. In Cape Town, gender-based violence and gangsterism in the working-class communities of the Cape Flats is a historical problem and the result of a host of socioeconomic factors. The legacy of contemporary urban apartheid, the Cape Flats was a creation of the Group Areas Act of 1950, which segregated and decimated thriving integrated communities in Cape Town, such as District Six and Claremont. Black people living near the inner city and in areas considered “prime property” today were all forced to move to newly created Cape Flats townships. The devastating effects of this grand apartheid scheme are what we are reaping today.

In contemporary South Africa, most Black people remain economically excluded from these “prime property” areas. In the apartheid years, the Cape Flats townships were left to rot and decay and became urban ghettos. The social and economic conditions in these townships were ripe for capture by gang lords and drug cartels ready to prey on fractured communities and youth living with little hope of social or economic prosperity. During the past three decades of the post-apartheid era, these conditions have only worsened. Despite this persistence of systemic and structural inequality, most people who reside in the Cape Flats have formed strategies of survival, resilience, and communal uplift.

The widespread nature of the violence across the sprawling high-density townships of the Cape Flats illuminates the glaring inequalities that were being exacerbated and exposed. In response to the terrorizing nature of this normalized violence (both structural and physical, Galtung 1969, 1990), the local interreligious solidarity movement established a multifaceted approach captured in the Cape Flats Interfaith Declaration published in August 2019. The Declaration was formally adopted at a public Interfaith Religious Service for Peace held at the Joseph Stone Auditorium on August 25, which was addressed by anti-apartheid stalwarts Rev. Dr. Allan Boesak, Imam Dr. Abdul Rashied Omar, Rev. Chris Nissen, and Avril Andrews from a local collective called Moms for Justice, Peace, and Reconciliation (VOC News 2019). The interreligious service was opened with a stirring rendition of the Islamic call to prayer, *adhān*. In a highly symbolic and powerful gesture, the event got underway with a peace procession from the Athlone Stadium precinct and had two stopovers at gang hotspots, previously ridden with rampant shootings and bloody gang warfare. At both sites, interfaith open-air prayer sessions were held and incense and holy water sprinkled to sacralize previously defiled spaces (VOC News 2019). Interfaith religious leaders collaborated with a local trade union to formulate an “Interfaith Declaration” that called for the cultivation of communities based on service, love, peace, freedom, and justice. Focusing on the experiences of many marginal social classes in the city, the Interfaith Declaration stated:

We stand by our people in depressed communities in any form of suffering and need. We give of ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another and our people. We witness and strive against any form of injustice, so that righteousness, love, peace, and harmony amongst all people may roll down like waters, and virtue like an ever-flowing stream. (Quoted in Paton 2021)

Through a preferential option for the “depressed communities in any form of suffering,” the local interreligious solidarity movement went beyond

an “ecumenical deal” (Ellis 1992) and grounded its activism not in liberal peacebuilding (Philpot 2010, 5–9) but in human dignity and social justice, taking up the interconnected ways in which suffering limits the potential of its victims (Chopp 1986). Inspired by a partnership with the Service and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (SAWUSA), the religious leaders of the service were galvanized into greater action to respond to the war, social decay, and moral degeneration on the Cape Flats (VOC News 2019). This inaugural service was followed in October 2019 by another interfaith prayer service that coincided with a local campaign for gender justice called the 16 Days of Activism. In all these efforts, the presence of the local Muslim community was strongly felt. Despite their small numbers, Muslims played a significant role in the formation of this collective call for action drawing on their tradition for inspiration and legitimation. In the final section, we reflect on the critical role of Muslims in South Africa and place it within a theoretical framework developed by T. Abdou Maliqalim Simone. The latter draws on the work of Jacques Derrida to conceptualize what Simone describes as “advantageous marginalities.”

