

Changing Perceptions  
of Islamic Authority  
among Muslims  
in Canada, the United  
States and the United  
Kingdom



Karim H. Karim

Diversity, Immigration and Integration



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# Diversity, Immigration and Integration / Diversité, immigration et intégration

Research Director / Directrice de recherche  
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This series consists of individual *IRPP Choices* and *IRPP Policy Matters* studies on Canadian immigration policy and its challenges from a comparative perspective. Issues discussed in this research program include the relationship between sovereignty, security and border control; economic integration; and the reconciliation of economic and humanitarian objectives.

Cette série comprend des études *Choix IRPP* et *Enjeux publics IRPP* qui portent sur la politique canadienne d'immigration et ses nouveaux défis dans une perspective comparée. Les questions abordées dans ce programme de recherche touchent aux rapports entre souveraineté et la sécurité et le contrôle des frontières, l'intégration économique et la conciliation des objectifs économiques et humanitaires.

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# Changing Perceptions of Islamic Authority among Muslims in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom

Karim H. Karim

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on Western targets by certain Muslim groups over the last few years, the media have frequently spoken of “the struggle for the soul of Islam.” The 1.2 billion Muslims of the world hold a diversity of views on the purported Islamicness of the attacks. A very tiny proportion of them are involved in terrorism. The overwhelming majority are opposed to terrorism, but their views about the West are multifaceted (see Adams 2007, 103-10; Pew Center 2007). Considerable soul-searching is taking place among Muslims regarding issues that go beyond the use of violence for political ends. For more than 200 years, beginning with European colonial incursions into Muslim lands, there has been discussion about the relationship between Islamic and Western views of the world. A key element of this discourse is the nature of modernity (Ahmed 1992; Al-Azmeh, 1993; Yassine 2000; Peletz 2002; Sajoo, 2008).

Muslims are seeking ways of engaging with the contemporary world on their own terms. For a long time, there was a widespread belief that modernity and westernization were synonymous. However, like other non-Western peoples, Muslims are seeking to embrace modernity within indigenous parameters. But they find themselves burdened by the tendencies shaped by interpretations of Islam that inhibit innovative engagement with contemporary conditions. This problem is particularly acute for Muslim residents of Western countries, who face many issues that have little precedent in Muslim contexts.

There are many publications on this topic (for example, Ramadan 2004; Safi 2003; Wolfe 2002), but few researchers have studied the role of Islamic authority. And hardly anyone has sought to hear from “ordinary” Muslims about the place of religious leadership in helping them deal with modernity. Contemporary conditions have substantially altered

the assumptions under which traditional Islamic authorities operate. The expectations that adherents have of their leaders have been transformed by not only the circumstances produced by modernity and migration, but also educational and technological advances and globalization

The faithful cannot be expected to think of religious authorities in the same way as they have in the past, considering that many of them have more education than the religious authorities. They have access to the primary intellectual resources of Islamic traditions, they are continually exposed to new ideas, and they are able to have discussions with each other over vast distances using the Internet.

In this study, I seek to examine the changes in the ways in which Muslims in Canada, the US and the UK view Islamic authority. The study's findings have implications for understanding how Muslims in the West are coming to terms with contemporary life through Islamic perspectives. The results of the research point to the emergence of perspectives that may help determine how they approach choices on issues ranging from medical treatment to education to political engagement.

For newcomers to be successfully integrated<sup>1</sup> into the receiving society, they need to have a sense of comfort in being able to manage change on their own terms. Individuals and communities tend to resist forceful assimilation into the dominant culture. Tariq Modood and Fauzia Ahmed's study, which is based on interviews with British Muslims, notes that "although 'moderate' or mainstream Muslims represent a variety of views, they are pro-multiculturalism as long as it includes faith as a positive dimension of 'difference'" (2007, 206). Muslim immigrants to the West seek to maintain their religious identity, but they are not averse to modulating aspects of their traditions to achieve material success in the new country (Bouchard and Taylor 2008, 235). In order to maintain this balance between faith (*deen*) and the world (*dunya*), they hope that their religious leaders' guidance will prevent them from straying away from the essential aspects of Islam. They also expect these authorities to provide an enabling framework that is mindful of the new circumstances in which they live. Whom or what sources Muslims regard as valid Islamic authorities, whether they are willing to turn to them for answers, and how they do this are therefore important in understanding the integration of Muslims into the countries where they have settled.

My findings are drawn primarily from a series of discussions with "lay" Muslims in several locations in

these three Western countries. I provide brief backgrounds of the settlement of Muslims in these countries and the transnational nature of their world. I discuss the ways in which Islamic authority has been traditionally conceptualized and how education and communication technologies are changing public engagement by Muslims. In the description of the research methodology, I outline how the primary research data were gathered. The information collected is examined in the analytical section of the paper, which discusses the problems Muslims in the West have with "imported imams," their expectations of their religious authorities regarding practical engagement in the world, and the importance they ascribe to an individual's critical understanding of her faith. Some of the research subjects are re-evaluating not only the status of religious leaders, past and present, but also the primary legal and scriptural texts of Islam, in the context of their present-day goals. I conclude the study with some policy suggestions.

The issues addressed in this study touch upon the nurturing of citizenship among Muslim immigrants. The study uncovers some of the ways in which these immigrants view successful settlement in their lands of adoption. Constitutional and legal structures in the three countries guarantee the freedom of religion, enabling Muslims to practise their religion. Their adherence to Islam is not an impediment to their integration into the receiving countries. However, societal and institutional prejudice and discrimination against Muslims may be a factor in producing alienation and antagonism, possibly leading to anti-social and even criminal behaviour. The pressures on marginalized youth to join militant groups are palpable – demagogic preachers prey on alienated young Muslims, encouraging them to act against Western interests (Roy 2004, 315-16). These are developments that Muslim communities and the larger society clearly want to prevent. The study identifies the discourses among those Muslims who are positively inclined towards citizenship in Western countries. A key concern for them is to find appropriate guidance that will enable them to remain Muslim while becoming Canadian, American or British. In this paper, I hope to contribute to the understanding by interested scholars and policy-makers of the Islamic context that frames the discourses of Muslims about their aspirations for successful integration into Western societies. Finally, the findings of this study point to some policy approaches that could promote a social environment enabling positive engagements between Muslims and their countries of adoption; these are discussed in the final section of the study.

## Arrival and Engagement with Western Societies

Islam has emerged over the last few decades as the second largest religion after Christianity in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and most other Western countries. This has largely been the result of the migration of Muslims of many national and ethnic backgrounds to these countries. While the majority are Sunnis, there are also substantial numbers of Shia Ithna Asharis and Ismailis. Ahmadis and Druze communities are also present. Sufi groups (*tariqas/turuq*) are yet another facet of the Muslim mosaic in the three receiving countries.

Britain has a long history of contact with Muslims. The best-documented pre-twentieth-century migration is a group of Yemeni men who settled in north-east England, where they worked in the docks (Peach 2005, 18–19). Although Muslims of various national origins have migrated to Britain, the majority are of South Asian origin. They began arriving in large numbers in the late 1940s “to fill the labour shortage in the industrial cities of London, the Midlands and the former textile towns of Yorkshire and Lancashire” (18). Even though there have been many other Muslim immigrants, prompted mostly by instability in home countries, the poorly educated menial labourers who arrived in the mid-twentieth century have shaped the social characteristics of most of Britain’s Muslim communities. The 2001 census counted some 1.6 million people who identified themselves as Muslims.

There are stories of pre-Columbian Muslim travel to the Americas. A Chinese Muslim admiral, Zheng He (1371–1433), is said to have led a naval expedition across the Pacific Ocean (Menzies 2003). Spanish Muslims are believed to have arrived in the late fifteenth century (Smith 1999, 51). A substantial number of West Africans brought over to America as slaves are also thought to have been Muslims. However, few traces remain of these early migrations in contemporary Muslim communities in the United States. The first properly documented Muslim immigrants sailed to the United States between 1875 and 1912 from what was then Greater Syria. A second wave from the same region and other former principalities of the collapsed Ottoman Empire arrived soon after the First World War. Washington permitted fewer to enter from the 1920s onward, but in the late 1940s some barriers began to be lifted. The growth of

Islam among African-Americans began to accelerate in the 1930s and continued in the decades thereafter.

There was an increase in Muslim immigration between 1947 and 1960, including large numbers from South Asia and Central Europe. These immigrants were more educated than their predecessors and tended to settle in cities. They were also generally more Western in their outlook (Smith 1999, 52). Much larger numbers of Muslims began to arrive after the repealing of national quotas in the *Immigration Act* of 1965. Wars, revolutions and civil conflict in majority Muslim countries have frequently been the causes of sudden rises in migration to the United States. Currently the majority of Muslim immigrants arrive from South Asia. Statistics on religious affiliation are not collected in the US national census, but in 1992 the American Muslim Council estimated that the number of Muslims in the United States ranged between 5 million and 8 million (Leonard 2003, 4). The current figure is most likely larger.

In Canada, the population of Muslims doubled in the period between the censuses of 1991 and 2001. The earliest official record of Muslims in Canada is from 1871, when the census counted 13 Muslim residents, although recorded history traces Muslim presence in Canada to earlier in the mid-nineteenth century (Hamdani 1994, 8). The numbers of those arriving remained fairly small until the end of the Second World War. The remnants of race-based immigration restrictions were lifted in the 1960s, and the last four decades have seen substantial growth in the diversity of origins. Whereas the early arrivals were mainly of Arab and Turkic origins, more recent Muslim immigrants also come from many other parts of the world, particularly South Asia. According to 2001 Census data on religious affiliation, there are 579,600 Canadian Muslims (Statistics Canada 2003), representing 2 percent of the country’s population. Of these, 61 percent live in Ontario, and generally they tend to concentrate in the larger cities across Canada. Muslims accounted for 3 percent of the inhabitants of Montreal, Vancouver and Calgary, and 5 percent of Toronto’s population. These figures are likely to continue to rise due to sustained immigration from majority Muslim countries; the relatively low median age among Muslims of 28 years also suggests higher fertility rates compared to Canadians as a whole.

There are significant differences in the social, economic and political integration of Muslims in the three Western countries under study. Canadian

Muslims have a very high level of educational attainment (Husaini 1990, 25); this may be a result of the Canadian immigration system's preference for applicants with university degrees. However, Canadian Muslims have high levels of unemployment, partly as a result of discrimination (Adams 2007, 98-101; Helly 2004). There is significant variation in educational attainment among Muslims in the highly heterogeneous Muslim communities in the United States, most of whom live in low-to-upper-middle-class households (Nimer 2002a, 37). A large majority of British Muslims possess poor educational qualifications and "have the lowest proportion [25 per cent] of population engaged in economic activity compared to other religious groups" (Peach 2005, 26).

Nevertheless, there is a substantial level of Muslim political activity in the British public sphere. The 2005 general election saw four Muslim members of parliament elected and several others have been appointed to the House of Lords. Following the 2006 federal election, Canada had four MPs and two senators who were Muslim; there were several others in provincial legislatures. In contrast, a lone US Muslim congressman was elected in 2006, and the possibility that Barack Obama was a Muslim was viewed negatively by mainstream American society.

Institutional development in Muslim communities has been significant in the three countries. Almost every city with a sizable Muslim community has organizations that attend to their spiritual and material needs. In addition, there are several national and umbrella groups that serve adherents in the various sects, particular approaches to Islam, gender, ethnicity and national origin (Nimer 2002a). The most visible structural presences are mosques and other places of worship. A particularly prominent building is the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamat on Sussex Drive in Ottawa, close to the prime minister's official residence. Another important facet of Muslim presence in the three countries' public spheres is the growth in print, radio, television and Internet media. A number of Muslims have also gained prominence in the major media.

There are multiple manifestations of other engagements with the larger society in the three countries of settlement, including participation in mainstream institutions, business liaisons and intermarriage. Some British Muslims, however, have chosen to live in areas where there are high concentrations of their co-religionists. In spite of the widespread anxiety about Islam in all three countries (Helly 2004; Nacos

and Torres-Reyna 2007), there has been a significant number of conversions to Islam over the last few decades. Estimates of converts<sup>2</sup> in the United States range from 20,000 to 50,000 (Smith 1999, 65). African-American Muslims and converts of European origins who have been in the three countries for a long time have experienced cultural tensions in their relationships with the larger immigrant Muslim populations (McCloud 1995; Jackson 2005; Smith 1999, 66).

