

A.2 Creative Response

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On 15 March 2019, a gunman terrorised two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, the Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre. Fifty people were killed that day and one more person succumbed to their wounds later.



This was a hate crime. The perpetrator was a far-right extremist, a white supremacist who was filled with prejudice and hate against Muslims. The term for such prejudice and hate is Islamophobia.



The gunman claimed to be acting in self-defence against Muslims taking over his land, rather than being an aggressor. He saw Muslim immigrants as invading Western countries and civilisation. This was his 'truth'.



Dr Naeem Rashid, a Muslim man worshipping at the Al-Noor Mosque charged at the gunman moments after the gunman had started shooting people at the mosque. Rashid was shot and fatally wounded. He was posthumously awarded the New Zealand Cross, the highest award of bravery in New Zealand.



In the immediate aftermath the Muslim community and the wider community responded with grief, fear and wanting answers.



The New Zealand Government immediately responded by imposing heightened security around various sites around Christchurch and around other mosques in New Zealand. Security was also increased around New Zealand's Parliament. Air travel departures were temporarily halted. The terrorism threat level was raised to high for the first time in the history of New Zealand.



Around the world people (in particular Muslims) were scared that more attacks would follow. In Australia, analysis of Islamophobic incidents by the Islamophobia Register of Australia showed that anti-Muslim sentiment remained about the same and in particular online incidents increased.



In the days and months following the event, many different parts of New Zealand society made deliberate choices in how they referred to the gunman. The New Zealand Prime Minister refused to refer to him by name. Rather she spoke about walking with the victims and their families.



The vast majority of the media did the same thing and focused on the victims and their loved ones. The court required the media to pixelate the perpetrator's face when covering the trial. Thus, in New Zealand, the perpetrator remained largely faceless and nameless.



The community responded with love and unity. The Muslim community were determined to move forward. They did not want the gunman's wish of perpetuating fear about Muslims to be fulfilled. New Zealand is a multicultural country which welcomes migration and cultural integration. The victim's families and the Muslim community did not want a division to form between them and other parts of the community. Overall, this incident brought people together as virtually all people were deeply saddened by the incident and wanted to show their support.



The perpetrator was put on trial for the murder of 51 people and the attempted murder of 40 more. He was also tried for an act of terrorism. He was found guilty of all counts and was sentenced to life imprisonment without parole.



The conclusion of the trial and outpouring of public support gave some closure to the families of the dead and to survivors. Many felt relief that the gunman was sentenced to life in prison without parole. People leaving court waved and made peace signs.



The New Zealand Government held a Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Mosques. Some of its key recommendations were to improve New Zealand's firearms licensing system and to create more appropriate criminal offenses to do with racial or religious discrimination and hate-motivated offences.



Changes were made to New Zealand's gun laws so that the use of semi-automatic firearms was generally prohibited. There were also laws made against converting single-shot guns into semi-automatics and larger bullet magazines were banned.



The New Zealand Coroner's Inquiry into the deaths of the 51 people in the 2019 attack is commencing. It will include a focus on how much of a role social media and internet platforms played in the perpetrator's development of extreme views. Use of social media is an ongoing issue in perpetuating racist views and prejudice toward Muslims.