Advantageous Marginalities: The Disproportionate Role of Muslims in South Africa

Despite their small demographic position, the local Muslim community has developed a rich legacy of resilience during colonial control, resistance to apartheid socioeconomic ideologies, and reconstruction in the new “rainbow” and inclusive South Africa. Echoing the moral vision of Archbishop Tutu, the rainbow South Africa was a post-apartheid political orientation that promoted constitutional democracy with an “affective investment” in the discourse of human rights (Puar 2013). As an ideology, however, it was challenged by the generation of “born-frees” who exposed the structural violence of the state (Chikane 2019). In the rainbow South Africa, Muslims have amplified their position and taken up seats of political and economic power, challenging the Christian hegemony of apartheid South Africa. How is it that Muslims have operated with such a loud and robust voice in South African history? In my view, this role can be explained through the lens of “advantageous marginalities.” Subverting the normative logic, the advantageous marginal community rearranges the power dynamic by exposing its underlying logic and breaking down its constructed ideologies and practices to their own advantage. T. Abdou Maliqalim Simone develops this theoretical formulation to describe the role of Muslim activism in the anti-apartheid struggle (1994).

Simone contends that the moral voice, and consequently the political impact, that Muslims had during the anti-apartheid struggle far exceeded their demographic numbers. Apartheid subjugation in this instance did not automatically lead to marginalization. Rather, it was creatively deployed as a tool of social cohesion for the local community of Muslims (Simone 1994, 211). Drawing on practices developed during colonialism and apartheid, the local Muslim community developed a spiritual resource that sustained their activism. Apartheid subjugation was used to amplify Islam's marginal voice for a just South Africa. Simone contends that the key to this micro-strategic maneuvering lies in a "psychological posture" (Simone 1994, 241). As movements of Islamic activism, The Call of Islam, the Muslim Youth Movement, and Qibla were minority movements for a minority constituency within the South African context, but they did not engage in politics from this position. Simone writes that "what is demonstrated here is the potential strength a minority has when it does not act like a minority, that is, when it acts as if it has the potential to be an agent of general social transformation and not simply the mediator of things done to it by the majority" (1994, 224). By fully embracing their Islamic heritage, as part of a constellation of traditions making up their identity, Muslim activists actively participated and shaped the broader national struggle with their non-Muslim comrades, their religious "others." Simone explains that, during the anti-apartheid struggle, the agenda of Islamic grassroots movements was the liberation of the country, making the interreligious solidarity movement an Islamic movement without officially bearing a Muslim designation (1994, 214). Muslims played a prominent role in the anti-apartheid struggle and challenged the assumed passivity of the local Muslim community (Jeppie 1991). Islamic activists, for example, reframed the central figure of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad, as an activist who fought against manifest and subtle forms of violent ignorance or *jāhiliyya* (Simone 1994, 226). Through their reconfiguration of the Prophet as a symbol of the South African movement, Islamic activists spread the message of a socially responsive interpretation of Islam. As a result of the increased activism of Muslims, white ethnonationalists were threatened. Afrikaner right-wing groups, including Afrikaner missionaries, alarmed by the increased activities of Muslims, declared Whiteness to be under a "massive onslaught." Islam was the threat, and it was condemned as a "false religion which poses a threat to Christianity in South Africa, Africa and the world at large" (Omar 1989). Members of the Muslim community were singled out as revolutionaries; having articulated an Islamic response to the violence of apartheid, they, along with their comrades, caught the attention of the security services of the state (Simone 1994, 217). Despite this broader context of racial

separation, progressive Muslims and Christians worked together in their effort to defeat the giant of apartheid because they believed it was a violation of social justice.