For their part, Muslims in the larger immigrant populations often have difficulties settling into their new social environments (Karim 2002a; Nimer 2002b; Vertovec 2002). Nevertheless, it appears that over time, individuals, families and communities develop ways of being Muslim and also participating in their adopted countries (Abdul-Ghafur 2005; Abdul Rauf 2004; Wolfe 2002; Khan 2002; Hasan 2001; McGown 1999). They are coming into contact not only with Western norms but also with the cultures of Muslims from around the world who have settled in their adoptive countries. This is prompting a rethinking of personal and communal identities that in many cases involves the separation of cultural norms of Muslims from the universal principles of the faith of Islam. There is also an attempt to better understand the history of Muslims in ways that distinguish custom from religion (Safi 2003).

## Global, Transnational, Translocal

Globalization has made possible transnational relationships between people that could not have been maintained in the past. The particular technological features of globalization, manifested in vastly enhanced transportation and communication, are enabling people not only to move around the world with relative ease but to maintain vicarious contact with each other on an almost constant basis (Karim 2003b). These developments have had an enormous impact on the lives of migrants. Unlike migrants of the past, many of whom severed relationships with their places of origin, diasporas are now able to maintain intricate intercontinental networks. They can travel back and forth regularly and be in touch with people and cultures across vast distances through the telephone, the Internet and satellite television.

Since the inception of Islam, Muslims have nurtured a sense of one singular community called the *ummah*. As Muslims settled around the world, this concept

expanded to incorporate a sense of global belonging. The idea of the *ummah* is a key factor in the transnational personal and societal identities of Muslims. There is a strong belief that the more than one billion adherents of Islam around the world constitute one community. This concept overlaps with but also contradicts the idea of the citizen as an individual living within the boundaries of a specific state. In reality, the *ummah* is more of an ideal than a reality, considering the exclusionary way in which even Muslim majority states treat each other's Muslim citizens. Nevertheless, it is a factor in the way many Muslims living in Western societies conceptualize diasporic relationships.

Combined with the technological and social innovations related to globalization, the concept of the *ummah* encourages transnational linkages among Muslims worldwide. These connections cut across nation-states, maintaining relationships through institutions and communication networks that operate laterally. Individuals travel and maintain contact on a regular basis with counterparts located in cities of various states; this sociological reality does not necessarily mean that they are cut off from their compatriots in their countries of domicile, but it suggests a multilayered existence that was not imaginable even a few decades ago. Peter Mandaville has conceptualized this social phenomenon as "translocalism," which he defines as follows:

Translocal spaces are hence constituted by those technologies and infrastructures which allow peoples and cultures to cross great distances and to transcend the boundaries of closed, territorial community. Translocality does not refer simply to a "place," nor does it denote a collectivity of places. Rather it is an abstract (yet daily manifest) space occupied by the sum of linkages and connections between places (media, travel, import/export etc.). The notion of locality is included with the term in order to suggest a situatedness, but a situatedness which is never static. Translocality can be theorised as a mode, one which pertains not to how peoples and cultures exist in places, but how they move *through* them. (2001, 49-50) [Mandaville's emphasis]

Many Western Muslims conceptualize their identities in multiple ways – as citizens of Western states, as residents of specific locations within these countries, as belonging to the global Muslim community, and as members of a specific Islamic sect and/or Sufi group – all of which exist in individual minds in a state of postmodern hybridity (Kraidy 2005).<sup>3</sup> The present paper examines how Muslims in Canadian, American and British cities manifest a translocality in

conceiving of themselves as diasporic members of the global *ummah* while being residents of Western locales. It explores how their experiences as Muslims and Westerners shape the understanding of their contemporary condition.

## Islamic Authority

A key difference between Islam and Christianity is Islam's integration of *deen* (faith/spirituality) and *dunya* (society/the material world). Proper social conduct (including in domains such as business and politics) is viewed as part of Islamic piety. Muslims who choose to continue practising their faith under conditions of Western modernity often find themselves in search of authoritative guidance in order to remain faithful to Islamic precepts. However, this is turning out to be a fairly difficult task. Not only do these Muslims face the challenges of dealing with a social setting in which their religion is relatively new, they also tend to lack strong institutional structures to which they can turn for support.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the fast pace of technological and social change continually puts before them unprecedented ethical problems.

Those who have come from countries with well-established religious institutions recall the ways in which issues of faith were addressed. A problem would usually be discussed with the local imam, who would issue a legal opinion (*fatwa*) on the matter. While a number of Muslims living in the West continue this practice, many others have become dissatisfied with it. They question the familiarity of imams, who are often "imported" from Muslim homelands, with Western contexts of life. Some even criticize imams' lack of intellectual capacity to engage with contemporary issues. An increasing number of the Muslim faithful living in the West regard Muslim scholars with academic training in Islamic studies, especially those who have studied in both Western and traditional institutions, as being more authoritative than traditional imams. Their familiarity with Western social conditions, institutions, philosophy and history are viewed as being essential to providing reliable advice. Being able to communicate effectively, in person and through various media, is another key criterion of their reliability.

There is not a common Muslim view on religious authority. Adherents of Islam are united in the belief

that ultimate authority lies with God, but they have disagreements regarding the implementation of His will on earth. The Shia hold that the Prophet designated Ali as his successor, and that religious and worldly leadership is derived from his lineal descendants who inherit the office of imam from father to son. Sunnis believe that the Koran, the Prophet's practice (*sunnah*) and His sayings/traditions (*hadith*) are the only primary basis of Islamic authority; these sources provide direction on the pursuit of an ethical and moral life. Some members of both branches seek to follow the Prophet's model of life as much as is possible in contemporary times and carry out a literal reading of the Koran, which was revealed in seventh-century Arabia. Others tend to search for timeless principles in scripture and the Prophet's example, applying them to the changing times and conditions of life. The religious practices and outlooks of the vast majority of the faithful fall somewhere in between the two ends of this broad spectrum.

The idea of a "priesthood" was rejected in Islam. However, due to a number of historical factors, including widespread illiteracy, the religious scholars (*ulama*) adopted the function of providing guidance and counsel to the faithful. The *ulama* developed interpretive means to enable Muslims to adhere to the primary sources, whose origins in seventh-century Arabia were often not congruent with changing circumstances. On issues of contention, the Sunni community followed the consensus (*ijma*) of scholars. Analogy (*qiyas*) was used as an interpretive tool to compare contemporary conditions with those of the Prophet's time. Where *qiyas* reached its limits, scholars applied reasoning (*ijtihad*) to resolve issues (see Hallaq 1997). Various schools of law were established and legal codes formalized. However, the *shariah*, which has come to be translated as "Islamic law," was not a unified, immutable system but a pluralistic framework modulated by custom and changing circumstances (Vogel 2008).

The first few centuries after Prophet Muhammad witnessed the emergence of a dynamic culture of scholarly debate and innovative engagement with the changing conditions of a rapidly expanding Muslim empire. Civilization flowered with the energetic pursuit of scientific and artistic endeavours. This occurred in a larger intellectual context in which non-Muslims, particularly Christian and Jewish scholars, played key roles. According to Mohammed Arkoun, the early period of Muslim history "sustained a rich theoretical and practical debate in the dialectic,

pluralist, dynamic context" which, after the fourteenth century, was replaced by "poor, dogmatic, local discussions and views" (2002, 208). The pace of growth began to slow in the Arab region, and eventually a decline set in in other Muslim domains as well. Even though debates on major issues were pursued by individual scholars, they were generally placed within the framework established in earlier times. A growing tendency toward conformity (*taqlid*) with established rulings tended to limit independent reasoning and was mirrored by the erosion of intellectual standards. Innovation (*bida*) came to be seen as inimical to the maintenance of Islamic norms, and was disallowed.

The dominant tendency among Muslims has been to refrain from either critically challenging the received wisdom of ages past or questioning the authority of established religious leadership. Even Islamism's opposition to dominant religious structures generally identifies its goal as a return to an imagined purity in the practice of Islam rather than seeking an Islamic engagement with modernity. However, this situation appears to be changing. Despite the ideal in Sunni Islam of the autonomous religious believer, the practice is to depend on the *ulama*, who largely tend to adhere to the legal and theological framework developed many centuries ago. Khaled Abou El Fadl notes that "the juristic concept of authority has become a firmly embedded part of Islamic dogma" (2001, 31). Dominant Sunni discourses often foreground notions of the permissible (*halal*) and impermissible (*haram*) in Islamic law. The people with the power to adjudicate on this are those who have traditional religious training. Under normative structures, they have the institutional legitimacy to interpret scripture in order to make rulings on issues in contemporary life that are brought before them.

Although the Shia were affected by the general ossification of Muslim society, they maintained distinct forms of religious authority. The Shia held that leadership of Islam had been passed on by the Prophet to his cousin, Ali, whose lineal descendants were to guide the community in spiritual and worldly matters as hereditary imams. Following the disappearance of the twelfth imam of the Ithna Aashari (Twelver) Shia, this group's *ulama* have maintained primary leadership for over a thousand years. Compared to the Sunni *ulama*, Twelver *ulama* who have obtained the rank of *mujtahid* have more interpretive leeway. A different situation prevails among the Shia group of (Nizari) Ismailis. The present Imam, Aga Khan IV, who claims direct lineal descent from Ali, provides religious and worldly guidance to his followers. There are no *ulama* in Ismaili communities;

they are administered by local and national councils whose members are appointed by the imam, in accordance with a constitution (Aga Khan circa 1998).

Eickelman and Anderson refer to “an emerging Muslim public sphere” in “Muslim majority states and Muslim communities elsewhere” (2003, 1). They comment on how “mass education, new messages, and new communication media” (16) have vastly expanded the number of Muslims who are aware of and engaged in discussion of issues that were previously viewed as belonging to the domain of intellectual elites.

Eickelman and Anderson see these developments as contributing to the growth of Muslim civil societies. Habermas (1989), who initially introduced the concept of the public sphere, conceived of it primarily as a unitary space within which discourse on public affairs took place among middle and upper class, urban, white, Christian males. In addition to feminist critiques of the concept (Benhabib 1992; Fraser 1992), there have been proposals to view the multiplicity of discourses within society as existing within “public sphericules” (Gitlin 1998) and a “multi-ethnic public sphere” (Husband 1998). Discussions in “public sphericules,” such as those of minorities, do not occur in isolation, but intersect with each other and with dominant public spheres in society (Shryock 2000; Karim 2002b).

Some Muslims in the West have sought to participate actively in the larger society through a contemporary engagement with Islamic sources. Starrett’s analysis of the use of educational (including media) resources on Islam by an African-American Muslim community in a mid-sized city in the Carolinas describes the shaping of local interpretive communities “in which personal and public virtue can be achieved” (2003, 98). Under the leadership of the Aga Khan, Ismailis have been conducting a vigorous engagement with modernity while continuing to adhere to traditional practices (Karim forthcoming).

The present study examines the perceptions of Islamic intellectual authority among Muslim individuals in several localities in Canada, the US and the UK in order to understand the characteristics of Muslim public “sphericules” as well as national and translocal commonalities between them. In the analysis of focus group findings, I discuss the research subjects’ attitudes toward local imams, the scripture and Islamic norms such as the *shariah*. Many of the research subjects had strong opinions about the validity of traditional structures of authority and were keen to decide for themselves how they would practise Islam and live their lives in their countries of adoption.

## Data Collection Methods

The empirical evidence presented in this paper is primarily drawn from the findings of focus group discussions conducted with Muslims in Canada (Ottawa and Montreal), the United States (Washington, DC, area), and the United Kingdom (London, Manchester and Leicester) between March 2004 and June 2005.<sup>5</sup> It is supported by information collected from personal interviews<sup>6</sup> conducted as part of the research project. Unlike the random sampling approach common to broad surveys and polls, the selection of the potential participants for focus groups is carried out in a deliberate manner called purposive sampling.<sup>7</sup> Berg (2001, 111-32) describes the efficacy of conducting focus groups when seeking specific information from people with particular social characteristics. According to Stewart and Shamdasani, “Insofar as the researcher has a specific agenda and wishes the group to interact in particular ways, he or she will structure the membership of the group to maximize the probability of the desired outcome” (1990, 53).

