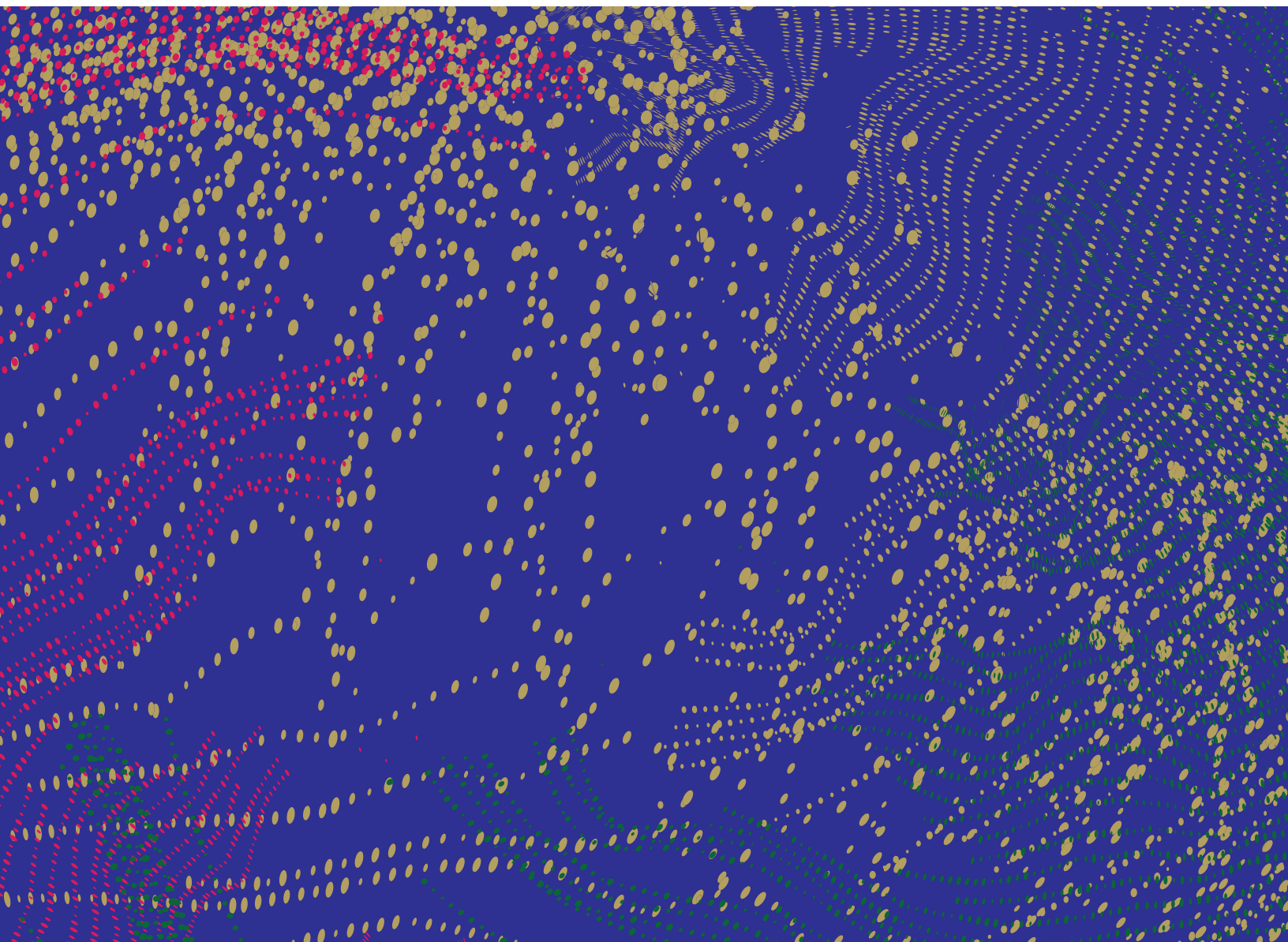The World Humanities Report

Understanding the Muslim Predicament in Contemporary Sri Lanka: Contribution of the Social Sciences and Humanities

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Understanding the Muslim Predicament in Contemporary Sri Lanka: Contribution of the Social Sciences and Humanities

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Since the end of the civil war in 2009, the Muslim population in Sri Lanka has come under attack from a well-organized and virulently anti-Muslim movement.[1] The ethnic conflict that took place primarily between the Tamil rebel group known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sinhala-identified Sri Lankan state military came to an end in May 2009 after a horrendous loss of life. Although the country has been a plural polity for much of its modern history, the ethnic war lasted nearly four decades. Although periodic anti-Muslim mobilizations had previously led to violence in Sri Lanka, the anti-Muslim movement that emerged after the war's end had no precedent in terms of scale and commitment. In the aftermath of the war, an organized attempt to cultivate an anti-Muslim sentiment among Sri Lanka's majority Sinhala Buddhist population emerged with the Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force). Consisting predominantly of Buddhist monks, the Bodu Bala Sena set about challenging what they saw as the undue influence of Muslims in various sectors in the country—ranging from the economy to politics—and the cultivation of social distance through dress and piety practices.

In 2019, the anti-Muslim movement won a gruesome victory on Easter Sunday, when Islamic militant suicide bombers—long predicted to have been waiting in the wings, hiding among the pious Muslims—attacked, killing hundreds. Nine suicide bombers targeted three churches, three luxury hotels, and one guest house, killing close to three hundred people and injuring hundreds more.[2] The bombings happened despite intelligence alerts to the possibility of such events, including the names of potential perpetrators known to the Sri Lankan police

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[1] Farzana Haniffa, "Sex and Violence in the Eastern Province: A Study in Muslim Masculinity," in *The Search for Justice: The Sri Lanka Papers*, ed. Kumari Jayawardena and Kishali-Pinto Jayawardena (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2016), 193–236.

[2] "Sri Lanka Attacks: What We Know about the Easter Bombings," BBC News, April 28, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48010697.

and military intelligence.[3] The anti–Muslim movement had long been claiming that Islamic extremist terrorist cells were operating in the country, and now their claim appeared to be vindicated.

Since the bombing, the Muslim population of Sri Lanka and their way of life are being held accountable at the state and popular levels for what happened.[4] This harsh retaliation is similar to what has happened after other attacks by militants affiliated with Islamic jihadist organizations, such as in the United States after the September 11, 2001, attacks. The rhetoric of the anti–Muslim movement took over the narrative regarding the bombing. Under emergency regulations, the government banned the face cover that some Muslim women wear. The state committed to reforming identifiably Muslim institutions, such as madrasas and the Ahadiya schools, and reforming Muslim Personal Law. Recognizably Muslim people—women wearing a hijab or abaya, for instance—were harassed everywhere. Two weeks after the bombings, violent attacks took place against the Muslim communities of the southwestern region, where two people were killed and massive damage to homes and businesses was recorded. This violence reflected a similar pattern to attacks against Muslims elsewhere in the country in 2014 and 2018 and had clearly been organized. A few weeks later, then president Maithripala Sirisena pardoned the monk Galaboda Aththe Gnanasara, who had been jailed for contempt of court.[5] Gnanasara, the secretary of the Bodu Bala Sena, was a well-known face of the anti–Muslim movement and a popularizer of the anti–Muslim rhetoric so prominent today. Gnanasara

[3] Sectoral Oversight Committee on National Security, *Report of the Proposals for Formulation and Implementation of Relevant Laws Required to Ensure National Security That Will Eliminate New Terrorism and Extremism by Strengthening Friendship among Races and Religions* (Colombo: Parliament of Sri Lanka, 2020). In fact, the committee found that there had been negligence on the part of the commander in chief and the security establishment.

