

**Alleviating the Clash of Ignorance(s): An Ismaili Muslim Initiative in Canada**

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## ABSTRACT

This doctoral dissertation examines and describes how both the Imamatus institutions and ordinary Ismailis are attempting to alleviate Islamophobia and, what I have termed, intra-*umma* dissonance in Canada. Through the promotion of pluralism (the Ismaili Pluralism Project) and religious literacy about Muslim diversity (the Muslim Literacy Project) they seek to foster pluralism in Canadian society by first alleviating fear of the Muslim, and Ismaili, ‘other’. Through various efforts, the Imamatus institutions are attempting to standardize Muslim diversity as an alternative discourse to the current “that’s not Islam, this is Islam” response to anti-Muslim narratives, thereby creating space for minority Muslim representation; however, as will be presented throughout this thesis, ordinary Ismailis are not only actively getting involved in various Imamatus-led initiatives, but are also contributing in their own unique ways, inspired by their faith, identity, and experience. I argue that, collectively, the Ismaili community’s inclusive response to anti-Muslim narratives stems from Ismaili identity and experience; being ‘othered’ by members of the *umma* due to their unique interpretation of the faith. Thus, through this inclusive collective response, Ismailis and their institutions not only aim to alleviate the othering of Muslims by non-Muslims, but the othering of Muslims by Muslims as well. Further, the Ismaili community is simultaneously standardizing and professionalizing their religious schooling system and offering other internal educational programming to strengthen Ismaili Muslim identity to withstand the effects of Islamophobia and intra-*umma* dissonance, to ensure that Ismailis are equipped with the tools necessary to become confident ambassadors of their faith in an increasingly multicultural world – part of an effort that I am calling the Ismaili Identity Project. All three of these projects together aim to bridge the divide between Muslims and non-Muslims and foster harmony amongst the diversity that exists within the Muslim *umma*. The research shows that the Ismaili community is attempting to create harmony between Muslims and non-Muslims by simultaneously creating unity, respect, and mutual understanding amongst Muslims themselves.

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*And, when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.*

— Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*

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## LEGEND

AKDN	Aga Khan Development Network
AKFC	Aga Khan Foundation Canada
AKG	Aga Khan Garden
AKM	Aga Khan Museum
AKP	Aga Khan Park
AKTC	Aga Khan Trust for Culture
AKU	Aga Khan University
BUI	Bayt ul 'Ilm
GCP	Global Centre for Pluralism
ICT	Ismaili Centre Toronto
ICV	Ismaili Centre Vancouver
IIP	Ismaili Identity Project
IIS	Institute of Ismaili Studies
IPP	Ismaili Pluralism Project
ISA	Ismaili Student Association
ISMC	Institute for the study of Muslim Civilizations
ITREB	Ismaili Tariqa and Religious Education Board
IVC	Ismaili Volunteer Corps
JAP	Jamati Ambassador Program
MKs	Mukhisahahebs, Kamadisahebs, Mukhanimas, and Kamadianimas
MLP	Muslim Literacy Project
MR	Moderately Religious
MSA	Muslim Student Association
NR	Not-Religious
RE	Religious Education
RoL	Rays of Light
SBNR	Spiritual but not Religious
SPDE	Shaping Pluralist Dispositions in Education
SR	Standard Religious
STEP	Secondary Teachers Education Program
WPG	World Partnership Golf
WPW	World Partnership Walk

## I. INTRODUCTION

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*Those who talk about an inevitable ‘clash of civilizations’ can point today to an accumulating array of symptoms which sometimes seems to reflect their diagnosis. I believe, however, that this diagnosis is wrong, that its symptoms are more dramatic than they are representative, and that these symptoms are rooted in human ignorance rather than human character. The problem of ignorance is a problem that can be addressed. Perhaps it can even be ameliorated but only if we go to work on our educational tasks with sustained energy, creativity and intelligence.<sup>1</sup>*

*– Aga Khan*

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## CONTEXT

On January 29, 2017, shortly after evening prayers at the Islamic Cultural Centre in Quebec City, 27-year-old Alexandre Bissonnette shot and killed 6 Muslim worshipers and injured 19 others.<sup>2</sup> This heinous act was the direct result of Islamophobic and anti-Muslim rhetoric that has been plaguing Western nations since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> Inciting fear of the “other” is a tale as old as time and, as this incident illustrates, has serious implications. While Prime Minister Justin Trudeau condemned this crime and rightfully labelled it an act of terror, much more needs to be done to alleviate the ignorant rhetoric that fuels Islamophobia and anti-Muslim narratives.<sup>4</sup>

In December 2016, before the Quebec shooting, Canadian MP Iqra Khalid introduced Motion-103 (M-103), a non-binding motion that calls on the Canadian government to actively condemn Islamophobia and “to recognize the need to quell the increasing public climate of hate

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<sup>1</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Signing of the Funding Agreement for the Global Centre for Pluralism in Ottawa’, *Aga Khan Development Network*, 2006 <<http://www.akdn.org/speech/his-highness-aga-khan/signing-funding-agreement-global-centre-pluralism-ottawa>> [accessed 10 September 2017].

<sup>2</sup> ‘Quebec Mosque Shooting: Update on the Police Operation’, *Montreal Gazette*, 30 January 2017 <<http://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/quebec-mosque-shooting-five-remain-in-critical-condition-following-attack>> [accessed 24 October 2017].

<sup>3</sup> Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (Vintage Books, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> On January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021, the government of Canada announced its intentions to make January 29<sup>th</sup> a National Day of Remembrance of the Quebec City Mosque Attack and Action Against Islamophobia.

and fear.”<sup>5</sup> While this motion was passed on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2017, the debate sparked protests and counter-protests around the country,<sup>6</sup> highlighting precisely the fear and hatred the motion aims to extinguish. Thus, while symbolic efforts are being made to alleviate Islamophobia in Canada much more needs to be done to foster understanding, healing, and tolerance.

We are currently living in an anti-Muslim climate,<sup>7</sup> where many narratives portray Muslims as foreign ‘others’ who have inherently different and incompatible values than our own. They are seen as a threat to our freedom and safety, and a threat to supremacist cultural norms that permeate throughout Canadian society.<sup>8</sup> Although 9/11 significantly contributed to today’s hostile environment towards Muslims and their faith, earliest accounts of Islamophobia date back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine Empire through to the Crusades.<sup>9</sup> This understanding is important because while the term Islamophobia is a modern construct, fear and hatred of the Muslim ‘other’ is not. According to John L. Esposito, the contemporary resurgence of Islamophobia “has been triggered by the significant influx of Muslims in the West in the late 20th century, the Iranian revolution, hijackings, hostage-taking and acts of terrorism in the 1980s and 1990s, attacks against the World Trade Center and Pentagon on 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks in Europe.”<sup>10</sup> Several acts of terrorism in Canada have further reinforced anti-Muslim rhetoric domestically. In 2006, counter-terrorism forces arrested 18 individuals in Toronto, known as the ‘Toronto 18’, for conspiring to commit acts of terrorism in Canada. Further, in 2014, there was a shooting on Parliament Hill by

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<sup>5</sup> ‘M-103 Systemic Racism and Religious Discrimination 42nd Parliament, 1st Session - Members of Parliament - House of Commons of Canada’ <[https://www.ourcommons.ca/members/en/iqra-khalid\(88849\)/motions/8661986](https://www.ourcommons.ca/members/en/iqra-khalid(88849)/motions/8661986)> [accessed 12 January 2021].

<sup>6</sup> Rahul Kalvapalle, ‘Anti-Islamophobia Motion Provokes Protests, Counter-Protests across Canada’, *Global News*, 4 March 2017 <<https://globalnews.ca/news/3288205/anti-islamophobia-motion-protests-m103/>> [accessed 12 January 2021].

<sup>7</sup> The terms anti-Muslim and Islamophobia are often used synonymously. I use the terms anti-Muslim rhetoric and discrimination when it is more deliberate and intentional. Islamophobia, on the other hand, reads more passively.

<sup>8</sup> Sunera Thobani, *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing, 2007) <<https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442685666>>; Naved Bakali, *Islamophobia: Understanding Anti-Muslim Racism through the Lived Experiences of Muslim Youth* (Springer, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> John L. Esposito, ‘Introduction’, in *Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century* (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. xxi–xxxv (p. xxii); Bakali, pp. 11–12.

<sup>10</sup> Esposito, p. xxii. p. xxii.

a Muslim convert which killed a Canadian soldier at the Canadian National War Memorial. Two days prior to this incident, two Canadian Forces members were hit with a car by another Muslim convert. These domestic and international instances of terrorism are important contributors to Islamophobia worldwide; however, such essentializing narratives often overshadow narratives of the unjustified interferences, war, and economic exploitations of natural resources in Muslim countries by Western nation states. This is not to say that these tragic events in the Global North and other parts of the Western world are at all justified, but that in order to mend the underlying problems there needs to be informed understanding, dialogue, and reconciliation on both sides.

The nurturing of fear and distrust in the public sphere, such as through media and politics, fosters environments of discrimination and exclusion and normalizes hostile anti-Muslim sentiment. This often results in harmful consequences for Muslims both nationally and transnationally. Further, evidence for manifestations of Islamophobia can be seen throughout Western societies: the banning of religious symbols in workplaces and public spaces (Quebec & Europe); discriminatory legislation (Europe and North America); Islamophobic Immigration and Refugee policies (Europe and North America); and American President Donald Trump's Muslim Ban. Before discussing some of these examples in the Canadian context, it is important to first define what we mean by Islamophobia.

## DEFINING ISLAMOPHOBIA

Islamophobia can be defined as “the dread, hatred and hostility towards Islam and Muslims perpetuated by a series of closed views that imply and attribute negative and derogatory stereotypes and beliefs to Muslims.”<sup>11</sup> The term can also be used to describe acts of violence, humiliation, or intimidation towards Muslims or people that look ‘Muslim,’ and/or their property. Islamophobia is very real and affects a significant portion of the Muslim population. In Canada,

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<sup>11</sup> *Islamophobia a Challenge for Us All* (The Runnymede Trust, 1997)  
 <<https://www.runnymedetrust.org/companies/17/74/Islamophobia-A-Challenge-for-Us-All.html>>.

Muslims and Indigenous people face the most discrimination.<sup>12</sup> Further, although Canadian Muslims are highly educated on average, the rates of unemployment and underemployment are significantly disproportionate when compared to other visible minorities;<sup>13</sup> this observation alludes to more systemic forms of discrimination within our public institutions.

Chris Allen argues that there are three components to Islamophobia which enable a framework for its study. “The first is that Islamophobia is an ideology, one that provides meaning about Muslims and Islam in the contemporary setting in similar ways to that which it has historically, although not necessarily as a continuum except in its nature as ideological.”<sup>14</sup> Muslims are then reduced and “conceived through various systems: thought, belief and symbols, all of which pertain, influence or impact upon social action, interaction, response and so on, shaping and determining understanding, meaning and attitudes in the social consensus: the shared languages and conceptual maps.”<sup>15</sup> This reductionist way of construing Muslims leads the uncritical mind to believe that religious doctrine is at the very centre of Muslim existence; neglecting the important roles that context and experience play in shaping religious identity. Islamophobic positioning inhibits one from understanding that Muslim belief is dynamic and variable on various socio-cultural factors. These homogenous depictions reinforce Islam as a monolith, neglecting the rich diversity that exists within the Muslim world, and ignoring the agency of the Muslim individual.

The second component according to Allen is that “Islamophobia is the ‘modes of operation’ through which meaning is sustained and perpetuated”;<sup>16</sup> that Islamophobic rhetoric standardizes, rationalizes, reinforces, and normalizes Islamophobia. For Allen, the ‘modes of operation’ are the “legitimation, dissimulation, unification, fragmentation, and reification” of reductionist Muslim

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<sup>12</sup> Amber Hilderbrandt, ‘Aboriginal Peoples, Muslims Face Discrimination Most: Poll’, *CBC News* <<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/aboriginal-peoples-muslims-face-discrimination-most-poll-1.874710>> [accessed 19 January 2018].

<sup>13</sup> *Survey of Muslims in Canada 2016* (The Environics Institute for Survey Research, April 2016) <[https://www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/project-documents/survey-of-muslims-in-canada-2016/final-report.pdf?sfvrsn=ffb85533\\_2](https://www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/project-documents/survey-of-muslims-in-canada-2016/final-report.pdf?sfvrsn=ffb85533_2)>.

<sup>14</sup> Chris Allen, *Islamophobia* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2010), p. 188.

<sup>15</sup> Allen, pp. 188–89.

<sup>16</sup> Allen, p. 188.

narratives.<sup>17</sup> Such narratives are reinforced by media through the display of certain images and the use of certain words to essentialize Muslims and their faith.<sup>18</sup> Another example is how politicians use Islamophobia to advance their political platforms, thereby legitimizing the discrimination and exclusion of Muslims from the public sphere – an example of this will be discussed in the section that follows.

Finally, Allen’s third component of Islamophobia is the institutionalization and normalization of exclusionary practices; specifically, “practices that disadvantage, prejudice or discriminate against Muslims and Islam in social, economic and political spheres.”<sup>19</sup> Examples of this final component are abundant in Western nations, and in North American society. The section that follows highlights various exclusionary practices, and other consequences of Islamophobia in primarily the Canadian context.

## ISLAMOPHOBIA AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Consequences of Islamophobia include the exclusion of Muslims from social and political affairs, discrimination, and mass-generalizations.<sup>20</sup> Naved Bakali contends that the meta-narrative “of the impending Islamization of Europe... has gained popularity in the public sphere and has been widely expressed by politicians, popular authors and media pundits.”<sup>21</sup> An example that plays into the ‘Islamization’ rhetoric that intended to discriminate and exclude some Muslims can be observed with the face-veil ban by the Conservative Government of Canada in December 2011.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Allen, pp. 188–89.

<sup>18</sup> Rubina Ramji, ‘Examining the Critical Role American Popular Film Continues to Play in Maintaining the Muslim Terrorist Image, Post 9/11’, *Journal of Religion & Film*, The 2015 International Conference on Religion and Film in Istanbul, 20.1:4 (2016), 21; Peter Gottschalk, Gabriel Greenberg, and Gary Greenberg, *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Allen, pp. 188–89.

<sup>20</sup> *Islamophobia a Challenge for Us All; Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century*, ed. by John L. Esposito and Ibrahim Kalin (Oxford University Press, 2011). p. xxii-xxiii.

<sup>21</sup> Bakali, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> On December 12, 2011 the then Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Jason Kenney, implemented a discriminatory rule that banned Muslim women from wearing the niqab, or face-veil, during their citizenship oaths. Kenney argued that wearing the face-veil inhibited judges from verifying that the soon-to-be citizen was actually reciting the oath, as required by law. See, ‘Niqabs, Burkas Must Be Removed during Citizenship Ceremonies: Jason

The ban issue later resurfaced in 2014, when 29-year-old Mississauga resident Zunera Ishaq brought the issue to the Supreme Court of Canada so that she could take the oath while wearing her *niqab*.<sup>23</sup> This case brought national attention to the matter and was then re-appropriated in 2015 by the Conservative Government to progress their election platform, saying that the veil runs contrary to Canadian values and contended that the veil is “rooted in a culture that is anti-women”.<sup>24</sup> The then Prime Minister Stephen Harper even promised a “barbaric cultural practices” tip line if he were re-elected.<sup>25</sup> Such Islamophobic remarks normalizes an anti-Muslim climate. Despite Harper’s efforts during the Canadian Federal Election season, the Federal Court of Appeal dismissed the government’s appeal and upheld Ishaq’s right to wear the *niqab*, and on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, she became a Canadian citizen while wearing her *niqab*.<sup>26</sup> However significant this event was, discriminatory legislation against Muslims has continued to find space in Canadian society.

Under the Harper’s Conservative Government various bills were passed that intentionally targeted Muslims and other racialized groups, such as Bills C-24 (Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act, 2014),<sup>27</sup> C-51 (Anti-Terrorism Act, 2015), and S-7 (the Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act, 2015). These bills reinforce the normalcy of anti-Muslim stereotypes and justify prejudice and discrimination against the Muslim ‘other’. In a press conference about Bill C-51 (Anti-Terrorism Act, 2015), Harper even linked the problem of radicalization with mosques, suggesting that Canadian mosques are creating terrorists.<sup>28</sup> Clearly

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Kenney’, *National Post*, 12 December 2011 <<http://nationalpost.com/news/canada/niqabs-burkas-must-be-removed-during-citizenship-ceremonies-jason-kenney>> [accessed 22 October 2017].

<sup>23</sup> The *niqab* is a face-veil most commonly worn by women in Saudi-Arabia, but also observed in other parts of the Arab world. The *niqab*, like other forms of veiling, is contested amongst Muslims.

<sup>24</sup> Adrian Wyld, ‘Niqabs “Rooted in a Culture That Is Anti-Women,” Harper Says’, *The Globe and Mail*, 2015 <<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/niqabs-rooted-in-a-culture-that-is-anti-women-harper-says/article23395242/>> [accessed 22 October 2017].

<sup>25</sup> Lucas Powers, ‘Tories Pledge New RCMP Tip Line to Report Forced Marriage and Other “Barbaric Practices”’, *CBC*, 2015 <<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-election-2015-barbaric-cultural-practices-law-1.3254118>> [accessed 18 December 2018].

<sup>26</sup> Then-Prime Minister Harper pledged to appeal the judgement if re-elected Prime Minister, but he lost the election to Liberal Party Leader, Justin Trudeau, who later dropped the appeal.

<sup>27</sup> This bill enables the government to revoke citizenship to dual citizens who are convicted of terrorism.

<sup>28</sup> Laura Payton, ‘Muslim Groups “Deeply Troubled” By Harper’s Mosque Remark’, *HuffPost Canada*, 2 February 2015, section Politics <[https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2015/02/02/stephen-harper-mosque-bill-c-51-muslim\\_n\\_6598496.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2015/02/02/stephen-harper-mosque-bill-c-51-muslim_n_6598496.html)> [accessed 25 January 2021].

anti-Muslim rhetoric is being normalized and justified through Canadian legislation and the province of Quebec is no exception.

In 2010, the province of Quebec proposed Bill 94 which stated that any Muslim woman who worked or wished to work in the Public Sector or with Government Officials would have to remove their face-veil. This set the context for the 2013 *Charte de la laïcité or Charte des valeurs québécoises*, or the *Quebec Charter of Values*, Bill 60, to ban public servants from wearing any religious symbols – similar to *laïcité* laws in France. Neither of these bills passed but paved the way for an equally discriminatory legislation to pass in 2017.

In October 2017, Bill 62 was passed which bans face-veils for anyone giving or receiving public services; including, riding the bus, seeking medical care, going to the library, and even parent-teacher meetings.<sup>29</sup> This bill was designed to specifically target face-veiling Muslim women and is an attempt to exclude them from the public sphere. Aside from the social and psychological consequences of this discriminatory bill, it will also have economic consequences for face-veiling women.<sup>30</sup> While, the section of this bill that bans face-veils was suspended in December 2017<sup>31</sup> and a subsequent rendition suspended in May 2018,<sup>32</sup> in June 2019, Bill 21 was passed, “which formally bans teachers, police officers, judges, and many other public servants from wearing

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<sup>29</sup> Graeme Hamilton, ‘Quebec Passes Bill Banning Niqab, Burka While Receiving Public Services’, *National Post*, 18 October 2017 <<http://nationalpost.com/news/politics/quebec-passes-bill-62>> [accessed 22 October 2017].

<sup>30</sup> Homa Hoodfar, in her research on veiling and un-veiling in Iranian society, found that the forced removal of the veil had economic consequences for previously independent women. The law did not “liberate” them as intended but excluded them from the public sphere forcing them to be dependent on male relatives. For more, see Homa Hoodfar, ‘The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women’, *Resources for Feminist Research; Toronto*, 22.3/4 (1992), 5–18.

<sup>31</sup> The section was suspended until the Government of Quebec could clearly identify the guidelines for “reasonable accommodation” requests. See, Marilla Steuter-Martin, ‘Bill 62: Quebec Releases Criteria for Requesting, Granting Religious Accommodation | CBC News’, *CBC*, 2018 <<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/quebec-bill-62-guidelines-accommodations-1.4655620>> [accessed 16 July 2018].

<sup>32</sup> In May 2018 the Government of Quebec identified six criteria for ‘reasonable accommodation’ requests but in June 2018 the bill was suspended again by Quebec Superior Court Justice Marc-André Blanchard because the bill continues to violate the Canadian and Quebec charters. See, Benjamin Shingler, ‘Judge Suspends Quebec Face-Covering Ban, Says It Appears to Violate Charter | CBC News’, *CBC*, 2018 <<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/quebec-bill-62-face-covering-july1-1.4724863>> [accessed 16 July 2018].

religious articles”.<sup>33</sup> Although discriminatory legislation such as this has been adopted in other European countries,<sup>34</sup> this is the first legislation of its kind to pass in North America.

It is important to note that the atrocities committed by violent Muslim extremists assist in fuelling anti-Muslim sentiment and legislation. Further, a study by Kathleen Deloughery, Ryan D. King, and Victor Asal also found a strong relationship between terrorist attacks and future right-wing hate crimes.<sup>35</sup> Thus, while violent Muslim extremism plays an important role in reinforcing anti-Muslim sentiment, innocent Muslim minorities then become targets for retaliation due to essentialist claims that Muslims are inherently violent. For example, in November 2015, ISIS executed three suicide bomber attacks in Paris, which killed 130 people and injured 368. This tragedy encouraged some Canadians to retaliate by committing a number of hate crimes and assaults against Muslims and their property, such as the setting of a mosque on fire.<sup>36</sup> The Paris tragedy also prompted at least 26 American States to pledge to refuse the resettlement of Syrian refugees in their respective jurisdictions in the midst of the Syrian refugee crisis.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, this is not the only example illustrating that the actions of violent Muslim extremists play a role in perpetuating Islamophobia and justifying anti-Muslim discrimination.<sup>38</sup> While it is evident that violent Muslim extremism affects non-Muslims, retaliatory violence and administrative responses directly affect Muslims. In the next section, we will see how violent Muslim extremism affects Muslims in their native lands.

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<sup>33</sup> See Heather Shipley’s ‘Reasonable Accommodation’ entry in Adam Possamai and Anthony J. Blasi, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of the Sociology of Religion* (SAGE, 2020).

<sup>34</sup> ‘The Islamic Veil across Europe’, *BBC News*, 31 January 2017, section Europe <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-13038095>> [accessed 22 October 2017].

<sup>35</sup> Kathleen Deloughery, Ryan D. King, and Victor Asal, ‘Close Cousins or Distant Relatives? The Relationship Between Terrorism and Hate Crime’, *Crime & Delinquency*, 58.5 (2012), 663–88 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/001128712452956>>.

<sup>36</sup> Bakali, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Patrick Strickland, ‘Islamophobia Seen as US States Shun Syrians’, *Al Jazeera*, 17 November 2015 <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/islamophobia-syrian-refugees-usa-governors-151116164708308.html>> [accessed 22 October 2017].

<sup>38</sup> On June 12th, 2016, Omar Mateen, a mentally unstable gay Muslim, committed a mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida. This incident targeted LGBTQ+ members and killed 49 individuals and wounded 53 others. A number of Islamophobic attacks followed this tragedy. See, Bakali, pp. 1–2.

To add to the Syrian refugee struggle, in January 2017 President Donald Trump issued an executive order, ordering the indefinite ban on Syrians from entering the US and also persons from other predominantly Muslim countries: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Hundreds of people were either stranded at the airport, denied to board, or sent away regardless of their documentation, visas, or passports.<sup>39</sup> Fortunately, the executive order was quickly shut down by Acting Attorney General of the Supreme Court Sally Yates as unconstitutional.<sup>40</sup> Despite efforts to shut down this discriminatory order, in early December 2017, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of Trump's travel ban and in June 2018, the Supreme Court upheld the travel ban after being challenged as discriminatory against Muslims.<sup>41</sup> This affair provides us with yet another example of exclusionary practice that reinforces Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiments.