The particular objectives of the research project prompted the development of very specific criteria in the choice of individuals invited to participate in the focus groups (see appendix 1). A primary screening criterion was that the potential participant self-identify as Muslim. No restrictions were placed on any group that declared itself to be Muslim or on individuals who had joined as converts. In order for the discussions to be productive, it was essential that the participants had some knowledge of contemporary Muslim scholarship. They had to have read at least two articles or chapters of a book by a Muslim intellectual,<sup>8</sup> be familiar with the work of an artist or have attended a series of lectures. The preference was also for people who had lived in the West for at least five years, so as to ensure participation of people who could speak from the basis of lived experience. For four of the sessions, the aim was to have equal male/female participation; in addition, there were two female-only focus groups that were both led by female moderators. The latter arrangement sought to ensure that the participants would feel free to explore topics that they might have felt inhibited from exploring, consciously or unconsciously, in the presence of men. Academics, religious leaders and current officials of Muslim organizations were excluded, in order to ensure that the voices of ordinary Muslims were privileged in the discussions.

Individuals who met the stated criteria were identified in each location. Participants were recruited with the help of research assistants based in or familiar with the respective locations. After a sufficient number of people had been identified, a list of 15 invitees was drawn up to reflect a relatively diverse group. Care was taken to exclude individuals who knew each other, although they were not completely excluded. Between 7 and 13 participants showed up at the various discussions. All the sessions were held in academic settings and each lasted approximately two hours. Attendees were asked to fill out forms that requested demographic information, but their names were not added to these forms in order to maintain privacy.

The focus groups in Washington, DC, and Manchester were composed of women only and were moderated by women; all the others were mixed in gender. The ages ranged from 18 to 70; ethnic origins included the Middle East, South Asia, Europe, Africa, and Southeast Asia; and diverse socio-economic classes were represented. Most participants had post-secondary training. They were students, working professionals, and retirees in fields such as engineering, medicine, architecture, media, public administration and education. The groups included adherents of the Sunni and Shia branches of Islam, and some also of Sufism. More detailed demographic data about the focus group interlocutors are presented in appendix 2. Information was not collected on whether individuals were converts, but some participants identified themselves as such in the course of the discussions in all the sessions, except the one in Ottawa. It is estimated that all the groups had one convert attending, and there were two present in the London discussion. The participation of converts is not viewed as having skewed the findings; they often expressed themselves more sharply on some of the issues than did other respondents, as will become apparent below.

The moderator informed the participants that they were not invited as representatives of any sect or school of thought, but rather as individuals who would contribute to the discussion as such. Emphasis was laid on the need to respect the differences in opinion that were expected to emerge due to the diversity of the respective groups. Even though there were a few heated exchanges, all the sessions took place in a civil manner. Among the questions asked by the moderator were some that sought to identify current issues in the practice of Islamic faith and the sources of guidance that the participants turned to in addressing them (see appendix 3 for the questions).

Focus group members were encouraged to name the intellectuals whose thinking had influenced them. However, several went beyond this to speak about the nature of their personal searches, and occasionally even the methods they used in pursuing answers to issues of faith. The perceptions of the interlocutors were taken at face value and the moderator made no effort to correct participants' statements of fact or interpretations – although other participants occasionally attempted to do so. There were variances between cities with respect to how the discussions unfolded and the range of topics that were addressed, but a series of commonalities emerged in the six locales where the discussions were conducted.

The participants in each session were not viewed as belonging to a unitary Muslim public sphere. They had a plurality of characteristics, and they recognized themselves as being affiliated with various communities (in religious and ethnic terms). Separate Muslim public sphericules interacted with each other during the discussions. The interlocutors in the project were not viewed as being representative of those present in Muslim communities in the West. This is not possible with the focus group method. It is not assumed that the range of issues represented and opinions expressed in the interviews and discussions cover all the perspectives on the topic of Islamic authority; rather it is assumed they are the result of the specific interactions that took place during the meetings with the particular individuals under the conditions imposed by the research methodology. Accordingly, the analysis of the findings and the discussion of policy implications reflect the types of people who were present in the focus group sessions. Some of the groups that the methodology was not designed to include are those who generally do not engage intellectually with scholarly literature on Islam; those who have literal, highly conservative, or militant religious viewpoints; and those who are reluctant to participate in discussions that are part of research that will be made public.

Some of the findings are discussed below under the headings "Imported Imams," "Praxis" and "Critical Approaches." They are presented in a free-flowing manner as if there were a single conversation that occurred translocally and simultaneously. The focus group discussions are treated as a source of primary evidence, and the interviews are used, when appropriate, to confirm specific points of discussion. I have chosen to quote the words of the interlocutors directly, despite the occasional errors in grammar and diction, in order to make available as much as possible the original

materials of this primary research. The quotations provide indications of the emphasis that interlocutors placed on certain points and, in some cases, give a sense of the emotion felt by individual participants. The identities of focus group participants and interviewees have been kept anonymous in accordance with research ethics guidelines. Only the initials and location are given when citing the individuals.

## Analysis "Imported imams"

At the beginning of every session, each focus group participant was asked to identify one or two intellectuals who had influenced his or her thinking. Sources of influence cited by individual interlocutors included Muslim and non-Muslim academics specializing in Islamic studies and other areas, religious leaders, artists and institutions. Relatives (especially parents), political leaders, historical figures, the Prophet Muhammad and Allah were also mentioned. Among the reasons participants gave for being drawn to specific sources were the institutions in which the intellectuals were trained, their ability to reach out effectively to Muslim audiences, and their accessibility, experience in Western environments, open-mindedness, balanced outlook, practicality, activism, commitment to Islam and appropriate uses of media. In each of the six sessions, several individuals mentioned intellectuals who most closely reflected their own sectarian and cultural identities, but some of these same participants also said they turned at times to people outside their groups, including non-Muslims. A number of participants indicated they sought insight from various figures over time, and others commented that the intellectuals themselves had changed.

The widest agreement was on the need for religious leaders to be familiar with the local conditions in Western societies; imams of local mosques were frequently criticized for not having sufficient knowledge of the local language (English or French) and for having traditional attitudes.<sup>9</sup> A number of interlocutors in the various focus groups also cited the imams' lack of familiarity with the cultural norms and problems in the location to which they were assigned. They were described as being out of touch with the needs of their flock. MK remarked near the end of the Montreal session:

My ultimate fantasy would be to find an imam who gives a *khutbah* (sermon) in a Friday mosque who happens to be someone who goes out to work from nine to five, takes the bus, is dealing with his kid who is picking up a marijuana joint at the age of thirteen. This is the kind of person that I want instructing me on Friday, not speaking to me about the battles that we won 1,200 years ago.

He referred to the struggles of lived reality that to him seemed divorced from the context of the imam's discourse. The expectations of this Muslim appear to be that he should be able to receive informed counsel on social issues from Islamic religious leaders. MK did not see any connection between the renderings of the glorious Islamic past and his family's daily struggles to integrate into Canadian society.

DO, who participated in the Ottawa discussion, criticized the lack of intellectual engagement by the congregation and the poor quality of the imams' discourses. She said that

Most of them [Muslims] don't even read. What they're listening to is what their local imam is saying. And most of these local imams don't have an education. For example, some of them, they haven't even had a type of education when it comes to *shariah*. Yet, they're issuing *fatwas* and they're issuing, you know, judgments here and there... I find the local imams have much more power than any scholars.

This is a strong comment on the influence that imams, regardless of how ill-informed they are, have over their congregations. DO even doubted that they have sufficient training in Islamic matters. She made an interesting distinction between the local imams, who are not considered to be learned, and "scholars," who are presumably more knowledgeable than imams.

HY, who left Turkey because she was not permitted to wear a head covering at the college where she was a lecturer, commented in the Leicester discussion:

What I am looking for is an intellectual Islam that examines where we are today and how we move forward; and within my own community [in England] it is a painfully slow process; and this lady here [another participant] mentioned fire and brimstone:...when I go to the mosque...that is all I see, this red face, beard and shouting and screaming.

She appears frustrated at the lack of "an intellectual Islam" and the overbearing presence of an uninformed emotionalism spouted from the *mimbar* (pulpit). HY reflected an oft-repeated wish in the various discussion sessions for more elevated discourse from religious leaders. There were frequent expressions of frustration about the lack of connection with the imams.

Also in Leicester, DM, a British male convert, felt that immigrant culture was often confused with Islamic practice in the mosque:

They've brought their own imams from their villages and they are trying to live the Islam that they knew in the village, which is not in the real sense of the word Islam. It is culture and tradition.

We see here a cultural clash between the village imams from a majority Muslim setting and a British convert. This highlights the problems that converts but also nonconverts face in engaging with a world view that they find culturally alien. The person DM identified as having influenced him the most, Ahmed Bullock, was himself a convert and imam of the mosque in Oxford in the 1970s. RB, another British convert in the Manchester group, named Hassan Guy Eaton who, he said, "normalized someone from my culture coming to Islam and importantly in his book *Islam and the Destiny of Man* addressed a lot of the intellectual and philosophical models I had been brought up with and were part of my upbringing and education here and broke them down and addressed them and looked at them and was able to turn them so I could understand how Islam would either fit in or complement or perhaps make them better." It is interesting that, while DM implied that there was a pristine, essential Islam untainted by any culture,<sup>10</sup> RB found it important that the religion be translated for him into a British context.

AHU, a female white convert in the Washington group, complained about feeling culturally alienated:

I mean many mosques would not consider me Muslim, would not let me walk through the doors the way I'm dressed every day. I feel one big problem is that mosques are where conservative-minded immigrant Muslims feel at home. And in general, it caters to very conservative religious people. And as a result, I mean, look at the data from CAIR [Council on American-Islamic Relations] about how many people attend mosque regularly – estimated to be 5 percent of the [Muslim] population of the United States. Probably 90 percent of that is men going to Friday prayers. So if I give the example of the mosque where I first spent a lot of time, and really where I was formed after converting and met my husband, founded by Arabs who came to Boston to be engineers, extremely Arab-dominated – the old imported imam, who barely speaks English, but recites wonderfully! You know, people say "fastest growing religion and converts" – but a lot of people walk through the door and walk right back out.<sup>11</sup>

It appears that the power structures in North American mosques, which are funded and frequented

by upper middle class professionals who are satisfied with the traditional form of religious leadership, and mosques in parts of Britain dominated by immigrants from South Asian villages, appear to influence the kinds of imams they employ. AHU found that she could not depend on the "imported imam" for advice on marriage, because he had no understanding of her cultural and family background. Interviewee Bob Crane, a member of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists,<sup>12</sup> mentioned a similar disillusionment and withdrawal from Muslim communities on the part of white American converts, and an African-American Muslim interviewee also described his alienation from "imported imams."<sup>13</sup>

SH, a woman of Iraqi origin in the Washington discussion, felt that some Western converts to Islam who had become religious leaders adopted very conservative attitudes, especially toward women. She recalled that

In school we had one of the people who converted to Islam, and he started giving *juma* (Friday communal) prayer. The problem was that he was too conservative. So I remember when we had international week, and you know girls like to go out dancing. The minute it was finished – it was Thursday – he started yelling at the girls and asking why they were at the mosque. I was so upset but I couldn't say anything. But I was about to tell him, once upon a time you weren't Muslim, and you went to the mosque, and now these women who are Muslim can't come inside the mosque.

New converts tend to exhibit a heightened zeal and an inflexibility in beliefs, observes Smith (1999, 66). Regardless of whether the imam is a convert, it is the lack of consideration of the cultural context in which the congregants live that appears to be at issue. As Muslim immigrants integrate increasingly into the mainstream of receiving societies, rigid attitudes on the part of religious leaders have the potential to heighten tensions in communities and families.

Speaking from other perspectives, several participants in the Washington session saw some value in what "traditional scholars" had to offer. AH, a young woman of mixed Shia-Sunni background and Iraqi-Irish parentage, viewed them as a potential "reference, but not a primary source." SH, in her thirties, indicated that she has to translate culturally the guidance from her Sufi *shaykh*, who is based in her homeland of Pakistan:

You have to be able to go into it in a new context and think, now what am I doing here, it's a different context. And I think if your *shaykh* has any understanding of the religion and of life in general, they would give you that freedom as well. I do have a *shaykh*, and that's because I'm in the Sufi tradition, but then

again, I would say there are some of the things that our *tariqa* [group; literally, “way” or “path”] does that I don’t adhere to. So I think there’s a cultural translation, but I do derive inspiration from many people.