[4] Swasthika Arulingam, "State Action on Easter Sunday Attacks: Complex Realities Hidden by Simple Narratives," *The Morning*, January 27, 2021, http://www.themorning.lk/state-action-on-easter-sunday-attacks-complex-realities-hidden-by-simple-narratives/; Farzana Haniffa, "How the Easter Bombings Left Sri Lanka's Muslims with No Path Forward," *The Wire*, October 18, 2019, https://thewire.in/communalism/how-the-easter-bombings-left-sri-lankas-muslims-with-no-path-forward.

[5] Gnanasara was charged with contempt for entering the court where the case regarding the abduction and disappearance of journalist Prageeth Eknaligoda was being heard. Members of the military intelligence had been accused of the crime, and the monk shouted at the judge and the lawyers when the military men were refused bail. He later threatened the missing journalist's wife. He was sentenced to six years for this infraction. See S. S. Selvanayagam, "Galagoda Aththe Thero Gets 6-Year Jail Term for Contempt of Court," *Daily Financial Times*, August 9, 2018, https://www.ft.lk/Front-Page/Galagoda-Aththe-Thero-gets-6-year-jail-term-for-contempt-of-court/44-660560. For news coverage of the pardon, see Chathuri Dissanayake, "President Pardons Gnanasara Thero," *Daily Financial Times*, May 23, 2019, https://www.ft.lk/front-page/President-pardons-Gnanasara-Thero/44-678714.

had long claimed that Muslims were preparing a jihadist attack on the country's Buddhists.

A report released in February 2020 by the Parliamentary Sectoral Oversight Committee on National Security propounds on the need to cultivate a single Sri Lankan identity and states that the Muslim community should not be blamed for the occurrences of Easter 2019. However, the report also contends that transformations are necessary in Muslim community institutions, such as madrasas and the *waqf* board, which administers mosques. The report also included the results of an investigation into the Halal Accreditation Council and made recommendations with regard to reforming the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act.[6]

One might hope that the parts of the report that criticize blaming most Muslim institutions will inform future state interventions, but the way the report approaches the issue of militancy reveals its bias. For instance, the report references the anti-Muslim groups only in its discussion of journalist irresponsibility and media conduct in inciting tensions. There is no mention of how political parties and state institutions have mobilized anti-Muslim sentiment popularized by the movement. It also makes no reference to the state's questionable law-and-order response to a decade of incidents of anti-Muslim violence. In the aftermath of the bombings, many commentators saw a direct correlation between the violent acts and the violence to which Muslim communities have been subjected in 2014 and 2018. None of these aspects of the problem feature in the framing of the oversight committee's report. This minimal engagement with the growing anti-Muslim movement speaks to its normalization in Sri Lanka today. It also speaks to the extent to which the committee's perspective, and by extension that of the government, is overdetermined by anti-Muslim rhetoric.

With the emergence of the anti-Muslim movement and after the violent attacks of 2019, Sri Lankan Muslims and progressives across ethnic divides have been looking for a way to understand these occurrences in a framework that avoids the Islamophobia of the Western and local press and the US-mediated counterinsurgency language of "violent extremism." A substantive, contextually located, historically informed analysis is required to create a narrative with which progressive forces can confront and resist the powerful interests behind the anti-Muslim movement and militant Islamist violence. It is also important as a way for Muslims to resist being defined by the terms of the anti-Muslim movement and the political actors trying to capitalize on its rhetoric. Sri Lankan Muslim activists today are struggling to come to terms with their own posi-

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[6] Sectoral Oversight Committee, *Report of the Proposals*, introduction, chaps. 7, 10, and 15.

tion in a context where political actors and the media continue to insist on the Muslim population's culpability for the bombings and call for assurances from Muslim representatives that they will not permit "radicalization" to occur.

This essay describes how some Sri Lankan Muslim humanities and social science scholars (in Sri Lanka and abroad) have struggled to understand the contemporary reality that the populace (not just Muslims) face after the bombings. As I will illustrate, frameworks offered by the social sciences and humanities have failed so far to provide a liberatory language that Muslim communities might use to articulate their predicament. The already available and often-used framings overdetermine the narrative, and even when there is an attempt to explain more fully what happened, racist and Orientalist language seems to creep in. The tropes that dominate national and international propaganda regarding "Islamic fundamentalism" and "jihadist violence" inevitably frame attempts to make sense of the events. However, the social sciences and humanities remain the place where we can most productively critique anti-Muslim racism and establish alternative framing. I show this through the recent work of three Sri Lankan Muslim scholars as they try to understand and come to terms with the carnage of Easter 2019.

Humanities and Social Science Knowledge Production in Sri Lanka

The organization of disciplines in the university system in Sri Lanka is of colonial origin. Today, most universities on the island have a dedicated faculty of arts that houses the social sciences and humanities. This includes departments specializing in languages, history, geography, sociology, demography, politics, international relations, and economics. The University of Colombo also has a Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies, as well as an Arabic and Islamic Civilizations Unit. Under the University Grants Commission, which oversees all state universities, a standing committee advises on matters concerning the social science and humanities curriculum and the employment prospects these streams offer. Arts degree programs have come under attack recently, and today there is a policy discussion on how students can be discouraged from pursuing social science and humanities disciplines in favor of other, more "useful" disciplines that make graduates more "employable." There is a lively debate about how arts graduates can be made more employable by introducing English-language capability, soft skills, and more exposure to technology. In any case, the social sciences and humanities remain the domain of production of new knowledge and language through which to understand and articulate the country's problems.

Much of the social science knowledge produced in Sri Lanka during the period of ethnic conflict (1980s to 2009) and for some years after has been about how the institutionalization of ethnic differences *within* the state machinery led first to violence against the Tamil minority and later to violent conflict in the north and east of the country.[7] The chief protagonists in this story of the war were the state's security establishment and the LTTE. In the mobilization of popular sentiment for the war and for military recruitment, a majority Sinhala nationalist sensibility was cultivated with state support. There has been substantial research on this process, as well as on the way civilian populations were affected by the war. Excellent work proliferated on the anti-Tamil violence perpetrated by organized Sinhala mobs,[8] the effects of militarization on society,[9] the gendered nature of militaristic nationalism,[10] and issues of memorialization.[11] This extensive literature largely neglected the country's Muslim population. They were, in fact, irrelevant to the narrative these interventions developed. Scholarship that did include Muslims explored either the effects of the war on Muslim communities or the impact of Tamil nationalist politics in deciding how Muslims were treated

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[7] E. Valentine Daniel, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Rajan Hoole, *Sri Lanka: The Arrogance of Power; Myths, Decadence and Murder* (Colombo: University Teachers for Human Rights, 2001); A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *The Breakup of Sri Lanka: The Sinhalese-Tamil Conflict* (London: C. Hurst, 1988); Newton Gunasinghe, "May Day after July Holocaust," in *Selected Essays*, ed. Sasanka Perera and Newton Gunasinghe (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 1996), 204–5; Bruce Kapferer, *Legends of People, Myths of State: Violence, Intolerance and Political Culture in Sri Lanka and Australia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011); Jonathan Spencer, *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1990); James Manor, *Sri Lanka in Change and Crisis* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984).