As previously mentioned, another equally important consequence of Islamophobic and anti-Muslim narratives are hate-crimes and hate-incidents.<sup>42</sup> A hate crime can be generally defined

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<sup>39</sup> Glenn Kessler, 'The Number of People Affected by Trump's Travel Ban: About 90,000', *Washington Post*, 30 January 2017, section Fact Checker <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2017/01/30/the-number-of-people-affected-by-trumps-travel-ban-about-90000/>> [accessed 24 October 2017].

<sup>40</sup> A second attempt was made by the Trump administration limiting entry from the previously mentioned countries – less Iraq and adding Chad, Venezuela, and North Korea to the list to make the legislation appear less discriminatory towards Muslims. This excluded people from those countries who have a formal invitation or have immediate family residing in the US; however, it is noteworthy that immediate family did not include grandparents, grandchildren, cousins, aunts, and uncles. However, this rendition was also deemed unconstitutional by Hawaii U.S. District Judge Derrick Watson in March of 2017. A third iteration, which included a permanent restriction on travel from these countries was presented in September 2017 but was again ruled as unconstitutional by Judge Derrick Watson who then extended the ruling across the US. See, Elaine Thompson, 'Hawaii Judge Extends Block on Trump's Travel Ban', *CBSN*, 2017 <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/hawaii-judge-extends-block-on-trumps-travel-ban/>> [accessed 22 October 2017]; Michael D. Shear, 'New Order Indefinitely Bars Almost All Travel From Seven Countries', *The New York Times*, 24 September 2017, section Politics <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/24/us/politics/new-order-bars-almost-all-travel-from-seven-countries.html>> [accessed 22 October 2017].

<sup>41</sup> Clark Mindock, 'All You Need to Know about Trump's Travel Ban Now It's Coming into Full Effect', *The Independent*, 5 December 2017 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/travel-ban-trump-what-is-it-muslim-countries-list-restrictions-latest-a8093821.html>> [accessed 19 January 2018]; Lawrence Hurley, 'U.S. Supreme Court Upholds Trump's Travel Ban on Muslim-Majority Countries - National | Globalnews.ca', 2018 <<https://globalnews.ca/news/4297149/trump-travel-ban-supreme-court/>> [accessed 16 July 2018].

<sup>42</sup> Hate crimes against Muslims were not the only thing to increase as a result of Islamophobic discourse. The National Council for Canadian Muslims (NCCM) tracks in detail all anti-Muslim incidents across Canada. They define a hate incident as "any behaviour that is motivated by bias against a victim's race, national or ethnic origin, language, colour, religion, sex, age, mental or physical disability or sexual orientation, but is not a criminal act (e.g. racial slurs against a person or group)." The NCCM created an interactive map that shows where the hate incident occurred and categorizes the incident according to whether it was physical, verbal, propaganda, vandalism, threats,

as a criminal act motivated by hate or intolerance towards a person, community or their property due to their race, religion, national or ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, age, and mental or physical disability or limitation. In Canada, a hate crime is defined under the criminal code as an event “advocating genocide, public incitement of hatred, wilful promotion of hatred and mischief motivated by hate in relation to religious property.”<sup>43</sup> Examples of hate crimes vary and may involve vandalism, damage of property, hate mail, bullying, humiliation, assault, or deadly violence. According to Statistics Canada, hate crimes against Muslims, that were reported, increased by 61% in 2015 from the previous year; 159 incidents versus 99.<sup>44</sup> It is important to note that this percentage does not include those hate-crimes against “Muslim-Looking” ethnicities and populations. For example, hate crimes against Arab and West Asian populations also went up 33%. Similarly, in the United States, reported hate crimes against Muslims went up by 76% in 2015, totalling 196 incidents.<sup>45</sup> Noteworthy is that these statistics directly correlate with the anti-Muslim rhetoric plaguing North American media at this time.<sup>46</sup> These statistics support the notion that Islamophobia and anti-Muslim rhetoric incites violence and intolerance against Muslim populations. Further, using Islamophobia as a means to campaign directly supports Allen’s idea that Islamophobia as an ideology “must be disseminated to the public and private spaces through a vast range of different actions, utterances, images, and texts” and must “be recognised and digested as meaningful by its recipients”;<sup>47</sup> that the propagation of this rhetoric, is precisely the

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or whether it occurred online. An example of an incident that can be found on the map is when an individual pepper-sprayed a group of Syrian refugees when they were gathered at a welcoming event at the Muslim Association of Canada Centre in Vancouver, British Columbia, in January 2016. The data presented on this map begins in 2013 and is current to the present-day. The number of incidents is steadily rising with 12 reported incidents for 2013, 23 for 2014, 59 for 2015, 64 for 2016, and 70 for 2017; again, you can see the jump in incidents reported in 2015 when compared to 2014. See, ‘NCCM - National Council of Canadian Muslims’, *NCCM - National Council of Canadian Muslims* <<http://www.nccm.ca/map/>> [accessed 24 October 2017].

<sup>43</sup> Department of Justice Government of Canada, ‘Hate Crime - National Victims of Crime Awareness Week’, 2015 <<http://victimsweek.gc.ca/res/r516.html>> [accessed 11 May 2018].

<sup>44</sup> Statistics Canada Government of Canada, ‘Police-Reported Hate Crime in Canada, 2015’, 2017 <<https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2017001/article/14832-eng.htm>> [accessed 22 October 2017].

<sup>45</sup> Laura Pitter, ‘Hate Crimes Against Muslims in US Continue to Rise in 2016’, *Human Rights Watch*, 2017 <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/11/hate-crimes-against-muslims-us-continue-rise-2016>> [accessed 22 October 2017].

<sup>46</sup> In the US, Donald Trump and other Republicans used Islamophobia as a means to progress their political campaigns. Closer to home, then Prime Minister Stephen Harper used the banning of the niqab in citizenship ceremonies as one of the central issues of his platform for re-election.

<sup>47</sup> Chris Allen, *Islamophobia* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2010), p. 188.

‘modes of operation’ through which meaning is reinforced and normalized. Thus, even though Islamophobic rhetoric was used strategically to gain votes, it reinforced, legitimized, and normalized the hate and fear of Muslims in Canadian society.

Mainstream media continues to play a significant role in perpetuating negative images of Muslims and Islam.<sup>48</sup> Studies show that Canadian Muslims feel discriminated against and are affected by negative media portrayals.<sup>49</sup> In March 2019, the Bridge Initiative Team published a factsheet that analyzed polls and surveys issued between 2004 to 2017 that measured “public opinions in Canada on issues related to anti-Islamophobia legislation, niqab bans, and the prevalence of Islamophobia in Canadian society.”<sup>50</sup> They found that while “most Canadians acknowledge that Islamophobia is a problem in Canada” they also found that “most Canadians hold unfavorable views about Islam and Muslims, and most are open to policies that would single out Muslims for heightened regulation and monitoring in public spaces.”<sup>51</sup>

It is evident that anti-Muslim and Islamophobic narratives are having an effect on public opinion about Muslims and Islam, which in turn is affecting Muslim populations and legislation across Western nation states including Canada, specifically. As presented, the consequence of such discourses fosters hostile environments, exclusion, and discriminatory practices. The fear of violent and extremist Islam has resulted in the universal attack on all Muslims as if they are inherently the same. They are not. Many approaches can be taken to alleviate the ignorance that fuels such hatred and intolerance. One solution to this dilemma, arguably, is acknowledging and

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<sup>48</sup> Tareq Y. Ismael and Andrew Rippin, *Islam in the Eyes of the West: Images and Realities in an Age of Terror* (Routledge, 2010); Mahmoud Eid and Karim H. Karim, ‘Ten Years after 9/11—What Have We Learned’, *Global Media Journal*, 4.2 (2011), 1–12; Karim H. Karim, *Islamic Peril: Media and Global Violence* (Black Rose Books, 2000); Elizabeth Poole, *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims* (I.B.Tauris, 2002).

<sup>49</sup> Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, ‘Islamophobia in Canada: Measuring the Realities of Negative Attitudes Toward Muslims and Religious Discrimination’, *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue Canadienne de Sociologie*, 55.1 (2018), 86–110.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Factsheet: Polls on Islam, Muslims, and Islamophobia in Canada’, *Bridge Initiative*, 2019 <<https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-polls-on-islam-muslims-and-islamophobia-in-canada/>> [accessed 1 April 2019].

<sup>51</sup> ‘Factsheet on Muslims and Islam in Canada’.

educating on the rich diversity that exists within the Muslim *umma*, thereby challenging the narrative of Islam as a monolith.

The quote at the beginning of this chapter is from His Highness Shah Karim al-Hussaini, the Aga Khan IV (henceforth, the Aga Khan), spiritual leader and Imam of the Shi'a Imami Nizari Ismaili Muslims (henceforth, Ismailis). In the excerpt, the Aga Khan refers to an inevitable “clash of civilizations,” directly alluding to Samuel P. Huntington’s infamous thesis, “The Clash of Civilizations?”<sup>52</sup> Therein, Huntington asserts that Islam and the west can never co-exist harmoniously because they are inherently incompatible.<sup>53</sup> The clash of civilizations hypothesis, although widely critiqued, fosters Islamophobia and reduces ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslims’ to ideologically stagnant self-serving constructions that have no scientific validity. Islam is understood to be backwards, illogical, barbaric, sexist, anti-democratic, and violent,<sup>54</sup> while the west imagines itself as progressive, liberal, logical, enlightened, egalitarian, democratic, and peaceful.<sup>55</sup> It is harmful to assert qualities to entire populations as if diversity does not exist. Diversity exists in all facets of life. Diversity exists at the molecular level in terms of how atoms bond together to make up different molecular compounds. Diversity is a product of the evolution of life in different environments at different times. Diversity is a reaction to the interaction with other diversity. Diversity is an inevitable natural product. It is ignorant to say that all Muslims believe, think, and behave the same way. The insider and outsider construction of an “Islamic ideal” is a product of individual context and experience, leading to millions, even billions, of “ideals”. Just as there is diversity in Christianity, Judaism and other world religions, there is diversity in Islam. Just as no two Christians bring to their religious understanding the same context

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<sup>52</sup> There has been extensive critique of Huntington’s thesis but the goal here is to only set the context for the Aga Khan’s appropriation of the term. Further, although there has been extensive criticism on the topic, ‘clash literature’ continues to be produced at an alarming rate. See, Meena Sharify-Funk, ‘Pervasive Anxiety about Islam: A Critical Reading of Contemporary “Clash” Literature’, *Religions*, 4.4 (2013), 443–68 <<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel4040443>>.

<sup>53</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, ‘The Clash of Civilizations?’, *Foreign Affairs*, 72.3 (1993), 22–49 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/20045621>>.

<sup>54</sup> *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend*, ed. by Andrew Shryock (Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> Esposito, p. xxxiii.

and experience, nor do two Muslims. Understanding and accepting this is arguably the first step in alleviating intolerance and ignorance.

## TAKFIRISM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Islam is often viewed as a monolith,<sup>56</sup> but like other faith traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity, there is much diversity in terms of beliefs, practices, and worldviews. One factor that contributes to Muslim diversity are the different schools of thought within the Islamic tradition: such as the Ahmadi, Shi'i, Ibadhi, Sufi, and Sunni. Furthermore, these schools of thought are comprised of a multitude of sectional beliefs, practices, cultural customs, and worldviews. To better understand this phenomenon, one has to understand that Muslims come from a diverse array of socio-political histories, cultures, ethnicities, languages, socio-economic statuses, *madhahib* (legal schools), and other factors. Thus, the possibilities are endless when trying to understand the make-up of one Muslim adherent, let alone one billion of them. No two Muslims are exactly alike. Furthermore, not all Muslims are regularly practicing their faith or have their faith as central to their identity. For example, they may place being African American, a mother, an entrepreneur, or some other quality before their faith – this all has an effect on the way a Muslim adherent thinks about themselves and how they construct their understanding of their faith. Thus, it is more accurate when referring to a particular Muslim community or individual's faith as one of many possible manifestations of Islam, or as their version of Islam amongst various alternatives.<sup>57</sup>

The only thing that Muslims have in common with one another, arguably, is the belief in God and the revelation as recorded in the Qur'an.<sup>58</sup> Even this statement is troublesome because there exists diversity in how Muslims understand God or how they personally think and feel about

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<sup>56</sup> Fred Halliday, "'Islamophobia' Reconsidered', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22.5 (1999), 892–902 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/014198799329305>>.

<sup>57</sup> Halliday.

<sup>58</sup> Although generally speaking Muslims agree that the Qur'an holds the revelations as revealed to Muhammad, some Muslims will acknowledge the possibility of some revelations being left out or omitted during the compilation of the Qur'an under the rule of the aristocrat, Uthman.

the revelations in the Qur'an. Further, even the belief of Muhammad as the last Prophet is not universal across all Muslim communities. To elaborate, there are schools of thought within the Ahmadiyya tradition that their founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908), is a prophet, the promised messiah, and *Mahdi*.<sup>59</sup> Although many in the Ahmadiyya still hold the Prophet Muhammad to be the central figure of Islam, this belief that the messiah has already come, has made them targets of religious persecution, discrimination, and intolerance by other Muslims in Pakistan and in the diaspora.<sup>60</sup>

Internal intolerance of Muslim diversity has erupted in conflicts around the Muslim world. This is not a modern phenomenon but has roots in the early years of Islam.<sup>61</sup> The fight for the claim of "True Islam" is very real and relevant to the discussion as it illustrates that not all Muslims even get along with one another. The promotion of intolerant exclusivist Muslim ideologies, such as that propagated by Wahhabi religious authorities, has been a cancer within the *umma*. How can Muslims unite against bigotry if they themselves refuse to self-reflect on their own supremacist and exclusivist worldviews?

Muslims are persecuted by other Muslims because of differing beliefs, practices, cultural traditions, and worldviews. The intolerance or persecution of Muslims by other Muslims is a practice known as *takfir*, which means to declare another Muslim a *kafir*, an apostate or unbeliever. *Takfiri* ideology, arguably, is the root cause of both inter- and intra-sectarian violence. Sectarian

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<sup>59</sup> The Mahdi can be understood as the messiah that will be reincarnated back into this world to unite humanity against evil. Different Muslim communities understand the role of the Mahdi slightly differently. This concept is not revealed in the Quran and comes from the Hadith tradition. During the Abbasid and Fatimid empires, caliphs from each claimed to be the Mahdi in an effort to gain more support for their competing administrations.

<sup>60</sup> Andi Muhammad Irawan, "They Are Not Muslims": A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Ahmadiyya Sect Issue in Indonesia', *Discourse & Society*, 28.2 (2017), 162–81 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926516685462>>; Ahmad Najib Burhani, 'Fundamentalism and Religious Dissent: The LPPI's Mission to Eradicate the Ahmadiyya in Indonesia', *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 44.129 (2016), 145–64 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2015.1135610>>; Saba Imtiaz, *Attacks against Minorities Understanding Intercommunal Violence in Pakistan* (Al Jazeera, Centre for Studies, 20 June 2016) <<http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2016/06/attacks-minorities-understanding-intercommunal-violence-pakistan-160614110134028.html>> [accessed 7 November 2017].

<sup>61</sup> An extremist sect of Islam formed during the early stages of the caliphate known as the Khawarij. They would kill other Muslims who would not conform to their ideology.

violence occurs most frequently in the North African and Middle Eastern regions,<sup>62</sup> in countries like Yemen, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria,<sup>63</sup> but Pakistan ranks highest in “social hostilities involving religion”.<sup>64</sup> Unfortunately, the Ahmadiyya community are the greatest victims of *takfirism* in Pakistan.<sup>65</sup>

Again, intra-*umma* intolerance, discrimination, and violence is not a modern phenomenon but has existed for centuries. Like the Ahmadiyya, the Ismailiyya are another example of a community that have endured a history of persecution and have even had *fatwas*, legal rulings, issued for their extermination.<sup>66</sup> In contemporary times Ismailis continue to be victims of intolerance, discrimination, and violence around the world and in Pakistan and Syria more predominantly but not exclusively. For example, in May 2015 in Karachi Pakistan, six gunmen opened fire on Ismaili bus passengers, killing 45 of them. The gunmen were reported to be affiliated with the Pakistani Taliban splinter group Jundullah and ISIS.<sup>67</sup> Ahmed Marwat, a representative from this group said that “these killed people (sic) were Ismaili and we consider

<sup>62</sup> *Trends in Global Restrictions on Religion*, Religion and Public Life (Pew Research Centre, 23 June 2016) <<http://www.pewforum.org/2016/06/23/trends-in-global-restrictions-on-religion/>> [accessed 7 November 2017].

<sup>63</sup> Katayoun Kishi and Angelina E. Theodorou, ‘6 Facts about Religious Hostilities in the Middle East and North Africa’, *Pew Research Center*, 2016 <<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/07/6-facts-about-religious-hostilities-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/>> [accessed 7 November 2017].

<sup>64</sup> ‘Religious Hostilities Reach Six-Year High’, *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, 2014 <<http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high/>> [accessed 7 November 2017].

<sup>65</sup> Pakistan has an overall population of 207,774,520 and 96% are Muslim. Approximately 75% of Muslims are Sunni, roughly 25% are Shi’i belonging predominantly to either the Ismailiyya or Ithna’ashariyya schools of thought. It is unclear how many Ahmadiyya reside in Pakistan because the state does not allow them to identify as Muslim on the census even though many still do. In 2017, sectarian violence in Pakistan resulted in 224 deaths and 678 injuries, a significant increase from the previous year which reported 137 deaths and over 182 injuries. Victims of persecution in Pakistan are mainly adherents of Shi’i, Sufi, and Ahmadi Muslims, but also consist of other religious minorities such as Hindus and Christians. See the following for more information: *Pakistan Bureau of Statistics | 6th Population and Housing Census* (Pakistan: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017) <<http://www.pbs.gov.pk/content/provisional-summary-results-6th-population-and-housing-census-2017-0>> [accessed 7 November 2017]; *2017 Annual Report: Pakistan* (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2017) <<http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Pakistan.2017.pdf>> [accessed 7 November 2017]; ‘Sectarian Violence in Pakistan’ <<http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/countries/pakistan/database/sect-killing.htm>> [accessed 7 November 2017].

<sup>66</sup> Yaron Friedman, ‘Ibn Taymiyya’s Fatāwā against the Nuṣayrī-‘Alawī Sect’, *Der Islam*, 82.2 (2005), 349–63 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/islam.2005.82.2.349>>; Shafique N. Virani, *The Ismailis in the Middle Ages: A History of Survival, a Search for Salvation* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>67</sup> ‘Karachi Ismailis Massacred on Bus’, *BBC News*, 13 May 2015, section Asia <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32717321>> [accessed 7 November 2017].

them *kafir*” (infidel).<sup>68</sup> Unfortunately, Ismailis, and other Muslim minorities, are also being targeted by ISIS in Syria.<sup>69</sup> These are only a couple examples of violence against the Ismaili community, other Ismaili communities (of different religious affiliations) face similar attacks and discrimination.<sup>70</sup> Violent extremist groups consider Ismaili Muslims, and other minority Muslim traditions, *kafir*.<sup>71</sup> Being labelled a *kafir* incites hatred, intolerance, social and public exclusion, and violence. In the last decade, there has been a call by authorities within the *umma* to do away with this polemic practice in an effort to unite and strengthen the *umma*.

In an effort to acknowledge and promote inclusion for the diversity that exists within the Islamic tradition, in July of 2005, King Abdullah II of Jordan convened the International Islamic Conference which hosted 200 of the world’s most prominent scholars of Islam from 50 countries. This conference “sought to declare what Islam *is* and what it *is not*, and what actions represent it and which do not. Its goal was to clarify to the modern world the true nature of Islam and the nature of true Islam.”<sup>72</sup> This conference was held in the context of violent Muslim extremism and the subsequent assaults against Western nation states and against other Muslims communities. In an effort to exclude and delegitimize violent extremist narratives from the *umma* they set criteria

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<sup>68</sup> Jake Flanagan, ‘Why Terrorists Are Targeting Pakistan’s Ismaili Community’, *Quartz* <<https://qz.com/404179/why-terrorists-are-targeting-pakistans-ismaili-community/>> [accessed 7 November 2017].

<sup>69</sup> Alison Meuse, ‘Syria’s Minorities: Caught Between Sword Of ISIS And Wrath of Assad’, *NPR.Org*, 18 April 2015 <<https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/04/17/400360836/syrias-minorities-caught-between-sword-of-isis-and-wrath-of-assad>> [accessed 26 January 2021].

<sup>70</sup> In October 2015, ISIS claimed responsibility for the suicide bombing on an Sulaimani Ismaili centre of worship in Najran, Saudi Arabia, killing two and injuring a dozen. See, Ahmed Al-Omran, ‘Islamic State Claims Responsibility for Saudi Mosque Bombing; Casualties Include Two Dead and a Dozen Injured at Ismaili Shiite Place of Worship in Najran’, *The Wall Street Journal. Eastern Edition* (New York, N.Y: Dow Jones & Company Inc, 2015); Generally speaking, Sulaimani Ismailis in Saudi Arabia, like other Shi‘i communities, face discrimination in employment, education, political representation, and the justice system due to their minority religious affiliation. See, Christoph Wilcke, ‘Christoph Wilcke: Discrimination against Ismailis in Saudi Arabia’, *The Guardian*, 22 September 2008, section Opinion <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/sep/22/religion.islam>> [accessed 26 January 2021]; Also see, *The Ismailis of Najran: Second Class Saudi Citizens* (Human Rights Watch, 22 September 2008) <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/09/22/ismailis-najran/second-class-saudi-citizens>> [accessed 26 January 2021] for other human rights issues.

<sup>71</sup> ‘Hand Grenade Attacks Kill Two Ismailis, Wound 28 in Karachi’, *Dawn.Com*, 13 August 2013 <<http://www.dawn.com/news/1035673>> [accessed 7 November 2017]; Flanagan.

<sup>72</sup> ‘Summary - the Amman Message’, *The Official Website of The Amman Message* <<http://ammanmessage.com/>> [accessed 5 November 2017].

of what it means to be a Muslim. After mindful deliberation, they decided that (1) to be a Muslim, one either adheres to one of the 8 *Madhabs*,<sup>73</sup> legal schools, of either Sunni, Shi'a, or Ibadhi Islam, or is a practitioner of Islamic theology, *Ash'arism*, Islamic Mysticism (*Sufism*), or of the *Salafi* tradition. They also forbade (2) *takfir* between Muslims, the labelling another Muslim an infidel, and (3) set limitations and preconditions for issuing *fatwas* in an attempt to eradicate “ignorant and illegitimate edicts in the name of Islam.”<sup>74</sup> Thus, if one accepts the first premise one must also accept the command of the second – one cannot be Muslim and then label another Muslim an apostate. This conference not only sought to narrow what constitutes a “True” Muslim adherent, thereby excluding all other Muslims who do not adhere to the first and second premises, but also, officially acknowledge and accept Muslim diversity, within the prescribed parameters, and unite the *umma* against intolerant exclusivist Muslim narratives. Although well intended, this conference does exactly what intolerant Muslim authorities do, they build figurative parameters around the concept of being a Muslim thereby excluding those who do not conform to the process. However well intended, exclusive polemics, by nature, divide rather than unite. Thus, a more inclusive solution is necessary in combating all forms of intolerance – this will be discussed more later.

