

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ken Parry, Me and Islamic leadership

Nezar Faris*

Centre for Islamic Thoughts and Education (CITE), University of South Australia, Adelaide 5001, South Australia

*Corresponding author. Email: Nezar.Faris@unisa.edu.au

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Abstract

This piece is a highlight of the foresight, wisdom, humbleness, role-modelling and leadership of Ken Parry.

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From the first moment I met Ken Parry in February 2007 to discuss my PhD proposal, I realised that he is a scholar of a different calibre. Our strong bond of friendship started at that moment. My first pieces of work were not up to scratch to say the least, nevertheless Ken was patient and encouraging. I will never forget the first paper I presented to Ken. ‘Excellent paper’, he wrote on the top of the paper. Yet as I read his remarks, I found hardly any of my own text left! He ripped it into pieces with his eloquent remarks and clever comments. He was able to find that balance between letting me write and make mistakes, while eloquently and courteously directing and assisting me to navigate my way through the PhD.

My research area was about leadership processes in Australian Islamic organisations. As my research progressed, we decided to write our first joint article that was published later in *Leadership Quarterly* titled: ‘Islamic organizational leadership within a Western society: The problematic role of external context’. Ken showed an extensive knowledge of Muslims and Islam. His contribution was invaluable. The way he formulated and organised ideas so quickly was fundamental to the publication of the article. We had many lengthy chats prior to writing the full first draft with a focus to moving away from depicting Muslim minorities living in Western countries as victims. Although victimisation has a negative connotation when applied to religion, many forms of ethnicity, and other forms of attribution, and while we did not believe that victimisation is a myth, we wanted to create robustness around the empirical findings that could give Australian Muslim leadership the sense of confidence and strength as well as valuing their contribution within the wider Australian society.

Ken was even aware of the Muslim calendar. For instance, on the occasion of Ramadan, he used to send me greetings and well wishes. He knew that Ramadan is the month of fasting for Muslims, the month of patience and the month of thinking about the poor and the needy. Once he sent me an email in 2010 saying:

‘I believe that Ramadan is drawing to a close. I do admire your temperance and charity, especially at times like this’.

He was deeply aware of what is going on in the Muslim world and in other parts of the world as well. He has such empathy for vulnerable people where ever they were located, regardless of their religion, ethnicity or nationality. After the terrorist attacks on France in November 2015, he wrote to me:

'I really miss our chats and Middle Eastern biscuits and hot coffee. I have a bad feeling about France, Israel and Palestine, Europe in general, the evolution and maturity of Muslims'.

I was astonished by his knowledge of Muslims and Islam, and his awareness of the global geopolitical environment they occupied. Ken believed that Muslims need a wise and strong leadership to steer them clear of the danger that radicalisation and extremism pose and that it would pull them down. In 2016, Ken wrote to me commenting on the inaugural speech of the Centre for Islamic Thought and Education at the University of South Australia by Professor Mohamad Abdalla:

'I have finally had a chance to listen to Dr Abdalla's speech. I listened and watched it while doing my ironing. My health has been up and down (the usual) over the last few weeks, plus I have had some visitors, so this is the first chance that I have had. As I expected, Mohamad's speech was very good. Most of it I have heard before, and I understand and empathise with what he said. Nonetheless, may I say that the challenge for Islam in Australia and around the world, is to manage, control and if possible to eliminate the extremists' mentality that is a cancer within the heart of Islam. Tolerating their presence is just fuel for the 'One Nation' and Donald Trump and other reactions that you are rightly so wary of. Yes, they are tolerated by the Islamic world. If Muslims does not manage this cancer, then someone else will manage it, and the result will not be pretty'.

The tragic event of Christchurch in March 2019 was an appalling disaster, and in this, Ken was so right!

While considering empirical evidence, Ken and I came to believe that Australian Muslim leadership is enigmatic, due to the problematic leadership processes that have impacted on it for a long time (Faris & Parry, 2011), we nevertheless realised that within this enigmatic domain, Australian Muslims could elevate great Muslim people to take the lead by adhering to the basic tenants of leadership espoused in Islam teachings, which encourages servant, ethical and moral leadership. Furthermore, Australian Muslims need to take heed of what Western models of leadership have to offer, especially their excellent processes of accountability, transparency, ethical and moral conduct that complements Islamic teachings. The sensitive and progressive integration of both Islamic and the Western aspects of leadership is an important part of recontextualising Islamic leadership that is both necessary and tenable.