[8] Pradeep Jeganathan, "All the Lords Men? Ethnicity and Inequality in the Space of a Riot," in *Collective Identities Revisited*, ed. Michael Roberts (Colombo: Marga Institute, 1997), 2:221–45; Manor, *Sri Lanka in Change*; Stanley J. Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[9] Neloufer de Mel, *Militarizing Sri Lanka: Popular Culture, Memory and Narrative in the Armed Conflict* (New Delhi: Sage, 2007).

[10] Malathie de Alwis, "The Changing Role of Women in Sri Lankan Society," *Social Research* 69, no. 3 (2002): 675–91.

[11] Sasanka Perera, *Violence and the Burden of Memory: Remembrance and Erasure in the Sinhala Consciousness* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2016).

in the war-affected areas, with some limited work on Muslim politics.[12] Scholarship on Sinhala and Tamil communities affected by the war drew from earlier work exploring elements of Sinhala culture, ritual, and history to understand the tropes through which the othering and demonization of Tamils was done.[13] The political economy of the conflict also constituted a subject for substantial research.[14]

The sudden visibility of Muslims on the national stage that came with the emergence of the Bodu Bala Sena and its emphasis on increasing awareness of Muslim "extremism" has resulted in only limited social science engagement. Helpful as they are, instead of drawing on the body of materials on Sri Lankan Muslims, these writings take their frames of reference from the conflicts and identity struggles of other communities with very different histories.[15] The body of work that could help a critical investigation of what is happening to Muslims in Sri Lanka today is slim. Mapping the diversity of the country's Muslim population or analyzing their engagement with state politics were not priorities for the social sciences at the time of independence or later. When ethnic differences were exacerbated through various laws after independence, the focus of inquiry was the nation-state project. Social science writing on Muslims in Sri Lanka is therefore limited, and some effort is required to pull together a coherent narrative regarding their history. In fact, scholarship on Sri Lanka's minority communities is not extensive. As I have argued elsewhere, the construction of knowledge about Sri Lanka's past has been limited by the requirements of the nation-building project and its ensuing academic critique. Research carried out on Catholicism and Hinduism under the rubric of religious

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[12] Dennis McGilvray and Mirak Raheem, "Muslim Perspectives on the Sri Lankan Conflict," *Policy Studies* 41 (2007): 1–86; S. H. Hasbullah, *Muslim Refugees: The Forgotten People in Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict* (Nuraicholai: Research and Action Forum for Social Development, 2001); Minna Thaheer, "Why the Proportional Representation System Fails to Promote Minority Interests," *PCD Journal* 2, no. 1 (2010): 115.

[13] Daniel, *Charred Lullabies*; Kapfferer, *Legends of People*; Jonathan Spencer, "Collective Violence and Everyday Practice in Sri Lanka," *Modern Asian Studies* 24, no. 3 (1990): 603–23.

[14] Gunasinghe, "May Day"; Mick Moore, "Economic Liberalization versus Political Pluralism in Sri Lanka?," *Modern Asian Studies* 24, no. 2 (1990): 341–83; Rajesh Venugopal, "The Politics of Market Reform at a Time of Civil War: Military Fiscalism in Sri Lanka," *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 49 (2011): 67–75.

[15] John Clifford Holt, "A Religious Syntax to Recent Communal Violence in Sri Lanka," in *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities: Religious Conflict in Contemporary Sri Lanka*, ed. John Clifford Holt (Corby: Oxford University Press, 2016), 194–210; Benjamin Schonthal, "Making the 'Muslim Other' in Myanmar and Sri Lanka," in *Islam, State and Society in Myanmar*, ed. Melissa Crouch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 234–57.

studies is rich; however, there are fewer such works on Muslims.[16] Stories about other groups have been derivative of the discourse regarding Sinhala nationalism. Constructing a body of knowledge about Muslims in the current time poses something of a challenge.

Muslims' efforts to deal with their situation are hampered by the absence of a significant body of knowledge regarding their past. The absence of Muslims in academic knowledge production was replicated in other spheres as well. Cultural production by Muslims featuring their own lives was substantial in the Tamil language but almost nonexistent in Sinhala and English, as the majority of Sri Lankan Muslims are Tamil speaking.

> In the absence of alternative narratives, the story of Muslim perfidy that the anti-Muslim movement constructed and disseminated using globally available tropes has come to hold a significant place in people's imaginations.

The unavailability of stories about Muslims in Sinhala, the language of the majority ethnic group, remains an issue. Today, many are struggling to find a form for understanding and articulating the Muslim predicament. In the absence of alternative narratives, the story of Muslim perfidy that the anti-Muslim movement constructed and disseminated using globally available tropes has come to hold a significant place in people's imaginations and is sometimes internalized by Muslims themselves. The next section outlines how prevailing discourses about the event cultivated the idea of Muslim culpability after the bombings.

Remembering Easter 2019

On the first anniversary of the Easter attacks, Muneer Mulaffer, a Muslim *moulavi* (cleric), appeared on a TV program with clergy representing the country's other major faiths for a discussion about the event and its aftermath.[17] Mulaffer is

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[16] Dennis McGilvray's work on Eastern Province Muslims remains the exception of detailed work on the issue. Dennis McGilvray, "Arabs, Moors and Muslims: Sri Lankan Muslim Ethnicity in Regional Perspective," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 32, no. 2 (1998): 433–83. See also R. L. Stirrat, *Power and Religiosity in a Post-Colonial Setting: Sinhala Catholics in Contemporary Sri Lanka* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Rohan Bastin, *The Domain of Constant Excess: Plural Worship at the Munnesvaram Temples in Sri Lanka* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002).

[17] Hiru TV program commemorating the first anniversary of the Easter Bombings, *Manushyathvaya venuven* [For the sake of our humanity], April 21, 2020; video is no longer available.

a member of the National People's Party, a collective of left-leaning progressives who contested the parliamentary elections of 2020 as part of a coalition supported by the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), a Marxist political party promising political change. Mulaffer is well known for his impeccable command of the Sinhala language. Since most Muslims are Tamil speaking, those who speak Sinhala have been sought after to respond to and engage with Sinhala-language media. The TV channel that carried the program, Hiru, is known for being anti-Muslim and biased toward the Rajapaksa government.[18] The host and moderator of the show, a member of the Catholic clergy, addresses the *moulavi* as a representative of the entire Muslim community. In a clip from the program that circulated on social media, the moderator asks Mulaffer the following: "None of us are angry with you all at this moment. We have a kind of sadness, and we pity the people who engaged in these acts. What do we learn from the past and take toward the future to live as good people [*yahapath minissu*]?" In this phrasing, he places the Muslims on one side of the equation of responsibility and everyone else—representatives of all other major faiths were present in the studio—on the other. In his claim that no one is angry at the Muslims, that everyone is sad, and in calling for the *moulavi* to speak as a representative of a culpable community, the priest demonstrates his Christian magnanimity. Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, the head of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka, had announced a few days earlier that the Catholic Church had forgiven the bombers, hence the expression of pity for them. Nonetheless, the collective culpability of the Muslims seemed to require some attention—a notion shared by all during the program—before there could be a conversation about future coexistence.

