

# CONSTRUCTING ISLAMO- PHILIA WITHIN THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

## THE CASE OF THE MUSLIM CANADIAN CONGRESS

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### INTRODUCTION

An online poll conducted in 2012 showed that 52% of Canadians distrust Muslims and 42% believe discrimination against Muslims is mainly their fault (Canadian Race Relations Foundation 2012). In response to this continued Islamophobia in Canada, a counter-discourse has developed, that of Islamophilia. Scholars such as Shryock (2010) use the term Islamophilia to describe the construction of an image of Islam and Muslims as necessarily positive, friends, familiar, and compatible with the 'West' and democracy. I argue that such an imagining is constructed not only from outside of Muslim communities but also from within Muslim communities.

Discourse concerning Canadian Muslims, especially in the media, has typically constructed a binary representation of Muslims as either 'good' or 'bad', 'moderate' or 'fundamentalist'. In Canada these binary representations are often constructed by taking input from two Canadian Muslim organizations: the Canadian Islamic Congress (CIC) and the Muslim Canadian Congress (MCC). Canadian journalists, politicians and others often use these organizations in order to represent 'fundamentalists' and 'moderates' respectively.

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In this paper, I will examine how the MCC constructs a philic account of Islam and Canadian Muslims. I argue that the MCC constructs a specific Islam that, in their view, is 'true' Islam in opposition to an 'other' Islam. The 'true' Islam constructed by the MCC is considered by them to be inherently compatible with Canada while the 'other' Islam is considered inherently incompatible with Canada.

This discussion of Islamophilia references a broader debate about the highly contested tradition-modernity dichotomy. Many scholars such as Asad, Butler, Mahmood, and Brown (2009), Canclini (2005), and Razack (2007) have challenged the idea of a dichotomy between tradition and modernity in relation to the construction of Islamic identity (and religious identity more generally). This paper offers some insight into how Muslims negotiate between tradition and modernity.

## CANADIAN MUSLIMS

Muslims have a long history in North America however, it is only since the 1960s that the numbers of both immigrants and Canadian born Muslims have increased dramatically. Today, Canada's Muslim population is over 579,000 and is mainly concentrated in Quebec and Ontario's urban cities (Statistics Canada, 2001). To put this number in perspective, Muslims make up about 2% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2001). Furthermore, the Muslim population is considered the fastest growing religious population by Statistics Canada (2010). This growth is said to be due to a large number of immigrants arriving from countries with high populations of Muslims as well as due to a high level of fertility among Muslim populations in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2010). In other words, second and third generation Muslim populations are growing and new Muslim immigrants are constantly arriving. I would also add that converts to Islam are adding to the growing Canadian Muslim population.

The Canadian Muslim population is made up of immigrants from around the world, Canadian-born Muslims and converts. This population has a diverse economic, ethnic, and educational backgrounds as well as different levels of religious commitment. Furthermore, Canadian Muslims belong to various sects of Islam, have differing views of Islam, and practice in different ways.

The clear diversity of the Muslim population in Canada begs the question of terminology. Using categories such as 'Muslim' and 'Canadian' is extremely problematic and these terms often do not grasp the diverse and fluid nature of these identities. Furthermore, 'Muslim' and 'Canadian' are not by any means mutually exclusive, nor are they natural entities but rather are cultural constructions. I use the term 'Canadian Muslims' in an attempt to grasp the entangled nature of the multiple identities that we all carry. By using the term 'Canadian Muslims', it should be noted, I do not wish to imply a homogenous group, nor a static identity. Rather, I recognize the plurality of identities that often shift, overlap, and change with time and space.

## ISLAMOPHILIA

Post 9/11, many Muslims (Canadian and otherwise) have publicly condemned fundamentalists and extremists who, in their view, had twisted and continue to twist Islam in a way that is contrary to its true nature. Several Muslim columnists along with other occasional contributors to the media following 9/11 "expressed collective self-criticism" (Modood 2005: 203). According to Modood, "they expressed shock at how anger and violence has become part of British Muslim, especially youth, culture, arguing that West-hating militant ideologues had 'hijacked' Islam and that the moderates had to denounce them" (2005: 203). Circumstances such as 9/11, other terrorist acts conducted in 'the name of Islam', and the growing unease of the increasing Muslim population in the 'West', have resulted in Muslims being defined and in defining themselves in oppositional terms (Modood: 2005).