Letters of support from Muslim leadership were included in the Amman Message. Amongst the letters was one from His Highness the Aga Khan where he affirms the Ismaili community's adherence “to the *Jafari Madhhab* and other *Madhahib* of close affinity,” thereby legitimating the Ismaili faith under the constructs of the Amman Message for all those who accept it. In the letter, the Aga Khan then affirmed his spiritual authority over the Ismaili community and legitimated their religious adherence to the authority of the Imam; “under the leadership of the hereditary Ismaili Imam of the time.”<sup>75</sup> The letter finished by declaring, “[t]his adherence is in harmony also with our acceptance of Sufi principles of personal search and balance between the

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<sup>73</sup> The Sunni Madhabs being Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali; the Shi'i being Ja'fari and Zaydi; and the Ibadi being the Thahiri.

<sup>74</sup> ‘The Three Points of The Amman Message V.1’, *The Official Website of The Amman Message* <<http://ammanmessage.com/the-three-points-of-the-amman-message-v-1/>> [accessed 4 November 2017].

<sup>75</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Letter from H. H. the Aga Khan – AmmanMessage.Com’, *Amman Message*, 2005 <<http://ammanmessage.com/letter-from-h-h-the-aga-khan/>> [accessed 4 November 2017].

*zahir* and the spirit or the intellect which the *zahir* signifies”, thereby nuancing the normalized construction of Muslim belief as being informed exclusively by one *madhhab*. The Aga Khan’s letter goes on to formally acknowledge and accept Muslim diversity, the respect for those various interpretations of Islam, and to reaffirm the importance of unity within the Muslim *umma*.<sup>76</sup> By accepting the interpretations of other Muslim traditions, he invites those traditions to mutually accept the Ismaili tradition as yet another legitimate interpretation amongst many others.

Although the Amman Message is a thoughtful and symbolic first step to reconcile intra-*umma* intolerance, or what I have come to describe as intra-*umma* dissonance<sup>77</sup>, some have argued that the message is simply rhetoric and those who have signed the message are already falling back on their commitments.<sup>78</sup> Further, as Michaelle Browsers notes, while the Amman Message includes the Aga Khan’s letter in its own section, it deliberately excludes it from the Shi’i Ja’fari section, which suggests that there is a lack of consensus as to the acceptance of Ismailis as members of the *umma*.<sup>79</sup> Further, Browsers also notes that while the Message attempted to alleviate sectarianism within the *umma*, relations between Sunni and Shi’i Muslims have actually declined.<sup>80</sup> For example, Wahabbi clerics in Saudi Arabia have since signed a statement that characterizes Shi’a Muslims “as ‘an evil among the sects of the Islamic nation’ and the ‘greatest enemy and deceivers of the Sunnis’, while accusing them of destabilising Muslim Countries.”<sup>81</sup>

Despite the Amaan Message, many Muslim authorities still resist to recognize Ismailis, amongst other Muslim communities, as Muslims.<sup>82</sup> Again, by labeling another Muslim an apostate,

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<sup>76</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Letter from H. H. the Aga Khan – AmmanMessage.Com’.

<sup>77</sup> I have coined the term intra-*umma* dissonance to represent the lack of harmony within the Muslim *umma*. This lack of harmony, to me, is not a result of competing Muslim diversity but of the inability to recognize and appreciate what this inherent diversity can offer due to the self-preserving nature of the ego. This term will be discussed further in the Methodology section of Chapter 2.

<sup>78</sup> Michaelle Browsers, ‘Official Islam and the Limits of Communicative Action: The Paradox of the Amman Message’, *Third World Quarterly*, 32.5 (2011), 943–58 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2011.578969>>.

<sup>79</sup> Browsers, p. 946.

<sup>80</sup> Browsers, p. 950.

<sup>81</sup> Browsers, p. 950.

<sup>82</sup> Browsers.

one intentionally or unintentionally incites intolerance, hatred, and violence against them. It is for this reason that it becomes ever more important to promote pluralism within the *umma* – how can Muslims unite against external intolerance if there exists intolerance within their own communities?

It is evident that although violent Muslim extremism is a threat to the west, it is an even greater threat to Muslims. *Takfiri* ideology is the root cause of intra-*umma* intolerance and violence, which transforms into the intolerance of non-Muslims as well. In the diaspora, Muslims are face-to-face with a variety of Muslim traditions from different religious schools of thought, ethnicities, cultures, languages, socioeconomic statuses, and socio-political histories. It becomes just as important to bridge the divide between Muslims of different makeups as with Muslims and non-Muslims.

## MUSLIM RESPONSE TO ISLAMOPHOBIA

The harmful consequences of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim narratives have encouraged many Muslims to mobilize to “correct” these misunderstandings about Muslims and Islam; often by replacing one homogenous narrative with another. While there might be good intentions behind these efforts, in actuality what these individuals, communities, and institutions are doing is creating a figurative box of what being ‘Muslim’ entails, excluding and ‘othering’ millions of other Muslims in the process. A simple statement such as, “Muslims pray five times a day,” or “Muslims follow a five-pillar model,” excludes and misrepresents some Shi‘i traditions of Islam<sup>83</sup> who pray three times a day, meditate, and observe a seven-pillar model.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, Muslims of different

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<sup>83</sup> Such as the Druze, the Nizari, and the Musta’ali Ismailis.

<sup>84</sup> In Ismaili Islam, the *Shahada*, or declaration of faith, is not a pillar but considered the foundation for the pillars to rest. Further, in addition to saying, “there is no God but God, and Muhammad is God’s messenger”, they add “and ‘Ali the master of believers is from Allah” or “and ‘Ali is the *wali* of Allah” which can translate to ‘Ali is the divinely chosen benefactor, guardian, friend, custodian, and/or helper of Allah. Like Sunni Muslims, Ismaili Muslims accept *hajj* (pilgrimage), *salat* (prayer), *zakat* (charity), and *sawm* (fasting), but they add *jihad* (struggle), *taharah* (purity), and *walayah* (guardianship) which is the belief that Allah has given humanity direction in the form of the prophets, Imams, and saints.

traditions have different forms of worship depending on various socio-cultural factors. By making generalized statements about Muslims, even if well-intentioned, one glosses over the rich diversity that exists within the Islamic tradition and the subsequent histories of intolerance and hostility towards minority Muslim communities. Through this process of projecting Islam as a monolith one reinforces the generalized stereotype that all Muslims are inherently the same. In this sense, Islamophilia can be just as marginalizing as Islamophobia.<sup>85</sup> As Andrew Shryock contends:

If we persist in portraying Islamophobia as an irrational force of mis-perception, or the result of malicious stereotypes, we might render ourselves oblivious to its ultimate causes and consequences, and the corrective imagery we develop in response to it might, in the manner of a bad diagnosis, end up reinforcing the very syndrome it was meant to counteract. In our rush to identify Muslim friends who think and act like ‘us,’ we turn those who think and act differently into potential enemies.<sup>86</sup>

By counteracting Islamophobic discourse with Islamophilic narratives, “[i]t constructs Muslim enemies even as (or precisely because) it stipulates the qualities of Muslim friends, and it encourages the latter to control and marginalize the former, a contest that unfolds in the self, the family, the community, the nation-state, and the transregional diaspora.”<sup>87</sup> Thus, this solution of replacing a negative Muslim image with a more positive one can also have harmful local and transnational effects as it directly plays into *takfiri* ideology by reinforcing the idea that Muslims need to be a certain way or else they are not ‘real’ Muslims. Again, by excluding some Muslim traditions, one not only dehumanizes them, but solicits intolerance, discrimination, and even violence, against them – quite similar to the effects of Islamophobia. For this reason, it becomes important to be more inclusive in one’s approach to combat Islamophobia – and other exclusive narratives.

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<sup>85</sup> Shryock, *Islamophobia/Islamophilia*.

<sup>86</sup> Andrew Shryock, ‘Islam as an Object of Fear and Affection’, in *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend*, ed. by Andrew Shryock (Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 1–25.

<sup>87</sup> Shryock, ‘Islam as an Object of Fear and Affection’, p. 20.

## ISMAILI RESPONSE TO ISLAMOPHOBIA

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*One of the central challenges that faces our world today is the challenge of harmonising many highly diversified voices within an increasingly globalised world. I use the word “harmonising” carefully — for our ideal here is not a chorus that sings in unison, but one that blends many distinctive voices into an intelligent, resonant whole. But to do that requires a deep understanding of what makes each voice distinctive. And that is the essential function of the educational endeavours that will make this place their home.*

*The challenge is particularly important in the area of religion — and it has been especially challenging for Islamic-Western relations. For centuries, the Muslim and Western cultures were largely separated geographically — although there have been memorable periods of integration as well — on the Iberian Peninsula and in South Asia — among other places. But those were hopeful exceptions to what some observers came, over time, to describe as an inevitable pattern of clashing civilisations.”<sup>88</sup> – Aga Khan*

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According to Allen, in order to overcome Islamophobia, steps must be taken to recognize Islam as a legitimate faith and acknowledge the diverse realities and expressions of Muslim people while not imposing one understanding over another. Allen also suggests that in order to move forward we need to move away from “employing [Islam] as a homogenous common denominator” or “a substitute for the actions and motivations of Muslims” while instead problematize such “claims to the true authenticity of Islam... by Muslim or non.”<sup>89</sup> Therefore, neither Muslim or non-Muslim should speak of what “true” or “real” Islam entails nor should they excuse the behaviour of Muslim extremists, and instead acknowledge diversity in interpretation, no matter how uninformed or horrid that interpretation is.

The Aga Khan, alongside his Imamatus institutions, is actively trying to alleviate both Islamophobia and at the same time intra-*umma* dissonance; however, ordinary Ismailis are also getting involved by their own convictions. The Canadian-Ismaili community, inspired by their faith and following the example of their Imam, the Aga Khan, are not only contributing to the

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<sup>88</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘The Aga Khan Centre Opening Ceremony (London, United Kingdom)’, *NanoWisdoms*, 2018 <<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10983/>> [accessed 11 August 2018].

<sup>89</sup> Allen, p. 187.

various Imamatus projects and initiatives intended to remedy the problems of Islamophobia and intra-*umma* dissonance, but ordinary Ismailis are also combating these issues in their own unique ways. While the Ismaili community is not the only community attempting to combat Islamophobia and anti-Muslim narratives, they are unique in their approach as they are not trying to replace one monolithic narrative with another – which excludes many Muslim identities and experiences in the process. Instead, their approach is more inclusive; I argue that they use the framework of religious literacy to nuance the image of Muslims and Islam and showcase the diversity that exists within Islam to make space for multiple Muslim identities and experiences to be acknowledged and appreciated (this will be discussed further in Chapter 5: The Muslim Literacy Project). Through these unique initiatives, the Imamatus institutions, alongside ordinary Ismailis, are not only combatting Islamophobia, but also intra-*umma* dissonance in the process.

This doctoral dissertation examines and describes how both the Imamatus institutions and ordinary Ismailis are attempting to alleviate Islamophobia and, what I have termed, intra-*umma* dissonance in Canada. Through the promotion of pluralism and religious literacy about Muslim diversity they seek to foster the ethic of pluralism by alleviating fear of the ‘other’. Through various efforts, the Imamatus institutions are attempting to standardize Muslim diversity as an alternative discourse to the current “that’s not Islam, this is Islam” response to anti-Muslim narratives; however, as will be presented throughout this thesis, ordinary Ismaili members are not only actively getting involved in various Imamatus-led initiatives but are also contributing in their own unique ways. I argue that, collectively, the Ismaili community’s inclusive response to anti-Muslim narratives stems from Ismaili identity<sup>90</sup> and experience; the experience of intolerance towards Muslim difference within the *umma* – which Ismailis themselves have experienced as we

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<sup>90</sup> I use the term identity as a descriptive term and not an analytical one. I am interested in understanding Ismaili identity in terms of who Ismailis think they are and how this construction impacts their motivations and behaviours. There is a vast literature on ‘identity’ as an analytic term with which my thesis does not engage with. Readers that are interested in the literature that explores identity as an analytic concept can refer to the following: Adis Duderija, ‘Factors Determining Religious Identity Construction among Western-Born Muslims: Towards a Theoretical Framework’, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 28.3 (2008), 371–400 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13602000802548003>> or; Chapter 2 of Lori G. Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

saw in this chapter, and as we will see again in chapters 3 and 8. Thus, through this unique collective response, Ismailis and their institutions not only aim to alleviate the othering of Muslims by non-Muslims, but the othering of Muslims by Muslims as well. Further, this thesis project examines the means in which the Ismaili community is attempting to promote the ethic of pluralism (what I have labelled, the Ismaili Pluralism Project) and literacy about Muslims (what I have labelled, the Muslim Literacy Project) to both non-Muslim and Muslim audiences. However, it is noteworthy that both the Ismaili Pluralism Project and the Muslim Literacy Project neither began as an external effort (Canada-wide), nor as an internal effort (*umma*-wide), but as an inner-community effort (Ismaili-wide). In an attempt to promote pluralism and literacy about Muslims within their own community, the Ismaili community is simultaneously standardizing and professionalizing their religious schooling system and offering other internal educational programming in an effort to not only strengthen Ismaili Muslim identity to withstand the effects of Islamophobia and intra-*umma* dissonance, but to also ensure that Ismailis are equipped with the tools necessary to become confident ambassadors of their faith in a multicultural world – part of an effort that I am calling the Ismaili Identity Project.

Overall, the Ismaili Identity Project can be seen as a direct attempt to crystallize and project Ismaili identity in Canada as one of many other Canadian-Muslim identities, thereby creating space for other minority Muslim identities to be represented. For the Muslim Literacy Project to work, Ismailis nation-wide need to be well versed in their unique identity so as to be able to discredit misinformation or generalizations about them, and other Muslims, to both non-Muslim and Muslim audiences – thus, religious literacy starts at home. Further, I argue that the Muslim Literacy Project is part of the greater Ismaili Pluralism Project, which aims to promote the ethic of pluralism amongst people from diverse backgrounds by first alleviating misunderstandings and fear of the Muslim, and the Ismaili, ‘other’ to both non-Muslim and Muslim audiences. All three of these projects together are necessary in bridging the divide between Muslims and non-Muslims and fostering harmony amongst the diversity that exists within the Muslim *umma*. The research shows that the Ismaili community is attempting to create harmony between Muslims and non-Muslims by simultaneously creating unity, respect, and mutual understanding amongst Muslims themselves.

## ORGANIZATION OF THESIS CHAPTERS

The outline of this thesis is as follows: Chapter 2, will present the literature pertaining to the modern-day Ismaili community and their various transnational efforts. It will also present the methodological approach used to conduct the study and how this approach was pertinent in uncovering the various layers of these national and grassroots efforts. Chapter 3 will be dedicated to presenting a brief overview of Ismaili Islam, while highlighting significant historical events that shaped Ismailism over time and those that continue to be cited in contemporary portrayals of Ismaili Muslim identity and experience. Chapter 4 will then present on the Ismaili (re)settlement experience in the context of the greater Muslim settlement experience in Canada. Therein, it will also discuss Canadian-Ismaili organization and activity. This chapter will also discuss how Canada became the headquarters for the institutionalization of the Ismaili Pluralism Project. Further, this chapter will then situate the Muslim Literacy Project and the Ismaili Identity Project into the greater Ismaili Pluralism Project. Next, the two chapters that follow will examine the various high-profile institutional efforts that make up the Muslim Literacy Project (Chapter 5) and the Ismaili Identity Project (Chapter 6). Therein, the chapters will also present some examples of how Ismailis are contributing to and partaking in these Imam-led initiatives, inspired by their faith identity. Next, chapters 7-10 will examine how Canadian-Ismaili Muslim identity and experience informs the efforts as described in chapters 5 and 6, and how it influences grassroots-level participation in these projects. Specifically, Chapter 7 will discuss how Ismaili identity and participation were measured and analyzed and how this method was influential in uncovering the extent to which Ismaili identity and experience help to inform the high-profile efforts as described in chapters 4, 5 and 6, and Ismaili participation therein. It will also present the demographics of the present study's Canadian-Ismaili sample and compare it to other studies examining Muslim identity in Canada. Then, Chapter 8 will examine how Ismailis negotiate their identity in two different informed contexts, Islamophobia and *takfirism*, to better understand the motivations behind these Imam-led initiatives. Therein, it will also present Ismaili Muslim experiences of intolerance by some members of the Sunni *umma*, and how this affects their identity and participation in various grassroots initiatives that will be discussed further in Chapter 10. Next, Chapter 9 will compare

and contrast Ismaili Muslim beliefs and practices against Sunni Muslim beliefs and practices to examine the extent of their “Muslim” difference. This chapter is also important as it helps us to better understand how Ismaili belief and practice influences participation in both Imam-led and grassroots initiatives. Then, Chapter 10 will present how ordinary Ismaili Muslims are contributing to the mandates of Muslim Literacy Project and the Ismaili Identity Project at grassroots levels and how Ismaili identity and experience has navigated their involvement. Finally, the findings of the present study will be summarized and discussed in the concluding chapter.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter begins by examining literature about contemporary Ismaili identity and the global efforts being undertaken by Ismaili Imamat institutions to standardize Ismaili identity and project a particular image of Ismaili Islam. Further, it presents how these Imamat-led projects are also inspired by Ismaili identity. Then, it will examine how the present study situates itself within the literature and the contribution this study makes in the field of contemporary Ismaili identity and contemporary Islam.

The second part of this chapter outlines the methodology used to answer the research questions of interest. Then, it discusses my position as a researcher in studying the Ismaili community (Reflections and Challenges: Insider and Outsider). Next, it presents the research sample and how that sample was obtained (Research Sample). Then, it discusses how the project was designed to answer the research questions of interest and how the data was collected (Research Design and Data Collection) and also how it was analyzed (Data Analysis). And finally, a section will be dedicated to the limitations of the methodology and limitations of the study (Limitations of the Study).

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The present study is interested in examining how Ismaili Muslim identity and experience influence the means in which the Aga Khan, alongside the Imamat institutions and ordinary members of the Ismaili community are attempting to change the way Canadians view Islam and Muslims in an effort to combat Islamophobia and, at the same time, intra-*umma* dissonance, a term that will be described in the Methodology section of this chapter. The Ismaili community's response to Islamophobia is unique in that it does not try to replace one homogenous narrative with another, instead it aims to nuance the image of Muslims by presenting multiple Muslim narratives in an effort to showcase and make space for Muslim diversity. The present study is not only interested in understanding the means by which the Imamat and ordinary Ismailis are attempting to challenge harmful narratives, but also why they are responding in this way instead of another way; how Ismaili identity and experience shape these efforts.

There is very little scholarship published on contemporary Ismaili Islam or Ismailism in the West or in Canada specifically,<sup>91</sup> and the scholarship that does exist remains in these archives.<sup>92</sup> Much of the scholarship that is being produced on Ismailis is being developed out of the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) in the UK and aims to situate Shi'a, and in particular Ismaili, thought, history, and experience in the greater discussions of Muslim civilizations and Islamic studies. For example, over the last two decades there has been a number of books written on the

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<sup>91</sup> Azim Nanji, 'The Nizari Ismaili Muslim Community in North America', in *The Muslim Community in North America* (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1983), pp. 149–64; Karim H. Karim, 'At the Interstices of Tradition, Modernity and Postmodernity: Ismaili Engagements with Contemporary Canadian Society', in *A Modern History of the Ismailis: Continuity and Change in a Muslim Community*, ed. by Farhad Daftary (I.B.Tauris, 2010), pp. 265–94; Karim H. Karim, 'Muslim Migration, Institutional Development, and the Geographic Imagination: The Aga Khan Development Network's Global Transnationalism', in *Transnational Europe: Promise, Paradox, Limits*, ed. by Joan DeBardeleben and Achim Hurrelmann (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 205–21; Karim H. Karim, 'Pluralism, Migration, Space and Song: Ismaili Arrangements of Public and Private Spheres', in *Diverse Spaces: Identity, Heritage and Community in Canadian Public Culture* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 148–69; Karim H. Karim, 'A Muslim Modernity: Ismaili Engagement with Western Societies', in *Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West*, ed. by Roberto Tottoli (Routledge, 2014), pp. 244–58; Daryoush Mohammad Poor, *Authority without Territory: The Aga Khan Development Network and the Ismaili Imamate* (Springer, 2014); Eboo Patel, 'Ismaili Religious Education and Modernity', *Journal of Islamic Law and Culture*, 8 (2003), 69–88.

<sup>92</sup> Tasnim Dharamsi, 'Living within the Hermeneutic Circle: Interpreting the Curricular Inquiry of Canadian Secondary Ismaili Religious Education Teachers' (unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 2014); Parin Dossa, 'Ritual and Daily Life: Transmission and Interpretation of the Ismaili Tradition in Vancouver' (unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1983); Alnoor Gova, 'The Nizari-Ismailis in Modernity' (unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2005); Arif Jamal, 'Linking Migration and Education across Generations: Ismailis in Vancouver' (unpublished M.A., Simon Fraser University (Canada), 2006); Rizwana Jiwa, 'Voices from the Diaspora: Identity Formation of Ismaili Girls and Women in Canada' (unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2003); Laila Kadiwal, 'Religious Pluralism in Ismaili Muslim Religious Education: From Difference to Diversity' (unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Sussex, 2014); Rahim Karmali, 'Legislated Multiculturalism & Second-Generation Hybrid Identities: A Phenomenological Study of Canadian Ismaili Muslim Men in Montreal, Quebec' (unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Ottawa, 2014); Kahir Lalji, 'Exploring the Role of Social Capital on Quality of Life among South Asian Shia Muslim Immigrant Older Adults in Canada' (unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2012); Kim C. Matthews, 'Ismailis in Canada: Locations of Subjectivity' (unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, McMaster University, 2007); Mohammad N. Miraly, 'Faith and World Contemporary Ismaili Social and Political Thought' (unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, McGill University, 2012); Shamsah J. Mohamed, 'Ismaili Women's Experiences of in-Group Discrimination' (unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, The University of British Columbia, 2002); Shezan Muhammedi, "'Gifts From Amin": The Resettlement, Integration, and Identities of Ugandan Asians Refugees in Canada' (unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Western Ontario, 2017); Sara Schroff, 'Muslim Movements Nurturing a Cosmopolitan Muslim Identity: The Ismaili and the Gulen Movement' (unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, Georgetown University, 2009); Salima Versi, 'Make This Your Home: The Impact of Religion on Acculturation: The Case of Canadian Khoja Nizari Isma'ilis from East Africa' (unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, Queens University, 2010).

Fatimid Empire (909-1171)<sup>93</sup> – an Ismaili empire that will be briefly discussed in the next chapter. Farhad Daftary can be accredited with building the scholarship on Ismaili Studies more generally,<sup>94</sup> which has significantly contributed to the expansion of the study.<sup>95</sup> Parin Dossa, Alnoor Gova, Arif Jamal, Rizwana Jiwa, Rahim Karmali, Kim C. Matthews, Shezan Muhammedi, Sarah Schroff, and Salima Versi have all written theses about Ismaili (re)settlement and identity in Canada.<sup>96</sup> Much of this scholarship examines the East-African Ismaili Muslims, as they make up the majority of Ismailis living in Canada. Many of these studies speak of the Ismaili community in terms of their dedication to pluralism, cosmopolitanism, and modernity or in terms of being a model-migrant community. Often, studies on Ismailism take exclusively either a textual analysis approach or ethnographic approach to better understand Ismaili identity. The aim of the present study is to not only better understand how narratives are important in shaping Ismaili identity, but also how Ismailis negotiate their Ismaili Muslim and Canadian identity in different public contexts. One important component shaping Ismaili identity is the religious education Ismailis receive through the Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board (ITREB), which in the last decade has been studied from an academic perspective.