In response, Mulaffer asks that the same magnanimity that led to the cardinal's call for forgiveness of the bombers be extended to the larger Muslim population. Acknowledging the power hierarchies in Sri Lanka, the *moulavi* invokes not the obvious idea of Christian charity but a similar concept in Buddhist philosophy to argue that anger cannot be the mode used to dispel anger. He invoked the actions of a former Sinhala Buddhist leader, J. R. Jayawardena, to beg for the mercy and forgiveness of the Muslim community. While minister of finance in the Ceylonese government in 1951, Jayawardena attended the San Francisco peace conference that decided the fate of Japan after World War II. After arguing for leniency toward Japan and declining reparations for Japanese attacks on Ceylon, Jayawardena evoked Buddhist teaching: "Hatred ceases not by hatred

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[18] The channel's bias was revealed when an off-air conversation between one of its presenters, Chatura Alwis, and others was mistakenly aired.

but by love."[19] The *moulavi* continued: "We are extremely distressed as individuals and as a community. Some people have become accustomed to looking at us as if we were personally responsible for the bomb attacks. We fully understand what those affected must have gone through. That is why we have distanced ourselves from the attackers and treat them as not of us and with derision [*pilikul sahagatha lesa*]."[20]

When the Buddhist monk on the show remarked that Muslims had embraced an Arabized culture as an Islamic culture, whereas Islam is a theology (*dharmayak*), Mulaffer agreed. He offered an example from the time of the Prophet when all Arabs, even those who were not Muslim, dressed alike. Here he seems to suggest that the attire is a cultural practice, not a religious one, and that Muslim dress today, arguably the most loaded popular signifier of a transformed Muslimness, is "Arabic" and therefore alien. The anti-Muslim movement has long claimed that in wearing "Arab" dress, Sri Lankan Muslims refuse their Sri Lankanness. Mulaffer echoes that sentiment: "We must understand that difference," he says.

Mulaffer draws attention to how the media acted irresponsibly to demonize Muslims after the bombings: he describes how four people in his village were arrested for various unrelated offences in the aftermath—for destroying the passport of a dead relative, for engaging in the meat trade (presumably without a license), and for various other reasons. Yet he states that the media implied that all of them had connections to Zaharan Hashim (the "mastermind" behind the bombings, who was himself killed in an explosion). Mulaffer describes how this representation led to fear on the part of the Sinhala community who patronized the businesses in his village and many businesses had to close down as a result. Mulaffer ends by stating that bringing someone to the "correct path" should not be done through punitive acts that cause pain (*riddavala*) or through an attack on them (*praharayak ella karala*). Rather, a person's suffering should be engaged with and responded to with love. Mulaffer invokes the former Sri Lankan politician who asked the United Nations to treat Japan with compassion after World War II. He ends by invoking the Sinhala phrase *vairayen vairaya nosansindey* (anger cannot be subdued by anger).

Although it was clear the *moulavi* had prepared his thoughts before his appearance, his discomfort when making his interventions was also evident. To me,

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[19] See "J. R. Jayewardene's Momentous Speech That Changed World History," *Daily News*, September 3, 2021, https://www.dailynews.lk/2021/09/03/features/258337/jr-jayewardene's-momentous-speech-changed-world-history.

[20] Here Mulaffer refers to the action of the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU), the council of Muslim theologians, to refuse Islamic burial rights to the bombers.

his statements are indicative of the struggle for a narrative, a struggle that many segments of Sri Lanka's Muslim population are currently engaged in. However, his response is also troubling in a number of ways. It validates the terms of critique—namely, that Muslims are bringing in an alien "Arabized" culture to the island nation—directed at Muslims by the anti-Muslim movement. A prominent Muslim validates the anti-Muslim movement's claim that the whole Muslim community is to blame, and in asking that Muslims be brought to the correct path not through attacks or through punitive actions but with compassion, he appears to agree with the popular idea that all Muslims must assume culpability for the attacks. Although his voice and tone suggest that he is not entirely comfortable with this position, the goal of his intervention—presumably endorsed by his Muslim colleagues, including leading clerics—was to call for leniency in the treatment of the country's Muslims.

When he acknowledges that the Muslim community needs to account for the carnage of April 2019, the *moulavi* indicates the extent to which Muslims (at least those who engage with the Sinhalese media and leadership) feel compelled to internalize and validate the narrative that prevails in the public domain. In a country where communalized identities are constantly mobilized for politics and are based on a war fought for several decades, Muslims cannot help but accept that the bombings were carried out in the name of a larger Muslim whole of which they are all a part.

I was living abroad when the bombings occurred and was not privy to the horror and tension in the immediate aftermath that led to all things Muslim being viewed as criminal and unwelcome. I heard many stories of families hiding and even burning their religious books and prayer paraphernalia and throwing away religious symbols and markers. An aging relative who ran a farm and owned an ancient rifle was arrested for owning a weapon for which the license had expired. Family members attribute his death a year later to the stress of the arrest. Many Muslim friends and colleagues spoke of feeling responsible. The inability to understand what this responsibility entails and how to mobilize it in a productive way remains a challenge in a racist context where anti-Muslim sentiment has been allowed to thrive unchecked. Left unaddressed, the issue has become fodder for political campaigns and validation of anti-Muslim rhetoric.

For Muslim groups, resisting the anti-Muslim campaign in the face of community responsibility has become difficult. One response has been to turn against other Muslims. Muslim groups that were once targeted by reformists for being inadequately Muslim have lately provided information on those same reformist groups to government bodies. These groups, known as Tharikas,

experienced the full force of organized resistance from reformists in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the virulence with which Tharika group representatives critique reformists speaks mostly to the long-standing animosity between these groups. As I have documented elsewhere, the acceptance of the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) as the default leaders of the community has been challenged by Muslim business elites in an attempt to broaden non-Muslim understanding of Muslim community leadership.[21]

Less prominent alternative narratives circulate among the national population. For instance, one says that all Muslims are not to blame and that the government must take responsibility. The irresponsibility of then president Maithripala Sirisena, who is said to have known about the threat and left the country with his family, continues to be discussed. The incompetence of the intelligence services and the security establishment, which did not respond adequately to available intelligence and did not follow up on leads as to the whereabouts of the mastermind, is a prominent argument in certain circles and at the center of the narrative of culpability found in government reports.[22]

One of the least acknowledged aspects of the Easter bombings is how all Muslims were blamed, anti-Muslim sentiments were actively cultivated, and harassment of Muslims was condoned. All Muslims were framed as "the other," who could then be harassed with impunity. There was no space for a discussion of what other sociopolitical reasons could be found for the attacks. At one point during the television program discussed above, the *moulavi* said, haltingly: "There have been different youth insurrections in the country—the JVP Sinhala youth in the south, the LTTE Tamil youth in the north, and now Muslim youth. . . . We must understand the conditions in the country that enabled this kind of sentiment to thrive."[23] The difficulty with which the *moulavi* expresses this idea suggests that he knew it would not be well received. The reception among his interlocutors may have been sympathetic, but in a media atmosphere

[21] Farzana Haniffa, "Merit Economies in Neoliberal Times: Halal Troubles in Contemporary Sri Lanka," in *Religion and the Morality of Markets*, ed. Daromir Rudnyckyj and Filippo Osella (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 116–37.

[22] See the new information that has been unearthed by the Commission of Investigation appointed by the current government and the commentary on the report by Arulingam, "State Action."

[23] Here the reference is to the multiple youth insurrections that Sri Lanka has experienced. In the southern part of the country, youths who were ethnically Sinhala but economically marginalized and members of less privileged caste groups were members of the leftist political party JVP. The JVP was responsible for two insurrections, one in 1971 and another in 1988. Beginning in the late 1970s and charged up by the anti-Tamil pogrom of 1983, Tamil youth in the north took to violent politics. Their politics, which escalated into an ethnic conflict and thirty years of war, ended with the state military forces "winning" the war in 2009.

where othering Muslims was the main story, his point that Sri Lanka has a long history of disappointing its youth was lost.