According to Boyarin (2006), the creation of the self is inherently linked to the creation of the other. He also argues that naming is an important aspect of separating oneself from others (Boyarin 2006). In the case of some Canadian Muslims, discounting extremists and fundamentalists as separate and not part of 'true' Islam creates and maintains themselves as the followers of 'true' Islam. A dichotomy has thus developed in Canada of the 'good Muslim' and 'bad Muslim'. The separation of two 'kinds' of Muslims allows space for 'moderate Muslims' to create identities that are not contrary to Canadian society, democracy, and modernity, and relegates negative associations with Islam to the 'bad Muslim', the 'other Muslim' that has nothing to do with their "good" and "moderate" Muslim identities.

According to the 'good/bad Muslim' construction, the 'good Muslim' is seen as the 'real' Muslim, the Muslim who follows 'true' Islam (Shryock 2010). The 'good/bad Muslim' construction refers primarily to those Muslims living in North America and Europe and is most often considered by scholars (Shryock 2010, Mamdani 2004) as a categorization created from outside Muslim communities. The 'good Muslim' is typified by the following characteristics: is ideally Sufi, peaceful, has a 'Western' understanding of women as equal, is well educated and works for a living, is in a monogamous marriage, and is politically moderate (Shryock 2010). Furthermore, the 'good Muslim' is inclined to assimilate and does not veil (especially does not don the niqab and/or burka). In contrast, the 'bad Muslim' is understood as someone who is politically radical, is perceived as hyper-veiled, and is often construed as a fundamentalist (Sharify-Funk 2009, Shryock 2010).

According to the 'good Muslim' (ie. those who have the above discussed characteristics), all negative associations with Islam are merely cultural traditions. In this way, culture is separated from religion and 'true' or 'pure' Islam is revealed. According to Roy (2009: 28), "A religion that claims to be the 'true' religion is one which at a given moment explicitly posits culture as otherness". The separation of cultural traditions that are seen as negative from religion has been seen by some scholars (notably Oliver Roy) to be occurring on a large scale due in part to globalization. However,

Roy sees this separation as mainly creating space for fundamentalists to flourish rather than, as I argue in this paper, a space for liberals and reformists to construct the 'good Muslim'. Furthermore, although those who fall into the 'good Muslim' category (as defined above) do seem to reject a culture associated with traditional Islamic and Arab societies, they tend to embrace another culture, that of the 'West'. In fact, those deemed to be 'good Muslims' argue that Islam and 'Western' (in this case, Canadian) ideals overlap significantly and that there is no conflict between the two ideological systems.

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There has now emerged a bipolar community of Muslims as 'Liberal Muslims' and 'Fundamentalist Muslims'

The idea that Islam and Canadian society share ideals such as democracy, gender equality, modernity, etc. is becoming more common and is expressed by Canadian Muslims and other Canadians alike. The term Islamophilia has cropped up in scholarly, political, and media discourse in recent years to describe this phenomenon. However, some (Shryock 2010, Trifkovic argue 2003) argue that Islamophilia itself has roots much earlier in history and is especially considered to be present in Orientalist thought. Literally meaning 'the love of Islam', Islamophilia has been used as an opposite to Islamophobia and generally refers to the uncritical admiration for Islam and Muslims. Shryock (2010) distinguishes Islamophilia as the imagining of Muslims as friends, familiar, and with whom no conflict is possible. Furthermore, Islamophilia constructs selectively positive images of Islam and Muslims (Shryock 2010).

Islamophilia (as well as Islamophobia) is not only constructed by non-Muslims but can also be produced within Muslim communities, by Muslims themselves. According to Shryock (2010), phobic and philic accounts of Islam are produced among some Muslims who are compelled to criticize and defend Islam and its institutions against backdrops of modernity. Thus, Islamophilia is a response to criticism of Islam and is often taken up by some Muslims as a way to show 'true' Islam as loving, peaceful, liberal, democratic, and as promoting equality, while condemning the 'other' Islam as fundamentalist, violent, undemocratic, and as oppressive

to women. One group that seems to publically construct a philic account of Canadian Muslims and is often regarded by other Canadians as the epitome of the 'good Muslim', is the Muslim Canadian Congress.