Over the last decade, there have been various studies examining the role of Ismaili religious education in modernizing the Ismaili community transnationally than ever before. This is due to

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<sup>93</sup> Heinz Halm, *Fatimids and Their Traditions of Learning* (I.B.Tauris, 2001); Hamid Haji, *Founding the Fatimid State: The Rise of an Early Islamic Empire* (I.B.Tauris, 2006); Shainool Jiwa, *Towards a Shi'i Mediterranean Empire: Fatimid Egypt and the Founding of Cairo* (I.B.Tauris, 2009); Shainool Jiwa, *The Founder of Cairo: The Fatimid Imam-Caliph al-Mu'izz and His Era* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013); Paul E. Walker, *Exploring an Islamic Empire: Fatimid History and Its Sources* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2002); Paul E. Walker, *Orations of the Fatimid Caliphs: Festival Sermons of the Ismaili Imams* (I.B. Tauris, 2009); *The Advent of the Fatimids: A Contemporary Shi'i Witness*, ed. by Wilfred Madelung and Paul E. Walker (London ; New York: I. B. Tauris in Association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2000).

<sup>94</sup> Farhad Daftary, *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'ilis* (I. B. Tauris, 1995); Farhad Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis: Traditions of a Muslim Community* (Edinburgh University Press, 1998); Farhad Daftary, *Mediaeval Isma'ili History and Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2001); Farhad Daftary, *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2005); Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); *A Modern History of the Ismailis: Continuity and Change in a Muslim Community*, ed. by Farhad Daftary (I.B.Tauris, 2010); Farhad Daftary, *A History of Shi'i Islam* (I. B. Tauris, 2014).

<sup>95</sup> Nadia Eboo Jamal, *Surviving the Mongols: Nizārī Quhistānī and the Continuity of Ismaili Tradition in Persia* (I.B. Tauris, 2002); Shafique N. Virani; Jonah Steinberg, *Isma'ili Modern: Globalization and Identity in a Muslim Community* (North Carolina Press, 2011); Poor.

<sup>96</sup> Dossa; Gova; Arif Jamal; Rizwana Jiwa; Karmali; Matthews; Muhammedi; Schroff; Versi.

the standardization and professionalization of the religious education system by the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS: London, UK), which will be discussed later in Chapter 6: The Ismaili Identity Project. Some graduates or developers of the Secondary Teachers Education Program (STEP), hosted by the IIS, have gone on to study the program from an academic perspective, examining how STEP aims to shape a modern Ismaili identity and how it aims to instill the ethic of pluralism in the delivery of the curriculum.<sup>97</sup> Noteworthy is that the vast majority of scholarship on the Ismaili community is being conducted by community members themselves – and this thesis is no exception. This need and desire for self-representation is of particular interest to this research, especially considering that the very mandate for the IIS is to promote scholarship about minority Muslim societies, with special consideration given to scholarship about the Ismaili community.<sup>98</sup> Thus, the present research aims to clearly identify what ‘Ismaili’ image the Imamat institutions are trying to crystallize and project, which will be discussed further in Chapter 6, and whether this image has been internalized by members of the Canadian Ismaili *jam’at*, which we will explore further in chapters 8 and 9.

More recently, there has been a shift to discuss the role of Ismaili Imamat institutions, such as the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), in standardizing and promoting Ismaili Muslim identity. Jonah Steinberg and Karim H. Karim have both written about how the transnational Ismaili community’s very own international development network, the AKDN, is being used to achieve various identity-crystallizing and standardizing initiatives. For example, in his chapters, Karim writes about how the AKDN functions as a manifestation of the ethics that Ismaili Islam encompasses.<sup>99</sup> Further, Steinberg illustrates how the AKDN, alongside its development projects, is simultaneously standardizing “Ismaili-Islam” worldwide, within the Ismaili communities it

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<sup>97</sup> Dharamsi; Kadiwal; Eboo Patel.

<sup>98</sup> Sahil Badruddin, ‘Pulling Back the Curtain with Dr. Karim H. Karim | Ignition Interview | Ismaili Digest’, *Ismaili Digest*, 2018 <<http://isma.li/Ksl34L>> [accessed 29 August 2018]; Eboo Patel.

<sup>99</sup> Karim H. Karim, ‘Muslim Migration, Institutional Development, and the Geographic Imagination: The Aga Khan Development Network’s Global Transnationalism’; Karim H. Karim, ‘Pluralism, Migration, Space and Song: Ismaili Arrangements of Public and Private Spheres’; Karim H. Karim, ‘A Muslim Modernity: Ismaili Engagement with Western Societies’.

serves.<sup>100</sup> Further, Steinberg notes that the AKDN is not only de-culturizing and demystifying the Ismaili Islam practiced by rural Ismaili communities, but also standardizing Ismaili belief and practice everywhere it functions through the implementation of its various modernizing programs. Karim and Steinberg have both argued that the Ismaili community is very active in its overseas development and Ismaili-Islam standardizing initiatives. The present project aims to build on this literature by describing how and to what extent the Ismaili institutions are also trying to standardize Ismaili identity in Canada and how these various efforts aim to crystallize a nuanced understanding of Islam and Muslims to wider audiences.

In Canada, the Ismaili institutions alongside ordinary community members are not only actively attempting to crystallize and project a particular Ismaili Muslim identity, but they are also attempting to deconstruct and reconstruct a more nuanced image of Islam more generally, not only for a Canadian audience, but also for wider Muslim audiences. Thus, similar to how Steinberg demonstrates in his work the various proselytizing efforts of the AKDN, the present study investigates how the Ismaili community is organizing itself at different levels of engagement to (1) crystallize Ismaili Muslim identity and (2) standardize a more nuanced image of Muslims and Islam, through long-lasting and highly visible Canadian-Ismaili programs and institutions. Further, this study is particularly interested in how Ismaili identity and experience inform the motivations behind and Ismaili participation in these two projects.

The section that follows presents the methodology used to investigate and understand these elite and grassroots efforts. It will first present the various methodologies selected to answer the research questions and will then discuss the project sample, the research design, how the data was analyzed, and then outline the limitations to the study.

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<sup>100</sup> Jonah Steinberg.

## METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

At the commencement of this research journey, I was initially interested in answering the following questions: Why is this minority Muslim community building these important Ismaili centres and institutions in Canada (see Table II.I)? Why are they important? Are they connected? If so, how? By using the grounded theory method (GTM) I was able to make discoveries through the data without the constrictions of a particular theory.<sup>101</sup> GTM allowed the data to guide the development of further research questions through the qualitative method.<sup>102</sup> GTM enabled me to concentrate on the “analysis rather than on arguments about it,” which allowed me “to construct an original theory” to interpret my data.<sup>103</sup> Thus, through ongoing analyses of the data, an interpretive theory was able to emerge.

Table II.I: Ismaili Institutions in Canada

Ismaili Institutions in Canada		
Name	Place	Year founded
Ismaili Centre Vancouver <sup>104</sup>	Burnaby, British Columbia	1985
Global Centre for Pluralism	Ottawa, Ontario	2006
Delegation of Ismaili Imamat	Ottawa, Ontario	2008
Ismaili Centre Toronto	Toronto, Ontario	2014
Aga Khan Museum and Park	Toronto, Ontario	2014
Aga Khan Garden	Edmonton, Alberta	2018

<sup>101</sup> Cathy Urquhart, *Grounded Theory for Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide* (1 Oliver’s Yard, 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2013) <<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526402196>>.

<sup>102</sup> Urquhart.

<sup>103</sup> Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis* (Pine Forge Press, 2006), p. 12.

<sup>104</sup> This was originally named Ismaili Center Burnaby up until 2019

Interpretive theories call “for the imaginative understanding of the studied phenomenon.”<sup>105</sup> They aim to “[c]onceptualize the studied phenomenon to understand it in abstract terms; [a]rticulate theoretical claims pertaining to scope, depth, power, and relevance; [a]cknowledge subjectivity in theorizing and hence the role of negotiation, dialogue, and understanding; [and] [o]ffer an imaginative interpretation.”<sup>106</sup> Thus, the present study presents ‘an imaginative interpretation’ of the data while acknowledging and assuming “multiple realities; indeterminacy; facts and values as linked; truth as provisional; and social life as processual.”<sup>107</sup> By following leads as they emerged from the data and simultaneously being open to interpretative constructions, GTM created space for an interpretive theory to emerge from the dataset; however, before getting into that discussion, I will take the reader through the GTM process that enabled an interpretive theory to emerge.

At the commencement of my investigation, I used textual analysis as guided by GTM to examine public literature pertaining to the centres presented in Table II.I, including respective speeches of the Aga Khan. Extant texts help researchers “address their research questions” while acknowledging that “these texts were produced for other—often very different—purposes.”<sup>108</sup> Textual analysis is important as it not only studies texts and other narratives on a surface level but dives deeper to explore relationships embedded in the texts. Whether the texts are elicited or extant, “[t]exts draw on particular discourses and provide accounts that record, explore, explain, justify, or foretell actions”.<sup>109</sup> Through this examination, I realized that these centres were being built in response to a growing climate of ‘othering’, and ‘othering’ of Muslims in particular. These buildings and projects are the seeds of an attempt to alleviate misunderstandings of the Muslim ‘other’, by not only nuancing Western constructions of the Muslim ‘other’, but also by creating space for the Muslim ‘other’ to represent themselves. This led me to examine Ismaili identity more

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<sup>105</sup> Charmaz, p. 126.

<sup>106</sup> Charmaz, p. 127.

<sup>107</sup> Charmaz, p. 126.

<sup>108</sup> Charmaz, p. 35.

<sup>109</sup> Charmaz, p. 35.

thoroughly; in particular, I wanted to examine whether the ‘othering’ of Muslims affected Ismaili identity and whether this informed the motivations behind these efforts. Further, because Ismailis are a minority Muslim community who have been the victims of intolerance by other Muslims, as discussed in the Introduction chapter and again in Chapter 3, I also wanted to examine if Ismaili identity was also affected by another form of ‘othering;’ the ‘othering’ of Ismailis by other Muslims. If this theme were to be found in the data, which it was, I needed to also examine the extent in which these elite efforts are also responding to this phenomenon. Thus, by examining Ismaili identity and experience, I was able to observe the extent to which these buildings are reflective of an effort to remedy the othering of Muslim by both Muslims and non-Muslims.

These observations led me to develop my research questions even further: How exactly are these buildings responding to this problem of ‘othering’? Is it just these buildings? How else is the Ismaili community responding to ‘othering’? Are ordinary Ismaili members taking part in these efforts, or is this an elite initiative? How does Ismaili identity inform the motivations behind these efforts? How does Ismaili identity shape and affect Ismaili participation in these or other grassroots efforts? GTM allowed me to uncover the multiple facets of this movement and see how they are all connected to the greater Ismaili Pluralism Project (Chapter 4). Further, GTM also enabled me to observe how Ismaili identity and experience are instrumental in informing the strategy, motivation, and guiding participation in these various efforts.

According to Linda D. Bloomberg and Marie Volpe, qualitative research enables researchers to examine “how the complexities of the sociocultural world are experienced, interpreted, and understood in a particular context and at a particular point in time.”<sup>110</sup> By using GTM, I was able to examine how Ismaili identity and experience, as shaped over time and space, has influenced the motivations behind these institutional initiatives. For example, initially I thought that I would find that these buildings were responding to Islamophobia by replacing one

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<sup>110</sup> Linda Dale Bloomberg and Marie Volpe, ‘Presenting Methodology and Research Approach’, in *Completing Your Qualitative Dissertation: A Road Map From Beginning to End: A Road Map From Beginning to End* (SAGE, 2012), pp. 65–93 (p. 80).

monolithic narrative of the Muslim ‘other’ with their own unique Ismaili narrative, like other Muslim communities are doing; however, instead I found that although Ismaili identity is being presented in some capacity at each of these buildings (such as through architecture and design as we will see in chapters 5 and 6),<sup>111</sup> the main way that these initiatives are responding to Islamophobic narratives is by promoting literacy about Muslims and the vast diversity that exists within Islam. When comparing the findings from different datasets, as prescribed by GTM, this observation coincides with the fact that Ismailis have been ‘othered’ throughout their history by both non-Muslims and other Muslims. Thus, it would make sense for them to present the diversity that exists within Islam to make space for minority Muslim traditions, like their own, to be acknowledged and accepted – as they know far too well the effects of intra-*umma* ‘othering’. Further, GTM enabled me to examine how Ismaili identity and experience not only lend to participation in elite efforts, but grassroots efforts as well (which will be discussed more elaborately in chapters 9 and 10). In addition, I was able to see why the Canadian context was best suited for such organized elite and grassroots projects – primarily given Canadian commitment to multiculturalism and pluralism, which will be discussed more in Chapter 4. Further, I was able to observe how the various overarching projects of interest – which I have labelled the Muslim Literacy Project and the Ismaili Identity Project – are both part of a greater project, the Ismaili Pluralism Project, which aims to serve the experience of all Canadians, not just Ismailis and other Muslims.

As I have shown, in order to be able to answer these research questions, it was important to use methodologies that were flexible as this would best help to uncover the various layers of this issue and see how they all fit together.<sup>112</sup> GTM allowed me to maintain research design flexibility, thereby enabling for a more engaging and interpretive study.<sup>113</sup> Further, GTM

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<sup>111</sup> The discrete projection of Ismaili identity is, arguably, due to their efforts to bridge dialogue and acceptance between Muslim communities instead of highlighting their differences. Theological differences have historically marginalized the Ismaili community from the rest of the *umma*. Thus, this is likely why we do not observe this type of projection of Ismaili identity in public Canadian spaces. See, Karim H. Karim, ‘Pluralism, Migration, Space and Song: Ismaili Arrangements of Public and Private Spheres’.

<sup>112</sup> Charmaz, pp. 2, 14–15.

<sup>113</sup> Bloomberg and Volpe, pp. 80–81.

encouraged me to follow leads that emerged from the data.<sup>114</sup> For example, another lead that I came across in the survey data was that Ismailis were more likely to conceal aspects of their religious identity to Muslim audiences than they were with non-Muslim audiences, which will be discussed further in Chapter 8. This lead directed me to investigate how this theme manifested in the motivations behind these projects of interest. This is where I found that these Imamat projects are not only trying to alleviate the ‘othering’ of Muslims in Canada, but the ‘othering’ of Muslims by other Muslims, thereby helping to alleviate intra-*umma* dissonance – a concept I will discuss next. Thus, this one lead was instrumental in constructing an interpretive theory; that Ismaili identity and experience navigate and inform the motivations behind and participation in both elite and grassroots efforts to remedy the ‘othering’ of Muslims by both non-Muslims and Muslims.

Through GTM, I was able to identify an important phenomenon that these projects aim to alleviate, ‘the Clash of Ignorance(s)’ or more precisely, cognitive dissonance of the ‘other’. Intra-*umma* dissonance is a term I have coined to describe the anxiety or discomfort a Muslim feels when confronted with the Muslim ‘other’. Intra-*umma* dissonance can have behavioural consequences, often self-preserving in nature. This term stems from Leon Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance, which can be described as the mental discomfort a person experiences when presented with information that contradicts pre-existing attitudes, ideas, and beliefs.<sup>115</sup> Left unresolved, cognitive dissonance can result in self-preserving defense mechanisms that further strengthen the dissonant cognition; thereby making it more difficult to deconstruct and remedy. Further, our thoughts affect our actions; thus, preserving a dissonant cognition will have defensive-like behavioural consequences. According to Eddie Harmon-Jones and Judson Mills, “[i]f the dissonance is not reduced by changing one’s belief, the dissonance can lead to misperception or misinterpretation of the information, rejection or refutation of the information, seeking support from those who agree with one’s belief, and attempting to persuade others to accept one’s belief.”<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Charmaz, p. 17.

<sup>115</sup> Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford University Press, 1957).

<sup>116</sup> Eddie Harmon-Jones and Judson Mills, ‘An Introduction to Cognitive Dissonance Theory and an Overview of Current Perspectives on the Theory’, in *Cognitive Dissonance: Progress on a Pivotal Theory in Social Psychology*,

Further, when cognitive dissonance is linked to a religious belief, it becomes even more difficult to challenge.

In exclusivist interpretations of Islam, as observed in Wahhabism and Salafism, cognitive dissonance becomes difficult to alleviate because religion, as Clifford Geertz describes, produces “powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”<sup>117</sup> Thus, when cognitive dissonance is bound to beliefs and attitudes rooted in religion, it naturally encourages the ‘othering’ of those who sit outside of those beliefs and attitudes as a natural self-preserving defense mechanism. Here we can see how intra-*umma* dissonance is linked to *takfirism*, the labelling of another Muslim as an apostate; intra-*umma* dissonance, arguably, fuels *takfirism* by promoting and constructing exclusivist ideologies about being Muslim and going out of one’s way to preserve these exclusivist ideologies to protect the Self. Thus, intra-*umma* dissonance – and dissonance of the Muslim ‘other’ more generally as in the case of Islamophobia – is a barrier to the greater Ismaili Pluralism Project, which is why the Imamatus institutions alongside the Ismaili community are invested in not only alleviating this cognitive discomfort within their own community (through the Ismaili Identity Project), but amongst other Muslims (and non-Muslims) as well (through the Muslim Literacy Project). By fostering a greater appreciation for the diversity that exists within the *umma* and drawing attention to the harm of intra-*umma* ‘othering’, the Muslim Literacy Project also aims to help alleviate intra-*umma* dissonance and by association, *takfirism*.

Although my initial interest was uncovering the meaning and importance behind these elite initiatives, GTM led me to examine Ismaili identity and experience to uncover the deeper meanings behind these efforts. Further, it also led me to examine whether ordinary members of the Ismaili

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ed. by Eddie Harmon-Jones (Washington, US: American Psychological Association (Washington, DC, US), 1999), pp. 3–21, Chapter xviii, 411 Pages (pp. 6–7) <<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.library.carleton.ca/10.1037/10318-001>>.

<sup>117</sup> Clifford Geertz, ‘Religion as a Cultural System’ as cited in Daniel L. Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 302.

*Jama'at*, community or congregation, were also taking part in these 'pluralism' promoting, identity-strengthening, and image deconstructing and reconstructing efforts. If Ismaili identity and experience were informing the motivation and strategy behind these efforts, was it also influencing Ismaili participation? I wanted to examine the extent to which Ismaili identity and experience were influential in motivating individual participation in various elite and grassroots initiatives. Thus, neither a purely quantitative approach nor a purely textual approach would have led me to the rich-data needed to observe all the working parts of these efforts of interest – in order to understand the meaning behind these initiatives, I needed to conduct qualitative inquiry in the form of textual analysis, qualitative surveys, and in-depth interviews.

GTM allowed me to examine the various elite institutional efforts that are being planted in Canadian society, aimed at fostering the ethic of pluralism, strengthening both Ismaili and Muslim identity in the contexts of Islamophobia and *takfirism*, and nuancing the image of Islam and Muslims through religious literacy. Further, GTM allowed me to examine how Ismailis self-construct their religious identity, how they participate in these efforts, and the factors that motivate the strategy and individual involvement in these efforts. Further, through textual analysis of the Aga Khan's public speeches and the coding and analyzing of surveys and interview transcripts, I was able to draw common themes illustrating that the central figure of the Ismaili faith, their Imam the Aga Khan, is having a direct impact on the Canadian Ismaili collective consciousness; that they are internalizing his words, instructions, and values and making meaning with them, which is reflected in survey and interview data. Thus, while these national initiatives were originally thought to be top-down efforts, the data suggests that Ismaili identity, history, and experience are instrumental in informing this unique strategy to combat Islamophobia and, as we will see, *intra-umma* dissonance, and also that ordinary Ismailis are getting involved at grassroot levels. All this will be discussed further in the subsequent chapters.

### **Reflections and Challenges: Insider and Outsider**

Various significant experiences throughout my life, and how I have interpreted those experiences, have influenced the construction of my own Ismaili identity. My early experiences with some

members of the Ismaili community at a young age were most significant in shaping my spiritual but not-religious orientation which I will discuss further.

I identify as both an insider and an outsider to the Ismaili spiritual tradition. I am an insider because I have taken *bay'ah*,<sup>118</sup> a requirement for all Ismailis, but am an outsider because of early experiences in the community to which my inherited cultural background was 'othered'. Thus, I am an insider to the Ismaili tradition to the extent that the Imam is my *murshīd*, spiritual guide, but have internalized being an outsider due to the treatment I received by some community members due to my unique background.

I was raised in the Ismaili tradition by my mother, Farida, a moderately religious woman who was a part of the Asian-Ugandan exodus in 1972. My father, Stephen, is ethnically British and not at all religious – at the most he would identify as an agnostic, although my mother would argue that he is spiritual at heart. Being bi-racial and having darker skin and features than most of my schoolmates and having lighter skin and features than my co-religionists, I did not feel a sense of welcoming, acceptance, or belonging to either Canadian or Ismaili communities growing-up.

My very name, Alyshea Cummins, can be used to illustrate my insider/outsider predicament and, as I suspect, likely influenced participation in the present study. My first name, Alyshea (على شاه), has its roots in an Ismaili history that other Muslims may find contentious. The 46<sup>th</sup> Ismaili Imam, Hasan 'Ali-Shah (1804-1881), was the first of the Ismaili Imams to be given the title of Aga Khan by the Persian Shah, Fath 'Ali Shah (1772-1834). He married one of Fath 'Ali Shah's daughters, Sarv-i Jahan Khanum.<sup>119</sup> However, while the Aga Khan I bears part of the name 'Ali Shah, it was actually the 47<sup>th</sup> Ismaili Imam, Shah 'Ali-Shah, Aga Khan II, where the

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<sup>118</sup> *Bay'ah* is a contract between two persons, in this case the Imam and *Murīd*, where in return for allegiance, the Imam delivers services like spiritual and material guidance and services through his governing bodies – his institutions and councils.

<sup>119</sup> Daftary, *A Modern History of the Ismailis*, p. 6.

name is appropriated after being given to his wife, Shamsul Mulk,<sup>120</sup> who became known as Lady ‘Ali Shah. Noteworthy, is that many non-Ismaili Muslims will not recognize the name Alyshea, or any of its other transliterations, as a Muslim name; however, it has come to be a common name for Ismaili girls over the past few generations. Thus, my name, in and of itself has confined me to an Ismaili version of Muslim identity, while simultaneously making me “not-Muslim-enough” in the eyes of other Muslims – a theme that will be further discussed in Chapter 8. However, to add to the dance of belonging and not-belonging, my last name, Cummins, has been met with curiosity, suspicion, and unsolicited remarks or demands by my Ismaili co-religionists, reminding me that I am also not “Ismaili-enough.” So, you see, to this day my appearance and name have been influential in shaping others’ ideas about me, and, consequently, my own ideas about myself, which coincidentally also impacted the willingness of Ismailis to participate in my study.

As an Ismaili, I have access to the *jamatkhana*, which is a private space for Ismailis to observe aspects of their *tariqah* tradition. Part of my recruitment efforts took place in various *jamatkhana*s in Edmonton, Calgary, Vancouver, Toronto and the GTA, and Ottawa. Even though in most cases I was accompanied by a local member of that particular *jamatkhana*, there were still instances where I was approached with curiosity and suspicion: “Ya ‘Ali Madad?” (May ‘Ali help you), the Ismaili greeting that I would hear posed faintly as a question from the curious Ismaili to which I would respond, “Mowla ‘Ali Madad” (May Mowla ‘Ali help you too), the traditional response to this greeting. In an instant the tension transformed into a more awkward exchange, and I was welcomed, albeit superficially, and perhaps in some cases over-welcomed to make up for the misunderstanding. This is an experience I know all too well growing up bi-racial and entering circles where I only partially belonged.