The discourse of othering continues to have political utility for the regime in power, with very significant consequences for the country's Muslims. Early in 2020, as the COVID-19 crisis grew, the spread of the virus was described in the media as being part of a Muslim conspiracy. Muslim representatives were called on to explain themselves on national television and account for the infected or possibly infected members of their community. Under the order for compulsory cremations of COVID victims, Muslims were denied the right to bury their dead.[24] The issue of burials was transformed into an election strategy by the party in power, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, which had begun the anti-Muslim movement.[25] By capitalizing on the fear and insecurity after the Easter bombings, Gotabaya Rajapaksa came to power as the country's president in a landslide victory in November 2019. His administration maintained the anti-Muslim position that his party embraced for the elections, and his was the first cabinet in the history of the country to not have a single Muslim member.[26]

The media and the government constantly reinforce Muslim culpability, as illustrated in reference to the Sectoral Oversight Committee's report. However, it is unclear if a similar culpability will be expected of the country's Sinhala Buddhists for their mob violence against Muslims. Muslim communities do not yet have a narrative that highlights this contradiction. The media and the government can distinguish between a few racist monks and the rest of the Sinhala Buddhist polity, but they are unable to distinguish between a few Muslim militants and all other Muslims. This inability is the heart of the problem. The story of Muslim culpability is pervasive and has effectively prevented the cultivation of a counternarrative.

My contention is that the social sciences and humanities provide space for hope and possibility for such a counternarrative and, in general, for the production of ideas, information, and even a language through which the country's Muslims can negotiate these times with dignity. I do not claim that such a narrative has already emerged or that it is not a challenge to create it under the damage that was done through those bombs, the lost lives, and the devastated

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[24] See Adilah Ismail, "On Living and Dying as a Muslim in Sri Lanka: An Essay on Grief, Identity, and Loss," *A Life of Saturdays* (blog), February 5, 2021, https://alifeofsaturdays. substack.com/p/on-living-and-dying-as-a-muslim-in.

[25] Farzana Haniffa, "Who Gave These Fellows This Strength? Muslims and the Bodu Bala Sena in Post-War Sri Lanka," in *The Struggle for Peace in the Aftermath of War*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingham and Daniel Bass (London: Hurst, 2016), 109–27.

[26] Later, after the general elections of 2020, the president's lawyer, Mohamed Ali Sabry (a Muslim), was made a cabinet minister.

communities. The skill with which the political manipulation of the available narrative is carried out and the way the story of Muslim perfidy was used and further normalized seem to close off all other possibilities. However, the responsibility of producing such a narrative must lie with those who can effectively use the language and vocabulary from the social sciences and humanities.

In the remainder of this essay, I describe three such attempts by Sri Lankan Muslim academics to come to terms with the bombings and imagine a future for all Sri Lankan Muslims who struggle with the limitations

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imposed by prevailing discourses. Although their analyses make use of the rhetoric of "Muslim fault" in ways I find troubling, their work opens new ways of presenting the problem.

Making Sense of What Happened on Easter 2019

Muslim scholars struggle to reclaim the narrative regarding the bombings and center the Muslim experience of being citizens in a fractured polity when discussing the events. In the immediate aftermath, however, these writers cannot help but restate some of the assumptions in the arguments of the anti-Muslim movement. Their struggle to push the conversation forward even while occupying the same terrain as the anti-Muslim discourse speaks to the promise and necessity of humanities and social science writing.

My first example of how scholars have tried to narrate the Eastern bombing is A. R. M. Imtiyaz's article "The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lankan Muslims."[27] Imtiyaz is a political scientist working in the United States. He opens his article with the claim that sociopolitical and cultural factors beyond "Arabization" must be considered when attempting to understand how the attacks took place. According to anti-Muslim rhetoric, the Sri Lankan Muslim community has transformed itself from a "traditional" Muslim group that lived peacefully with the Sinhala majority to an "Arabized" Muslim

[27] A. R. M. Imtiyaz, "The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lankan Muslims," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 55, no. 1 (2020): 3–16.

community. Muslim changes in dress practices in the 1980s and early 1990s are considered emblematic of this shift. Global Islamic reform movements were active during this time and brought about a transformation in popular Muslim religious practice, including among Muslim communities in Sri Lanka. In the Sri Lankan media, in government documents after the Easter bombings, and in some academic work, these changes are seen as the influx of a Saudi Arabian reform movement—Wahhabism. The term borrowed from global media has little resonance among Sri Lanka's Muslims, who experienced the influx of various different groups espousing different reformist ideas. Some of the groups were influenced by teachings of Saudi Arabian clerics, but just as many made claim to different origins. In addition, reformist success took place in wartime Sri Lanka and must be understood as a response to ethnic polarization during the war.[28]

Several incidents of anti-Muslim violence in postwar Sri Lanka occurred before the Easter bombings. The most extensive were Aluthgama in the Kalutara district in 2014 and Digana in the Kandy district in 2018. Imtiyaz provides details of these events, especially in Digana. He writes:

> It is theoretically expected that the violence unleashed on Muslims could provoke a strong response from Muslim youth. It could be a triggering factor for radicalizing Muslim youth. Though the Muslim community in Sri Lanka has kept itself busy with business and trade, carefully planned violence by Sinhala mobs could have pushed some Muslims to resort to violence by marginalizing Muslim moderates and democratic political representations.[29]

I question Imtiyaz's presentation of Sri Lanka's two million Muslims as a "community" reducible in terms of professions to only "business and trade." As Qadri Ismail pointed out in 1995, the Muslim trader stereotype is prevalent, propagated by the Muslim elite and embraced by many Muslims.[30] Currently, the Muslim population includes a large professional and entrepreneurial class, in addition to representation in agricultural and fishing communities extending throughout the

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[28] Farzana Haniffa, "Piety as Politics amongst Muslim Women in Contemporary Sri Lanka," *Modern Asian Studies* 42, nos. 2–3 (2008): 347–75.

[29] Imtiyaz, "The Easter Sunday Bombings," 5. In March 2018 there was widespread anti-Muslim violence in Kandy District. Digana town suffered a large amount of damage. See Law and Society Trust, *Fact-Finding Report on the Anti-Muslim Violence in the Kandy District, March 2018* (Colombo: Law and Society Trust, 2021), https://www.lstlanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Kandy_fact-finding_report_English.pdf.