There appears to be a negotiating process that involves interpretation and the making of choices, possibly facilitated by the cultural understanding of the spiritual guide. MA, in her twenties and of Egyptian origin, said in the Washington discussion that some of her contemporaries who had been born and raised in America, but obtained religious training in Arab countries, “are able to take [this religious training] and sculpt it to their audience” upon their return. In Leicester, AB, in his fifties and of Indian origin, stated that

Over the last 50 years or so in the earlier period of my religious exposure, our understanding came from traditionalists who had gone through the traditional schools, they only had one way of thinking: that is right, that is wrong, and this is the way. But since then my community has developed institutes, one called the Institute of Ismaili Studies, which specializes and teaches youngsters to train themselves in teaching us from a perspective of a modern way, totally modern. They come to our *jamat khanas* [“congregation houses”] and tell us “look – this is one way of interpreting your faith but there are several others, go away and think for yourself,” and I feel more comfortable with this because my children – I don’t even have to tell them to come to the prayers, they come automatically. I don’t have to tell them “you must come,” they join me on Fridays, without question.

There is a growing recognition of the problem of the cultural illiteracy of “imported imams,” and some Muslim institutions in the United Kingdom and the United States are making efforts to address this problem. The Muslim College in London attempts to train imams in a contemporary Western context,<sup>14</sup> and the Islamic Foundation, near Leicester, offers a diploma in Muslim chaplaincy.<sup>15</sup> The Zaytuna Institute in Hayward, California, is also developing a full-time seminary. The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London trains *waezeen* and religious education teachers for Ismaili communities in various countries, including those in the West.<sup>16</sup> These institutions are deliberately positioning themselves as being distinct from traditional religious schools. For example, the Muslim College’s “aims and objectives” include the following:

Students of the Muslim College are expected to develop a critical approach to traditional and contemporary issues of religion, and to combine theoretical, vocational and practical experiences in their evaluation of the religiously plural situation...They are to develop

an appreciation of the challenges that modern life poses to Islam and religion in general, and the impact that the interaction between Islam and modernity leaves on the patterns of culture, belief and social behaviour. (Muslim College 2005)

Muslim communities in the West are beginning to make a concerted effort to seek out imams with an understanding of Western contexts. In 2008 the Ottawa Muslim Association, which runs the largest Sunni mosque in the city, endeavoured to fill a position with a person of such background. However, it ultimately hired an imam educated at Al Azhar University in Egypt, the premier training ground in Sunni theology, and the source of the Ottawa mosque’s previous two imams.

Focus group participants in all three countries identified imams’ lack of cultural literacy as a key issue in the search for appropriate religious guidance. This is of significant concern for Muslim communities in the West. While efforts are being made to address this issue, it appears that it will continue to persist in the foreseeable future. The faithful are looking for direction to help them remain good Muslims as they engage with Western societies. They seek religious leadership that can guide them as they navigate spiritual and worldly matters in a knowledgeable and insightful manner. They expect their imam to have not only an intellectually sophisticated understanding of Islamic sources but also a keen appreciation of the Western contexts in which they are living. Researchers, policy-makers and front-line workers serving immigrant communities would be well served if they comprehended these complex cultural and religious issues facing Muslims. They need to be able to recognize the tensions that may be present in communities where congregants are not well served by imported imams.

### Praxis

A key aspect of Islamic intellectual authority mentioned in many of the focus group discussions was that the scholar or religious leader puts belief into practice. Comments ranged from a perception that the intellectual was able to address issues that were culturally relevant in Western contexts to noting that the person was an activist. Putting belief into practice included enabling Muslims to participate in society as citizens, endeavouring to establish Muslim institutions in the West, and carrying out charitable work. The much misunderstood term *jihad* denotes “effort,” and such effort can range from one inner spiritual struggle to a defensive war against enemies (Karim 2003a, 38-

54). It reflects the Islamic principle of practical engagement in all aspects of life. Criticism of religious leaders in the focus groups centred around them not practising what they were preaching.

In the discussions, participants expressed their own views and also those of others they had come across. In the views of “fundamentalist” activists and militants, many scholars were passive. ARM, a participant in London, reported that she knew of a man

from Finsbury Park [who was] preaching “suicide bombing” kind of thinking. I once met him when I was there and he was very anti-intellectual. It was interesting for me because he had been with Hizb ut-Tahrir [an internationalist, anti-nationalist, pan-Islamic Sunni group], Muhajiroon [a banned pro-terrorist group] and he wasn’t university educated and had very bad manners...But what struck [me] was that he felt the intellectuals don’t take any action – they just sit around and talk.<sup>17</sup> He said “I believe in martyrdom operations.” He was sick of intellectuals.

Such discourse helps to provide some insight into the ways in which some militants conceive of the choices between passive intellectualism and terrorism. It is noteworthy that Egyptian-born engineer Abu Hamza al Masri, who in 2006 was jailed for seven years after being convicted of inciting murder and race hate, was the imam of the North London Central Mosque in Finsbury Park at the time of the focus group discussion. “The shoe bomber Richard Reid and Zacarias Moussaoui, the alleged 20th 9/11 hijacker, were among the angry young Muslims who went there” [to the North London Central Mosque] (Dean and Allen 2006). This appears to be indication of the extreme degree to which an “imported imam” not only discouraged integration into the larger society but promoted violent attacks against it.

HY in Leicester said that she was influenced by the way Fazlur Rahman, the late University of Chicago professor, “explained some of the concepts and he relates them to modern life,” and also by “Syed Qutb...his understanding of radical Islam, fundamentalist Islam and how he relates – his understanding of Islam is not passive Islam. It is active Islam, you see activism there, and he influenced me from an activist perspective.” This seems to illustrate how this person’s leanings toward modernist and militant approaches to Islam appeared together. It is even more noteworthy that, although she described herself as a Sufi from Turkey,<sup>18</sup> she was not restrictive in her reading about Islam. While HY was a Sunni, among those she cited were Ali Shariati, an Iranian scholar of Shia background; Ahmed Qadiani, who founded a group that

has been declared non-Muslim by the governments of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia; Toshiko Izutsu, a Japanese scholar of Islam whose “academic work on Islam, the concepts of Koran...increased my understanding of the Koran from a historical perspective and how I can relate these concepts into my practical life.”

This speaker was critical of the tendency of scholars to engage in academic discourse without addressing practical contemporary concerns. She was more impressed with Muslim medical doctors in providing direction than with *ulama* who were wrapped up in scholastic detail. Referring to a conference panel, she found that medical practitioners who had “Islamic knowledge” provided more useful information on bioethics than traditional scholars of Islam, who tended to be overly concerned with deferring to the medieval founders of the schools of Islamic law. In the same discussion, SM stated that for knowledge on a contemporary issue relating to the practice of faith, she would “turn to...people who are academics in this country, who do have a grounding in classical Islam and at the same time they have some sort of specialty in the area that I am concerned with – they have a science background if we are talking about genetics or GM [genetic modification], that kind of thing.”

There was a running thread in the Ottawa session on the involvement of scientists in contemporary Islamic discourse, which was seen by AK as being part of the historical tradition represented by “Ibn Sina or Omar Khayyam, who were holistic.” He mentioned Hasan Fathi, a twentieth-century architect; Abdus Salam, a physicist and the first Muslim Nobel Prize winner; Pervez Hoodhboy, a physicist and political writer; and Ziauddin Sardar, who has written on the Muslim history of science:

They come from the scientific traditions, so there’s an element of rationality. Because, whether you live in the West or the East, the law of gravity applies. So you cannot but be rational when you’re pursuing science. So, that particular bent sort of gives them an insight when they’re looking at the causes of why the Islamic society is...or why the struggles the Muslims are facing...and the consequences of their choices.

MT in the Ottawa session went even further than that in actually becoming a first-hand observer of a scholar. In response to the question of which Muslim scholar had influenced him most, he said that one of his primary role models was

Hasan Fathi of Egypt, because I chose architecture as my profession and I was brought up by my parents to believe that you learn directly from people, you don’t learn from books. You

need the person. And, there's a saying by Rumi [a medieval Sufi saint] that "a moment in the presence of masters is worth more than a thousand years of worship," so to speak. So, right from an early age, I tried to find these people and be with them and I spent – in my first years of study, I left my study and went to Egypt to meet Hasan Fathi, and spent one month with him. And, what I learned from him was how you live the life of an intellectual, as a lived life. That there is no separation between your beliefs and the way you... [inaudible]. So, when you're young and you see this embodiment in front of you, it's an amazing moment. I think you learn by looking, really. So, here I had this example of an architect who was an important authority on architecture.

This interlocutor presented the idea of becoming a disciple of a major figure in one's profession, who embodied the finest in Islamic living. MT expressed strong respect and admiration for a man who integrated his faith with his calling. In the Montreal session, EL was appreciative of the work of Mohammed Elmasry, an engineering professor who is the founder of the Canadian Islamic Congress, and whose work she described as "practical and theoretical sometimes...about how Muslims live in the West." Elmasry, who was interviewed, described his approach as that of supporting "smart integration" for Muslims.<sup>19</sup>

In the London group, IE, originally from Mauritania, cited his Senegalese Sufi *shaykh*, Ali N'Daw, who

has had Sufi training for 33 years, but he is also an intellectual who was formerly a lecturer in anthropology. Currently, he is the managing director of a company that was founded to help Muslims integrate into society. He has travelled extensively and has done a lot of work in Europe. He is someone who understands both spiritual issues and everyday life issues for Muslims. And, to me, he has come up with some interesting answers.

The coalescence of scientific pursuit, Islamic knowledge and the practice of religious faith appears to be a strong point of attraction for these interlocutors. But in the eyes of some focus group participants, one did not have to be a full-fledged scientist to have insight into practical matters of pursuing an Islamic way of life.

OW, an 18-year old Montreal participant of European ethnicity, referred to several converts in the Bay area in California who had become imams: Hamza Yusuf, Zaid Shakir,<sup>20</sup> and Shuaib Webb. He related that

these are people who...pursued...education in terms of Western sciences, and then pursued other types of education within the Islamic sciences. But still to a degree, especially the three of them, have sort of contact with a

certain community and understanding of the problems and the pitfalls that people face, and how to try to navigate them and how to try and – I guess, pick their fights ... There's this group in Chicago...it's called...IMAN [Inner-city Muslim Action Network]. And, they've done a lot of social work but they make social work sort of broad, and they just try and make an impact in a broad way, without being overly didactic about Islamic themes or Islamic whatever. It's just that the concept is just that they're working, and they're working within the confines of the *shariah*, but...we're doing this, because Islam says this.

OW admires the activism of these men, who actually have advanced training in Islamic studies, but are able to act in practical ways to effect change in communities. AB, a participant of Ismaili background in the Leicester session, expressed similar admiration for the work of the Aga Khan Development Network.<sup>21</sup> He viewed this organization, founded by the Western-trained Ismaili imam, as expressing Islamic values through its transnational philanthropic activities.<sup>22</sup> Like others mentioned above, OW and AB appeared to appreciate Muslim leaders who lead by example.

YM, another participant in the Leicester discussion, gave the example of a local activist:

Abu Muntasir who...[has] studied classical works – is not formally a scholar but is someone who has acquired knowledge and he is involved in social things. So he will be involved in local activities such as supporting a sports hall, raising funds or charity for schools, finding out what kinds of books are available in schools for our children and that our children are reading. Like recently he came to a mosque and gave a talk saying there is a book by Harun Yahya and it was something to do with [opposing] terrorism...When I read it I found everything in there was acceptable and you could go to the school and you could tell them to take this book...so if there are any Muslims who are going towards the more extreme forms, they may come back to the balanced way.

What YM found praiseworthy in this man was that he had taken the trouble to read classical Islamic works but he was not enclosed in an academic cocoon. He was active in community building and was making practical suggestions to ensure that Muslim children did not veer toward extremism. RA, a woman in her twenties who participated in the Washington session, cited two people.

Rami Nasruddin – he's in Chicago. He started a lot of grassroots local work in the inner city, bringing out people and showing Islam, and [religious] practice, and helping people to do those things. Native Deen is doing a good job of integrating rap and Islamic culture and trying to put together a message to young people who are really confused about

what it means to be Muslim and American at the same time. There's also slam poetry groups – just talking in terms of application.