## MUSLIM CANADIAN CONGRESS

The Muslim Canadian Congress (MCC) is an organization that aims to provide an alternative for Canadian Muslims who do not feel represented by existing organizations such as the Canadian Islamic Congress (CIC), Muslim Association of Canada (MAC), and the Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-CAN). These existing organizations are viewed as sectarian, ethnocentric, authoritarian, fearful of modernity, and as having an aversion to joy (MCC 2001). As an alternative, the MCC support a "progressive, liberal, pluralistic, democratic, and secular society where everyone has the freedom of religion" (2001: 1). The MCC have set themselves apart from some other Muslim organizations in Canada by taking the opposite side of the debate on controversial issues. For example, the MCC oppose faith-based arbitration, support same-sex marriage legislation, advocate gender equality, and are actively involved in the campaign to ban the burka and niqab.

Following the events of 9/11, in December of 2001, Tarek Fatah and a group of liberal and secular Muslims in Toronto formed the MCC. Tarek Fatah is an author of several books on the subject of Islam as well as a broadcaster and activist. Besides his advocacy surrounding Islam (support of gay rights, separation of church and state, rejection of Shari'ah law, and promotion of a reformed Islam that is progressive and liberal), Fatah was also extremely involved in politics for some time. He supported the NDP for many years before leaving the party to support the Liberal candidate, Bob Rae. In recent years he has been outspoken about a flood of those he calls 'Islamists' entering the NDP party. Fatah has been extremely critical of so called 'Islamists' and 'Islamic radicalism'. His activism and outspoken criticism of these individuals and groups resulted in several threats and led to his resignation as the MCC's communications director in 2006 when he cited concerns for his safety as the reason for his resignation (Fatah 2006).

The same year as Fatah's departure, a major split occurred within the MCC when several executive and board members along with others left the MCC to form the Canadian Muslim Union (CMU). The reason for the split is still somewhat contested. The *Globe and Mail* (Fatah 2006) reported that the split occurred due to a number of members' attendance at an anti-war rally where support for Hezbollah was prominent. This led, according to The *Globe and Mail* (Fatah 2006), to a disagreement among members of the MCC between those who did not want to support Hezbollah and those who participated and/or supported the rally. However, according to those members who resigned, the split was due to their belief that the MCC could no longer influence Muslim communities (Canadian Muslim Union 2006). Following the split, Farzana Hassan took on presidency of the MCC until April 2010. Hassan was already well known as a writer and public speaker. As president she was very outspoken and involved with the media. Hassan also published several press releases and article postings during her time as president of the MCC and she continues to be a strong voice in the public sphere. Today, Farzana Hassan remains a member of the board and the president of the organization is Intizar H. Zaidi. Zaidi has not been particularly active as president of the MCC. He is relatively unknown to the media and is generally not the outspoken public figure that past presidents of the MCC have been.

Before the split in 2006, the MCC claimed to have 300 dues-paying members and the organization was extremely active and outspoken on issues involving Muslim communities. After the split, the number of members has likely decreased drastically (due to the resignation of the entire executive and several board members) and the organization seems less active. This decrease in activity is evidenced by the lack of upkeep and of article postings on their website. However, the MCC is still often asked by Canadian media to speak on issues involving Canadian Muslims. The Canadian media has often used the MCC and the CIC as two opposing voices for the Canadian Muslim population, the liberal and the conservative respectively.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

I will focus on the MCC as a case study of the construction of Islamophilia within the Muslim community. While the MCC is far from a homogenous group it presents itself as such through press releases, their mission statement, and through their spokespeople who interact with Canadian media. Thus when I speak of the MCC I am concerned with the organization as it presents itself to the public rather than individual members who may have differing views.

The use of the MCC as a case study is strategic as the organization is often pegged by Canadian media as an example of the 'good Muslim'. In other words, they are seen as liberal, progressive, and democratic. I wish to examine if the MCC themselves construct this 'good Muslim' identity and if so, how? Do the MCC contribute to Islamophilia and if so, how? Furthermore, I ask the larger question of how the MCC as an organization negotiates between so called modernity and tradition.

In order to attempt to answer these questions, I examine the organization's position on and participation in three specific issues concerning Canadian Muslims that were extremely prevalent in the media and popular discourse. These three issues are: the controversy surrounding faith-based arbitration, the debate over veiling during citizenship ceremonies, and the issue of veiling while testifying in court.