[30] Qadri Ismail, "Unmooring Identity: The Antinomies of Muslim Self-Representation," in *Unmaking the Nation*, ed. Qadri Ismail and Pradeep Jeganathan (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 1995), 55–105.

coastal areas of the island. Colombo's large urban population includes a significant underclass of Muslim daily-wage laborers as well as petty criminals. As with any community, the self-representation by the middle class is not indicative of the wide differences that exist in the wider Muslim population. Further, the trope of the Muslim trader's business prowess undermining the success of the Sinhala trader is often heard in the rhetoric of the anti-Muslim movement.[31]

Imtiyaz points to a pattern of national political parties in the country providing concessions to Muslim communities and politicians as a means of placating them and obtaining their votes. Although he doesn't specify the precise form of this provision, he claims that the result is the proliferation of mosques and madrasas. What Imtiyaz seems to be suggesting is that the state permitted the emergence of what he calls "Islamic fundamentalism," and it was thereby complicit in laying the foundation for the emergence of Muslim militancy. His drawing attention to how the state used and validated reformist religious identity claims and encouraged their further institutionalization among Muslim communities is a valuable contribution because it presents the spread of reformism as a broader social phenomenon not reducible to Muslim community activity alone. That said, Imtiyaz does not question the popular claim that this militancy, which he calls "radicalization," emerged from something called "Islamic fundamentalism." He participates in the narrative popularized by the anti-Muslim movement that reformist Islam cultivates a pathological religiosity that leads to jihadist violence. The view that Islamic militant violence is part of an inevitable progression, which begins with becoming religious and ends with militancy and suicide bombings, informs much of the racist rhetoric that emerged after the Easter bombings. This view also enables the attribution of blame to the entire Muslim population.

Imtiyaz further claims that the national political elite was open to regional politicians allowing a Muslim political identity to develop in the Eastern Province and he seems to attribute the solidifying of reformist religiosity—"fundamentalism"—to this cultivated identity. He suggests that the cultivation of a Muslim political identity based on religion contributed to the spread of "Islamic fundamentalism." Imtiyaz writes,

> Muslim politicians need to understand the consequences of employing symbolic religious slogans to win the votes of Muslims who value religious identity over other traits. It is very likely that too much dependency on religion to just win

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[31] Law and Society Trust, *Fact-Finding Report*.

elections could transform society into the stage where commitments to non-violence can be discouraged as Sri Lanka witnessed on 21 April 2019.[32]

Many non-Muslim politicians and some southern Muslim politicians openly critique Muslim political parties for the ethnic polarization in the country. In making this claim, Imtiyaz also contributes to the narrative of Muslim politicians' culpability in cultivating narrow ethnoreligious political identities at the cost of a broader national outlook.

The efficacy of political organizing on an ethnoreligious basis has been debated among the Muslim intelligentsia, and much has been written about it.[33] Indeed, this topic is the one exception to the dearth of scholarly writing on Muslims in Sri Lanka. Given the demographic dispersal of Muslims, with few areas of population concentration where they could form a voting bloc, Muslims organizing themselves politically has rarely been a viable option. However, the proportional representation (PR) system, introduced in 1978, ensured the success of small parties. Muslim political organization thrived under the PR system. The successes, however, were not limited only to the Muslim parties.[34] The Sinhala Buddhist ultranationalist party, the Sihala Urumaya (later the Jathika Hela Urumaya), also received a national platform.[35]

In the postwar context, Sinhala supremacy and triumphalism were cultivated and normalized. The Sinhala nationalist conception of the state, the systematic marginalization of minorities, and the ascription of second-class status to all non-Sinhalese have achieved a hegemonic status today. In this context, the idea that minority parties may organize on the basis of ethnic identity is considered an affront to the assertion of a national Sri Lankan identity.[36]

[32] Imtiyaz, "The Easter Sunday Bombings," 10.

[33] Thaheer, "Why the Proportional Representation System Fails"; Jayadeva Uyangoda, *Questions of Sri Lanka's Minority Rights* (Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2001).

[34] Shari Knoerzer, "Transformation of Muslim Political Identity," in *Culture and Politics of Identity in Sri Lanka*, ed. M. Thiruchelvam and C. S. Dattathreya (Colombo: International Center for Ethnic Studies, 1998), 136–68; F. Zackariya and N. Shanmugaratnam, "Communalisation of Muslims in Sri Lanka: A Historical Perspective," in *Alternative Perspectives: A Collection of Essays on Contemporary Muslim Society* (Colombo: Muslim Women's Research and Action Forum, 1997), 7–46; Urmila Phadnis, "Political Profile of the Muslim Minority of Sri Lanka," *International Studies* 18, no. 1 (1979): 27–48; Thaheer, "Why the Proportional Representation System Fails," 115.

[35] Neil DeVotta, "Parties, Political Decay, and Democratic Regression in Sri Lanka," *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 52, no. 1 (January 2014): 139–65.

[36] On minority politics, see Uyangoda, *Questions of Sri Lanka's Minority Rights*. On piety movements, see Farzana Haniffa, "In Search of an Ethical Self in a Beleaguered Context: Middle Class Muslims in Contemporary Sri Lanka" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2007). On the culture of violence, see Amarasingam and Bass, *Sri Lanka*.

Immediately after the 2019 bombings, much was written about the incongruousness of the targets.[37] The choice of targets, churches on Easter, did not reflect existing ethnic animosities in Sri Lanka. The connection between Muslim religiosity and the use of violence against Christians and the West cannot be made sense of with reference to the Buddhist-majority Sri Lankan context alone. That the bombers were referencing an outside context was clear to many, but the extent to which that context could be understood as having caused the attacks has not yet been explored. In the struggle to make sense of the attacks, the narrative has come to rest on the actions and lifestyles of Muslims alone.[38]

Imtiyaz readily acknowledges that the anti-Muslim movement, especially the attacks on Digana, might have been instrumental in motivating the suicide bombers. The rhetoric of the bombers—the YouTube videos of the leader, Zaharan Hashim, for instance—directly references the Digana attacks and threatens the country's Buddhist establishment.[39] Imtiyaz stops short of arguing that the attacks were directly causal, but at the same time, he draws a direct link between what he calls "fundamentalist" Islam and the radicalization of the bombers. He supports the anti-Muslim movement's narrative regarding the need for the state to regulate Muslim life.

Substantial social science research at the global level questions the simple categories that governments affected by such violence have used to deal with the phenomenon of Islamic militancy. Again, policymakers and the United Nations have not accepted a definition of the terms "terrorism" or "violent extremism," which policy discourses so readily use.[40] A large body of work has examined the long-standing Orientalist lenses that have framed the world's Muslim populations and the racism inherent in that framing.[41] Another body of work draws attention to how religiosity is often only tangentially connected to Islamic militancy.[42] In addition, a substantial literature addresses the history of Islamic

[37] Amarnath Amarasingham, "Terrorism on the Teardrop Island: Understanding the Easter 2019 Attacks in Sri Lanka," *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 5 (May/June 2019): 1–10.

[38] Farzana Haniffa, "How the Easter Bombings Left Sri Lanka's Muslims with No Path Forward," Rajani Thiranagama Memorial Lecture, Jaffna, Sri Lanka, September 21, 2019, https://m.thewire.in/byline/farzana-haniffa.

[39] S. I. Keethapancalam, "Sri Lanka Did Not Choose ISIS: ISIS Chose Sri Lanka," *Colombo Telegraph*, May 29, 2019, https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/sri-lanka-did-not-choose-isis-isis-chose-sri-lanka/.

[40] Randy Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories," *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2012): 7–36.

[41] Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism."

[42] Owen Frazer and Christian Nünlist, "The Concept of Countering Violent Extremism," *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* 183 (2015): 1–4.

reform movements and the multiplicity of positions they adopt.[43] Imtiyaz recognizes the bind that most Sri Lankan Muslims find themselves in—namely, how to express the personal responsibility they feel for the 2019 attacks in a context where the racism of the state is constantly asserting collective Muslim culpability. He does not, however, interrogate how the current government and policymakers are framing the issue using dated and irrelevant tropes about Muslim perfidy.