Contemporary music appears to be a powerful tool for discourse in Muslim public sphericules, local and transnational.<sup>23</sup> Even as conservative Muslims deride the permissibility of music in Islamic practice, it retains an age-old utility in fashioning contemporary religious messages. In London, GNK, a woman in her sixties who was born in Bangladesh, spoke about how the music of Yusuf Islam (formerly Cat Stevens, a highly successful pop singer) helped her interfaith activities outside Muslim communities. She remarked that “I always find that converted Muslims are more practical than those who are born Muslim.”

Some interlocutors saw aspects of practicality in the work of certain academics. DO in the Ottawa session referred to Tariq Ramadan:

The reason he impressed me so much is that he writes about being Muslim and living in the West. And he was born in the West and I grew up in the West, so when he talks about his own experience, I can actually relate to it. Being Muslim and growing up in a non-Muslim country is very hard. You're faced with a lot of challenges. And he talks about how you can contribute to this society and still remain Muslim and remain true to your own beliefs.

Ramadan's work is particularly popular with Muslim youth in Western countries. His writings appear to resonate with their own struggles to adhere to Islamic values while attempting to integrate materially into Western societies. He visits Muslim communities in various locations in the West, drawing large audiences.<sup>24</sup> In contrast to the works of other scholars who deal with frequently ponderous theological issues, Ramadan's work directly addresses the possibility of being both Muslim and Western. RA in Washington cited Umar Faruq Abdullah and Sherman Jackson, whom he saw as striving to create a Muslim American identity. Several of the focus group discussions touched on issues of confused identity in Muslims, especially the youth. There was greater confidence in the ability of Muslim scholars who were born in the West or had lived there for a long time and were educated in Western universities than that of traditionally trained imams to address these problems effectively.

The respondents' preference for practical approaches to life in the West should not come as a surprise, given Islam's predilection for societal engagement. But several lamented they were not getting answers to some of their pressing questions from their imams.

Whereas some major Muslim figures in the past were involved in theological scholarship as well as scientific study, many contemporary Islamic leaders are far removed from issues of the material world. Most imams working in mosques seem unable to deliver solutions that Muslims can use to resolve the problems they face in their daily living. Muslims are therefore turning to Muslim scientists who can provide practical answers. The concern, however, is that sometimes engineers like Abu Hamza al Masri, who provide deceptively simple solutions that appear to fix complex social problems, are leading vulnerable individuals into militancy.<sup>25</sup> The Muslim Association of Britain and the British government did not seem to think that urgent action was required to address the danger that Abu Hamza posed to Muslims in that country, and he had already caused significant harm by the time they acted against him. It behooves Muslim communities, researchers and agencies that serve immigrants to recognize situations in which Muslim youth in search of practical approaches to life's problems may be drawn to militancy.

### Critical approaches

Some participants expressed an interest in critical approaches to studying Muslim history and theology. The desired level of criticality varied from person to person. They took various positions, ranging from the need for debate to disagreeing with elements within scripture. They saw such dissent as being an important part of the Muslim tradition. However, this is not a usual position in the dominantly conservative Muslim discourses, which generally tend to abhor any criticism of the normative creed (Abou El Fadl 2001; Arkoun 2002; Safi 2003). It is also noteworthy that no one in the focus groups appeared to favour a literalist approach to Islamic scriptures. This was most likely a function of the criteria used in recruiting participants (see appendix 1).

A number of interlocutors indicated that, while they were in their native countries, they had accepted at face value what their religious teachers and parents told them about Islam. However, once they were living in the West, they were exposed to other ways of thinking – in works by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. MN in Montreal said that Khaled Abou El Fadl “was the first to sort of open my mind to the fact that you can question things in Islam...And, he was very clear in making distinctions between the Koran and *hadith* (the Prophet's traditions) as the basis for *shariah*, Islamic law, and *fiqh*.”<sup>26</sup> It appears that MN's traditional religious education had made him view the scriptures,

*shariah* and *fiqh* as having equal theological value, which he later corrected through his reading of Abou El Fadl. Most Muslims tend not to know the distinctions between the three, and are not aware of the varying levels of authority they hold.

Even though the moderators asked for names of *Muslim* intellectuals who had influenced the participants, several knowingly gave the names of non-Muslims. In addition to Toshiko Izutsu, others included Edward Said, Karen Armstrong, Maxim Rodinson, and Carl Brockelmann. However, DM, a convert, asked in the Leicester session, “can a non-Muslim teach the Koran?...most scholars would say ‘no.’” There has been a tendency among some Muslims to question the propriety of non-Muslims teaching Islamic studies in universities. But SH, a participant in that session originally from South Asia, commented:

I just like listening to what various people say without just absorbing everything everybody says...I am very interested in the critical side of Islam. I recently read a book on the Prophet Muhammad by a Jewish person. I can't remember the name of the author [she confirmed later that it was Maxim Rodinson] and it was interesting to read it. At some places you might think “how dare he”; then you have to put yourself back and...So I am quite interested in reading all the sides and making up my own mind.

The large number of publications on Islam by non-Muslim scholars is easily accessible to Muslims living in the West. These works have frequently been instrumental in introducing them to specific aspects of their faith. However, the political and ideological intentions of some scholars of Islam (Orientalists) have also been brought into serious question (Said 1978).

The understanding of Islam among Muslim youth was a frequent topic in various discussions. The general opinion was that traditional imams were failing to reach young people because of the cultural and linguistic gap. AB, a participant in Leicester, noted: “I can see the younger generation are questioning and being very forthright and frank about what their thinking is.” He saw this as a direct result of living in the West. SN in Manchester echoed this perception:

I think when you come to a Western country you are always justifying, for me I am always justifying to my children why we do this, why we do this, and they always want proof – “where is it written in the Koran, show me in *hadith*, whose *hadith*, mummy. Who told you, did you read it yourself or did you hear it from one of the priests?”

She noted that she herself had not dared to question received wisdom of traditional sources while growing up in what was then East Pakistan (now

Bangladesh). SH, a woman in her twenties originally from India, indicated that the religious freedom in her household encouraged her to explore readings beyond traditional material:

I guess my views are a little different because of the family environment I grew up in. We, in terms of religion, have a very don't-ask-don't-tell policy, which is, “I don't tell you what to do, so you don't tell me what to do.” So, in that sense, I've never really looked to scholars or anything for any kind of religious influence.

But...I guess what I look for are narratives that I can sympathize with and writers that kind of discuss and explore issues that I'm interested in. And so the two authors, the names that really come to mind are... First is Ahdaf Sweif. She's an Egyptian writer, but that's based in the UK. And, [in] her novels she looks at issues of family and sexuality and things like that, things that traditional women don't discuss and I find that very fascinating.

It is interesting that although SH was not drawn to scholars of Islam and was not strict in her religious practice, she still looked to a novelist from a Muslim majority country for insight on issues of family and sexuality, despite their cultural differences.

Even when they are immersed in Western modernity and ways of understanding the world, some Muslims remain cognizant of the distinct epistemological orientation of Islam. From the perspective of EH, a doctoral student studying Muslim architecture in Montreal, the conception of knowledge in the Islamic world view was much larger than that of the West.

I think we as Muslims have the most widely open epistemology. Our epistemology encompasses different spectrums of human knowledge: what's wrong, what's right, how we can know things, and the veracity of things, how we establish the veracity of the things which we know...it's not only from Muslim point of view but also through the critique of Muslim scholars who critique modernity, that modernity is a reductivist paradigm. So we have to realize that when we are living in Western society, that this culture doesn't account for many things which we hold to be necessary and actually [are] at the basis of our epistemology. This will create some kind of miscommunication, or...inability on our part to explain things, because our project is larger, the base on which we deal with reality is much larger. They have fewer colours in their spectrum.

According to EH, not only was the Western construction of modernity flawed, the very epistemological basis of Western knowledge was skewed. Syed Hossein Nasr, who has written extensively about Islamic intellectual heritage (for example, Nasr 1968), also raised this issue in an interview.<sup>27</sup>

Conversely, a number of participants said that as Muslims they did not necessarily eschew Western knowledge, and cited Islamic scripture to support this position. AM, a convert of Italian origin, said in the London discussion,

I think it is wrong to think in terms of these dichotomies of the West and Islam. The best philosophy and religion do meet. What I think we should consider out of secular thought is this idea of self-critique. Inherent within the West there is a mainstream culture which is also a counterculture and it is the dialectic between the two which is really interesting. And something which comes from Christian religion is this notion of self-sacrifice to accept your suffering and your struggle.

MK in Montreal was more aggressive in his criticism regarding the current lack of freedom of thought among Muslims: “there’s no space for *ijtihad* [reasoning], or skepticism, or reading, or anything. And, that’s maybe why I find that Christians have so much liberty in exploring the Muslim religion, more than Muslim people do.” In the same session, EL suggested reasons why Muslim intellectuals were unable to address pressing issues adequately:

some of them have been stuck in the boat, and others are being too afraid from the public outcry against them if they become progressives, so they want to please the majority, so they can’t move forward. Those who can, move forward – some others can’t move forward because of the way they have been trained.

The travails of Muhammad Said al-Ashmawi and Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, two Muslim intellectuals from Egypt who openly espoused critical approaches, were mentioned in the discussions. MK in Montreal said that Abu Zaid

tries to break the literalism of strict followers of the Koran and presents a different opinion. And, this person has been hassled big time. He was decreed an infidel in Egypt, making his marriage to his wife illegal, and he had to flee the country.

FO stated in the same session that, although her outlook was secular, “it’s important for me, as a Muslim to speak,” as a result of such persecution, “and also to give voice to the kind of woman I am.” Despite having distanced herself from the practice of Islam, out of solidarity she identified with the rationalist approach of Muslim scholars who were seeking to examine Islamic heritage from critical perspectives.

SM, in Leicester, also felt it was important to listen to contemporary Muslim scholars who challenged the status quo. This was in particular reference to the question of whether women should be allowed to lead prayers.

I am not necessarily saying I agree with them, but there are different voices that are now being heard and that are now being talked about. Amina Wadud from America who led her prayers at her university – that was groundbreaking. I am not going to sit here and say she is right, but still I think it is very important that she looked into things, that she challenged things, questioned things. Sometimes we accept things as a given without looking into them and I think one the main points of her argument was that there is nothing specifically in the *hadith* to say “no, women cannot”; although there are various *hadith* suggesting that they wouldn’t be allowed to do such a thing. But I think it’s important to listen to all these voices, and it’s good because then it’s not just something that means that feminism is something that comes from the West, or something that is a non-Islamic thing. I think we need Muslim women who speak out and say “Wait! No! What about us?”

This interlocutor seems careful not to appear too enthusiastic about feminism. It has been debated for some time among Muslims, and some see it as being inherently inimical to Islamic values (Mahmood 2005). SM is not certain about the appropriateness of Wadud’s actions, but appears glad that she stood up and asserted herself intellectually and through her actions.

Some focus group members commented that a lot is said about the lofty place of women in Islam but the social reality is quite different. Scripture is quoted to affirm the rights of women, but the established structures in favour of men remain entrenched. SH said in the Leicester discussion that

no matter how much you state that the Koran says this, the *hadith* says this, it’s all theoretical. It’s not happening in practice, and maybe in the 1960s women’s rights – I don’t really subscribe to them, but that has helped in bringing the women’s cause to the fore. And I think Muslim women are using this opportunity in different ways to come up and discuss their issues, and it’s very important. A whole lot of men sitting at the table [at a conference panel] discussing...divorce...when a [single] woman isn’t there. I do argue “no, you need a woman to be able to put the whole essence of the woman on the table as well” because a lot of men can bring in all the *shariahs* and all the laws and all that, but from a woman’s perspective they do need that input. And I think Islam [i.e. Muslims] in the West hasn’t fully looked at that because they feel threatened by the feminist white movements.

Muslim women in the West feel they are caught between patriarchal structures in Muslim communities and the dominantly secular and often culturally insensitive approaches of Western feminism (Mahmood 2005). They are attempting to carve out a distinct niche that allows them to express their spirituality as well as their rightful position within Muslim communities (Bhimani 2003; Abdul-Ghafur 2005) without seeming to adopt a non-Islamic Western stance.