The first issue is faith-based arbitration, commonly referred to as 'the Ontario Shari'ah Debate'. The Shari'ah controversy dominated the media in Canada and was debated around the world from 2003-2005. Faith-based arbitration, which had been permitted in Ontario since 1991, allowed religious groups to arrange their own arbitration tribunals to settle civil disputes. In 2003 controversy was sparked when the Islamic Institute for Civil Justice (ICCJ) announced their intent to provide an Islam-based arbitration system. This announcement led to a firestorm of controversy with many organizations (including the MCC) condemning faith-based arbitration and others such as CIC supporting the decision. The debate prompted Dalton McGuinty (the Ontario Premier

at the time) to commission Marion Boyd to conduct an investigation. Despite Boyd's recommendation to uphold faith-based arbitration, the extremely negative response from the public and organizations such as the MCC resulted in McGuinty banning all faith-based arbitration.

The second issue I examine is the debate over whether or not burkas and niqabs should be allowed during citizenship ceremonies. Canada's Minister of Immigration and Citizenship, Jason Kenney, announced his decision in December 2011 to ban the wearing of face coverings (including the burka and niqab) during citizenship ceremonies. Some such as the MCC have praised the ban and the MCC in particular has even argued for an extension of the ban to other aspects of public life.

The third and final issue I investigate is the Ontario Court of Appeal Case of *R. v. N.S.* Due to a publication ban the complainant is referred to as N.S., a Canadian Muslim woman who wears a niqab. N.S., during a preliminary trial into her accusations of sexual assault against her uncle and cousin, refused to remove her niqab. The Court of Appeal had to decide whether or not N.S. would be allowed to wear her niqab when testifying. Some argued that not allowing N.S. to testify while wearing the niqab violates her right to freedom of religion. Others (including the MCC and several feminist organizations) argued that allowing N.S. to testify while wearing a niqab goes counter to democracy, the right of the accused to face their accuser, and for the defendants' lawyers to see her facial expressions. The MCC has commented extensively on the case and was one of several intervenors in the case.

In order to understand the MCC's role in the above issues, I conducted a discourse analysis. Discourse analysis provides a way to examine the particular language used by the MCC to speak about both themselves as an organization and about Canadian Muslims. Furthermore, discourse analysis allows an examination of the social implications of the discourse used by the MCC. A search for Canadian newspaper articles in which the MCC is quoted or referenced pertaining to the above three issues yielded seven articles. These newspaper articles came from a wide range of well

known regional and national newspapers including: National Post (2), Huffington Post (1), The Toronto Star (1), Globe and Mail (1), The Toronto Sun (1), and CBC News (1). I also gathered all articles (eight) on the MCC website that concerned the three issues being examined. Furthermore, the MCC's mission statement was used as this points to the organization's stance on important issues as well as to how they wish to present themselves to the public. Finally, I included in the discourse analysis the factum submitted by the MCC to the Ontario Court of Appeal. This data spans from 2001 to 2012 inclusive. Through discourse analysis I examined how the MCC responds to popular issues concerning Canadian Muslims in Canada and how these responses construct a certain Canadian Muslim identity and a particular image of Islam.

## MCC DISCOURSE

Islamophilia is constructed by the MCC by creating an image of Canadian Muslims and of Islam as: compatible with democracy and Canadian law, progressive and/or liberal, secular, integrated into Canadian society, and supporting gender equality. The discourse also constructs a counter category, separate from the MCC and 'true' Islam. This counter category comprised of 'other' Muslims and an 'other' Islam that is fundamentalist, radical, and possibly violent. These themes are discussed in detail below.

### *Compatible with Democracy & Canadian Law*

Democracy was a common theme throughout the MCC's discourse. Within their mission statement, the MCC establishes their commitment to Canadian law, including the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the Canadian constitution. According to the MCC's mission statement, "As Muslim Canadians we believe in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the Canadian constitution as our guiding principles" (2001: 1). The MCC especially emphasizes that Canada is a democratic society and embraces this principle into their mission statement.

The MCC's commitment to democracy and to Canadian law is particularly evident in their participation in the Shari'ah debate. Throughout their responses to the faith-based arbitration the MCC consistently rejects what they see as two types of law (one for religious minorities and one for other Ontarians). In a submission made to Marion Boyd in the Review of Arbitration Process, the MCC argues that, "the Arbitration Act is unconstitutional and...it breaches the rights contained in section 2, 7, and 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms..."(2004a: 1). In an article posting on the MCC website, Farzana Hassan (then president of the MCC) wrote, "We need to show that our way of thinking is universal, that we can live with the law and there is no contradiction" (2005a: 2).