The solution to prevent future radicalization is not the ongoing critique of Muslim religiosity. Instead, we must first acknowledge the new global threat posed by organizations such as ISIS and how they target vulnerable Muslim communities around the world. The ongoing political and social marginalization of Muslims must also be addressed as a causal factor.

Though called "security" measures, legislation and policymaking vis-à-vis the Muslim communities appear to be intended as punitive measures. The Sri Lankan state's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially its refusal to grant burial rights to Muslims, are examples of such punitive measures.[44] State functionaries in charge of making decisions regarding the disposal of the COVID dead reversed a decision to permit burials to specifically limit Muslims from accessing the bodies of loved ones because of a perceived threat that they might use the bodies to engage in biological warfare. The country's chief judicial medical officer, Channa Perera, made such a statement to the international press in March 2020. Even when the science regarding COVID progressed, and it became clear that burial was not a factor in the spread of the disease, the Sri Lankan government refused to overturn the ban on burial.

The history of antiminority state-building in Sri Lanka has led to widespread disaffection among minorities. In the case of the Tamil minority, the Sri Lankan state violently targeted its protests against state injustice with tragic consequences for many decades.[45] The same is now true of Muslims. Currently, the Muslims of Sri Lanka face the prospect of violence not just from the anti-Muslim movement but also from the structural violence perpetrated by state institutions. In addition, retaliatory violence from disaffected Muslims who feel victimized has become an imminent possibility since the bombings.

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[43] For the South Asian context, see Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, *Islamic Reform in South Asia* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[44] See "Refrain from Discriminatory Practices, Allow Burials of Covid Infected Dead: Tamil Speaking Feminist Group Tells Sri Lankan Government," *Colombo Telegraph*, December 23, 2020, https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/refrain-from-discriminatory-practices-allow-burials-of-covid-infected-dead-tamil-speaking-feminist-group-tells-sri-lankan-government/.

[45] Wilson, *The Breakup of Sri Lanka*.

Articulating the problem of violence by Muslims only in terms of the historical transformation of Muslim religiosity is not sufficient to identify or address the multiple roots and routes of violence.[46]

Imtiyaz's essay presents the problem that Sri Lankan Muslims today are compelled to confront: how to incorporate a narrative regarding the Easter bombings into a narrative of their own belonging in Sri Lanka. Such a narrative must confront the debilitating effect of the violence, the possibility of its recurrence, and the need for mitigation. It must also acknowledge that Muslims have been victimized in Sri Lanka for narrow political and nationalistic ends and that Islamic militant–led organized violence such as the Easter bombings is a new phenomenon in Sri Lanka. The country has had a long history of youth taking up arms, but Muslim youth taking arms against other ethnoreligious groups and justifying such a position on the basis of Islam and Muslim identity is new. Instead, however, the Easter bombings and the lead-up to them are written and spoken about as if such violence has existed in Sri Lanka for as long as Islamic militancy has been a topic of discussion around the world. If such was indeed the case, analysts must ask themselves why their prophecy of militancy took so long to realize itself in Sri Lanka. Muslim commentators, in turn, must highlight the fact that analysts are consistently failing to do so and inaccurately attributing blame for that event to the Muslim population as a whole. Even at the heights of the COVID-19 pandemic, the racism of the state was apparent, and popular racism against Muslims and uninformed commentary about Muslim culpability continued unabated.

The second piece of writing about the Easter bombings that I consider is Amjad Mohamed Saleem's 2020 article "Tackling Challenges for the Sri Lankan Muslims in the Wake of the Easter Sunday Attacks."[47] Saleem, a scholar of ethnopolitics, frames his article as a response to the call for Muslims to reform themselves that occurred after the Easter attacks. In prescribing the ideal form that such reform should take, he argues that Muslims need to reposition themselves in Sri Lanka along several different axes. Saleem describes how they have asserted an exclusivist ethnoreligious identity and positioned themselves as different from the main ethnic groups in the country, especially the Tamils. He argues that historically speaking, Sri Lankan Muslims are likely the progeny of cross-community marriages between Muslims, the Sinhala, and Tamils. Therefore, according to Saleem, it is important that in addition to the Arab roots they

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[46] See Haniffa, "How the Easter Bombings."

[47] Amjad Mohamed Saleem, "Tackling Challenges for the Sri Lankan Muslims in the Wake of the Easter Sunday Attacks," *Insights* 2, no. 4 (November 2020): 1–24.

insist on, Muslims should recall their Tamil and Sinhala heritage when asserting their identity today. Saleem also claims that different Muslim communities have different cultural practices. In other words, he calls for recognizing multiplicity in the Muslim community, contending that Sri Lankan Muslims have somehow gotten their identity construction wrong.

Saleem's description of the Muslim population as heterogeneous, with differing histories and allegiances, is useful. It challenges how diverse Muslim groups often speak of themselves as "a community" regardless of differences among them.[48] It also permits the narrative inclusion of the many strongly felt differences that sometimes take on political meaning among Muslims. For example, those who identify as members of the Sunnat Jamaat and claim affiliation to different Sufi sheikhs or "preceptors" have been actively feeding information regarding reformist Muslim groups and various regionally important

> The social sciences and humanities, with their modes of analysis that allow the clarification of assumptions underlying the use of language, enable a critique of prevailing state-mandated "truths."

Muslim community institutions to the anti-Muslim idealogue Galaboda Aththe Gnanasara.[49] Muslim representatives have also appeared before commissions of inquiry pointing out the egregious acts of "the Wahhabis."[50] Understanding the history of violence that has informed relationships between such groups is important.

Saleem argues that the religious identity that Muslims have assumed for themselves has benefitted from cultivating exclusivity from ethnic others. He suggests that the religiosity that reformists have embraced is limited in scope. He puts forward the familiar argument that the reformists represent a strait-jacketed form of piety, one that closes off the possibility of critical thought and positive action. Moreover, there is a loss of spirituality in the way the reformists articulate their practice of Islam. Following Tarik Ramadan, he claims

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[48] Note that Saleem does not proffer a term other than "community" to describe the group.

[49] The Sunnat Jamaat in Sri Lanka refers to groups that follow different Sufi sheikhs and/or are members of Tharika (*tariqa/tareeqa*) groups. The term "Sufi" is not widely used in Sri Lanka today.

[50] See my discussion of the Ulema Council's attempts to address these differences in Farzana Haniffa, "'Reconciliation' Problems in Post-War Sri Lanka: The Anti-Muslim Movement and Ulema Council Responses," in *Claiming and Making Muslim Worlds: Religion and Society in the Context of the Global*, ed. Jeanine Elif Dağyeli, Claudia Ghrawi, and Ulrike Freitag (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 229–55.

that the reformist piety excludes the influences of the culture of the countries where it takes root.[51] Saleem's attempts to draw attention to the multiple forms of Muslimness that the Sri Lankan Muslim population claims and to critique various reformist groups' preoccupation with asserting a uniformity to pious practices are salutary and necessary elements in normalizing differences among Muslims. However, similar to what we saw in Imtiyaz, Saleem reflects some of the tropes of the anti-Muslim movement. Several Muslim-bashing ideologues have claimed that the Muslims of Sri Lanka are involved in a practice of "social separatism," whereby the community considers itself distinct from (and better than) other ethnoreligious communities, and that the "Wahhabi" influence is at the core of this bid for separation.

