



*Sheema Khan is the author of [Of Hockey and Hijab: Reflections of a Canadian Muslim Woman](#).*

Toward the end of graduate school, I embarked on a deeply personal spiritual journey, immersing myself in the study of the Qur'an. As a result, pop culture passed me by in the 1990s – including that era's music.

So, it was only last week that I first saw the music video for [Nothing Compares 2 U](#), the classic song by the Irish singer known professionally as Sinead O'Connor, [after her death at the age of 56](#). The footage was mesmerizing and raw, and the glistening tears she shed elicited a well of emotions from me. And that voice! Words cannot do it justice.

I wasn't paying attention in 1992 when she ripped up a photo of the Pope on *Saturday Night Live*, decrying sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. The photo had belonged to her mother, and upon her death, Ms. O'Connor took it with the intent to destroy it, in revenge for the ways in which she had suffered terribly at the hands of her mother, the Church and its institutions.

But the backlash was swift and brutal. Madonna, Frank Sinatra and Joe Pesci denigrated her; her albums were crushed by a steamroller at Rockefeller Plaza. Her actions were deemed "a gesture of hate" by Cardinal Bernard Law, the former archbishop of Boston, and "an example of anti-Catholicism" by a spokesperson for Cardinal Roger Mahony, then the archbishop of Los Angeles.

(Cardinal Law would [resign](#) in 2002, while Cardinal Mahony would be [removed from public duties in 2013](#), both for shielding sexually abusive clergy.)

Her courage was breathtaking. “I’m not sorry I did it. It was brilliant,” she [told](#) the New York Times in 2021. Nonetheless, “it was very traumatizing ... It was open season on treating me like a crazy bitch.” The evisceration of her musical career was a steep price to pay for being a woman who was unflinchingly ahead of her time.

Throughout her life, Sinéad O’Connor stood up for the dispossessed: abused women and children; gay, lesbian and transgender people; AIDS patients, racial minorities and Palestinians (she refused to play in Israel in 2014). She donated her Hollywood mansion to famine-stricken children in Somalia. There has been an outpouring of reflection about her honest struggles with mental health, and about her strength in the face of trials she endured, such as the heartbreaking suicide of her son last year.

But some tributes have underplayed her Muslim faith. In 2018, after years of studying texts from a range of religions and leaving the Qur’an for last (“I had bought into the nonsense that people talked about Islam,” she admitted), she found her home in the Qur’an, and changed her name to Shuhada’ Sadaqat. Umar Al-Qadri, chief imam at the Islamic Centre of Ireland and her spiritual adviser, [spoke with NPR last week](#) about what attracted her to Islam: “the fact that you can communicate with God directly,” he said, as well as the confirmation of the original Torah and Bible, along with the prophets.

A friend also gave her a hijab, which she donned in private, [tweeting](#): “Not gonna post a photo because is intensely personal. I’m an ugly old hag. But I’m a very, very, very happy old hag.” Ms. Sadaqat would appear often in public wearing the hijab, believing that a woman had the right to wear it or not. In many photos, her inner radiance – her *noor*, in Arabic – shines through. And earlier this year, beaming from under her keffiyeh, she [dedicated](#) her Classic Irish Album award to Ireland’s refugee community: “You’re very welcome in Ireland. *Mashallah*. I love you very much and I wish you happiness.”

In [a 2021 interview with Good Morning Britain](#), Ms. Sadaqat said that prior to converting, she would listen to the *adhan* (the Islamic call to prayer) and find solace in its perfection and optimism. And when she converted, Mr. Al-Qadri allowed her to give the *adhan* in his mosque; a recording of her prayer shows

women, children and men of different races entranced, some weeping upon hearing her call. I wept too, when I watched it.

Upon Ms. Sadaqat's death, many Muslims invoked another traditional prayer: "to God we belong and to God is our return." It is a reminder that death will visit us all. She was our sister in faith, and we, her *ummah* – her world community.

She was a trailblazer, ahead of her time. Though she is gone, her light shines on. And while I may have missed her rise to fame decades ago, I am grateful to have learned – even now, after she has returned to God – about her compassion, her uncompromising commitment to justice, and her humanity. Let us all do the same.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-sinead-oconnors-road-to-islam-serves-as-an-inspiration/>

Sinead/Shuhada can never be other than controversial with her raw reactivity to everything around her. Not just a Catholic upbringing, but an Irish Catholic one, left her damaged with more than could be handled psychologically and politically. We owe gratitude to her for in a sense not "handling it," for not sacrificing her honesty, along with sympathy for the toll taken on her. Ms. Sadaqat also demonstrated to us the power of Islam—its capacity to induce certainty—which should make us rethink Islam: If Sinead O'Connor could become a Muslim, happily so, is all that Westerners take issue with in Islam actually real or relevant? Sinead could not be Catholic—that had been ruined for her—but the spiritual desire in her could still find a path in becoming Muslim. This, of course, will be seen by conservative Christians as proof of her derangement, instability—able to find peace only in a rebellious fundamentalism—and apostasy. But Sinead/Shuhada never let other people's judgments hold her back.

To my mind, what birthed "Christianity"—we have been left without credible names for this tired, discordant phenomenon—is something that applies equally to all religions, to arise from within, not imposed from without. What the Galilean heretic "did" to the Yahweh cult of his time is what a "Christian" should do to the "Christianity" of these times, what a Jew should do to Judaism, what a Muslim should do to Islam, what a Buddhist should do ... and so on. Forget names. Ms. O'Connor/ Sadaqat in her fiery extremism also showed us how much we need a religious channel to navigate a spiritual process successfully. Made evident too is the challenge such a gifted person, tortured soul, and indomitable spirit poses to any religious institution, teacher, [TJB] spiritual director, imam, or guru. Thank you, Sinead, Shuhada. Rest in peace.