Further, a significant amount of my online recruitment efforts was also met with suspicion. I was often interrogated if I wanted to leave a post about my study and survey on an Ismaili group

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<sup>120</sup> Shamsul Mulk was the daughter of Fath ‘Ali Shah and Khurshid Kulah, one of his queens, given the progeny of the subsequent Aga Khan’s royal status.

page, and in other cases I was just ignored. In some of my recruitment attempts, an Ismaili friend and colleague completing his PhD at another university helped “authenticate” me in various online circles. Even during some interviews, I was asked whether I was Ismaili, why my last name was Cummins, and why I was interested in studying Ismailis. Thus, it is likely that part of the reason why I was unable to attain as many interviews as I had intended is because my last name positioned me as an outsider. Further support for this suspicion is that when I emailed survey participants who agreed to be interviewed, my invitation email would begin, Dear so-and-so... And while some would answer my call for participants, I was much more likely to receive an email back if my emails began, ‘Ya Ali Madad’, the Ismaili greeting alluding to the recipient that I am a member of the community and that I am ‘safe’. Now, it would not be fair if I did not reiterate that many Ismailis come from places where being an Ismaili is often met with suspicion or hostility, as I mentioned in the introductory chapter. So, I understand the hesitancy of some Ismailis not wanting to engage with someone who may take their responses out of context, thereby putting the community at risk. Thus, it is difficult to say how many more survey responses or interview participants I may have had if my last name was more “Ismaili” – whatever that even means as Ismailis come from all sorts of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Needless to say, it appears that my name, and in other cases my appearance, played a role in peoples’ willingness to participate in the study.

Being an insider has its advantages. Maxine Baca Zinn argues that “field research conducted by minority scholars has some empirical and some methodological advantages” with the most important one being “that the ‘lenses’ through which they see social reality may allow minority scholars to ask questions and gather information others could not.”<sup>121</sup> While the Ismaili community has a high degree of public engagement, when it comes to their religious spaces and sacred traditions, they preserve their privacy.<sup>122</sup> Outsiders are not allowed into the private spaces

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<sup>121</sup> Maxine Baca Zinn, ‘Field Research in Minority Communities: Ethical, Methodological and Political Observations by an Insider’, *Social Problems*, 27.2 (1979), 209–19 (p. 212).

<sup>122</sup> Karim H. Karim, ‘Pluralism, Migration, Space and Song: Ismaili Arrangements of Public and Private Spheres’, p. 150.

of the community and certain religious understandings are reserved for the initiated. Thus, one obvious advantage of my insider status is access to these religious spaces and sacred traditions.

Secondly, my insider affiliation, arguably, granted me a higher degree of trust amongst my participants;<sup>123</sup> that is, once participants knew that I was an insider (see previous discussion). Being an insider to a minority tradition can help participants feel more comfortable sharing various types of information and trusting that this information would not be used to exploit them—<sup>124</sup> a concern for many minority communities, including Ismailis given their unique experiences with intolerance and persecution. Zinn contends that “[p]eople in minority communities have developed so many self-protective behaviors for dealing with outsiders, that it is quite reasonable to question whether many real behaviors and meanings are accessible to outsiders...”<sup>125</sup> While I had the advantage of participants sharing more openly about their experiences and understandings, this also put me in a vulnerable position as a scholar.

I realized early on that I was being entrusted with sensitive topics and information that could be misinterpreted if not presented with care. Further, I was faced with the challenge of reporting on private Ismaili beliefs, practices and experiences, many of which have been used to marginalize and ‘other’ Ismailis from the rest of the Muslim *umma*. Thus, in order to harmonise my positions as insider and research observer, I elected to write about the Ismaili community primarily from an emic perspective, using ‘experience-near’ concepts as opposed to ‘experience distant language’ where appropriate.<sup>126</sup> The emic approach gave me the ability to write about the Ismaili community from a point of view that they recognized of themselves, with a voice that reflected their true experience, using their own language and meaning. Further, the emic approach allowed me to discuss private aspects of Ismaili faith and tradition, to the extent that this

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<sup>123</sup> Josephine Beoku-Betts, ‘When Black Is Not Enough: Doing Field Research among Gullah Women’, *NWSA Journal*, 6.3 (1994), 413–33 (p. 416); Zinn, pp. 211–12.

<sup>124</sup> Zinn, pp. 211–12.

<sup>125</sup> Zinn, p. 212.

<sup>126</sup> Clifford Geertz, “‘From the Native’s Point of View’: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding”, *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 28.1 (1974), 26–45 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3822971>>.

information was offered by participants. For example, the Ismaili community has a unique and sacred tradition where the Imam guides them in both spiritual and worldly matters through *farmāns*, sacred and private edicts meant only for Ismaili initiates.<sup>127</sup> Due to the importance placed on *farmāns* by community members, I could not exclude them entirely from the study nor could I publish them. Instead, to report with integrity while simultaneously respecting this sacred tradition, I took a more sensitive approach to access *farmāns* by allowing participants to discuss the *farmāns* that resonated with them the most and how they made meaning with them in matters of *dīn* and *dunīya* (spiritual and worldly). This allowed me to observe how this unique Ismaili tradition was inspiring decision making and impacting the lives of Ismaili participants while simultaneously preserving the sacredness of these edicts.

The main criticism of the insider perspective is that of objectivity.<sup>128</sup> Can a researcher be objective as an insider? Can any researcher be fully objective regardless of their position as insider or outsider? It is impossible for any researcher to be fully objective due to their biases and lenses that affect how they view the world.<sup>129</sup> The key to mitigating this methodological challenge is through transparency and reflexivity,<sup>130</sup> to be aware of one's own "intellectual and personal standpoint vis-à-vis others" and to "research and write consciously from within [one's] context and standpoint, whether as insiders or outsiders."<sup>131</sup> Thus, reflexivity is one way that can help scholars overcome the various methodological challenges of both insider and outsider research.

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<sup>127</sup> *Farmāns* will be discussed further in Chapter 9.

<sup>128</sup> *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, ed. by Russell McCutcheon (London ; New York: Cassell, 1999).

<sup>129</sup> Scott W. VanderStoep and Deidre D. Johnson, *Research Methods for Everyday Life: Blending Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (John Wiley & Sons, 2008), pp. 171–72.

<sup>130</sup> David J. Hufford, 'The Scholarly Voice and the Personal Voice: Reflexivity in Belief Studies', *Western Folklore*, 54.1 (1995), 57–76 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/1499911>>.

<sup>131</sup> Kim Knott, 'Insider/Outsider Perspectives', in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. by John Hinnells, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 259–74 (p. 261).

## Research Sample

The research sample consisted of Ismaili survey respondents and interviews with ordinary members of the Ismaili community alongside members of the Ismaili leadership – survey and interview sample characteristics and demographics will be presented more elaborately in Chapter 7. In this study, Ismaili leadership consisted mainly of Ismaili community members but also one non-Ismaili member, who was employed at the Aga Khan Museum. When I write of Ismaili leadership, I am referring to any persons in privileged positions either within the Ismaili institutions such as the Ismaili council, the Aga Khan Museum, the Aga Khan Garden, the local *Jamatkhana*, etcetera, or those in privileged positions within either secular or Ismaili faith spaces. Two examples of the latter that participated in the present study is a professor at a university who uses their privileged position to nuance the image of Muslims and Islam in their classes, and an entrepreneur who developed a website to connect English speaking Ismailis with resources about their faith and identity. Neither of these participants work for any of the Ismaili institutions in Canada or abroad, but instead felt compelled on their own to help alleviate Islamophobia and misconceptions about Muslims, as in the former example, and strengthen Ismaili Muslim identity in the diaspora against competing Muslim discourses, as in the latter example. Identifying and recruiting such participants was done strategically and purposefully.<sup>132</sup> Many were sought out because of their involvement in an Ismaili institution, and others were sought out because their work, whether vocational or voluntary, directly coincided with one of the objectives, which I have come to differentiate and label as either the Ismaili Identity Project (IIP) or the Muslim Literacy Project (MLP).

Another part of the research sample consisted of extant texts: public literature such as speeches, news articles, pamphlets, web presence, and any other promotional literature surrounding the Ismaili institutions presented in Table II.I, or other initiatives that were discovered through GTM (such as the Shaping of Pluralistic Dispositions in Education project discussed in

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<sup>132</sup> VanderStoep and Johnson, p. 187; John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (SAGE Publications, 2008), p. 178.

Chapter 5, or the Jamati Ambassador Program and Ismaili Civic initiative discussed in Chapter 6). Such data was collected online or at the various Ismaili institutions and programs of interest. Gathering, coding, and analyzing such documents was essential to guiding the development of the present study. They later enabled me to identify other initiatives happening in Canada, and how all of these initiatives fit into the multiple projects at play, the IIP, the MLP, and the Ismaili Pluralism Project (IPP). Further, through this analysis, I was also able to see how these efforts are informed by Ismaili identity and experience and, also, how Ismaili identity and experience influence participation in these efforts, by comparing it to the data derived from the surveys and interview transcripts. All qualitative data was coded and analyzed for themes, which will be discussed further in the Data Analysis section of this chapter. Non-Ismaili online news articles and press releases related to the Ismaili community were also collected and analyzed to see how Ismailis are portrayed publicly in Canadian society. Noteworthy, is that through the textual analysis of public literature surrounding these movements, it was found that in many cases both project themes of strengthening identity and educating about Muslims and Islam were spoken about simultaneously. This supports the hypothesis that Ismaili Muslim identity, and other Muslim identities, is an important component to the MLP – that in order to promote a nuanced understanding about Muslims and their diversity, Muslim identities must be clearly understood, internalized, and articulated confidently by community members. This will be argued further in the subsequent chapters.

### **Research Design and Data Collection**

The online survey and interviews were designed to answer the following questions: (1) How is the Ismaili community responding to Islamophobia and anti-Muslim rhetoric? (2) How exactly are these buildings responding to this problem? (3) Is it just these buildings? (4) How else might the community be attempting to change the way Canadians view Muslims and Islam? (5) Are ordinary Ismaili members taking part in this movement, or is this an elite movement? (6) How does religious identity shape and affect Ismaili involvement in elite and grassroots efforts?

Again, as previously mentioned, through the gathering of literature from the institutions outlined in Table II.I it became clear that these institutions served important purposes, which will be discussed in greater detail in the subsequent chapters. However, it was only through the online qualitative survey and in-depth interviews with both leadership and Canadian-Ismailis that I began to understand the means through which these purposes were being fulfilled and how the strategy behind these efforts was influenced by Ismaili identity and experience.

### *Survey*

Ordinary members of the *Jama'at* were recruited to participate in an Ismaili identity and participation survey.<sup>133</sup> The online survey was hosted by SurveyMonkey and the Uniform Resource Locator (URL) for the survey was, <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/CanadianIsmaili>. In order to complete the survey, participants needed to be Ismaili, living in Canada, and at least 18 years of age or older. The survey was advertised through various means: social media, email subscriptions, and word-of-mouth. The sample collection was non-random and convenient in nature; any participant that met the above criteria and wanted to participate was able to participate in the survey.<sup>134</sup> Further, participants did not have to identify as being religious; the survey was designed to include spiritual and non-religious Ismailis, which will be discussed further in Chapter 7: Measuring Canadian Ismaili Identity.

The online survey allowed me to gather a greater amount of data to better understand the layers of Ismaili identity. The survey was designed to not only measure Ismaili identity, but also practice and participation in the efforts of interest. For example, through the survey it was revealed that volunteering, or selfless service, is an important aspect of Ismaili identity. This ethic of service is instrumental in understanding Ismaili participation in these elite efforts – which will be

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<sup>133</sup> Noteworthy is that I use the term ordinary to represent regular Canadian-Ismailis but many of which were far from ordinary in that they had lengthy resumes of service both within and outside of the Ismaili community.

<sup>134</sup> VanderStoep and Johnson, p. 27.

discussed more elaborately in Chapter 9. Thus, this qualitative survey enabled me to understand the role that identity has in motivating participation in these various initiatives.

The foundation of this survey was derived from Peter Beyer's 2016 survey examining religious and cultural identity in Canada.<sup>135</sup> Beyer's survey was designed to pick up on nuanced identities that may not have otherwise been identified using traditional survey methods. Unlike traditional survey methods, Beyer's survey makes as few assumptions as possible regarding (non)religious and cultural identity and allows participants to elaborate on their answers. While the present survey was derived from Beyer's survey, amendments were made in order to measure if outsider perceptions about being Muslim and being Ismaili Muslim, and thus different from other Canadians and other members of the *umma*, have been internalized (see Chapter 8). Further, the survey also had space for participants to express the esoteric and, possibly, activist natures of their faith – an aspect of Ismaili identity that we see embedded within the architecture and design of these elite projects. Finally, additional questions were added in order to measure the negotiation of Ismaili identity in different social contexts, how Ismailis construct their identity in relation to the Muslim 'other', and also whether Ismailis are participating in these Canadian-Ismaili initiatives or other similar grassroots initiatives. More of this will be discussed in chapters 8, 9, and 10, respectively.

The survey was primarily qualitative in nature. The quantitative component was used to describe the sample's demographics and also helped to categorize participants into one of four identity categories; this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7. While the survey had 'tic-box' questions where appropriate, the qualitative component enabled participants to elaborate on their answers in greater detail. Initially I was concerned that the qualitative component would prove tiresome for some participants, but to my surprise many contributed rich and lengthy responses. The initial data gathered and analyzed from this survey led me to add some additional

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<sup>135</sup> Peter Beyer, Alyshea Cummins, and Scott Craig, 'Measuring Religious Identity Differently: A Canadian Survey Study | Beyer | Bulletin for the Study of Religion', *Bulletin for the Study of Religion*, 45.1 (2016) <<https://journals.equinoxpub.com/index.php/BSOR/article/view/30174>> [accessed 10 September 2017].

follow-up questions in the interview questionnaire, mainly pertaining to experiences with the Muslim ‘other’.

While I did travel to various *jamatkhanas* across Canada (Vancouver, Burnaby, Calgary, Edmonton, Toronto and the GTA, and Ottawa) to recruit survey and interview participants, the snowball sampling method was the most influential strategy in attracting participants.<sup>136</sup> Those who participated in the study would often share the survey with their Ismaili networks, mainly through social media outlets, and some in these networks then later completed the survey and did the same. At the end of each survey, participants were asked if they would like to be contacted to participate in a follow-up interview. This method proved fruitful and while 80 participants left their contact information for a follow up interview, only 19 of those participants actually accepted my invitation and completed an interview despite numerous attempts.

## *Interviews*

### *Canadian-Ismaili Interviews*

The Canadian-Ismaili interview questionnaire was semi-structured and open-ended in nature and lasted anywhere from an hour to three hours. The interview questionnaire was designed to delve deeper into Ismaili identity and how identity and experience motivates participation in various Ismaili efforts across Canada. The interviews peeled back layers of identity (Cultural, Canadian, Muslim, and Ismaili) and revealed tensions and struggles within the community, which the IIP and MLP, and the greater IPP, arguably aim to mend. Further, through these in-depth interviews it was revealed that many Ismailis are contributing to the IIP and MLP projects in their own unique ways, examples of which will be presented in chapters 5 and 6, but discussed more elaborately in Chapter 10: Ismaili Participation in the Muslim Literacy Project and the Ismaili Identity Project.

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<sup>136</sup> VanderStoep and Johnson, p. 27.

Anyone who wanted to be interviewed was interviewed and because participants came from all around Canada, the interviews were conducted over Skype© and recorded using Ecamm© Call Recorder for Skype. Conducting interviews over Skype was not only cost effective but allowed me to interview participants from across Canada at their convenience. A few interviews were conducted in-person and were recorded using a handheld Sony© voice recorder. As previously discussed, I suspect that part of the reason only 19 out of 80 persons responded, is likely due to suspicion about myself and what I might do with the results of the study; however, there is no way to know for certain about how this may have affected participation.

### Leadership Interviews

The leadership interview questionnaire was also semi-structured and open-ended in nature and would last anywhere between 20 mins to an hour. The interview questionnaire was designed to uncover how the institutions and other leaders were responding to the climate of anti-Muslim narratives. Like the Canadian-Ismaili interviews, they were also designed to understand personal motivations to become more involved in these Ismaili efforts in Canada. Again, because the survey was administered prior to conducting interviews, additional questions were added to uncover the role that intra-*umma* dissonance plays in shaping Ismaili identity and experience. Thus, through in-depth interviews, I was able to see how intra-*umma* ‘othering’ not only affects Ismaili identity and experience, but also how the Ismaili institutions and other leaders within the *Jama‘at* are responding to this issue – both inside and outside of the community.

These interviews were also conducted over Skype© and recorded using the Ecamm© Skype recorder, although some were done in-person when it was convenient for both the interviewer and participant, and those were recorded using the Sony© voice recorder. Each interview participant was emailed the consent form prior to the interview. Participants could either complete the consent form and email it back or they could respond to the email indicating their consent. This made it easier for participants to give their consent. Once the interview started, the participant was reminded that the interview would be recorded and asked for permission to proceed. Participants were advised that they did not have to answer all the questions and that they

could end the interview at any time. Participants did not receive compensation for their participation.

### **Data Analysis and Synthesis**

Before officially launching the survey, a test survey was launched at the end of September 2015. A few Ismaili friends were asked to test the survey and provide feedback. There were no issues reported, thus, the official survey was launched in October 2015. The survey remained open for one year and was closed in the beginning of September 2016.

Participants that did not meet the necessary participation criteria (being Ismaili, living in Canada or being a Canadian citizen, or meeting the age requirement) were removed from the sample. Incomplete survey questionnaires were also removed from the sample. Further, there was one survey response that was removed because it was clearly written by someone who is anti-Ismaili, which was determined by the vulgar language used and expressions of hostility towards the Aga Khan and community members. Overall, only 12 survey submissions were removed.

All survey and interview data were coded and anonymized. Pseudonyms were ascribed to key participants and the pseudonyms were purposely selected because of their particular importance in Ismaili history and identity. The reason why this was done was because I could not help but see how this dissertation, in and of itself, was contributing to the Ismaili projects of interest. I realized that by even writing about these efforts I was simultaneously validating and crystallizing them. Thus, as a symbolic gesture to the Ismaili community for allowing me to study them, I wanted to reference some of the most important names that have contributed significantly to Ismaili history and identity throughout the ages.

Coding was done to categorize segments of data into greater analytic themes.<sup>137</sup> A two-step coding method was conducted in accordance with best practices in GTM. The initial coding phase aimed to capture all potential theoretical directions.<sup>138</sup> In this phase, the coding labels used closely followed the language presented in the data and aimed to highlight what the data may be suggesting.<sup>139</sup> The second phase of coding was much more focused and aimed to make sense of the most frequent and significant themes that emerged from the initial coding phase.<sup>140</sup> The second phase helped to “synthesize and explain larger segments of data”,<sup>141</sup> and also helped direct subsequent data-gathering toward the analytic issues that emerged.<sup>142</sup> The process of coding and analyzing can best be described as a dance between different datasets; as themes were identified in one set, they were then examined in others and vice-versa. This allowed me to document the most significant themes in the data, form overarching categories through axial coding,<sup>143</sup> and then revisit other datasets to make some analytic interpretations.

One dataset consisted of extant texts: the Aga Khan’s public speeches and other literature and news media surrounding the Imamat projects discussed previously. These were printed and coded line-by-line using language that closely resembled the data as prescribed by GTM. Then, they were re-coded using a more focused approach and re-labelled according to most prominent themes. Extant texts are important as they can complement ethnographic and interview methods.<sup>144</sup> Further, they are also important as they “can bring about change in our knowledge (we can learn things from them), our beliefs, our attitudes, values and so forth.”<sup>145</sup> Thus, examining these texts allowed me to understand the change that these initiatives were trying to achieve. The textual analysis used here is primarily interested in how discourses aim to affect or challenge pre-existing

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<sup>137</sup> Charmaz, pp. 43–44.

<sup>138</sup> Charmaz, p. 46.

<sup>139</sup> Charmaz, pp. 47–48.

<sup>140</sup> Charmaz, pp. 57–58.

<sup>141</sup> Charmaz, p. 57.

<sup>142</sup> Charmaz, p. 42.

<sup>143</sup> Charmaz, p. 60.

<sup>144</sup> Charmaz, p. 37.

<sup>145</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (Routledge, 2003), p. 8.

ideologies.<sup>146</sup> Thus, when examining these elite texts, I am not simply analyzing them for patterns and themes but examining them against the greater context of competing ideologies; ideologies that fuel Islamophobia and *takfirism*.

Through textual analysis, as delineated by GTM, I was able to observe two separate but interconnected projects emerging in response to anti-Muslim narratives: the MLP and the IIP. Both these projects aim to deconstruct harmful ideologies, thereby alleviating cognitive dissonance amongst both Canadian and Muslim audiences and aim to reconstruct ideologies that are more inclusive and inviting of the foreign ‘other’.

The survey and interview data were also managed and analyzed manually. Survey responses were analyzed in Microsoft Excel© and tabs were created therein to code for themes. Interviews were transcribed and manually coded in Microsoft Word©. Tables and charts were created therein to help quantify the data and to illustrate trends and themes, some of which can be found in chapters 7, 8, and 9. Through the synthesis of the data, it was revealed that Ismaili identity and experience were important in informing, shaping, and participating in the projects of interest: the MLP and IIP.

### Limitations of the Study

There are a number of limitations to the present study. First and foremost, this is an interpretive study. While the analysis of the data guided the interpretive theory to emerge, one has to recognize that multiple-realities and experiences are inevitable. Further, like most participant samples, this sample is not representative of the entire Canadian-Ismaili community – this will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

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<sup>146</sup> Fairclough, p. 9.

GTM has been criticized for objectivity. While true objectivity is perhaps not possible, it is important that the researcher recognize their biases, question themselves, be reflexive in the collection and analysis of the information, and be transparent about the work and themselves throughout the process. Criticism about objectivity mainly stem from the earliest formulation of GTM<sup>147</sup> which “fail[ed] to recognize the embeddedness of the researcher and thus obscure the researcher’s considerable agency in data construction and interpretation, as well as the framing of accounts.”<sup>148</sup> Contemporary renditions of GTM, on the other hand, demand for greater transparency via reflexivity;<sup>149</sup> that is, the “manner and extent to which the researchers present themselves as imbedded in the research situation and process.”<sup>150</sup> Further, having a very clear and delineated coding strategy can help ensure that the data is guiding the interpretations of the researcher. While having these practices in place can help ensure the credibility of the research, there is no absolute way to guarantee objectivity.

Other possible limitations are that of researcher bias and participant reactivity bias. As a researcher, I did my best to reflect on and set aside my own biases and allow the data to speak for itself. To be transparent, I did not expect to find some of the findings I did, specifically pertaining to Ismaili identity and their participation in various national and grassroots initiatives. While I come from an experience of ‘not-belonging’ to the Ismaili community, the data reveals that other Ismailis, too, have their own issues of belonging as we will see in Chapter 8. Throughout the data gathering and analysis, I mindfully reflected on my own biases to ensure that I was representing the Ismaili community accurately, even if that portrayal did not coincide with my own suspicions. Further, in an effort to be transparent, I consulted with peers and mentors to see what they would make of the data. Again, while I did my best to maintain researcher objectivity, as post-positivists

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<sup>147</sup> Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago, IL: Aldine de Gruyter, 1967).

<sup>148</sup> Virginia L. Olesen, ‘Feminist Qualitative Research and Grounded Theory: Complexities, Criticisms, and Opportunities’, in *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. by Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2007), pp. 417–35 (p. 422) <<https://www-doi-org.proxy.library.carleton.ca/10.4135/97818486>>.

<sup>149</sup> Charmaz; *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. by Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (1 Oliver’s Yard, 55 City Road, London England EC1Y 1SP United Kingdom: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2007) <<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848607941>>.