Two participants in Montreal also cited Irshad Manji, who calls herself a “Muslim refusenik” (2003), in response to the question of which Muslim intellectual had influenced them the most. OW noted that despite the fact that I don’t agree with much of what she says, I find Irshad Manji very interesting...She’s put into a book a lot of the problems that many Muslims have with Islam as a body politic. I think, when it comes to her arguments about Islam in terms of fundamental issues, about historical issues, I think she’s totally out of her league, and she doesn’t know what she’s talking about. But she does sort of have a common touch of what the issues of the body politic of Muslims is towards the way that mosques can be structured or certainly these other issues, and it’s, if you want a sense of what that problem is, and I’ve been talking to people over and over again, you hear the same things that she’s sort of enunciating.

Also in the context of Manji’s work, EH added: “The existence of such writings and of looking at such logic and defining the flaws in it, and how each individual looks at it, helps as well to find your way.” Such a willingness to look at the observations of a writer who has vigorously criticized established Muslim structures and values indicates there is an openness to multiple discourses on contemporary Islamic practice. SB in Manchester adopted a utilitarian but ultimately conservative position towards reading critical material: “it is always better to know even if there are a few arguments against what you think...it might make you stronger in what you believe if you see what different people are talking about.”

A number of individuals in Ottawa raised the fact that in Muslim history there were open critical approaches to the pursuit of knowledge. MT referred to the debate between two medieval Muslim philosophers, Ibn Rushd and Al Ghazali.

These two people were the intellectuals of the world at this time; not the Muslim world, of the [entire] world...and they’re beating the daylight out of each other, disagreeing completely with each other, and they’re refuting each other’s claims.

This appeared to be in stark contrast to the perceived poverty of debate among contemporary Muslims on religious issues. DO, also in Ottawa, said:

When I compare to our state of knowledge now, compared to what we had 400 years back, I think that we [have] kind of regressed. Because, back in the day, they used to challenge one another. And, if you come up with some new idea, people weren’t afraid of that. You could talk about it.

Several participants were troubled by a tendency toward conformism and adherence to received wis-

dom that discourages critical thinking and even thinking for oneself.

A number of interlocutors commented that Muslims tended to have a binary approach to religious matters. They perceived a resistance to examining the details of an issue. Several people complained Muslims were not living up to the rhetoric of engaging in serious debate. SM said in the Washington session:

I see the usual talk about “oh, *ikhtilaf* [disagreement on scholarly matters] is really good,” you know, disagreement is very good, and we should accept all disagreement – we don’t do a little bit of that, not at all...we don’t accept those differences of opinion. We don’t want to accept greyness, we want to see very simple answers, we want to see a very simple world, and that is our world...So I see that as our main problem, in that it’s almost like a postmodern kind of problem, our lack of acceptance of greyness. There’s a lot of greyness in our current position.

This seems to be a central problem in contemporary Muslim discourses: simple, even simplistic, answers are presented to resolve complex questions. Issues are often boiled down to the permitted (*halal*) and the prohibited (*haram*) in a binary fashion, leaving little room for what SM sees as postmodern greyness.

A number of women in the focus groups expressed their reluctance to approach imams for advice. They spoke of how they would pursue their individual quests for answers to personal problems in the practice of faith. AHU in Washington said,

Using this example of deciding to terminate pregnancy, there’s a lot of different opinions in the Muslim point of view, and ultimately, we have to make a decision on our own. And to me, reading Khaled Abou El Fadl has been so important to me. He loves the sources, he’s so immersed in the sources. And I realized as a convert, I don’t have an attachment to this history of *fiqh*, it’s not compelling for me. I didn’t convert for the *fiqh*. I converted for the five pillars.<sup>28</sup>

AHU does not find the regulations in *fiqh*, which was constituted centuries ago, relevant to her life as a Muslim in the contemporary world. Religious law’s governance of the minutiae of daily life under religious law is contentious not only for Western Muslims but also for Muslims living in majority Muslim countries (Mahmood 2005; Arkoun 2002). AHU took a very independent stance on this matter:

There are a lot of things now, personally, when I’m trying to make a decision about something where I don’t care what the scholars say. I don’t care if the scholars say I should fast when I’m pregnant, or it’s not okay to pay for the days you missed for your period, even if you’re pregnant or breastfeeding for six years.

So then you have to make up 120 days. I don't care. I don't care what they have to say, because I know when it comes to some issues like women, *fiqh* is so flawed.

The scholars she appears to be referring to are the classical and medieval authors of *fiqh*. AHU is defining for herself what it is to be a Muslim (specifically a Muslim woman) by placing emphasis on broader principles, not the legalistic minutiae. But she goes even further:

There's stuff in the Koran I cannot agree with, so how can I give validity to the rest of the tradition? So I'm not saying whether this is good or bad, but I don't care. I consider myself a Muslim, I don't care if others do or don't, I'll raise my kids as Muslim, but that authority, I'm a little bit past that.

In saying that she cannot agree with "stuff in the Koran," she is breaking with the fundamental tradition of identifying Muslimness with complete acceptance of the holy book. She is taking an individualist position that is not very commonly heard, although it does exist among Muslims (for example, see Arkoun 2002; Berkta 1998). It certainly stood out among the statements made in the focus group discussions and interviews. Whereas AHU was the most outspoken on this issue, it is noteworthy that the other participants did not challenge her on the vehemence of her statements. A number of interlocutors also expressed the need to do their own reading and interpreting.

Participants expressed a range of opinions on how to approach Islamic scriptures. For SN in the Manchester session, the Koran provides the principles of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad performed the rituals for Muslims to follow. He said the *hadith* indicates how the prayers are to be carried out and the traditions of the Prophet are core to the religion. He distinguished between the *fatwas* of scholars and the Prophet's traditions: "you can challenge *fatwas*, but you cannot challenge *hadith*."

SMF in Ottawa, in contrast, was not certain about veracity of the texts containing the *hadith* and the *sunnah* (the Prophet's practice); he felt that significant weight should not be given to these sources in determining contemporary Muslims' lives, especially those living in the West. He also emphasized the Koran's allegorical language, which, according to him, has led Muslims to adhere selectively to its guidance: "the Koran already has given us all the loopholes, or all the freedom, that is reflected...according to circumstances. Definitely, everything that happened during Muhammad's time is not final."<sup>29</sup> He seemed to be suggesting that Muslims have a signifi-

cant amount of leeway to live their lives. Consequently, he suggested, Muslims do not have to seek answers to issues such as organ transplantation and other bio-ethical matters in *hadith*. This view is not part of the dominant discourses of Muslims, but it certainly is present in contemporary debates. It is indicative of the intellectual challenge to normative modes within Islam.

Many focus group participants were not happy with the conservatism of dominant Muslim discourses. They were keen to apply their own reasoning to examine the sources of authority – not only the instruction provided by local imams, but also that of the founders of the school of law as well as the Koran and the Prophet's *hadith* and *sunnah*. Some interlocutors challenged the absoluteness of these particular sources' authority. They were determined to apply critical reasoning to the Islamic tradition in order to engage effectively with the larger environment of the countries where they live, while continuing to maintain their Muslim identities. There have been increasing calls over the last century to reinstate *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) to enable Muslims to better face their changing circumstances, particularly in the light of Western modernity (Iqbal [1930] 1977; Ramadan 2004).

Living in the West appears to have significantly influenced the views of Muslims about religious sources. Apart from assimilating the general skepticism of Western societies, some who have higher education have been exposed to critical ways of approaching texts. The members of the focus groups articulated several avenues of inquiry: (1) going beyond the teaching of the local imams to the writings of classical and medieval Muslim scholars, (2) consulting the primary Islamic scriptures, and (3) viewing the scriptures and foundational writings as shaped by their historical circumstances and not adequate for contemporary times. Several interlocutors referred to Muslim and non-Muslim intellectuals who are encouraging critical approaches. While there is a growing tendency among Muslims to challenge received wisdom and use their own reasoning, policy-makers and other observers would be mistaken to assume that this means they are abandoning their Muslim identity. On the contrary, it reflects a complex soul-searching in which many Muslims are attempting to come to terms with their Western and Islamic selves. It would be an error to view these tendencies as being irreconcilable. What we are seeing is the emergence of contemporary ways of simultaneously being Muslim and citizens of Western countries, and this is challenging conventional notions of Islam and modernity.

## Implications for Policy Development

The research reported in this study has revealed some of the intellectual ferment occurring among Muslims in Western countries. This will hopefully serve to uncover for policy-makers the existence of important tendencies that have previously not been given sufficient attention. The focus group discussions have helped to show some of the complexities of Muslim soul-searching, which has often simplistically been portrayed in popular discourses as a contest between “moderates” and “fundamentalists.” The research has provided insight into Muslim views on immigrant integration by examining how perceptions of religious authority shape engagements with the public sphere. It is particularly important to understand the expectations that Muslims have of their leadership because of the integral connection that Islamic beliefs make between faith (*deen*) and world (*dunya*). They strive to maintain a seamless spiritual and material existence. The ethics guiding their citizenship are drawn from their religious beliefs, as is often also the case for the followers of other religions.

Current sociological conditions for Muslims in the West are historically unique. Not only do they have unprecedented physical access to literary sources in printed and electronic forms, they have also acquired European languages, in which a significant amount of material on Islam is now published. In previous times, a lack of knowledge of the major Muslim languages, especially Arabic, hampered participation in Islamic discourses by non-Arabic speakers, who make up the majority of Muslims. A number of the focus group interlocutors mentioned that certain English translations of Islamic scripture were the most important literature in their understanding of Islam. They confidently participated in the discussions, quoting chapter and verse in English. Topics that had previously been the purview of intellectual elites have become part of the religious debates among a larger number of Muslims. The overlapping of discussion threads between the six locations of the focus groups demonstrates the translocal nature of this process in the three countries. This may be evidence of what some have called the emergence of a Western Islam (see, for example, Ramadan 2004).

Muslims' perceptions of Islamic authority are crucial in understanding how their integration in Western

societies will unfold, because these perceptions provide insight into the mechanisms Muslims are using to resolve issues regarding their Islamic and Western identities. Several of the focus group members indicated that their regard for those who had traditionally been held as religious authorities had declined, if it had not vanished altogether. They were still willing to listen to certain figures, but not with blind faith. The focus group participants expected imams, in addition to having a substantial knowledge of Islamic sources, to be cognizant of the Western conditions in which Muslim communities live. They also want them to demonstrate a certain practicality based on their Islamic beliefs and to engage with the real-world conditions of contemporary society. Increasingly, believers appear to be insisting on thinking for themselves and utilizing their rationality when approaching personal matters of faith. Now ordinary Muslims are exposed to the Western critical approach to religious texts, an approach that existed in Islam until the fourteenth century but that had all but disappeared in the last few centuries. The well-read faithful are beginning to examine for themselves the theological status of scripture and religious law and their relevance to the regulation of their religious and social lives.

The issues under debate extend into the broader socio-political discussions of the societies in which they live. Muslim individuals are examining their roles as good citizens of Western countries and as good Muslims. Such reflection has significant implications at present when the followers of Islam are facing a range of social options that include assimilation into secularism, at one end, and embracing religious extremism, at the other. A number of interlocutors mentioned the importance that they gave to living balanced lives. The particular solutions that Muslims in the West will choose will differ between communities and individuals; however, the discursive journeys towards these ends and their outcomes will necessarily have implications for society at large. Muslim public spheres invariably intersect and interact with dominant public spheres, nationally and transnationally. Therefore, policy-makers will benefit from a better understanding of Muslims.

International and domestic events involving Muslims have made evident the case for knowledgeable and coherent engagement with issues affecting the adherents of Islam. One of the ways in which this can be attained is through increased interaction between Muslims and others in society. Indeed, the Quebec gov-

ernment's Bouchard-Taylor Commission recommended a number of policies and programs to promote better interaction and understanding between immigrants and the larger society (Bouchard and Taylor 2008); the provincial government appears to be supportive of this proposal, as is evident in its "law to promote action by the Administration with respect to cultural diversity."<sup>30</sup> The report of the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia presented the case "for seeing Islamophobia as a form of racism" and observed that "most race equality organisations have not yet adequately responded to the challenges of Islamophobia" (Stone 2004, 15). It is possible for authorities in Canada and other Western countries to consider initiatives that work towards a more harmonious integration of Muslims into their societies, and the issues itemized below should be considered in the process.