Recovering from the deep wounds of colonialism and apartheid, Black South Africans, including many Muslims, still feel the brunt of the socio-economic challenges in post-apartheid modernity. While the post-apartheid regime has secured a range of social liberties, it must still subvert the enduring legacies of economic marginalization, gender-based violence, poverty, and ontological hopelessness before the structural violence turns more virulent. The challenge for the local Muslim community is whether they can combine their efforts to further their status as an advantageous marginal class and contribute to the development of a compassionate society. Extending Simone's analytical concept to the position of Muslims in South Africa, we argue that the local Muslim community has taken full advantage of their marginal demographic position by contesting local politics with Islamic ethics and going beyond a narrow besieged "laagar mentality," fully embracing the South African nation and its projects for reconstruction and inclusivity. Simone writes, "the new world order comes from the margins but must act as if this is not the case" (1994, 206). In the case of Muslims in South Africa, they played a vital role in communal practices of solidarity with religious others. Rising above theological differences, this form of interreligious solidarity works together for the common good (Simone 1994, 219). In this act of solidarity, Muslims have come together to show their common humanity with the other as a mode of political agency and spiritual transformation. By working with others, Islamic activists subverted the logic of apartheid segregation demonstrating how an oppressed class can form a collective that challenges state violence and oppression (Simone 1994, 222). The activism of the Claremont Main Road Mosque shows how a small community is grounding its activism in the resources of Islam to extend material and discursive solidarity with "others." Through their campaigns against toxic masculinity, poverty, and environmental destruction, this marginalized mosque in Cape Town is fighting against violations of human dignity. Continuing the legacy of the anti-apartheid interreligious solidarity, the CMRM community expands a "theology of reconstruction" into an intersectional struggle for social justice, embracing the "other" as an extension of the self, as the Qur'ān commands (49:13).

Conclusion

In a famous *ḥadīth qudsī* (a tradition that forms part of the prophet Muhammad's sayings but is not included in the Muslim sacred scripture,

the Qurʾān), God addresses the needs of material and spiritual poverty by linking the service to the poor with the very presence of the Divine:

God, the Exalted, will (question a person) on the Day of Resurrection (asking): “O child of Adam, I asked you for food, but you did not feed Me.” The person would submit: “My Lord, how could I feed You and Thou art the Lord of the worlds?” God would say: “Did you not know that such and such a servant of Mine asked you for food, but you did not feed him? Did you not realize that if you had fed him, you would certainly have found Me at his side?”

The above Muslim tradition resonates well with the New Testament teaching found in the Epistle to the Hebrews: ‘Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares’ (13:2, KJV and Matthew 25:35-40). This passage is one of many biblical texts that provide the theological foundations for what has been described as the Christian doctrine of “radical love for the other.”

Reflecting on the importance of this tradition for an ethics of compassion, Saʿdiyya Shaikh writes that by attending to the material needs of a “poor, hungry, and ill person” the seeker cultivates a “fertile opportunity for a fellow human being to encounter God. Moreover, such a person is not merely an intermediary, but God as the embodiment of love is fully present” (2012, 80) in and through that person’s predicament. By attending to those “occupying marginal and liminal positions,” social justice activists not only attend to the material need of their fellow human beings but also find the presence of the Divine (2012, 83). Through these acts of service, activists become vehicles of compassion. By embodying this theological witness, Muslims have taken up the struggle for human dignity and social justice in varied ways. In spite of their marginal status in South African racial politics, local Muslims developed a local sociopolitical and cultural expression of Islam influenced by transnational Islamic politics and engaged the struggle for political freedom by cultivating a theology of liberation. This article reflected on the role of the Muslim community in the interreligious solidarity movement in South Africa. It argues that, despite their small demographic position, the local Muslim community continues to play an informative and engaged role in local interreligious solidarity politics. Through a conceptual lens of “advantageous marginality,” I have suggested that the local community has expanded the role of Islam into the national discourse and politics of liberation beyond the scope of locality.

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EDITORS' NOTE

In relation to Omar's article, it is important for us to acknowledge the context that influenced this special issue, and that is the Cape Flats Interfaith Declaration as a practice of interreligious dialogue. With regard to this Declaration, we wish to highlight two comments.¹

Gerhardus de Vries Bock, pastor and one of the main promoters of the Cape Flats Interfaith Declaration, states:

The Anti-Crime Interfaith Dialogue as it is currently known was formed in 2019. After several discussions & meetings this body was formally established on Sunday 25 August 2019, in Kewtown, at the Joseph Stone Auditorium. Since then, this body has expanded and represents a broad, grassroots coalition of spiritual and religious interfaith activists from several organizations and concerned individuals. It includes men and women from Christian denominations, Islamic *masjids*, Jewish congregations, Buddhist and Hindu communities.