<sup>150</sup> Olesen, p. 423.

argue, it is impossible for a researcher to be fully objective due to the many lenses that influence how we view the world.<sup>151</sup>

As with any researcher using interviews as a means to collect data, there is the possibility of *participant reactivity* bias.<sup>152</sup> Joseph A. Maxwell (2013) contends that the researcher has an influence on their research subjects and their research settings.<sup>153</sup> According to Maxwell, what the participant says “is always influenced by the interviewer and the interview situation.”<sup>154</sup> While I only conducted a few interviews in person, it is possible that participants tried to gauge how I wanted them to respond and, thus, responded accordingly.<sup>155</sup> While it is impossible to eliminate researcher influence,<sup>156</sup> I did attempt to mitigate participant reactivity through my research design. One way that I tried to mitigate this bias is through the design of my interview questionnaire. The questionnaire was peer-reviewed and the questions were designed to be open and not leading in nature. Another way that I tried to mitigate this bias was to remain non-judgmental to participant responses and create a space where participants felt that they can be open and honest. Further, participants were not given the opportunity to amend their responses once the transcripts were finalized, this also helped to mitigate participant reactivity. While I made attempts to mitigate the possibility of participant reactivity, there is no sound way to ensure this was accomplished.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

Various members of the Ismaili community have investigated contemporary Ismaili identity, the role of religious education in shaping Ismaili identity, and how the Ismaili development network, the AKDN, is simultaneously standardizing Ismaili identity in its various global development efforts. This research project aims to build on the current literature, by presenting how Ismaili

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<sup>151</sup> VanderStoep and Johnson, pp. 171–72.

<sup>152</sup> Bloomberg and Volpe.

<sup>153</sup> Joseph A. Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach: An Interactive Approach* (SAGE, 2013), p. 124.

<sup>154</sup> Maxwell, p. 124.

<sup>155</sup> Bloomberg and Volpe.

<sup>156</sup> Maxwell, p. 124.

identity is shaped and negotiated in Canadian and Muslim contexts, how Canadian-Ismaili institutions and members are helping to standardize a Canadian-Ismaili identity and also crystallize a more nuanced and open understanding of Muslims and their diversity, and how Canadian-Ismaili identity and experience inform these efforts.

To best explore these themes and the layers that inform these initiatives, GTM was used. GTM was critical in developing further research questions and guiding the research design as the data was gathered and analyzed. GTM allowed for the various layers of these projects to surface and was pertinent to understanding how identity and experience is an important contributor to these national efforts. GTM enabled for a more flexible research design and was instrumental in guiding the project design and analysis. Through textual analysis, interviews with leadership and regular community members, and a national online qualitative survey, an interpretive theory was able to emerge; that Ismaili identity and experience navigate and inform the motivations behind and participation in these elite and grassroots efforts, aimed at remedying the ‘othering’ of Muslims by both non-Muslims and Muslims. Of particular importance are Ismaili experiences with the Muslim ‘other’, leading them to develop an inclusive strategy to alleviate intra-*umma* dissonance alongside their efforts to alleviate Islamophobia; thereby, collectively ‘Alleviating the Clash of Ignorance(s).’

Noteworthy is that the organization of this dissertation stems from the order of discoveries found through GTM. Chapters 5 and 6 are generally descriptive in nature, highlighting the various institutional efforts that comprise what I have termed the Muslim Literacy Project (MLP) and the Ismaili Identity Project (IIP). Therein, the reader will find examples of how ordinary members of the Ismaili community are participating in these elite efforts. Further, these chapters are also important in preparing us to examine the role of Ismaili identity and experience in influencing the strategies behind the MLP and the IIP. Then chapters 7, 8, and 9 will connect the data together, demonstrating exactly how Ismaili identity and experience inform these efforts. And, finally, Chapter 10 will present how Ismailis are participating at grassroot levels, inspired by their faith, identity, and experience, which further builds on the findings of all previous chapters.

While the focus of this dissertation is on the IIP and the MLP at elite and grassroots levels, and how Ismaili identity influences these efforts, it is noteworthy that these two projects are instrumental for the success of the greater Ismaili Pluralism Project (IPP), which will be presented in Chapter 4. However, before discussing the IPP, it is important to dedicate a chapter to Ismaili history and experience (Chapter 3); this will give the reader a greater understanding of the community and how their religion, history, and experience has helped shape contemporary Ismaili identity.

### III. KNOW YOUR NEIGHBOUR: WHO ARE THE ISMAILIS?

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*A cosmopolitan society regards the distinctive threads of our particular identities as elements that bring beauty to the larger social fabric. A cosmopolitan ethic accepts our ultimate moral responsibility to the whole of humanity, rather than absolutising a presumably exceptional part. ... What this means, perhaps above all else, is a readiness to participate in a true dialogue with diversity, not only in our personal relationships, but in institutional and international relationships also. But that takes work, and it takes patience. Above all, it implies a readiness to listen. What is needed, as the former Governor General of Canada Adrienne Clarkson has said, and I quote, is a readiness “to listen to your neighbour, even when you may not particularly like him.” Is that message clear? You listen to people you don’t like!<sup>157</sup> – Aga Khan*

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Ismaili Islam traces its tradition back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad, yet many people have little to no knowledge about this minority Muslim tradition. One of the goals of the Ismaili Identity Project, which will be discussed in Chapter 6, is to make Canadians and other Muslims aware of Ismailis and their unique background and history. Part of the reason behind this is to alleviate the ‘clash of ignorance’ that fuels fear, hatred, and intolerance of the ‘other’. This is also one of the reasons for this chapter; for readers to get to know their Ismaili neighbours, from their own point of view. However, this is not the only purpose for this chapter.

One central element that continues to shape and form Ismaili Muslim identity is storytelling. Sacred religious narratives and collective histories are instrumental in shaping Muslim identity and experience.<sup>158</sup> According to Nancy T. Ammerman, religious narratives are “the building blocks of individual and collective religious identities.”<sup>159</sup> As we will see throughout this dissertation, religious narratives, including sacred histories, are activated in various social settings. In this section, I will present historical narratives that continue to be important to the construction of Ismaili Muslim identity today; either because they are recounted by the community or because

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<sup>157</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Samuel L. and Elizabeth Jodidi Lecture at Harvard University’, *Aga Khan Development Network*, 2015 <<http://www.akdn.org/speech/his-highness-aga-khan/samuel-l-and-elizabeth-jodidi-lecture-harvard-university>> [accessed 17 August 2017].

<sup>158</sup> Duderija, ‘Factors Determining Religious Identity Construction among Western-Born Muslims’, p. 390.

<sup>159</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman, ‘Religious Identities and Religious Institutions’, in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. by Michele Dillon (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 207–24 (p. 216).

they are particularly important in shaping Ismaili Muslim identity. Further, I will present some important concepts that are pertinent in shaping Ismaili belief and experience throughout the ages, which we will see resurface in chapters 8 and 9. Noteworthy is that, while this section presents a multitude of Ismaili narratives, each Ismaili adherent is unique and their identity may be informed by various other religious, secular, or other narratives.

This chapter will then present contemporary examples of how Ismaili Muslim identity has been adapted and shaped by the Imamāt – a theme that will continue throughout this thesis. When examining the construction of Muslim identity, Adis Duderija argues that it is important to examine the role of “interpretative models of the Qur’an and the Sunnah;”<sup>160</sup> however, Ismaili identity, as we will see, is not confined to the interpretative models of these narratives and, therefore, must include an examination of their central authority, the Imamāt. Finally, this chapter will end with a discussion of how Ismailis came to be in Canada. This particular narrative is important to the construction of a Canadian Ismaili identity as it is often retold with great gratitude and appreciation towards Canada for opening its doors to foreign strangers in need.

## WHO ARE THE ISMAILIS?

The *umma* is formed by Muslims from a diverse array of cultures, ethnicities, languages, geographies, and traditions, each embodying their own unique histories and practical and theological differences. The Ismailis themselves are a diverse community, with origins in different countries, cultures, languages, histories, and even a variety of religious devotional expressions. Despite their differing backgrounds, Ismailis are all united under the central authority of the Imam, a spiritual guide for the Shi’a Imami Nizari Ismaili Muslim *umma*, who traces his lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad. Unlike, the lowercase Sunni “imam”, who is primarily responsible for leading prayers and giving sermons, the Shi’i understanding of the Imam is that the spiritual and political authority of the Prophet Muhammad is inherited and passed on through the lineage of the

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<sup>160</sup> Duderija, ‘Factors Determining Religious Identity Construction among Western-Born Muslims’, p. 391.

sacred Imams. The Imam of the Time, or *Hazar* Imam, is responsible for interpreting the Revelation for the current day and age and helping to uplift his followers both materially and spiritually. Today, many of the material mandates of the Imam are carried out by Imamatus institutions such as the Aga Khan Development Network, which operates in areas where there is a significant Ismaili presence, although its efforts are intended to support the entire surrounding population, regardless of background or creed.

Ismaili Islam can be characterized as a spiritual tradition, similar to Sufi Islam – a mystical tradition that, we will see, took greater form during the Ismaili Alamut period. As with Sufism, Ismailism gravitates towards the hidden dimensions of the Muslim faith, the *batini*, but also remains open to the truths of other religious traditions.<sup>161</sup> Like other *tariqah* traditions,<sup>162</sup> Ismaili *murīds*<sup>163</sup> pledge allegiance to the Imam of the time, their *Murshid* or spiritual guide. According to the Ismaili Constitution, “The authority of the Imam in the Ismaili *tariqah* is testified by *bay’ah*<sup>164</sup> by the *murīd* to the Imam which is the act of acceptance by the *murīd* of the permanent spiritual bond between the Imam and the *murīd*. This allegiance unites all Ismaili Muslims worldwide in their loyalty, devotion and obedience to the Imam within the Islamic concept of universal brotherhood. It is distinct from the allegiance of the individual *murīd* to his land of abode.”<sup>165</sup> The latter sentence clarifies that the *murīd* also has an obligation to the country in which they live. This can be seen as a political statement ensuring that while Ismailis give allegiance to their Imam, this allegiance would not interfere with the politics of the countries in which the *Jama’at* lives. As we will see, *bay’ah* is an important religious prescription of the present research because it helps to explain why there is a unified effort to help manifest the Imam’s vision in Canada. However,

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<sup>161</sup> Karim H. Karim, ‘Pluralism, Migration, Space and Song: Ismaili Arrangements of Public and Private Spheres’, p. 155.

<sup>162</sup> A *tariqah* is a school or order that is led by a master guide who helps their disciples on their spiritual paths. *Tariqahs* are found mainly in the Sufi mystical tradition but not exclusively. Ismaili Muslims are part of an order under the spiritual authority of the Imamatus.

<sup>163</sup> An adherent who has committed themselves to a particular *tariqah* or *Murshid*, a master guide

<sup>164</sup> *Bay’ah* is a contract between two persons, in this case the Imam and *Murīd*, where in return for allegiance, the Imam delivers services like spiritual and material guidance and services through his governing bodies – his institutions and councils.

<sup>165</sup> *Ismaili Constitution*, 1987 <<http://ismaili.net/source/legal-documents/1990-ismaili-constitution-canada.pdf>>.

before getting into the results of the data, which will be discussed in subsequent chapters, it is important for the reader to understand Ismaili history and the origins of the Ismaili Imamate as this helps to situate Ismaili Islam in the context of the diversity of Muslim history and thought.

For all Muslims, the legitimacy of their belief system remains an important foundation for their religious identity. Sunni and Shi'a Muslims are both taught slightly different historical accounts according to their own unique tradition(s), thereby authenticating their belief system over others. Here, I will recount the Shi'i narrative of history that places the authoritative succession in the lineage of Imams, known as the Imamate. This narrative continues to hold importance in legitimacy claims of Shi'a Ismaili Muslims today, as we will see in Chapter 8, and thus, is worthy of discussion. I will then discuss Shi'i Ismaili history specifically, as this minority narrative is often neglected by theologians and historical scholars, and if Ismailis are mentioned in historical accounts, it is often informed by polemic literature.<sup>166</sup>

## The Imamate

Ismaili Muslims, like other Shi'i Muslims, believe in the concept of Imamate. Imamate is the lineage of Imams who trace their authority and bloodline back to the Prophet Muhammad. Again, the Imam of the Time is responsible for the community's well-being and promises to guide them in both spiritual and worldly matters. This differs from the concept of the *caliph*, whose responsibility to the community is strictly political. The Imam must come from the 'Alid lineage of Imams, meaning that he must be related to the Prophet Muhammad through the progeny of his daughter *Hazrat* Fatima and her husband, *Hazrat* 'Ali – who is the cousin of Muhammad and whose father, Abū Tālib ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib, helped to raise Muhammad. The Imam must be a descendent of *Hazrat* Fatima and *Hazrat* 'Ali's son, Imam Hussain – not the progeny of his brother, Hassan.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> As a result of this, the Institute of Ismaili Studies launched the "Ismaili Heritage Series," an academic book series that aims "to make available to wide audiences the results of modern scholarship on the Ismailis and their rich intellectual and cultural heritage..." (Ismaili Heritage Series, front matter)

<sup>167</sup> Fatima and 'Ali had other children together including their son, Hassan, and two daughters, Zaynab and Umm Kulthum.

Different Shi'i traditions affirm different Imams after Imam Hussain but are united in that Imam Hussain and his martyrdom at Karbala still play a significant role in the lives of Shi'as around the world today. The Shi'i Nizari Ismaili community has had a total of 49 Imams with their present living Imam being Shah Karim al-Hussaini, more commonly referred to as His Highness the Aga Khan IV.<sup>168</sup> It is important to note that the Nizari Ismaili community is the only Ismaili community today who has a present living Imam. The Imam guides his community through sacred decrees, known as *farmāns*, which are considered infallible. This leads us to the theological conception of the Imam, which will be discussed now.

As canonized by Imam Jafar al-Sadiq, the last Imam recognized by both Ismailiyya and Ithnashariyya as the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> Imam, respectively, the Imam is attributed to certain laws, the first being that the Imam is designated by way of *nass*, legal injunction.<sup>169</sup> Before the death of the Imam, he is to explicitly designate his successor – much like how the Prophet Muhammad designated 'Ali as his legatee, or *wasi*, by way of *nass* months before his death<sup>170</sup> – a story that will be recounted shortly. This transfers all the authority of the previous Imam to his successor. This may or may not include *khalīfah* power, which is purely political power.<sup>171</sup> As stated previously, the Imam's responsibility is two-fold: to enhance the lives of his followers and to provide spiritual and worldly guidance – thus being in political power is secondary to these mandates. In the Aga Khan's own words:

The role of the Ismaili Imam is a spiritual one; his authority is that of religious interpretation. It is not a political role. I do not govern any land. At the same time, Islam believes fundamentally that the spiritual and material worlds are inextricably connected. Faith does not remove Muslims — or their Imams — from daily, practical matters in family life, in business, in community affairs.

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<sup>168</sup> The title, His Highness was granted to the Aga Khan IV by Her Highness Queen Elizabeth in 1957. The honorific title, "Aga Khan" was granted to the first Aga Khan, Hasan 'Ali Shah, by the Persian Shah, Fath 'Ali Shah.

<sup>169</sup> Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina, *The Just Ruler in Shi'ite Islam: The Comprehensive Authority of the Jurist in Imamite Jurisprudence* (Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 43; Daftary, *A History of Shi'i Islam*, p. 53.

<sup>170</sup> Daftary, *A History of Shi'i Islam*, p. 55.

<sup>171</sup> Daftary, *A History of Shi'i Islam*, p. 53.

Faith, rather, is a force that should deepen our concern for our worldly habitat, for embracing its challenges, and for improving the quality of human life.<sup>172</sup>

The Imams are also believed to possess special divine knowledge, or *'ilm*. *'Ilm* enables the Imam to have both esoteric knowledge, the inner and hidden understandings, and exoteric knowledge, outer and worldly meanings, of the divine revelation, that which is both recorded and not recorded in the Qur'an. Through way of *nass*, *'ilm* is transferred from one Imam to the next, thus only the Imam of the Time has sole access to this sacred knowledge; knowledge that is used to guide the community of followers on the Right Path, *Sirat al-Mustaqim*.<sup>173</sup>

Another attribute of the Imam is that the Imam is infallible, *isma*, which means he is “immune from sin and error.”<sup>174</sup> The Imam's guidance is considered to be rooted in divine guidance, which places his words alongside the authority of the Qur'an. Many Shi'a Nizari Ismaili Muslims believe that their present Imam is the living and speaking Qur'an. I have also heard Ismailis say that the Imam thinks beyond the concept of time, that he sees everything for what it truly is, and is, thus, better able to guide his community because of this knowledge – this attribute will be discussed again in Chapter 9.

Imam Jafar al-Sadiq remains an important figure in Shi'i traditions. He died in 765 and was buried in Madina next to his father and grandfather. Noteworthy, is that their tombs were later destroyed by the modern-day Saudi Arabian Wahhabi regime.<sup>175</sup> Violent Muslim extremism continues to destroy the diversity of Islamic heritage, attempting to erase minority religious traditions and histories from existence. In subsequent chapters, we will see that these exclusivist harmful Muslim ideologies are precisely the reason why the Imam, alongside the Ismaili community, is not only trying to alleviate Islamophobia, but also intra-*umma* dissonance – the

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<sup>172</sup> Aga Khan IV, 'Address to Both Houses of the Parliament of Canada in the House of Commons Chamber (Ottawa, Canada)', *NanoWisdoms*, 2014 <<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10724/>> [accessed 20 August 2017].

<sup>173</sup> Daftary, *A History of Shi'i Islam*, pp. 53–54.

<sup>174</sup> Daftary, *A History of Shi'i Islam*, p. 54.

<sup>175</sup> Daftary, *A History of Shi'i Islam*, p. 56.

Ismaili community is quite aware that exclusivist ideologies are just as much of a threat to the Muslim *umma* as is Islamophobia.

Today the Imamatus has made some modern shifts. According to Daryoush Mohammad Poor, the Imamatus has transcended from “the person of the Imam into the ‘office of the Imamatus,’” thus we are currently witnessing the institutionalization of the Imamatus in order for the Imam to serve his community in a greater organized capacity. Secondly, we see the Imamatus stressing the need for his community to balance their spiritual life with their worldly life, so as to not create unnecessary internal dissonance from living in an environment that may oppose Islamic ethics and values —<sup>176</sup> such as living amongst the temptations of harmful social habits, consumerism, materialism, and political divide or oppression. Finally, the institutionalization of the Imamatus enables the Imam to have authority “free from nationalistic and ideological boundaries of territorial nation-states.”<sup>177</sup> This institutionalization also allows for the standardization of Ismaili belief and practices,<sup>178</sup> while simultaneously allowing for diverse devotional expressions, providing they do not contradict Islamic ethics as depicted by the Imamatus.<sup>179</sup>

As will be discussed in chapters 8 and 9, the Imamatus remains central to Ismaili belief and practice. The Imamatus is also central to Ismaili history; Ismaili history cannot be discussed without mentioning the Imamatus and its role in shaping this unique minority Muslim history. We turn to this now.

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<sup>176</sup> In Jasmine Zine’s research, Muslim religious identity acts as an ‘anchor’ in the diaspora and ‘is a means to mediate the dissonance and challenge of living in environments that are laced with conflicting cultural values and practices.’ See, Jasmin Zine, ‘Muslim Youth in Canadian Schools: Education and the Politics of Religious Identity’, *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 32.4 (2001), 399–423 (p. 402) <<https://doi.org/10.1525/aeq.2001.32.4.399>>.

<sup>177</sup> Poor., p. xiv.

<sup>178</sup> Jonah Steinberg.

<sup>179</sup> Jonah Steinberg.

## SHI'A ISMAILI HISTORY

The death of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632) brought anxiety and confusion to the early *umma*. There was panic over who would now lead the *umma* in both spiritual and material matters. Some members of the community (later known as the Sunni community) proclaimed that the Prophet never appointed a successor and while 'Ali was still with Muhammad's body, Umair nominated Abū Bakr as the new *caliph*. While the Sunnis hold that the Prophet made no such appointment, the Shi'i tradition maintains that 'Ali was appointed by the Prophet publicly at *Ghadir Khumm* a few months before the Prophet died.<sup>180</sup> The story goes, as narrated by Daftary:

On 18 Dhu'l-Hijja 10/16 March 632, when returning from his Farewell Pilgrimage, the Prophet stopped at a site by that name between Mecca and Medina to make an announcement to the pilgrims who accompanied him. Taking 'Ali by the hand, he uttered the famous sentence *man kuntu mawlahu fa- 'Ali mawlahu* (He of whom I am the master, of him 'Ali is also the master), which, according to the Shi'a, made 'Ali his successor. Furthermore, it is the Shi'i belief that the Prophet had received the designation (*nass*) in question, nominating 'Ali as the imam of the Muslims after his own death, through divine revelation.<sup>181</sup>

This historic event at *Ghadir Khumm* continues to be commemorated annually as an official *Eid*, or festival, by the Shi'a and is often "celebrated as one of the most important Shi'i feasts."<sup>182</sup>

To understand the need for a successor to the Prophet, one needs to be introduced to an important concept in the Islamic tradition – the divine promise of a "just and equitable public order embodying the will of God."<sup>183</sup> For Muslims alike, faith is not meant to be segregated from other aspects of life. One is meant to practice and implement the ethics of their faith in all aspects of their daily lives. It is for this reason that the early community needed to establish a successor to the Prophet's authority; they needed a living guide to prescribe *shari'a*, the divine blueprint for how one should live their life in accordance with the faith, in order to manifest God's promise.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Sachedina, p. 215.

<sup>181</sup> Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, p. 39.

<sup>182</sup> Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, p. 39.

<sup>183</sup> Sachedina, p. 3.

<sup>184</sup> Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, p. 40.

One of the main differences between those who would later be known as the Sunni and the Shi'a, is that the Shi'a believed that the successor, in addition to interpreting *shari'a*, should also guide the community in their spiritual progress, therefore interpreting the revelation for both spiritual and worldly matters.<sup>185</sup> The Sunni community later relied on Islamic scholars, the *ulema*, to fill this void.

After Abū Bakr became *Khalīfa*, 'Ali and his followers protested but were unsuccessful. This protest coincided with a dispute between the Prophet's daughter, Fatima, and Abū Bakr, over the Prophet's inheritance, which, according to Islamic law, should have been awarded to his only surviving daughter, Fatima.<sup>186</sup> Abū Bakr affirmed that this was an extraordinary circumstance and awarded the Prophet's inheritance to the *umma*. Arguably, if Fatima had been given her inheritance, the *ahl al-bayt*, the family of the Prophet, would have had the means necessary to challenge Abū Bakr's succession.

It is important to note that there are various accounts about what happened after the Prophet's death. According to renowned Shi'ism and Ismailism scholar, Daftary:

It cannot be overemphasised that many of the original and fundamental disagreements among Sunnis, Shi'is and other Muslims will in all likelihood never be satisfactorily explained and resolved, mainly because of a lack of reliable sources, especially from the earliest centuries of Islamic history. As is well known, almost no written records, with the major exception of the text of the Qur'an, representing the sacred scripture of Islam, have survived from those early centuries, while the later writings of the historians, theologians, heresiographers and other categories of Muslim authors, display variegated 'sectarian' biases.<sup>187</sup>

After Abū Bakr died, Umair was elected as the second *khalīfa*. After his death, the aristocrat, Uthman was elected *khalīfa*, and appointed many of his family members into positions within his administration. Eventually, Hazrat 'Ali was appointed as the fourth *khalīfa* but by this time the

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<sup>185</sup> Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, p. 40.

<sup>186</sup> Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, p. 38; Sachedina, p. 132.