Acknowledging all of the above, and in the light of the tragic events in Christchurch, I believe that Ken would concur with me that the most significant lessons to learn are as follows:

Firstly, the strong, wise, compassionate, concerned and brave leadership showed by the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, is much needed in these times of crisis and despair, not just by other Western leaders but also Muslim leaders. Muslims in New Zealand, Australia and around the world have voiced praise for how Jacinda Ardern has shown herself to be an exemplar of a recontextualised leadership that has at its heart inclusion, oneness, respect and compassion for all peoples of New Zealand. Muslims in New Zealand cherish and adore her, see her as an image of hope (McNeilly, 2019; Small, 2019). The lesson from Muslims' affection towards Jacinda's leadership is loud and clear; good leadership transcends religion, race and nationalities. It reminds me of the first great migration in Muslim history, when Prophet Mohamad (peace be upon him) advised his companions to migrate to Abyssinia to escape local persecution, where they could freely practice their religion and feel safe and secure. At the time, a Christian King called Negus ruled Abyssinia. The Prophet said to his companions, 'Go to Abyssinia, therein is a ruler in whose land no one is oppressed. That land is one of fairness and justice. Stay there until God grants ease'. Jacinda Ardern's enactment of leadership resonates with that of King Negus.

Secondly, terrorism has no single face, religion, culture, ethnicity or race. Terrorism has too many hidden faces. Leaders of all persuasions must denounce it in the strongest possible terms where ever it comes from and to call it for what it is – an act of pure evil against all humanity.

Thirdly, we need to differentiate between hate speech and free speech. Although I know that there are many different views surrounding this issue, leaders in Western democracies and in the Muslim world need to acknowledge in as many ways as possible the danger of hate speech and propaganda that may fuel violence and terrorism. I think Political leaders need to think more seriously about how to combat hate in all shapes and forms and make it a platform or signature part of their leadership.

Fourthly, leadership that is practiced wisely has the potential to become the glue that binds people from all backgrounds, as we witnessed in New Zealand after the Christchurch massacre.

On a final note; research into Islamic leadership in Australia is still in its infancy (Dalglish & Miller, 2010; Faris & Abdalla, 2018; Faris & Parry, 2011; Sohrabi, 2016). Drawing on Ken's approach to studying leadership, future research on Australian Islamic leadership needs to utilise a wider range of methods and paradigms in order to give it more relevance and practical application. For example, there is a need to explore the relational dynamics of Australian Muslim leaders with the Muslim communities in general and young Muslims in particular to recontextualise leadership within this substantive setting. Perhaps a worthy starting point would be to research what Australian and New Zealand Muslim leadership can learn from the tragic events of Christchurch, especially how communities galvanise and rebuild their lives and their relationships through different acts of leadership. The dynamics of political power as enacted in Australian Muslim institutions is also an important area for future research on recontextualising leadership more specifically, how Australian Muslims can build political influence subsequently building new realities and opportunities for the construction of a more powerful leadership. It is important, for example, to investigate the role of personalities in shaping leadership contexts (Jacinda Ardern being a good example) or the role of the cult of personality in leadership amongst the Islamic community and how such personalities may alter leadership identity and create new powerful and purposeful meanings. Most importantly, we need to take the lead to ensure that Australian Islamic leadership is better understood at all levels of society, and the contextual challenges identified by Ken are brought to the fore. Never has so much depended on us answering this call.

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Dr Nezar Faris is a scholar in Leadership and Management with a focus on the context of Muslim organisations in the West. He holds a PhD in (Leadership) from Griffith University's National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies (NCEIS). Dr Faris' work has appeared in *The Leadership Quarterly*. His timely Co-authored book has been published: *Leadership in Islam: Thoughts, Processes and Solutions in Australian Organizations* (Palgrave MacMillan; 2018). He is currently working as a research fellow at the University of South Australia. His research interests include Leadership processes, power procedures and transitions, ethical leadership, responsible leadership, sense making, cultural complexity, Leadership metaphors in organisational contexts, leadership Research methodologies.

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