Strangely, the things that really unite us are the social and other challenges of the Cape Flats. With most of these challenges we have a bottom-up approach—where we believe firmly that power lies with the people—rather than a top-down one. What makes us unique is the fact that our relationship is not just on a piece of paper or based on the intellect of a few individuals, but our relationship and engagement is based on real issues of real people on the ground. The complexity of our social economic challenges leaves us no option than for faith leaders to vacate our comfort zones, join hands, and have roundtable discussions with the community to find the

1. These remarks, as well as those by Johann Groenewald below, were made at the symposium "Limits of Religious Plurality" held at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study: STIAS on 7 March 2022. This is the conference that gave rise to this special issue.

best possible solutions. The ACIFD has a dynamic power of connecting and creating strong partnerships that I believe could be very sustainable. Our unity is based not on particular religious tenets but on relationship, social action, and a common underlying inclusive spirituality that honors difference and embraces diversity. The best way we have exercised our mandate has been to engage meaningfully and visibly. The Anti-Crime Interfaith Dialogue has opened up the opportunity for meaningful engagement and broader participation.

As indicated above, the interfaith declaration expects us to appreciate and respect each other's religions and at the same time embrace the commonalities we share, with the aim to restore the dignity of our families and communities in the Cape Flats. This culture of interconnectedness and living in social cohesion, should be the motto for breaking down every barrier that disturbs our relationship. This interfaith initiative has opened up once again the possibility to be more relational than institutional.

In turn, Johann Groenewald, Professor of Sociology at Stellenbosch University, comments:

[I bear] admiration for the determination of the interfaith leaders to act in unison and solidarity to face the overwhelming challenges of living a life of dignity on the Cape Flats. As they said themselves, "Strangely, the things that really unites us are the Social and other Challenges on the Cape Flats ... the violent and sexual abuse of our women and children, large-scale drug addiction and absence of common decency and respect." In short, "Gangsterism, crime, violence and drug peddling found a fertile breeding ground within the socio-economic constraints in working class communities that still bears apartheid scars."

After nearly three decades of post-apartheid governance, one would reasonably have expected the tide of such challenges to have begun to turn at least, if not to go out—because everywhere in the modern world the lifting of "socio-economic constraints" implies that governments deliver on their end of the social compact: that is, provide the physical and social infrastructure for communities to thrive. What could have prevented the government from doing so? Again, as the interfaith leaders themselves observed in their declaration, "inferior public education, overburdened health care and limited government social services are among the underlying causes of social ills facing the people"—clearly, functions that governments, under modern statehood, are supposed to provide, especially to struggling citizens. (The ACIFD could have added the collapse of even the meagre pre-existing railway transport, postal, communication, and policing services on the Cape Flats.) The tenacity and resilience of the ACIFD to stand together to face up to such challenges is therefore admirable, to say the least.

Even more remarkable, however, is their (the faith leaders') collaboration and unity with a leading trade union (SAWUSA) in taking up the plight of the "working class community." In the sentence above ("*Strangely*, the things that really unites us are the Social and other Challenges on the Cape Flats" italics added), unity is seen to be grounded in what in Marxian analysis would be called the material conditions of life. This begs a sociological as well as a theological interpretation: sociological because religion as expressed in faith communities has so often been portrayed as antithetical to social action (as in "religion is the opium of the masses"). It is theological because even the religious leaders themselves recognize it as "*strange*," i.e., that Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist, and Hindu activists have somehow 'suspended' their dogmatic differences ("Our unity is based *not* on particular religious tenets," italics added) to find "a common underlying inclusive spirituality." And not just any spirituality, but one anchored in a rights discourse embracing inclusivity "that honors difference and embrace of diversity." As observers, we may be surprised to learn that the juxtapositioning, à la Marx and Weber, of the material and the ideal as the prime movers of social change may have been a false dichotomy all along.