During the N.S case, the MCC also displayed the importance they place on Canadian societal values such as democracy. The MCC took the position that allowing N.S to wear her niqab goes against the Canadian judicial system, citing open court principles, the historical importance of demeanor evidence, and the right of the accused to a fair trial. In the factum submitted by the MCC to the Ontario Court of Appeal it is argued, "that allowing a witness to testify without being seen violates the open court principle and accordingly is contrary to the values of a free and democratic society" (2010: 23). It is clear from this statement and those previously discussed that the MCC endeavors to present themselves and Islam in general as compatible with democracy and Canadian law.

### *Progressive/ Liberal*

The Canadian media and the Canadian public often see the MCC as a group of progressive Muslims or 'moderates'. As discussed earlier this image is one of the reasons the MCC is often approached for comment on controversial issues. In my discourse analysis it was evident that this progressive and liberal image was also constructed consciously from within the MCC.

The mission statement of the MCC refers to Muslims as believing in, "a progressive, liberal, pluralistic, democratic, and secular society where everyone has the freedom of religion" (2001: 1).

It was also indicated on the MCC website that several members of the MCC advocate for reformation within Islam. In an article posting concerning the Shari'ah debate, Farzana Hassan points out that,

*Religious absolutism must therefore be questioned not only for its rigidity but also for its practicability in modern times. A belief in the immutability of the Quaranic message cannot and must not be understood in the absolute sense. Absolutism endorsing literal applications of the Quran could function only if one rejected the view that societies evolved. Yet, change is inevitable. And while the doctrinal and moral principles of the Quran can be regarded as eternal, its legislative injunctions must be revisited from time to time in accordance with modern challenges (2005c: 1).*

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There has now emerged a bipolar community of Muslims as 'Liberal Muslims' and 'Fundamentalist Muslims'

During the Shari'ah debate, an ongoing rivalry between the MCC and other Canadian Muslim organizations such as the Canadian Islamic Congress (CIC) became heated. The CIC accused those Muslims who were members of the MCC as being Muslim only in name. In response to these accusations, an article posting by the MCC states, "The friction between the proponents and opponents of Shariah is now being perceived as a battle between devout Muslims, and those who are 'Muslim only in name'... there has now emerged a bipolar community of Muslims as 'Liberal Muslims' and 'Fundamentalist Muslims'." (Hassan 2005a: 1). Although it is not said who belongs to which category, we can be sure that when Hassan refers to 'Fundamentalist Muslims' she refers to Muslims such as CIC members, while those she calls 'Liberal Muslims' are Muslims such as members of the MCC. While the MCC only identifies itself as 'progressive' or 'liberal' on a few occasions, we can conclude by their emphasis on change and reformation of Islam as well as their rather liberal values (supporting homosexual marriage for example) that the organization does in fact construct a progressive and liberal image of themselves.

*Secular*

Another frequent theme throughout MCC discourse is the value placed on secularism. The importance of a secular society is discussed directly in the MCC's mission statement, "We believe in the separation of religion and state in all matters of public policy. We feel such a separation is a necessary pre-requisite to building democratic societies..." (2001: 1). In a submission to Marion Boyd during the Shari'ah debate, the MCC describes itself as "a secular organization" (2004b: 1).

In the MCC's response to faith-based arbitration the organization argued that what they called Shari'ah courts as well as any religious courts should have no place in a secular society. This is evidenced in a press release by the MCC in which Fatah is quoted as saying, "...Let us keep Rabbis, Imams and Bishops out of Canada's judicial system" (2005: 1). Furthermore, in an article posting by Fatah, it was argued that, "...it is not the business of the state to validate or endorse any set of religious laws" (2005a: 2). The MCC also takes the position that the niqab and burka should not be permitted in public, especially in dealings with government and/or law authorities. In the above ways, the MCC is able to construct the idea that it is acceptable, even preferable for Muslims to be secular in certain ways at certain times.

*Integrated*

The MCC regularly generates an image of Canadian Muslims as being able to integrate full into Canadian society. The MCC seems to view integration and even assimilation to a certain extent as positive and necessary in order to participate fully in Canadian society. According to the MCC's mission statement, "The Muslim Canadian Congress looks to the future and not to the past for the best days of the Muslim community; a community that will fully integrate and participate with other Canadians..." (2001: 1). Furthermore, one of the main concerns the MCC had with the potential introduction of what they called Shari'ah courts, was that a separate court for Canadian Muslims would hinder integration (Fatah 2005b).