### Addressing Islamophobia

Following the stereotyping that has resulted from the terrorist acts conducted by people claiming to act in the name of Islam, Muslims have become wary of prejudicial attitudes. They are concerned about what they see as systemic discrimination against them; for example, there are wide discrepancies between educational qualifications among Muslims and their employment (Adams, 2007). This situation appears to be having a significant impact on the integration of Muslims into Western societies. The report of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission and the Stone report in the United Kingdom identified negative or exaggerated media depictions of Muslims as a source that tended to foster Islamophobia. The Bouchard-Taylor report spoke of the media's role in the following terms:

The media must...learn to discipline themselves. Media exploitation of Imam Jaziri, a marginal figure in the Muslim community, was pernicious inasmuch as it reinforced the worst stereotypes. The repeated displays of the same photos of Muslims wearing the burka or the niqab, of Muslims bowing down in prayer, produce the same effect. It will always be useful to remind ourselves that the stigmatization of Muslims helps to create in their communities solidarities that risk rebelling against Québec society. (Bouchard and Taylor 2008, 235)<sup>31</sup>

The Quebec commissioners raise here the possibility that social alienation will foster militancy. Muslim alienation could be alleviated by the development and implementation of nuanced anti-racism and anti-discrimination policies that deal specifically with problems of Islamophobia (Bouchard and Taylor 2008, 271; Stone 2004, 78). Both commissions advo-

cated the fostering of mutual knowledge among various groups in society through education and participatory activities. In addition, this study has pointed toward issues that the media could explore to promote a richer understanding of Muslims and hopefully a productive engagement with them.

### Promoting intercommunal interaction

The findings of the focus groups indicate a strong willingness among Muslims to participate in interaction with people of other backgrounds. It is vital that understanding between individuals of various religions and ethnicities develop on a broad basis in order to ensure social stability and harmony in society (Bouchard and Taylor 2008, 270). Governments should consider supporting religious and civil society organizations that seek to promote such interaction (Stone 2004, 78-79). Such activities will serve to reduce intercommunal tensions and enable individuals of different backgrounds to work towards common purposes. They will also help to diminish stereotypes.

### Engagement with Muslim organizations

A number of organizations seek to promote greater participation of Muslims in the larger society. Such civil society bodies are natural allies for governments and NGOs seeking to promote the integration of immigrant communities (Stone 2004, 82). However, this study has shown that Muslims have diverse views about the kinds of engagement they wish to pursue. A standardized approach for all will therefore be counterproductive in working with a variety of organizations and individuals. That said, Muslims who have first-hand knowledge about complex communal issues as well as of the specific challenges that Muslims face regarding integration into the larger society could contribute significantly to the development of appropriate policies. Beyond this, governments may also consider wider community consultations on major initiatives; such an approach would assist in overcoming suspicions of the authorities' intentions and gain community support.

### Promoting better understanding of Muslims in public institutions

This paper has demonstrated the importance of a sound understanding of immigrant Muslim communities. Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and the Canadian International Development Agency have been organizing annual

workshops on this topic for small numbers of public servants. This is an example other public-sector organizations, education systems and the media could follow (Stone 2004, 82, 86). Politicians may also benefit from a better knowledge of Muslim as well as other religious communities; this would contribute to a more informed response to intercommunal tensions and those resulting from the intersection of civic and religious identities (Karim and Hirji 2008).

Academics, policy-makers and immigrant serving agencies should expect intense debate among Western Muslims on issues of settlement. These discussions will most likely ebb and flow and the pendulum may swing in favour of integration, on the one hand, or isolationism, on the other. Apart from the few who encourage militancy, the vast majority appear to be engaged with exploring different modalities of remaining true to their faith and achieving success in their material lives. Addressing the contexts of Western societies, of practising what one preaches, and of an individual being able to conduct her own (critical) inquiries into spiritual and worldly matters emerged as important issues for the focus group members. Even though the voices of converts were over-represented in the discourses quoted in the analysis section, they seem to indicate a possibility of playing a bridging role in enabling their immigrant co-religionists to pursue productive engagements with Western modernity. Whereas the converts tended to be more outspoken in their views, this forthrightness appeared to underline the tensions felt by the others.

The conversations carried out in the focus groups have echoes in the writings of many Muslim academics working in the West and in majority Muslim countries. The higher access to education and freedom of expression that Western Muslims enjoy seems to be encouraging the open articulation of widely felt sentiments. This may be indicating future trends in the global Muslim *ummah*. However, it is important not to overlay the findings of this research, whose subjects are not positioned as being “representative” either of transnational Islam nor even of communities in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, the opportunity to conduct in-depth discussions on the issue of Islamic authority has elicited information that is useful in comprehending some of the critical issues pertaining to Muslim engagements with modernity. It is hoped that this paper will prompt more extensive research into the attitudes of Muslims living in the West.

# Appendix 1

Criteria for Selecting Focus Group Participants
<p>Focus groups should consist of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A mix of males and females</li> <li>• Varying age groups (18+)</li> <li>• Different ethnicities and countries of origin</li> <li>• Varying sectarian backgrounds (including Sufis)</li> <li>• Different social classes</li> </ul>
<p>Participants should not be closely acquainted</p>
<p>There should be no leaders of organizations or opinion leaders on the discussion topics (such people might be more appropriate as interview subjects)</p>
<p>There should be no one who might dominate discussions</p>
<p>Participants should have knowledge of contemporary intellectual discussions relating to Islam and demonstrate this by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having read articles and books/attended seminars or lectures</li> <li>• Being able to cite the names of Muslim scholars/opinion leaders</li> </ul>
<p>Participants should</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have lived in the West for 10 years (if it proves difficult to find participants who meet this criterion, then we can stipulate a minimum of 5 years)</li> <li>• Be available on the day of the session</li> <li>• Be able to participate well in English</li> <li>• Not have participated in another focus group in the previous six months</li> </ul>

# Appendix 2

Table 1 Selected Characteristics of Focus Group Participants, by City of Domicile						
	Ottawa	Montreal	London	Manchester	Leicester	Washington <sup>1</sup>
<b>Gender</b>						
Female	5	6	5	6	3	7
Male	8	7	5	0	4	0
<b>Age</b>						
18-29	4	7	4	2	2	
30-39	4	3	5	3	1	
40-49	3	2	0	0	1	
50-59	1	1	1	1	2	
60+	1	0	0	0	1	
<b>Highest level of education completed</b>						
Elementary/ primary school	0	0	0	0	1	
High school/ CEGEP	3	3	2	0	0	
Undergraduate	3	5	2	1	3	
Postgraduate	7	5	6	5	2	
Other	0	0	0	0	1	
<b>Religious affiliation</b>						
Sunni	10	12	6	4	5	
Shia	3	1	4	2	2	
<sup>1</sup> Age, education and religious affiliation were not collected for the Washington participants.						

**Table 2**  
**Participants' Place of Birth and Ethnicity**

Place of birth <sup>1</sup>		Ethnicity <sup>2</sup>	
Afghanistan	1	Afghan	1
Algeria	1	African	1
Bangladesh/East Pakistan	3	Arab	10
Canada	4	Asian (common term for	
Egypt	2	South Asian in the UK)	4
India	3	Berber	1
Iran	1	Bangladeshi	1
Italy	1	British	1
Kenya	1	British Asian	3
Lebanon	3	British Bangladeshi	1
Malaysia	1	Burmese	1
Mauritania	2	Canadian	1
Burma/Myanmar	1	East African Asian	1
Malawi	1	Egyptian	1
Morocco	1	Egyptian-Canadian	1
Pakistan	1	English	2
Somalia	1	European	1
Switzerland	1	Gujarati	1
Syria	2	Hungarian	1
Tanzania	2	Indian	5
Turkey	1	Indian-Canadian	1
Uganda	1	Indo-Pakistani	1
United Kingdom	9	Iranian	1
		Irish	2
		Lebanese	4
		Malay	1
		Pakistani	5
		Scots	1
		Somali	1
		Somali British	1
		South Asian	2
		Syrian	1
		Turkish	2
		White European	1
		Yugoslavian	1

<sup>1</sup> Excluding Washington participants.

<sup>2</sup> Self-described categories; multiple responses were permitted; data for Washington are not available.

### Appendix 3 Focus Group Questionnaire

In this discussion, we are taking the position that the views on Islam of all the people around the table are valid. The research project is interested in hearing from people who describe themselves as Muslims. The people in this group have deliberately been chosen from a variety of backgrounds so that we can get a wide range of views. Our intention here is not to discuss the correctness of any branch or interpretation of Islam, but to bring forth various views on the issues at hand. There are no right or wrong answers – all your responses will contribute to the better understanding of how various individual Muslims think.

Do not be concerned that the viewpoints that you discuss or the names of intellectuals which you mention will not be recognized by anyone else – we also want to hear about the issues and people often overlooked by others. However, you are not seen as representing the particular groups that you

may belong to but as presenting your own, individual viewpoints.

There may be disagreements among various participants about specific issues – and that is to be expected in a diverse group. But the purpose of this focus group is not to resolve any disagreements among different viewpoints – it is merely to learn about the range of opinions among the participants. Perhaps there will be very few or no disagreements – that in itself will be a very interesting result. The research team comes here with few preconceptions about what you are going to say – we have an open mind on this.

#### Intellectuals

Whether Muslims are born in Canada or in the West or in a traditional Muslim homeland, we may be faced with challenges about the practice of Islam – whatever our Islamic beliefs may be.

I would like to open the discussion by asking: who is a Muslim intellectual who has been most helpful to you in dealing with life in Canada in a constructive manner?

This person may have written books, articles or given lectures, *khutbas*, *wa'iz*, etc., on your beliefs. It may be someone who is an academic scholar, a journalist, or a person with traditional religious training – someone who is known beyond his or her own circle.

The intellectual I am asking about is not necessarily one who provides all the answers – it is someone who may provide a way to think within an Islamic framework and enables you to deal with various issues from a thoughtful perspective that agrees with your religious world view.

Perhaps such a person who has helped you in this manner may not live in Canada or even identify herself or himself as a Muslim.

So, who is the one intellectual whose work has helped you to cope with life in Canada within an Islamic framework?

[Who would like to begin?]

### Contemporary issues

1. In your experience, how do Muslims deal with contemporary concepts such as modernity, secular society, universal human rights, individualism, and democracy?
2. Where do Muslims look for answers to contemporary issues such as bio-ethical questions?
3. Are Muslim intellectuals who have been trained in traditional Islamic manners able to address successfully the challenges of living as a Muslim in the West?
4. Are Muslim intellectuals who have been trained in departments of Islamic studies in Western universities able to successfully address the challenges of living as a Muslim in the West?
5. What does Western knowledge have to offer you in better coping with life in the twenty-first century?
6. What does traditional Islamic knowledge have to offer the West in better coping with life in the twenty-first century?

### Interpretations

7. Does the individual Muslim have the capability or the authority to interpret the teachings of Islam to deal with modern life?
8. Who has the capability or the authority to interpret the teachings of Islam to deal with modern life?
9. Are you aware of the issuing of *fatwas* through the Internet? If so, what are your views on this?

### Media

10. Do you receive any information on Islam and Muslims from the mainstream media that you find useful in being a Muslim in Canada?
11. Are there any Muslims working in the mainstream media who have been able to provide useful information on Islam and Muslims?
12. Are there any non-Muslims working in the mainstream media who have been able to provide useful information on Islam and Muslims?
13. Today, there are several media available in Canada that address issues of Islam to Muslims living in this country. Which Muslim media are you most familiar with?
14. Which Muslim media (print, TV, radio, Internet) are the most useful for your life in Canada?
15. How much information on Islam and Muslims do you receive through the Internet?
16. In what form do you receive this information (e-mail attachments; listservs; Web sites)?
17. Are you aware of any Muslim organizations in Canada or in other Western countries that use the Internet effectively to put across Muslim points of view for the public?

### Future

18. What do you expect will be the status of Muslims in Canada in the next 10-20 years?
19. What do you expect will be the status of Muslims in Canada in the next 50 years?

