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ABSTRACT ONLY – WORK IN PROGRESS

“Shari’a, Islamophobia and Legal Pluralism in Practice: Insights
from Sydney and New York”

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The global cities of Sydney and New York have significant Muslim populations that encapsulate the breadth of Muslim diversity and experience. In both cities, few issues have fuelled contemporary Islamophobia more than the concept of *shari’a* law. Politicians, media commentators and skilled polemicists in Western nations including Australia and the United States have portrayed *shari’a* as a *mortal* threat to Western liberal democratic values and sought to gain political capital through opposing it publically. This paper is based on findings from a three year project (2012-2014) funded by the Australian Research Council and conducted by a multidisciplinary team from the University of Western Sydney (UWS) and City University of New York (CUNY). It draws upon a large body of evidence including interviews with Muslim attorneys, Imams and community leaders as well as analysis of court cases and extensive media analysis to explore the nature of contemporary discourse around *shari’a* and the dynamics of legal pluralism in practice. Analysis reveals that the spectre of brutal punishments and enforced adherence utilized by Islamophobes to polarize debate is actually more benign in practice. Where practiced by Muslims, *shari’a* is negotiated, mediated and relates primarily to family law and custom. *Shari’a* has proven to be part of daily life for Muslims in both Sydney and New York city, as they negotiate their faith in a secular society and contribute as citizens and Muslims to the life of their nation. This paper challenges a central component of the Islamophobic thesis, that of Muslims as the *enemy within*.