<sup>187</sup> Daftary, *A History of Shi'i Islam*, p. 5.

family of Uthman had already established a stronghold in the Umayyad dynasty – a dynasty that would eventually take the life of the Prophet’s grandson, Imam Hussain at Karbala.<sup>188</sup>

Again, the Shi’a typically agree on the lineage of Imams up until the death of Imam Jafar al-Sadiq in 765. The Ismailiyya believe that the rightly appointed Imam was Imam Jafar al-Sadiq’s eldest son, Hazrat Ismail, which is where the Ismailis inherit their name. The Ithna’ashariyya believe that the next rightly guided Imam was Imam Jafar al-Sadiq’s youngest son, Hazrat Musa. Further, according to the Ithna’ashariyya, their 12th Imam, Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Mahdi (869-?), is currently in the Occultation and will one day return as the prophesied Mahdi, who will bring peace and justice to the entire world. The Ithna’ashariyya, today, make up the largest Shi’a community while the Nizari Ismailis make up the second.

There were various polemic attacks against the ‘Alid authority, partly because it directly challenged the religious legitimacy of its Sunni rivals, such as the Umayyads and Abbasids.<sup>189</sup> The Abbasid Caliphate was established in 750, at a time where many of the populace still believed that only a member of the Prophet’s family could restore order and bring justice back to the lands.<sup>190</sup> They even moved their capital to Baghdad, not only for economic reasons, but to further their legitimacy campaign because of Baghdad’s historical connection to the Prophet’s family.<sup>191</sup> The ‘Alid threat was so great that the Abbasids then began to claim that they too inherited rights from the Prophet through the lineage of the Prophet’s uncle al-‘Abbas.<sup>192</sup> Further, the death of the second caliph al-Mansur in 775 led to the succession of his son Muhammad Ibn Mansur (r. 775-785) who

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<sup>188</sup> This historic event is known as the battle of *karbala*, where the *ahl al-bayt* fought the unjust rule of the Umayyad dynasty.

<sup>189</sup> Daftary, *A History of Shi’i Islam*, pp. 5–6. It is interesting to note that the legitimacy of the ‘Alid Imams gained so much support, that the Abbasids then started to claim that they too inherited rights from the Prophet’s family through the Prophet’s uncle, al-‘Abbas. See Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (Pearson Education Limited, 2004).

<sup>190</sup> Kennedy, p. 123.

<sup>191</sup> Amira K. Bennison, *The Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the ‘Abbasid Empire* (Yale University Press, 2009), p. 5; Kennedy, p. 133.

<sup>192</sup> Kennedy, p. 123.

took the title al-Mahdi to gain support from the Shi'a community,<sup>193</sup> a clear attempt to further authenticate their rights to power. These attempts were politically challenged with the establishment of the first Shi'i, and the first Ismaili, empire, the Fatimid Caliphate.<sup>194</sup>

### The Fatimid Empire, 909-1171

Named in the honour of the Prophet's daughter, Fatima, the Fatimid Empire was established in 909 in Ifriqiya (present-day Tunisia and eastern Algeria), by Imam-caliph Ubayd Allah al-Mahdi Billah. The Imam-caliph gained much Shi'i support by presenting himself as the legitimate Mahdi.<sup>195</sup> With the establishment of the first ever Shi'i caliphate, tensions between the Abbasids grew and so did the defamatory anti-Ismaili literary campaigns.<sup>196</sup> Because the Fatimid Empire was led by direct descendants of the Prophet's household, it directly challenged the political and religious legitimacy of the Abbasid Empire.

The establishment of the Fatimid Empire allowed for the institutional development of the Ismaili religion and legal code. Daftary asserts that Ismaili religious law "had not existed during the earlier underground phase of Ismailism" and was finally able to manifest during the initial stages of the Fatimid period.<sup>197</sup> Previously, Ismailis were not able to establish themselves publicly as they were the targets of religious and political persecution. Having their own state allowed them to practice their religion freely.

In the tenth century, under the leadership of Imam-caliph al-Mu'izz (r. 953-975), the Fatimids conquered Egypt and moved the capital from Alexandria to Cairo.<sup>198</sup> Prior to the Imam's arrival, Egypt had been in a state of despair, "epidemics and famines had ruined the country and

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<sup>193</sup> Kennedy, p. 136.

<sup>194</sup> Named after the beloved daughter of the Prophet, Fātima al-Zahra.

<sup>195</sup> Haji, p. 1.

<sup>196</sup> Shafique N. Virani, p. 6.

<sup>197</sup> Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis*, p. 64.

<sup>198</sup> Haji, p. 3.

anarchy had crippled its resistance.”<sup>199</sup> The citizens put hope in the Fatimids in that they would restore social order and public safety. Imam-caliph al-Mu’izz not only guaranteed that citizens would be free to practice their Christian and Jewish religions and other Muslims their respective *madhhabs*, but they were also guaranteed safety and protection for their lives, their property, their families, their livestock, and their estates, regardless of their religion.<sup>200</sup> Thus, due to these unique circumstances and the Imam-caliph’s commitment to citizens, Egypt was seized rather peacefully, and the populace welcomed the changes that Imam-caliph al-Mu’izz promised.

Under the direction of Imam-caliph al-Mu’izz, the al-Azhar mosque was built for Shi’i congregational purposes. Contrary to popular belief, the al-Azhar mosque was not primarily an educational institution; however, for a short period of time, al-Azhar did teach Ismaili *fiqh*, jurisprudence, to both men and women under the sponsorship of Yaquub Ibn Killis.<sup>201</sup> These lectures on *shari’a* and the esoteric understandings of Islam, paved the way for the first secular institution of knowledge in Cairo, the *Dar al-‘Ilm*, in 1005.

The *Dar al-‘Ilm* was built in Cairo under the order of Imam-caliph al-Hakim (r. 996–1021). According to Paul E. Walker, this was the first institution of its time.<sup>202</sup> Aside from Qur’anic sciences, educational sessions included astronomy, grammar and philology, philosophy, law, math, and physiology.<sup>203</sup> Imam-caliph al-Hakim financed the upkeep of the *Dar al-‘Ilm* and even donated books from the palace library and supplied writing tools and paper for visiting scholars and scribes.<sup>204</sup> Unfortunately, the *Dar al-‘Ilm* was raided and destroyed in 1068 by the court’s soldiers after the mysterious disappearance of the Imam-caliph al-Hakim.<sup>205</sup> It is worth mentioning here that Sitt al-Mulk, the half-sister of al-Hakim, stepped in as caliph from 1021-1023 until al-

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<sup>199</sup> Halm, p. 30.

<sup>200</sup> Shainool Jiwa, *The Founder of Cairo*, p. 212.

<sup>201</sup> Paul E. Walker, ‘Fatimid Institutions of Learning’, *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, 34, 179–200; Halm, p. 41.

<sup>202</sup> Walker, ‘Fatimid Institutions of Learning’, pp. 189–90.

<sup>203</sup> Halm, pp. 72–73.

<sup>204</sup> Halm, p. 74; Walker, ‘Fatimid Institutions of Learning’, p. 189.

<sup>205</sup> Halm, pp. 76–77.

Hakim's son, Abu'l-Hasan 'Ali, also known by his title Zahir li-I'zaz Dīn Allah, was ready to take over as Imam-caliph.

Imam-caliph Al-Zahir's son, al-Mustansir succeeded him after his death in 1036. The death of Imam-caliph al-Mustansir (d. 1094) was met with a succession struggle between his two sons, Abu Mansur Nizar and Abu al-Qasim Ahmad, or al-Musta'li bi'llah. Al-Musta'li bi'llah killed his brother and became the next Imam-caliph from 1094-1101, and his followers came to be known as Musta'lian Ismailis, later known as the Dawoodi Bohra. The Musta'li lineage would continue to reign until the Mongol invasion in 1171. The Shi'a Nizari Ismaili lineage carried on through the progeny of Imam Abu Mansur Nizar, where the Nizari Ismailis inherited their name. The Nizari Ismailis fled to Persia where they had a stronghold in Alamut.

### The Alamut-Period, 1090-1256

In 1090 one of Imam-caliph al-Mustansir's *dā'īs*, missionaries, and most senior dignitaries, Hasan-i Sabbah, seized the fortress of Alamut in Persia.<sup>206</sup> This marked the establishment of the Nizari Ismaili State of Persia and Syria.<sup>207</sup> During the beginning phases of this State, the Nizari Ismaili Imams remained in occultation until 1162 when Imam Hasan 'ala dhikrihi al-salam revealed himself and took over state rule (1162-1166). The Ismaili Imams continued their rule until the Mongol invasion in 1256.

Hasan-i Sabbah was able to gain wide support through his writings on the concept of *ta'lim*, or spiritual edification, and quickly became the enemies of Abbasid allies, the Saljuq Turks.<sup>208</sup> Shafique Virani asserts that the Ismailis were victims of massacres and did not have the military power to take on their threat. As such, they developed a military strategy that would allow them to succeed despite their small numbers. They trained small numbers of skilled soldiers, who

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<sup>206</sup> Shafique N. Virani, p. 7; Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, p. 301.

<sup>207</sup> Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, p. 301.

<sup>208</sup> Shafique N. Virani, p. 7; Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, p. 303.

specialized in infiltration and the elimination of strategic targets.<sup>209</sup> These highly skilled soldiers would infiltrate positions of power within the Saljuk administration and wait patiently until they were given the command to act. These elite warriors became known as the ‘assassins’, spawning the assassin legends.<sup>210</sup>

Despite ongoing threats and hostilities, the Nizari Ismailis maintained “a sophisticated intellectual outlook as well as a literary tradition, elaborating their teachings in response to the changing circumstances of the Alamut period.”<sup>211</sup> Hasan-i Sabbah built a remarkable library with many books pertaining to the Ismaili faith, which would later be destroyed at the advent of the Mongol invasion.

In 1164, during the Imamate of Hasan ‘ala dhikrihi al-salam, the Nizari Ismaili tradition moved from one of orthopraxy to one of Gnosticism – this event is known as the proclamation of the *Qiyama*, or The Resurrection. This event is important as it marks one of the founding similarities between the Nizari Ismailis and Sufis.

The Ismaili tradition switched from a faith of orthopraxy and orthodoxy to one of Gnosticism, like that of the Sufis. At one point, Ismailism and Sufism were indistinguishable.<sup>212</sup> According to Dossa, “Emphasis and extension of certain elements in the doctrine of Imamate further invigorated the dispersed Ismaili settlements. Key elements which received emphasis were the principle of talim (authoritative teaching of the Imam) and qiyama, proclamation of the batin given by Imam Hasan ‘ala dhikrihi al-salam in 1164. By claiming the ‘dawn of resurrection’, the Imam

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<sup>209</sup> Shafique N. Virani, p. 7.

<sup>210</sup> According to Farhad Daftary, the Crusaders had confrontations with the Nizari Ismailis in Syria and, thus, vilified and ‘othered’ them in Europe to help support their campaign. The term ‘Assassin’ was originally based on a variant of the Arabic word, *Hashishi* – a derogatory term used by other Muslims to ‘other’ the Nizaris. The Crusaders appropriated this term for their own anti-Ismaili campaign and these “sources provided the basis for the studies of the nineteenth-century orientalists on different aspects of the Ismaili movement.” See Daftary, *The Isma‘ilis*, p. 11.

<sup>211</sup> Daftary, *The Isma‘ilis*, p. 302.

<sup>212</sup> Henry Corbin, ‘Nasir-I Khusrau and Iranian Isma‘ilism’, in *The Cambridge History of Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 1975), IV, 520–42 (pp. 529–30).

abolished the exoteric elements of religion, containing outward acts of devotion.”<sup>213</sup> Thus, there were various events that led to the adaptation of Ismailism over time, and because those changes were made by the Imam of the Time, they were accepted as authentic adaptations of Islam in accordance with the time.

Ismaili history and significance are often overshadowed by dominant Sunni discourses of Muslim history. An example of this is the vast scholarship on the Sunni Abbasid Empire but significantly less scholarship on the Shi’a Ismaili Fatimid empire. Historiographers have an important role in legitimating majority narratives over others. By privileging certain Muslim histories over others, minority histories are often marginalized, and their significance is either downplayed, misinformed, or even erased. The Institute of Ismaili Studies (1977) in London has played a tremendous role in reviving both Shi’i and Ismaili narratives – which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6: The Ismaili Identity Project. Creating space for minority Muslim histories is important in cultivating pride in the diversity of Muslim experience and identity. Muslims did not all share the same history, yet the history we hear about is often not nuanced. Accounting for these diverse histories is an important step in reconciling with sometimes contentious histories, and legitimating diverse Muslim identities and expressions.

Ismaili experience and identity continued to be shaped by its context but discussing the entirety of Ismaili history and significance is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead I am only presenting histories that Ismailis continue to call upon to legitimate their minority Muslim narrative and those that have particularly influenced the presentation of a modern-day Ismaili Muslim identity. Thus, I will now skip ahead and turn to a more recent era in Ismaili history that marks the modernization of the community under the guidance of the 48<sup>th</sup> Imam, Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah, the Aga Khan III.

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<sup>213</sup> Dossa, p. 16.

## ISMAILIS IN THE MODERN ERA

### The Aga Khan III

This section will examine the role of the Aga Khan III in shaping Ismaili identity in the modern age. This discussion is important as it helps us to understand how previous Imams have paved the way for the present Imam, Aga Khan IV, to continue to adapt and shape the faith to suit the current context. However, as previously discussed, the role of the Imam is not only to interpret the faith for contemporary contexts, but to also better the living conditions for his followers and their communities. In the case of the Aga Khan III, we will see that his modernizing effort was intertwined with his role as the Imam as he never excluded religion from his ambitions. But before we get into that discussion, I will present a few things about the Aga Khan III that situates him in the global modernizing effort.

Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah, the Aga Khan III<sup>214</sup> was born in Karachi, British India, modern-day Pakistan, on November 2, 1877 and died in 1957. He inherited the Imamate from his father, Aqa ‘Ali Shah who died in 1885 in Pune, India, and who was buried in the family mausoleum in Najaf, Iraq. Sultan Muhammad Shah became Imam when he was only 8 years old. He was groomed for the Imamate by his mother, Shams al-Muluk, also known as Lady ‘Ali Shah<sup>215</sup> (1850-1938), who was the granddaughter of Fath ‘Ali Shah of Persia.

The British Indian context is important to the discussion. Tensions between Hindus and Muslims were significant and rising, and the Aga Khan III had both political and spiritual roles to play. Muslims were often excluded from Indian university settings, thus, in 1902, when the Aga Khan III was nominated to the viceroy’s legislative council, he used this opportunity to advocate

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<sup>214</sup> Again, this honorific title was first bestowed on Hasan Ali Shah, the 46<sup>th</sup> Imam of the Shi’a Nizari Ismaili Muslims the Persian Shah, Fath Ali Shah Qajar in 1818. The word “Aga,” or “Aqa” in Persian, means elder brother, and the word “Khan” means king or ruler.

<sup>215</sup> Lady Ali Shah played a significant part in helping to prepare her son for the role of Imam and led the Ismaili community until 1893. She was a very generous woman and a champion for the education of girls.

for the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh to become the first recognized Indian-Muslim university.<sup>216</sup> Further, in an attempt to better the quality of life for Muslims in India, in 1906, “he headed the Muslim delegation that met Lord Minto at Simla, asking the Viceroy to regard the Indian Muslims not as a minority but as a nation within a nation whose members deserved adequate representation on both local and legislative councils of the land.”<sup>217</sup>

The Aga Khan III’s role in improving the quality of life for all Muslims was recognized by his co-religionists. To better serve the Muslim community, he helped to establish the first All-Indian Muslim League<sup>218</sup> in 1907, and was elected the first president, a position he held until 1912.<sup>219</sup> The Aga Khan III then became the leader of the Indian delegation to the Assembly of the League of Nations<sup>220</sup> in 1932 and again from 1934-1937, and in 1937 served as the league’s president.<sup>221</sup> These historical roles are not only significant to South Asian Ismaili history, but also to South Asian Muslim history. However, some of his modernizing efforts were directed explicitly to his Ismaili community.

In 1914, the Aga Khan III advised his *murīds* to give up “their Indo-Muslim names and habits,” which he believed would assist them in their integration to British India – similar guidance was given to his followers in other parts of the world years later.<sup>222</sup> It was his hope that such policies would alleviate the local difficulties of Ismailis who lived as religious minorities in various colonial parts of the world.

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<sup>216</sup> Daftary, *The Isma’ilis*, p. 482.

<sup>217</sup> Daftary, *The Isma’ilis*, p. 482.

<sup>218</sup> The All-Indian Muslim League was a political party in British India which strongly advocated for the advancement of Muslims in Indian society and a Muslim-majority state, which was later Pakistan.

<sup>219</sup> G. Laithwaite, ‘Aga Khan [Mohammed Shah] III (1877–1957), Leader of the Ismailis’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2011 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/30345>>. Daftary, *The Isma’ilis*, p. 482.

<sup>220</sup> The League of Nations was founded in 1920 with the mission to attain world peace and would later become the United Nations in 1945.

<sup>221</sup> Laithwaite; Daftary, *The Isma’ilis*, p. 483.

<sup>222</sup> Daftary, *The Isma’ilis*, p. 482.

The Aga Khan III devoted much time and resources into bringing his community of followers into modernization. According to Daftary, “[h]e was particularly concerned with introducing socio-economic reforms that would transform his Shi’i Muslim followers into a modern, self-sufficient community with high standards of education and welfare.”<sup>223</sup> However, he did not want this modernization to come at the cost of “destroying Ismaili traditions and identity.”<sup>224</sup> The Aga Khan III decided to develop new forms of communal organization, such as local councils, to help “implement his reform policies.” Due to the loyalty of his *murīds*, and the sacred importance placed on *farmāns*, reform policies were readily accepted.<sup>225</sup> These policies included, educational reforms and gender reforms.

The Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh was set up by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan in 1875.<sup>226</sup> As mentioned previously, such an educational institution was necessary as tensions continued to rise between Muslims and Hindus.<sup>227</sup> Further, literacy rates were much lower amongst Muslims when compared to Hindus, especially when looking at Muslim populations in rural areas.<sup>228</sup> The aspiration for this college was to offer Muslims a “liberal education within an Islamic context which would create not scholars immersed in the minutiae of tradition but public intellectuals engaged with the political and social realities materializing around them.”<sup>229</sup> Muslims would finally have a safe space where they could develop themselves intellectually and construct what it means to be modern, Indian, and Muslim.

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<sup>223</sup> Daftary, *The Isma’ilis*, p. 484.

<sup>224</sup> Daftary, *The Isma’ilis*, p. 484.

<sup>225</sup> Daftary, *The Isma’ilis*, p. 484.

<sup>226</sup> Shiraz Thobani, ‘Communities of Tradition and the Modernizing of Education in South Asia: The Contribution of Aga Khan III’, in *A Modern History of the Ismailis: Continuity and Change in a Muslim Community*, ed. by Farhad Daftary (I.B.Tauris, 2010), pp. 161–85 (p. 164).

<sup>227</sup> Paul R. Brass, *Factional Politics in an Indian State: The Congress Party in Uttar Pradesh* (University of California Press, 1965), p. 88.

<sup>228</sup> Shiraz Thobani, ‘Aga Khan III and the Modernization of Education in India’, p. 166.

<sup>229</sup> Shiraz Thobani, ‘Aga Khan III and the Modernization of Education in India’, p. 164.

In 1896, the Aga Khan III visited Aligarh College and Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan.<sup>230</sup> The Aga Khan recounted this meeting in his memoirs stating: “This was the origin of what was for many years one of the crucial concerns of my life – my interest in the extension and improvement of Muslim higher education, and specially the college and university at Aligarh.”<sup>231</sup> He later pushed for the college to achieve university status, which it did in 1920. Aga Khan III believed this university would help to elevate the standard of Muslim education in India. Further, from the outset of his campaigning, he urged “that Sanskrit be taught at Aligarh, together with the history and evolution of Hindu civilization, religion and philosophy, so that Muslims could better understand their Hindu neighbours”<sup>232</sup> – similar to what the Muslim Literacy Project is trying to do today under the direction of his successor and grandson, His Highness Karim Aga Khan IV – this will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

The Aga Khan III was also a strong advocate of non-denominational public schooling but found it difficult to obtain state support for universal education. He strongly believed that primary education would help alleviate poverty not only within the *umma*, but amongst all Indians:

My Lord, has not the time come for the commencement of some system of universal primary education, such as has been adopted by almost every responsible Government? The extreme poverty of this country has recently been much discussed both here and in England, and all sorts of causes have been found and given to explain the undoubted fact. But, my Lord, in my humble opinion the fundamental cause of this extreme poverty is the ignorance of the great majority of the people.<sup>233</sup>

Due to the lack of administrative support, the Aga Khan III turned to the idea of non-denominational private schooling, which would be “open to children of all backgrounds, regardless of their faith, culture, gender or financial status,” while simultaneously providing exceptional education.<sup>234</sup> He opened the first Aga Khan School “in Zanzibar in 1905, in Dar es Salaam in 1906,

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<sup>230</sup> Shiraz Thobani, ‘Aga Khan III and the Modernization of Education in India’, p. 166.

<sup>231</sup> Aga Khan III, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan: World Enough and Time* (Cassell, 1954), p. 60.

<sup>232</sup> Shiraz Thobani, ‘Aga Khan III and the Modernization of Education in India’, p. 177.

<sup>233</sup> Aga Khan III, *India In Transition: A Study in Political Evolution* (Bennett, Coleman And Company., Limited, 1918) <<http://archive.org/details/indiaintransitio029294mbp>> [accessed 3 December 2018]., p. 218 (fn.1)

<sup>234</sup> Shiraz Thobani, ‘Aga Khan III and the Modernization of Education in India’, p. 171.

and in Mundra, India in 1907, eventually leading to the founding of over 200 schools in Africa and Asia during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>235</sup> It is important to note that these schools “catered largely to Ismailis,” as part of the Imam’s mandate to uplift the community; however, children from different traditions such as Shi’a, Sunni, Hindu, Christian, and Sikh, were also attending these schools.<sup>236</sup>

Noteworthy is that the current Aga Khan is carrying on his grandfather’s legacy in further making available Early Childhood Development classes accessible for all Ismaili children in Canada. The Aga Khan has called upon his institutions in Canada, primarily the Aga Khan Education Board and the Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board, to ensure that every *murīd* has access to this important early education. Other educational initiatives will be discussed in Chapter 6: The Ismaili Identity Project.

As previously mentioned, the Aga Khan III’s modernizing effort was not confined to the Ismaili community but included the Muslim *umma* more generally.<sup>237</sup> Zayn R. Kassam says that the Aga Khan III “included the ‘woman question’ in his interest in the relations between Muslim-majority societies and the world as a whole.”<sup>238</sup> The Aga Khan III strongly believed that modernization could not occur without the inclusion and participation of women.

The Aga Khan III was a strong advocate for the education of girls and women. He even encouraged young Ismaili girls to be defiant if their parents discouraged or prohibited them to go to school.<sup>239</sup> Kassam documents that on various occasions the Aga Khan said that educating girls was necessary to ensure they could run their own lives and be independent.<sup>240</sup> He believed so strongly in the education of girls that he said that if a family could only afford to educate one child,

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<sup>235</sup> Shiraz Thobani, ‘Aga Khan III and the Modernization of Education in India’, p. 171.

<sup>236</sup> Shiraz Thobani, ‘Aga Khan III and the Modernization of Education in India’, p. 172.

<sup>237</sup> Zayn R. Kassam, ‘The Gender Policies of Aga Khan III and Aga Khan IV’, in *A Modern History of the Ismailis: Continuity and Change in a Muslim Community*, ed. by Farhad Daftary (I.B.Tauris, 2010), pp. 247–64 (p. 249).

<sup>238</sup> Kassam, p. 249.

<sup>239</sup> Kassam, p. 258.

<sup>240</sup> Kassam, pp. 258–59.

that they should invest in their daughter's education.<sup>241</sup> This statement is still cherished and repeated amongst Ismailis today; illustrating that the words of the Imam are taken very seriously. The Aga Khan III argued that women were important in shaping a better future for us all; that an educated woman would transmit ethics and values and lead her children to shape a better tomorrow.