Saleem's calls for self-reflection by Muslims might address issues that have become fossilized among Muslim community gatekeepers. Issues that emerged as a consequence of reformist successes—the certitude of positions held by religious establishments, the othering of other Muslims, and the marginalization of women in the Muslim community—could do with reassessment. Even though, like Imtiyaz, Saleem is unable to fully escape or critique the language used by the anti-Muslim movement, his intellectualized call for rethinking the prevailing certainties provides a way through which the social sciences and humanities can be used to bring about change in the Muslim community.

My third and final example is a 2019 article by Farah Mihlar, a human rights scholar working in the United Kingdom. Mihlar's article is intended not as an account of the aftermath of the Easter bombings but as an analysis of how Muslim groups in Sri Lanka have responded to anti-Muslim sentiment, which, as I have shown, long preceded the bombing. Mihlar describes how Muslim leaders in Sri Lanka are foregrounding an ethic of interacting with ethnoreligious "others" as part of an Islamic practice.[52] She identifies the ACJU and the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka as constituting Sri Lankan Muslim leadership and sees their responses as reflective of all Sri Lankan Muslims. To Mihlar, the approach and actions of the ACJU and the Muslim Council are transforming "Islam" in Sri Lanka.

Mihlar brings into focus an issue addressed by Imtiyaz and Saleem, as well as many others: the cultivated exclusivity through which Sri Lankan Muslim religious groups have articulated religious reform in the past few decades.[53] She argues that the current wave of friendliness exhibited by Muslim groups toward

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[51] Tarik Ramadan, quoted in Saleem, "Tackling Challenges," 13.

[52] Farah Mihlar, "Religious Change in a Minority Context: Transforming Islam in Sri Lanka," *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 12 (2019): 2153–69.

[53] Haniffa, "Piety as Politics."

"others" through such programs as the Open Mosque initiative and cleaning up Buddhist temples (including the idols) after a flood is an attempt to reverse the earlier position espoused by their religious leadership.[54] During the civil war, Muslims emphasized distancing themselves from ethnic and religious others, using Arabic terms such as *shirk* (idolatry) and *bidat* (innovations) to describe any *kafir*-inflected practices and shame all Muslims who engaged in them. Mihlar sees these efforts to substantially reengage with such groups as a much-needed initiative to disprove the anti-Muslim movement's accusations about Muslim "separatist" tendencies. She argues that the emergence of militancy must not be understood as a general tendency among Muslims but as the work of a fringe group that was mobilizing available international frameworks for local action.

I see Mihlar's intervention as the bravest among the three examples, for she directly takes on the prevailing sentiment that all Muslims and only Muslims are culpable for the bombings. Her article pays detailed attention to Muslim group responses to threats from the anti-Muslim movement. In so doing, she offers a language through which Muslims can articulate a process of moving forward from the many crises they are confronting. Her analysis offers a mechanism by which an act of terrorism, putatively carried out in the name of Muslims, may instead be seen as the actions of a nonrepresentative group. It allows us to understand the multiplicity of positions to be found among Sri Lankan Muslims.

Conclusion

This essay has reflected on how Sri Lankan Muslim scholars have used the language and conceptual toolkit of the humanities and social sciences to understand and come to terms with the terrible carnage of Easter 2019. That act of terrorism destroyed many lives and devastated the Tamil and Sinhala Christian communities. It has also affected the position of Sri Lankan Muslims in terms of how they see themselves and how the state and the rest of the polity perceive them.

The three authors I considered here all attempt to advance a narrow conversation about Muslim culpability, prevalent at the state and community levels, that has been cultivated and fostered by racist media outlets. Imtiyaz sees the bombings, to some extent, as the product of a new Muslim religiosity that has substantially transformed the local landscape of social interaction. This critique of Muslim religiosity is also part of the Sri Lankan anti-Muslim movement and is fed by stereotypes prevalent in global Islamophobic discourse. Imtiyaz

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[54] Mihlar, "Religious Change," 2156.

attributes the success of "fundamentalism" to the state's unwillingness to take steps to prevent its development and to the fact that Muslim parliamentarians encouraged political identity-building exclusively along religious lines. Leaders permitted such identity-building at the national level, he argues, only so that they could use the Muslim vote to their advantage.[55] This valuable social scientific insight broadens the conversation to include the role national-level politics may have played in enabling an attack of the sort that occurred in 2019.

Saleem's article emphasizes a different aspect of Sri Lankan Muslim life: their supposed cultural self-alienation. The anti-Muslim movement sees Muslims' religious practices, mode of dress, and distancing from other ethnic groups as responsible for cultivating a religiosity that is "culturally" alien to Sri Lanka. This argument is not informed by the long-held position among anthropologists that culture is changeable, and Saleem does not address the question of who has the power to define culture. He also does not consider the power dynamics of arguing for a Muslim culture that is acceptable to the majority. Saleem further contends that the Islam that reformists espouse "lacks spirituality" without discussing what constitutes such a spirituality. His position could be taken to support a Sinhala nationalist call for cultural uniformity in addition to reproducing what is a very middle-class understanding of "spirituality." Yet his insistence that Muslims look at their own practice and be critical of reformist positions is important. There is much that needs to be transformed in the Muslim community in terms of its institutions and social and cultural practices. The current crisis provides an opportunity to address the way reformist practices have hitherto negatively affected Muslim social life and community institutions in Sri Lanka.

Mihlar suggests that Muslim groups are carrying out what Saleem has recommended. She describes how Muslim religious leaders are trying to inculcate a new Islamic ethic among their congregations, one that engages with other religious groups. Using the example of Muslim groups actively helping restore Buddhist temples after a flood, Mihlar argues that actions that might have been considered compromising under an earlier iteration of Muslim pious practice are now being encouraged. At an earlier time, reformists probably would have

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[55] Imtiyaz's analysis is relevant with regard to Muslims who vote only for Muslim parties. However, the vast majority of Muslims outside the north and east who vote have political allegiances that are not reducible to coreligionists or religiously affiliated parties. Southern Muslims' long engagement with Sinhala-led "national" political parties is absent from his analysis. See Farzana Haniffa, "Conflicted Solidarities? Muslims and the Constitution-Making Process of 1970–72," in *The Sri Lankan Republic at Forty: Reflections on Constitutional History, Theory and Practice*, ed. Asanga Welikala (Colombo: Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2013), 220–52.

discouraged such close engagement with people of other faiths, especially in their places of worship. Mihlar sees these Muslim practices as indicating the need for "reconciliation" that was felt in the aftermath of a long war and now a devastating terrorist attack. Importantly, her analysis successfully complicates the popular and state-level perception of the Sri Lankan Muslim population by showing that the emergence of militancy is localizable to a fringe group. Mihlar's intervention is helpful by providing a complex view of Muslims.

This essay has attempted to illustrate how the social sciences and humanities, with modes of analysis that permit the clarification of assumptions underlying the use of language, enable a critique of prevailing state-mandated "truths." Knowledge constructed and used as "truths" are discourses and narratives fed by assumptions. They have material consequences for people's lives. History can be introduced to decenter such truths, and a request for complexity can be made. It is unclear whether the full range of possibilities offered by the social science and humanities toolkit are being used by the Sri Lankan Muslim intelligentsia. The three flawed attempts I have discussed here are representative of the difficult struggle that we are collectively engaged in. Academics researching issues pertaining to Muslims are haunted by the lack of substantial prior scholarship, especially on the history of the community in Sri Lanka. As Muslim scholars writing about Muslims, we are further haunted by our personal positioning when confronting such issues. The social science and humanities toolkit remains a valuable resource nonetheless, and my analysis here has suggested some of the directions in which it may be taken.

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