## Notes

- This paper is based on the findings of a project entitled "Islamic Reform in Diaspora: A Study of the Responses to the Emergence of Muslim Scholarship in Canada, the US and the UK." It was primarily funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. The project also received support from Harvard University's Divinity School, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, and Center for the Study of World Religions, and the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. While the project's scope extended to broad developments in Islamic reform in the three countries, the current paper deals only with issues related to religious authority. The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of Denise Helly, Marie Gillespie and Peter Mandaville in identifying research assistants in Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, respectively.
- 1 The term "integration" is contentious. It is used widely in Canada to distinguish the process of engagement with mainstream society that enables immigrants to maintain their own cultures within the context of multiculturalism, and to a certain extent, Québec's policy of interculturalism. It is in this sense that "integration" is used in this study. The term is contrasted with the American preference for "assimilation," which has traditionally described absorption into a "melting pot." Some discourses in the UK appear to equate "integration" with a melting pot "assimilation."
  - 2 A number of the converts in the focus groups referred to themselves as "reverts," suggesting that they had returned to their original or essential spiritual orientation.
  - 3 For a discussion on Muslim engagements with tradition, modernity and postmodernity, see Karim (forthcoming).
  - 4 Shia communities tend to have more centralized structures of authority than Sunnis. The Ismailis have a well-defined transnational network of institutions, which are also present in Canada, the US and the UK (Aga Khan IV circa 1998). However, it would be incorrect to suggest that the Shia are not challenged by changing conditions.
  - 5 The locations and dates of the focus group discussions were: Ottawa, March 14, 2004; Montreal, July 24, 2004; London, May 21, 2005; Manchester, June 11, 2005; Leicester, June 12, 2005; Washington, DC, July 9, 2005.
  - 6 Sixty-two in-depth interviews were conducted for the larger project in the period during which the focus group discussions were conducted (2004-2005).
  - 7 Purposive selection ensures that the participants are able to address the issues under study from a basis of knowledge. In identifying the potential focus group members, he says that "If you want to know about Sioux (Native American) culture, you simply cannot ask a group of Quakers" (Berg 2001, 123).
  - 8 "Intellectual" was broadly defined as including academics, religious leaders, journalists, novelists, painters, and musicians.
  - 9 For a discussion of the failure of the traditionally trained religious Muslim leadership to comprehend contemporary conditions, see Zaman (2002, 181-91).
  - 10 This view was expressed several times by various Muslims in other conversations that the author engaged in while conducting his research in the UK.
  - 11 Omid Safi noted in an interview that he found the largely adult male congregation of a mosque that he had previously attended to be intolerant of children (personal interview, October 28, 2004, Colgate, NY).
  - 12 Personal interview, September 26, 2004, Washington, DC. Jane Smith notes that "Some Anglo converts have formed support groups to help one another in the transition to a new faith and identity" in the United States (1999, 66).
  - 13 Personal interview with Omar Abdurrahman, November 18, 2004, Cambridge, MA. The comfort that African-American Muslims have with mosques run by religious leaders of their own cultural backgrounds is apparent in the clear distinction between indigenous and immigrant groupings of Muslims in the USA, the latter dominated by leaders and communities of Arab and South Asian backgrounds. See Ansari (2004), Jackson (2005), McCloud (1995), and Smith (1999).
  - 14 Personal interview with Zaki Badawi, June 16, 2005, London, UK.
  - 15 Personal interview with Siddiqui Attaullah, June 13, 2005, Markfield, UK.
  - 16 Personal interview with Azim Nanji, May 24, 2005, London, UK.
  - 17 Yvonne Ridley, a journalist for the Islam Channel in London and a convert, criticized "armchair jihadis" (personal interview, May 26, 2005, London, UK).
  - 18 Sufis are usually given to the mystical and contemplative dimensions of spirituality; however, they do not shun the worldly aspects of life.
  - 19 Personal interview, March 14, 2004, Ottawa, ON.
  - 20 Yusuf and Shakir are attached to the Zaytuna Institute in California.
  - 21 "The engagement of the Imamatus in development is guided by the ethics of Islam that bridge faith and society, a premise on which I established the Aga Khan Development Network" (Aga Khan IV 2008: 58).
  - 22 This was also expressed by Ali Asani in an interview on March 7, 2004, in Cambridge, MA.
  - 23 "The hip hop cultural movement needs to be examined with a seriousness of purpose and a methodology that considers the networked nature of Islam in order to reveal the hidden aspects of this highly misunderstood transglobal phenomenon, a cultural movement whose practitioners represent, arguably, some of the most cutting-edge conveyors of contemporary Islam" (Alim 2005, 272).
  - 24 Many academics have also been active as imams or in other ways in the religious education or administration of their community organizations.
  - 25 There has been a preponderance of individuals with engineering or other forms of technical

training among the Muslims who have engaged in terrorism. Of course, this does not mean that the hundreds of thousands of Muslims with such education are automatically inclined towards simplistic solutions to social problems.

- 26 *Fiqh* constitutes regulations based on Islamic sources governing religious ritual and the social domain; initial bodies of *fiqh* were produced by classical scholars in the early history of Islam following Muhammad.
- 27 Personal interview, September 24, 2004, Washington, DC.
- 28 Five acts considered in dominant Islamic discourses to be obligatory for Muslims: bearing witness (*shahadah*) to the oneness of God and the prophethood of Muhammad, prescribed daily prayers (*salat*), almsgiving (*zakah*), fasting (*sawm*) during the month of Ramadan and performance of the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca once in a lifetime.
- 29 This reflects Arkoun's ideas about the Islamic scriptures not being a "closed corpus" (2005).
- 30 Government of Québec. "Bill 106 An Act to Promote Action by the Administration with Respect to Cultural Diversity." <http://www.assnat.qc.ca/eng/38legislature1/Projets-loi/publics/08-a106.pdf>
- 31 See also Karim (2003a).

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Quelle perception les musulmans qui vivent au Canada, aux États-Unis et au Royaume-Uni ont-ils de l'autorité rattachée à l'islam ? C'est cette question que Karim Karim entend éclaircir dans cette étude. Pour comprendre de quelle façon les musulmans s'intègrent dans la société occidentale, il importe de savoir où, à leurs yeux, se trouve la véritable autorité islamique, car cela a aussi une incidence sur les questions sociopolitiques plus générales dans ces trois pays et dans le reste du monde occidental. Les adeptes de l'islam ré-examinent aujourd'hui leurs rôles en tant que citoyens et en tant que croyants. Ce processus est important de nos jours, où les musulmans résidant dans les pays occidentaux font face à un éventail de choix qui s'étend depuis le sécularisme jusqu'à l'extrémisme religieux.

Les conclusions de l'auteur émanent principalement d'une série de groupes de consultation auxquels prenaient part des musulmans « laïcs ». Elles révèlent en partie le caractère complexe de cette interrogation des musulmans, dont le discours populaire a souvent tendance à donner une image réductrice en la caractérisant comme un affrontement entre « modérés » et « intégristes ». L'étude offre un aperçu nuancé des vues des musulmans sur l'intégration des immigrants en montrant comment les perceptions qu'ont les participants de l'autorité religieuse influent sur leur engagement dans la société d'accueil. Il importe tout particulièrement que les responsables des politiques publiques comprennent les attentes qu'ont les musulmans envers leurs dirigeants, car, dans la vie islamique, les convictions religieuses et le monde matériel sont intimement liés. En d'autres termes, ce sont les croyances religieuses des musulmans qui inspirent et façonnent leur sens de l'éthique civique. Plusieurs participants ont fait valoir à quel point il importe de vivre une vie équilibrée. Ils s'attendent à ce que les autorités religieuses leur fournissent un cadre propre à faciliter la poursuite de cet objectif tout en tenant compte du nouveau contexte dans lequel ils se trouvent.

Les résultats indiquent également que les musulmans qui vivent dans les pays occidentaux évaluent à la lumière de leurs objectifs actuels non seulement le statut de leurs leaders religieux mais aussi celui des textes juridiques et scripturaux islamiques de base. Plusieurs participants ont souligné que le respect que leur inspiraient traditionnelle-

ment les autorités religieuses avait diminué. Ils se disaient toujours disposés à écouter les conseils de certains leaders religieux, mais non pas de façon aveugle. Ils s'attendaient à ce que les imams reconnaissent les conditions dans lesquelles vivent les communautés musulmanes implantées dans les pays occidentaux. Ils souhaitaient également que les imams fassent preuve d'un certain sens pratique inspiré de leurs croyances musulmanes et reconnaissent la nécessité de composer avec la réalité du monde contemporain. Les croyants au sein des groupes de consultation insistaient sur la nécessité de penser par eux-mêmes et d'adopter une approche rationnelle en matière religieuse. Certains participants remettaient même en question la pertinence, dans le monde d'aujourd'hui, de certains éléments scripturaux fondamentaux de l'islam.

L'auteur espère que son étude contribuera, dans l'Occident, à une appréhension plus éclairée de la façon dont l'islam encadre les aspirations des musulmans désireux de s'intégrer dans la société occidentale. Une meilleure compréhension du monde musulman permettra aux gouvernements d'élaborer des politiques aptes à promouvoir une intégration plus harmonieuse. À cette fin, l'auteur propose quelques avenues :

- La politique d'intégration doit s'employer à atténuer le sentiment d'aliénation des musulmans en veillant à ce que les programmes de lutte contre le racisme et la discrimination prennent en compte l'islamophobie.
- Les mesures destinées à accroître le soutien accordé aux organisations sociales qui s'emploient à promouvoir davantage la connaissance mutuelle et les initiatives intercommunautaires auront de nombreux effets bénéfiques.
- Les consultations menées par les gouvernements et les activités de programmation des ONG doivent prévoir la participation des organisations musulmanes.
- La participation accrue des musulmans à la formulation des politiques publiques aidera à mieux comprendre les enjeux complexes qui caractérisent leurs communautés.
- Il importe que les dirigeants politiques, les fonctionnaires et les médias acquièrent une connaissance plus approfondie des débats qui animent la société musulmane contemporaine.

# Summary

**H**ow do Muslims in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom view Islamic authority? In this study, Karim Karim aims to shed light on this question. What sources Muslims regard as valid Islamic authorities is important to understanding their integration into Western societies. The topic also has implications for broader socio-political issues in these three countries and the rest of the Western world. Followers of Islam are re-examining their roles as good citizens and as good Muslims. This is an important process in contemporary times, when Muslims in Western countries face a range of options from secularism to religious extremism.

The findings are primarily drawn from a series of focus group discussions with “lay” Muslims. They reveal some of the complexities of this Muslim soul-searching, which is often portrayed simplistically in popular discourse as a contest between “moderates” and “fundamentalists.” The study provides insight into Muslims’ views on immigrant integration by revealing how the participants’ perceptions of religious authority shape their engagement in the broader society. It is particularly important for public policy-makers to understand Muslims’ expectations of their leadership because in Islam, faith and the material world are integrally connected. In other words, Muslims draw civic ethics from their religious beliefs. A number of the participants mentioned how important it is to live a balanced life. They expect their leaders to provide an enabling framework that takes into account the new circumstances they are encountering.

The research shows that Muslims in the West are evaluating in the context of their own present-day goals not only the status of their religious leaders, but also the pri-

mary legal and scriptural texts of Islam. Several focus group participants indicated that their regard for those they traditionally perceived as religious authorities had declined. They were still willing to listen to certain figures, but not blindly. They expected imams to be cognizant of the conditions in which Western Muslim communities live. They also wanted them to demonstrate a certain practicality based on their Islamic beliefs and to engage with real-world conditions. The believers in the groups insisted on thinking for themselves and taking a rational approach in matters of faith. Some of the participants even challenged the relevance of the primary scriptural elements of Islam in current times.

With this study, Karim hopes to improve the West’s understanding of how Islam frames the aspirations of Muslims for their successful integration into Western societies. This improved understanding would enhance the formulation of policies for more harmonious integration. In this regard the author suggests the following specific avenues be pursued:

- Policies should work toward alleviating Muslim alienation by ensuring that anti-racism and anti-discrimination programs deal with Islamophobia.
- Providing more support to social organizations that work to increase mutual knowledge and enhancing intergroup initiatives will have multiple benefits.
- Government consultations and NGO programming should be inclusive of Muslim organizations.
- Enabling more Muslims to participate in the policy-making process would provide first-hand knowledge about complex community issues.
- Government leaders, the public service and the media need to gain a better understanding of the contemporary debates among Muslims.