Another area where the MCC are concerned about integration is veiling. During the controversy over veiling during citizenship ceremonies, Tahir Gora of the MCC argued that, "It [the niqab] should be completely banned in Canada...We feel that this is a marginalization of Muslim women. When you put a niqab on a woman, they are unable to fulfill their duties, they are unable to intermingle in the society" (Raj 2011: 1). This attitude surrounding veiling has been maintained by the MCC in the N.S. case. According to Tyler Hodgson (a member and lawyer of the MCC), the niqab limits one's participation and integration in a democratic society (Smith 2011: 2). The factum submitted by the MCC to the Ontario Court of Appeal mirrors this stance, calling the wearing of a face-covering inconsistent with "full participation and integration of a marginalized group into Canadian society" (2010: 20). Furthermore, veiling is referred to as a "visible sign of isolation, separation, and segregation of women from the larger society, an obstacle to full participation in society on equal terms and prevents engagement in communal life" (MCC 2010: 21). The MCC's stance on the above issues clearly delineates the importance the organization places on integration. The discourse demonstrates that the MCC view integration as important and necessary for Canadian Muslims.

### *Gender Equality*

Arguably the most significant and frequent theme that emerged from the MCC's discourse is that of gender equality. Likely influenced by popular concern surrounding Islam and women, the MCC actively constructs an image of Islam as compatible with gender equality. The gender equality ideal is endorsed in the MCC's mission statement as follows, "We oppose gender apartheid that is practiced in parts of our community, and believe it is contrary to the equity among men and women enshrined in Islam. We believe that Muslim men and women should work together, shoulder-to-shoulder, in their effort to rejuvenate our community" (2001: 2). The term gender apartheid seems intentionally used as this invokes a strong image of historical injustice.

The MCC take a similar stance in their response to the Shari'ah debate, "... it [Shari'ah] discriminates against women and minorities,

due largely to its pseudo-Islamic content” (Hassan 2005c: 1). In another article posting by Hassan she quotes Taj Hashmi of the MCC as saying, “The moral principles of the Qur’an outweigh its legal principles (for example, while slavery, concubinage and polygamy are tolerated in Islam for a specific historical era, the Qur’an does not promote or encourage these practices)” (2005a: 1). In the above ways, the MCC promotes the idea that the Qur’an has been misinterpreted and abused by those promoting gender inequality. In doing so, the MCC dismisses the idea that Islam in any way promotes gender inequality.

As discussed previously, the MCC clearly opposes the burka and niqab and overwhelmingly cites gender equality as the reason behind this. The MCC not only supported Canada’s immigration minister, Jason Kenney, in his decision to ban burkas and niqabs from being worn during citizenship ceremonies, but also encouraged him to expand the ban to other areas of public life. An article appearing in the Toronto Sun quoted Khan (an MCC member) as calling burkas and niqabs, “symbols of gender inequality” (Doucette 2012: 1). Furthermore, Hassan argued that veiling is rooted in Middle Eastern culture not in Islam (CBC News 2009: 1).

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**Veiling is rooted  
in Middle Eastern  
culture not in Islam**

More recently the MCC has spoken out against veiling in the debate over whether or not N.S. should be allowed to wear her niqab while testifying. Fatah was quoted in a National Post article as saying, “The covered female face is a reminder to the wearer that she is not free and to the observer, that she is a possession” (Kay 2011: 2). The MCC, regarding the N.S. case, argue, “In this case, the MCC submits that the Appellant’s section 2(a) claim is incompatible with the free and democratic values of gender equality and the open court principle” (2010: 20). Furthermore, the MCC argue that veiling goes against the Charter, which guarantees equality to men and women (2010: 20). The MCC even go as far as calling the veil “a symbol of a sexual apartheid, women’s oppression and subordination...” (2010: 21). While opposing veiling as a practice steeped in gender inequality, the MCC are careful to point out that the burka and niqab are not a religious requirement

in Islam but is in fact a cultural practice. In this way, the MCC establishes 'true' Islam, 'their' Islam, as supporting gender equality.

*The 'Other' Islam*

In defining 'true' Islam according to the above values (such as gender equality), the MCC separates other values and practices as belonging to the 'other' Islam. This is evidenced by the opening lines of the MCC mission statement, "The Muslim Canadian Congress is a grassroots organization that provides a voice to Muslims who are not represented by existing organizations; organizations that are either sectarian or ethnocentric, largely authoritarian, and influenced by a fear of modernity and an aversion to joy" (2001: 1). It further states, "We believe that fanaticism and extremism within the Muslim community is a major challenge to all of us. We stand opposed to the extremists and will present the more humane and tolerant face of our community" (2001: 2).

The MCC's image of a separate Islam from their own is further evidenced in the organizations responses to key issues concerning Canadian Muslims. In terms of the Shari'ah debate, the MCC posted several articles opposing Shari'ah courts, arguing Shari'ah courts are "antithetical to the Constitution and Canadian values" (Fatah 2005a: 2). Hassan also implies that proponents of Shari'ah are 'Fundamentalist Muslims' and are separate from 'Liberal Muslims' (2005a: 1).

Another separation the MCC makes between their Islam and the 'other' Islam is in terms of veiling. According to Gora, "Only a very tiny percentage of women put the niqab on their face- which is a very extremist element of our community" (Raj 2011: 1). Here the niqab wearer is deemed extremist and as a minority separate from the rest of the Canadian Muslim population. The characterization of someone who veils as extremist occurs throughout MCC discourse. A woman who veils is also considered as going against Canadian societal values, "The action that the Appellant seeks to protect under s. 2(a), the wearing of a face-covering in court, is far removed from core Charter values..." (MCC 2010: 20). The MCC thus constructs a veiling woman, Shari'ah courts, and

extremism as not only separate from 'true' Islam but also as outside of Canadian values.

## CONSTRUCTING ISLAMOPHILIA

The common themes that appeared in MCC discourse, which were discussed in detail above, are central to constructing Islamophilia. Following Shryock's (2010) explanation of Islamophilia, we find that the above themes are typical features of philic accounts of Islam and Muslims. The MCC actively constructs Islamophilia by producing an account of Islam as democratic, progressive, and secular. These characteristics coincide directly with many features and highly valued aspects of Canadian society, therefore rendering Islam as compatible.

This selective image of Islam is further constructed by separating out anything deemed to be cultural. This allows the MCC to create a space where they can construct a 'pure' or 'true' Islam. One clear instance in which this occurs is the MCC's stance on veiling as not a religious requirement but as a cultural tradition. In a similar fashion as Boyd's report during the Shari'ah debate, the MCC constructs two types of Islam: Islam as religion and Islam as culture (Brown 2010). According to Brown (2010: 351), "the dual construction of Islam perpetuates common Canadian conceptual constructions, working to render Islam familiar to the general non-Muslim public". In other words, the MCC (as well as the Boyd report) maintains normative constructions of Islam. By separating out 'negative' cultural traditions (such as the niqab and burka) from 'true' Islam, the MCC creates a universal Islam irrespective of regional differences.

Furthermore, the MCC dismisses the idea that 'true' Islam could be oppressive to women. The MCC's promotion of gender equality corresponds to 'Western' notions of gender equality and, by opposing veiling; the MCC appeases the concerns and fears non-Muslims have of security threats and women's oppression.

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The MCC constructs their Islam in opposition to the 'other' Muslim that is (legitimately) feared

The MCC also placates ‘Western’ unease of Muslims as separate and ‘other’ by first promoting integration and secondly by separating out a ‘bad Muslim’. The MCC constructs their Islam in opposition to the ‘other’ Muslim that is (legitimately) feared. In these ways, the MCC selectively constructs a positive image of Islam as compatible with Canadian society, as familiar, and as ‘good’.

### SPEAKING FOR MUSLIMS(?)

Identity construction, such as the MCC’s construction of a ‘true’ Islam and of themselves as ‘good’ Muslims, is a process that involves both self-identification and identification by others. Socio-Cultural Anthropologist Muna Ali (2011) points out that this process is continually dynamic and is constantly (re)created and contested. Furthermore, Ali argues that discourse is fundamental to any identity construction and often involves “interactions within social situations where relationships are often asymmetrical; it is by nature power-laden” (2011: 358). In terms of the MCC, much of their discourse appears authoritative, especially in comparison to everyday Muslims living in Canada.

The MCC is often called upon by Canadian media journalists to weigh in on controversial issues and are presented as an authoritative voice for ‘moderate’ or ‘good’ Muslims. However, the MCC is not only presented by others as an authoritative voice for Canadian Muslims, the MCC also presents itself as such. For example the MCC presents itself as providing “a voice to Muslims who are not represented by existing organizations” (2001: 1). Furthermore, the fact that the MCC acted as an intervenor in the N.S. case shows that the organization is considered and considers itself an important actor in issues concerning Canadian Muslims.

Despite this construction of the MCC as authoritative and as representing a large group of Canadian Muslims, the MCC is often criticized by other Canadian Muslim organizations as a group of secular and either atheist or non-practicing Muslims. Speaking of the MCC’s members, Mohamed Elmasry of the CIC says, “non-religious Muslims have no right to tell religious people what to

do” (Kamlani & Keung 2004: 2). In other cases those opposing MCC’s stances on certain issues charged MCC members of being apostates, non-Muslim Islamophobes, non practicing Muslims, or Muslim only in name (Hassan 2005b, Hassan 2005a). Criticism of Tarek Fatah in particular is widespread, for example Haddara (president of the Muslim Association of Canada) points out that Fatah rarely, if ever, has anything positive to say about Muslims and argues “Muslims are no longer listening to Fatah” (Lewis 2011). Furthermore, the MCC split that occurred in 2006 was said by board members at the time to be the result of the MCC’s limited influence within Muslim communities (CMU 2006). According to those board members who resigned, the MCC was no longer a credible voice within Muslim communities and when days later the CMU was formed their mission statement included their intention to work within Muslim communities (CMU 2006) rather than from outside them (as was implied that the MCC was doing). It is clear from the above criticisms that the MCC is far from representative of Canadian Muslims. Despite these criticisms however, the MCC represents itself and is represented in the media as a key player and an authoritative voice for ‘moderate’ or ‘good’ Muslims in Canada.

The fact that the MCC is presented as representative of the ‘good Muslim’ has important implications for Canadian Muslims as well as for other Canadians. The construction of a particular philic account of Islam, that is inherently compatible with Canadian society, may result in the perception by some non-Muslim Canadians that those who do not fit this mould must be incompatible with Canadian society. The MCC’s construction of Islam thus contributes to the polarization of Muslims as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Such a polarization inhibits the development of a more nuanced understanding of Islam and, Sharify-Funk argues, may contribute further to conflict “by reinforcing an ‘us versus them’ dynamic” (2009: 77). The label of ‘moderate’ Muslim that the MCC adopts also implies that most Muslims are not moderate (Sharify-Funk 2008). According to Sharify-Funk (2008: 20), “labeling Muslims as either ‘moderate’ or ‘immoderate’ tends to silence a majority of Muslim voices and reinforces illusive good Muslim versus bad Muslim dichotomies”. Muslims themselves often fall in between these labels and thus remain largely unrepresented in popular discourse.

## CONCLUSION

The MCC is represented in media discourse as representative of the ‘good Muslim’. However, this image is not simply placed upon them by outsiders but is actively constructed from within the organization itself. The MCC constructs Islamophilia by presenting a selectively positive account of Islam, as evidenced in their mission statement and responses (through article postings, newspaper articles, etc) to controversial issues concerning Canadian Muslims. The MCC constructs an image of Canadian Muslims and of Islam as: compatible with democracy, progressive and/or liberal, secular, able to integrate completely into Canadian society, and supporting

gender equality. Furthermore, the MCC separates out any practice that might be considered incompatible with Canadian society by labeling it as a cultural tradition. This results in a counter category being constructed, that of an ‘other’ Islam that is fundamentalist, extremist, and incompatible with Canadian society.

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Islamophilia is no  
less problematic  
than Islamophobia

By creating a ‘true’ Islam in opposition to an ‘other’ Islam, the MCC contributes to polarizing categories of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ Muslim, modernity versus tradition, and Islamophilia versus Islamophobia. Islamophilia is no less problematic than Islamophobia and, in fact, may be more dangerous. The danger of Islamophilia is similar to Islamophobia in its selective representation of Islam and Muslims, resulting in a universalizing and essentializing account. However, Islamophilia may not be immediately recognized as problematic and thus may be more dangerous than overt Islamophobia. As scholars and as citizens, we must be careful, in trying to find an alternative to Islamophobia, that we do not simply fall into its opposite. We must find a more nuanced understanding of Islam that will allow for a dynamic and encompassing category for Muslims to construct and reconstruct as is necessary.

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