Aside from education, the Aga Khan III was a strong advocate for the advancement of women in society more generally. He believed that women played a crucial role in bringing India into modernity and was very critical of the State for not doing enough to end gender inequality.<sup>242</sup> The Aga Khan III, like many other progressive intellectuals of his time, was frustrated by the prejudice Indian women faced in society. Kassam notes that he fearlessly challenged the view that a woman's place remained in the home and encouraged their educational and political participation:<sup>243</sup> He said that, "[t]he progressive modernization which depends on co-operation and understanding between the rulers and the ruled will be impossible in India unless women are permitted to play their legitimate part in the great work of national regeneration on a basis of political equality."<sup>244</sup> The Aga Khan III contended that if women were given political representation then society would naturally become more inclusive to the needs and rights of women and girls. He was adamant that religious and cultural ideologies that hindered the progress of women had no place in modern society.

The religion of Islam has been, arguably, mis-referenced in support of the subjugation of women. Being a distinguished Muslim leader with religious authority, the Aga Khan III once responded to this misuse of Islam in justifying the subjugation of Muslim women:

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<sup>241</sup> Kassam, p. 259; K. K. Aziz, 'Aga Khan III: A Study in Humanism', *The Institute of Ismaili Studies*, 2003 <<https://iis.ac.uk/aga-khan-iii-study-humanism>> [accessed 7 December 2018].

<sup>242</sup> Aga Khan III, *Aga Khan III: Selected Speeches and Writings of Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1998), VOL. I, p. 111. as cited in Kassam, pp. 250–51.

<sup>243</sup> Kassam, p. 251.

<sup>244</sup> Aga Khan III, VOL. I, pp. 122–23.

A second cause of our present apathy is the terrible position of Moslem women. ... There is absolutely nothing in Islam, or the Koran, or the example of the first two centuries, to justify this terrible and cancerous growth that has for nearly a thousand years eaten into the very vitals of Islamic society. ... How can we expect progress from the children of mothers who have never shared, or even seen, the free social intercourse of modern mankind? This terrible cancer that has grown since the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries of the Hijra must either be cut out, or the body of Moslem society will be poisoned to death by the permanent waste of all the women of the nation. But *Pardah*,<sup>245</sup> as now known, itself did not exist till long after the Prophet's death and is not part Islam. The part played by Moslem women at Kardesiah and Yarmuk, the two momentous battles of Islam next to Badr and Honein, and their splendid nursing of the wounded after those battles, is of itself a proof to any reasonable person that *Pardah*, as now understood, has never been conceived by the companions of the Prophet. That we Moslems should saddle ourselves with this excrescent of Persian custom, borrowed by the Abbassides, is due to that ignorance of early Islam which is one of the most extraordinary of modern conditions.<sup>246</sup>

The Aga Khan argues that the segregation of women and their veiling known as *Pardah* was a Persian practice inherited by the Abbasids. Unfortunately, many traditions of the Abbasids have been mistaken for traditions of the Prophet and it has taken the work of contemporary scholars, many of them women, to correct these misguided associations. Many scholars have argued that the treatment of women in Islam is a product of the patriarchal contexts in which these policies towards women were written and nothing to do with what the Prophet Muhammad preached.<sup>247</sup> The present challenge is undoing culturally embedded norms that have subjugated women for centuries and reviving the histories of Muslim women and their significance in Muslim history.

Trying to nuance and discredit vestigial norms and practices has to be done carefully so as to not disrupt the equilibrium. In Kassam's research on the Aga Khan III and his gender policies,

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<sup>245</sup> *Pardah*, or *Purdah*, can be used to refer to the veiling of women and/or their separation from men.

<sup>246</sup> Aga Khan III, VOL. I, pp. 210–11.

<sup>247</sup> See Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford University Press, 1999); Amina Wadud, *Inside The Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oneworld Publications, 2013); Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (University of Texas Press, 2009); Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (Women Unlimited, 2004); Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (Yale University Press, 1992).

she describes how he abolished certain practices that he felt were hindering the progress of Ismaili girls and women; such as polygamy, “infant marriages, barring widows and divorcees from remarriage, and payment of large dowries.”<sup>248</sup> Kassam, contends that through these revolutionary policies, “the Ismaili Imam was able to demonstrate to the community that young girls and women were not to be viewed as items of exchange between men, nor were widows or divorcees to be stigmatized for the loss of a husband (thereby subtly shifting emphasis to the woman herself rather than her virginity), nor were they to suffer the indignity of polygyny except in rare cases such as barrenness, thereby striking at the idea that women existed for the sole pleasure of men.”<sup>249</sup> Further, to authenticate these progressive prescriptions the Aga Khan III often referred to his role as the Rightful Imam and the *‘ilm* he possesses.

The Aga Khan III was able to communicate his prescriptions to the Ismaili community through *farmāns*, private guidance to his followers. In her analysis of the Aga Khan III’s *farmāns*, Kassam found common trends to bring ‘believing Ismaili men and women’ to the acceptance and appreciation of gender equality as ordained by God. Kassam notes:

[I]n 1899, at Bagamoyo in Uganda, he said to the community that men and women were exactly equal in the Ismaili faith, and that unrelated men and women should treat each other as siblings or as parents, thereby ensuring a modicum of respect and familial bonding that would prevent one from harming the other and keep matters of sexuality in their proper place. In Karachi in 1920 he advised Ismailis not to be so foolish as to keep women in a cage and behind a veil, *for one who kept a woman in such bondage was not an Ismaili* [emphasis mine]. In Mombasa in 1937 he made the comment that today was not the time, unlike the old days, when the male was in front and the woman behind. Rather, men and women should be in step with each other.<sup>250</sup>

These *farmāns* were made to both men and women within the community because he wanted men, who were privileged due to their gender, to ensure that his prescriptions for his community were enforced. Although he encouraged women to advocate for themselves, he knew that nothing would

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<sup>248</sup> Kassam, p. 256.

<sup>249</sup> Kassam, p. 256.

<sup>250</sup> Kassam, p. 257.

change unless men's ideas of women changed. Thus, the Aga Khan spoke vastly about gender equality in order to change the minds of his followers, and other Muslims and Indians more generally.

As discussed, while this modernization effort came about in the context of British India, it became a transnational effort for his *murīds* worldwide. The duty of the Imam is to adapt the Muslim faith to the current day and age and assist in the removal of artificial obstacles that impede Ismaili progress. The present Ismaili Imam, the Aga Khan IV, has continued his grandfather's legacy in the advancement of education and the upliftment of women in their respective societies. Today, Ismailis can be found throughout the world and significant populations have migrated to Western countries, such as Canada, to seek a better quality of life.

Now that the reader sees how the Ismaili tradition has changed according to different temporal contexts, we are almost ready to turn to how Ismaili identity manifests in the Canadian context, which will be presented in subsequent chapters. But before we can move forward, we must first examine the conditions that brought Ismailis to Canada in the first place; the major factor being the South-Asian exodus from Uganda. This event not only initiated the wave of Ismaili migration to Canada, but it is still recounted by Ismailis and the Imam today as why they are so grateful to Canada. Further, it also depicts one of the reasons why the Imam has developed such an intimate relationship with the Government of Canada. As we will see in Chapter 9 when examining the importance of *farmāns* in shaping Canadian-Ismaili identity, this historic event continues to play a significant role in the construction of Canadian-Ismaili identity, and why Ismailis feel at home in Canadian society.

## The Ugandan Exodus

Anti-Asian campaigns were on the rise in East-Africa, and Uganda in particular, and hate-filled speech began to infiltrate the media in the late 1900s.<sup>251</sup> The Aga Khan IV set up a newspaper in 1962 called the *Uganda Nation*, arguably, to try and counteract the hateful propaganda but it was unsuccessful and closed after only one year of operation. In the early 1970s, Ugandan President and Military General Idi Amin started to use the media, specifically the newspaper *Voice of Uganda*, to mobilize Africans and propagate hateful rhetoric against the South-Asians who had originally settled in the late 1800s to build the Ugandan Railway.<sup>252</sup> Idi Amin then banned the production and sale of foreign newspapers claiming that his populace was not educated enough to be critical of their content,<sup>253</sup> thereby, being the sole narrative and cutting his population off from the rest of the world. Then, on August 4, 1972, President Idi Amin ordered the expulsion of all Ugandan-Asians and gave them only a few months to leave his country.

Idi Amin accused Ugandan-Asians of disloyalty as some were seeking citizenship elsewhere; even though the vast majority were in the process of obtaining Ugandan citizenship.<sup>254</sup> Another accusation was that Ugandan-Asians were sabotaging the economic prosperity of Ugandan-Africans; this accusation was echoed in the neighbouring countries of Kenya and Tanzania and the solution therein was Africanization, Africa for Africans.<sup>255</sup> As the economic prosperity of Ugandan-Asians increased, so did tensions with local Ugandan communities.<sup>256</sup> Idi Amin gave Ugandan-Asians only 90 days to evacuate, forcing them to leave behind their

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<sup>251</sup> Muhammedi, pp. 57–60.

<sup>252</sup> Derek R. Peterson and Edgar C. Taylor, 'Rethinking the State in Idi Amin's Uganda: The Politics of Exhortation', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 7.1 (2013), 58–82 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2012.755314>>; Arif Jamal, p. 2.

<sup>253</sup> John C.G. Isoba, 'The Rise and Fall of Uganda's Newspaper Industry, 1900–1976', *Journalism Quarterly*, 57.2 (1980), 224–33 (p. 232) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/107769908005700204>>.

<sup>254</sup> Vali Jamal, 'Asians in Uganda, 1880–1972: Inequality and Expulsion', *The Economic History Review*, 29.4 (1976), 602–16.

<sup>255</sup> Muhammedi, p. 43; Nanji, 'The Nizari Ismaili Muslim Community in North America'; Karim H. Karim, 'Pluralism, Migration, Space and Song: Ismaili Arrangements of Public and Private Spheres'.

<sup>256</sup> Vali Jamal; Muhammedi, p. 50.

possessions and businesses. According to 1969 census data, there were approximately 74,300 South-Asians living in Uganda at the time and a third of them were citizens.<sup>257</sup>

The Aga Khan IV and the then Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau worked closely together to help in the resettlement of Ugandan-Asians. The two were close friends prior to the event. They exchanged letters to one another, congratulated one another on the births of new children, and vacationed and celebrated holidays together.<sup>258</sup> Noteworthy is that upon the death of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, the Aga Khan was even invited by the family to be an honorary pallbearer at his funeral.<sup>259</sup> It is no wonder why Trudeau was so willing to help out the Aga Khan in resettling thousands of displaced South Asians.

When the crisis occurred, the Aga Khan recounts that everything was initiated by a simple phone call, “Pierre and I were friends and there was an informal understanding that if there was a racial crisis, Canada would intervene. So when Uganda’s Idi Amin decided in 1972 to expel Asians, I picked up the phone, and Trudeau affirmed then and there that Canada would wish to help. His response was magnificent.”<sup>260</sup>

The story about the number of refugees that Canada agreed to accept is that of legend. Since this entire chapter is really dedicated to the narratives that shape Ismaili identity, it would be unjust to not mention a particular story that continues to circulate within the Canadian Ismaili community today, about the circumstances in which they were accepted into Canada. To add to the already serendipitous recollection, this story involves something truly Canadian – hockey. In 1972, when all this commotion was happening in Uganda, Canada was playing the USSR in the Summit Series of hockey. On September 28, 1972, the Aga Khan was meeting with Canadian immigration government officials, the same day as the hockey game, to discuss the resettlement

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<sup>257</sup> Muhammedi, p. 79.

<sup>258</sup> Muhammedi, p. 3.

<sup>259</sup> Haroon Siddiqui, ‘Prince Aga Khan Was among the Honorary Pallbearers’, *Toronto Star*, 3 October 2000 <<http://ismaili.net/timeline/2000/20001002.html>> [accessed 11 September 2017].

<sup>260</sup> Siddiqui.

of Ugandan-Asian refugees. Noteworthy, is that this was also the same day that the first flight of Ugandan refugees arrived in Canada. All high government officials were watching the hockey game and so they sent a junior chief, Jim Cross, to meet with the Aga Khan and discuss Canada's commitment to the crisis.<sup>261</sup> Mike Molloy, who was a Canadian Immigration official during the crisis, recounts the following story of the Aga Khan's meeting with Canadian official, James Cross:

Jim arrives, not happy, and he's got 4 people who work for him, they're not happy either, but they're doing their duty as Canadians... Jim grabs the maître d' and says, you've got a TV set going in there haven't you? "Of course, we have." So, they agree somehow or other with the Aga Khan sitting there, with his back to that door, and that's the door to the kitchen, that as the scores change in the game, the maître d' would come to the door and signal. And my suspicion is left-hand is Russians, after all they're commies, right-hand is Canadian's score. So, the lunch goes on and occasionally the Canadians get up or down and I'm sure His Highness is a very perceptive man but couldn't quite figure out what the hell was going on here. But eventually at some point, and at one point in the game – and Joe and I have found it – there's a three... one-and-a-half-minute segment of time when the score is 3 to 3. At that moment, the Aga Khan finally leans across the table and says, "Really Mr. Cross, you have to tell me how many you're planning to take." The door opens [and the maître d' gestures on his fingers, 3-3], so without realizing he's being stared at intensely, Mr. Cross puts 6 fingers on the table [gestures 3 fingers on each hand], and all the Canadians look at that, and with great satisfaction His Highness catches it and says, "6 thousand? That would be splendid."<sup>262</sup>

Six-thousand refugees was double the amount initially agreed upon.<sup>263</sup> This story has been recounted in various ways to show gratitude for the Canadian sport – "if it wasn't for the Canadian love of hockey, we wouldn't be here today."

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<sup>261</sup> 'Michael Molloy - Uganda Asian Refugee Movement 1972 - YouTube', *Migration and Ethnic Relations - YouTube*, 2012 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtQPKNhxymY>> [accessed 24 August 2019].

<sup>262</sup> 'Michael Molloy - Uganda Asian Refugee Movement 1972 - YouTube'.

<sup>263</sup> Mansoor Ladha, *A Portrait in Pluralism: The Aga Khan's Shia Ismaili Muslims* (Detselig Enterprises, 2008); Rahim Mohamed, 'A Brief History of the Ismailis in Canada', *Policy Options*, 2017 <<http://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/march-2017/a-brief-history-of-the-ismailis-in-canada/>> [accessed 8 September 2017].

Canada and its officials were very ambitious in their efforts to resettle displaced Ugandan-Asians. Canada did not have an Embassy in Uganda, “but within six days of arrival, the Canadians established a fully equipped office and a team of immigration officers, visa specialists and government doctors...” The Canadian High Commission was reported to have opened their offices earlier than other High Commission offices and they even stayed open until nightfall. A participant from Salima Versi’s Master of Arts thesis recounts the following:

Britain made it as hard as possible for people to get their claims processed or documents processed. So the British High Commission in Kampala would open at nine in the morning, close at noon, re-open at one-thirty, close three-thirty. Thousands of people lined up. ... And, at about day forty-five or so, the U.S. government put a full page ad in the newspaper saying they will take so many doctors and so many engineers to go to the U.S. ... Also, about that time, Canada announced that they were going to take five thousand people to Canada. So the Canadian High Commission, put out an ad in the newspaper saying ‘we are going to open at six in the morning.’ Most of us thought that this was a big joke because all the other embassies opened at nine, but since we were accustomed to lining up in the middle of the night, we went and lined up, and sure enough, at about seven o’clock, they opened their doors. And they didn’t close them for lunch. And they didn’t close them till they had processed all the people for that day. Not only that, they had kept chairs for us outside, to sit on. The day I went for my interview, a battalion of tanks was coming by and you could see – where the Canadian High Commission was located, it was in the IPS building, and all the other embassies were lower down – and you could see all the guards pushing people out of all the embassies. And here were Canadians, saying to everybody, come on in. And Mike Molloy<sup>264</sup> stood in front of this glass panel and he said, ‘nobody’s going to do anything to you,’ and one of the battalion... points its gun at the window, and of course then they took off.<sup>265</sup>

The climate in Uganda became quite hostile to South-Asians but the Canadian High Commission’s office did what they could to be of support to these new refugees. Canada also made multiple accommodations to their refugee policy so that Ugandan-Asian refugees could meet Canadian

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<sup>264</sup> Mike Molloy was a Junior Immigration Officer at the Embassy in Beirut which at that time was responsible for immigration from East Africa.

<sup>265</sup> Versi, pp. 53–54.

immigration requirements.<sup>266</sup> These accommodations were then used to improve the existing refugee policy which made it easier for future refugees to obtain resettlement in Canada.<sup>267</sup>

It appears that the temporal circumstances could not be any more favourable to the Ismaili community, with hockey being only one of them. During the time of the crisis, the Aga Khan's uncle, Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, was serving as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (1966-1977). In his position, Prince Sadruddin was able to work with countries such as Great Britain and India to help with the relocation of refugees. Under the partnership between the Aga Khan and the then-Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Canada ended up admitting 7,550 Ugandan-Asians between 1972-1974.<sup>268</sup> The vast majority of those Ugandan-Asians that came to Canada were Ismailis followed by Hindus, Christians, other Muslim traditions, and Sikhs.<sup>269</sup> By November 8, 1972, there were 2,862 Ugandan-Ismailis resettled in Canada.<sup>270271</sup> This historic event marked the first mass-migration of non-European and non-Christians into Canadian society. Further, other Ismailis, namely from Tanzania and Kenya who were also facing difficulties due to social tensions, followed suit.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presented the concept of the Imamate and its importance in shaping Ismaili identity and experience. Again, the Imamate's role is two-fold: to interpret the faith for the present day and age, and to enhance the quality of life for his followers. Through the histories presented here, we see that the Imamate has played an important role in interpreting and adapting the faith to suit different contexts, which has made Ismaili Islam, identity, and experience unique when compared

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<sup>266</sup> Vali Jamal.

<sup>267</sup> Mike Molloy, 'Western News - Molloy: Reflecting on the Ugandan Refugee Movement', *Western News*, 2012 <<http://news.westernu.ca/2012/10/molloy-reflecting-on-the-ugandan-refugee-movement/>> [accessed 9 September 2017].

<sup>268</sup> Muhammedi, p. 1.

<sup>269</sup> Muhammedi, fn47; Molloy.

<sup>270</sup> Muhammedi, p. 239.

<sup>271</sup> According to Shezan Muhammedi, by November 8, 1972 the other religious traditions to migrate were Hindus (a total of 649), Christians (a total of 466), other denominations of Islam (a total of 382), and Sikhs (a total of 61).

to other Muslim communities – a topic we will return to in Chapter 9: Ismaili Identity in Comparison to Sunni-Normative Constructions of Muslim Identity. Further, as seen in the example of the Aga Khan III, the Imam is also adamant in improving the condition for all Muslims – he not only helped to elevate educational achievement amongst Muslim men, but Muslim women as well. Further, while the Aga Khan III championed the education of Muslim women, he was also very invested in the full emancipation of Muslim women more generally, and Ismaili women in particular. He helped to eliminate discriminatory practices and barriers that affected Ismaili women, so that they could become independent and active members of their respective societies.

Finally, we saw how the Aga Khan IV was instrumental in the resettlement of South-Asian Ugandans in Canada and elsewhere. This event paved the way for further Ismaili settlement into Canadian society and its story has become as part of the collective Canadian-Ismaili consciousness – as we will see in the chapters that follow.

Now that the reader has a general understanding of the Imam, its role in shaping Ismaili identity throughout the ages, and the major historic events that lead to the first major wave of Ismaili migration to Canada, we can now turn to the examination of Ismaili migration within the general context of Muslim migration in Canada. Further, in the following chapter, I will briefly introduce the beginnings of Ismaili engagement in Canadian society, which will be discussed more thoroughly in the chapters that follow.

## IV. ISMAILI PRESENCE AND ENGAGEMENT IN CANADA

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*As you may know, my close ties with Canada go back almost four decades, to the time when many thousands of Asian refugees from Uganda, including many Ismailis, were welcomed so generously in this society. These ties have continued through the cooperation of our Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) with several Canadian Institutions, including the establishment, four years ago, of the Global Centre for Pluralism in Ottawa... I was also deeply moved by Canada's extraordinary gift to me of honorary citizenship. I always have felt at home when I come to Canada but never more so than in the wake of this honour. And if I ever felt any trepidation about accepting this evening's invitation, it has been significantly reduced by the fact that I can now claim, however modestly, to be a Canadian!<sup>272</sup> – Aga Khan*

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The beginning of Ismaili presence and engagement in Canadian society is predominantly marked by Canada opening its doors to Ugandan-Asian refugees during the early 1970s. Since then, the community has not only made Canada their permanent home, but also made it home to various public projects aimed at fostering the ethic of pluralism. This chapter begins by discussing the factors that influenced Ismaili (re)settlement and their integration in Canada. For many migrants, Canada offers many opportunities that their homelands do not; such as educational advancement, economic prosperity, better quality of life, safety, and freedom. While many individuals and families migrate for these opportunities, refugees migrate for other reasons. For the most part, refugees are not planning to migrate, they are migrating out of necessity – their lives depend on it. They may be coming from war-torn countries, sectarian violence, climate disasters, or religious persecution. Thus, this discussion aims to provide a general understanding of the factors that influenced Ismaili migration specifically, within the context of the (re)settlement of other Muslim communities. The chapter then turns to discuss how the high organization of the community has not only enabled the successful integration of the community into Canadian society, which is evident by their representation in politics and television, but also the manifestation of various high-profile projects: the Ismaili Pluralism Project, the Muslim Literacy Project, and the Ismaili Identity

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<sup>272</sup> Aga Khan IV, '10th Annual LaFontaine-Baldwin Lecture, Institute for Canadian Citizenship, "Pluralism", and Apres Lecture Conversation with John Ralston Saul (Toronto, Canada)', *NanoWisdoms*, 2010 <<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9601/>> [accessed 17 July 2020].

Project. However, before we can get into that discussion, the chapter will first situate Ismaili settlement within the greater context of Muslim settlement in Canada.

## MUSLIMS IN CANADA

There is no consensus about who were the first Muslims to arrive in Canada. Some scholars assert that the first Muslims in Canada were a Scottish family, James and Agnes Love and their newborn son who arrived in 1854;<sup>273</sup> however, one cannot discount the number of African Muslims who were brought to the Americas as slaves in the 1500s<sup>274</sup> – about which there is a lacuna of scholarship on the subject in the Canadian context. Thus, the presentation that follows is primarily guided by official census records of Muslims in Canada and supported by secondary scholarship.

The Canadian Muslim community is said to have formed as a result of two major waves of migration: one pre- and the other post-World War II (WWII).<sup>275</sup> The earliest official records of Muslims in Canada are from the 1871 census which recorded a total of 13 Muslims.<sup>276</sup> The 1881 and 1891 census records reported a total of zero Muslims, which might not be reflective of the actual Muslim population living in Canada at the time. Baha Abu-Laban estimates that by 1901 Canada had between 300 and 400 Muslims therein, mainly of Turkish and Syrian origin.<sup>277</sup> By 1911, this number had increased to around 1,500 with Muslims originating primarily from Turkey (approximately 1,000) and traders from Syria and Lebanon.<sup>278</sup> Baha Abu-Laban says that due to restrictive immigration policies, the growth of Muslims in Canada between 1911 to 1951 was very

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<sup>273</sup> Jasmin Zine, *Canadian Islamic Schools: Unravelling the Politics of Faith, Gender, Knowledge, and Identity* (University of Toronto Press, 2008). & Daood Hassan Hamdani, 'Canadian Muslims on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 19.2 (1999), 197–209.

<sup>274</sup> Aminah Beverly McCloud, 'Islam in the Americas', *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: MacMillan, 2005), 4685–91.

<sup>275</sup> Baha Abu-Laban, 'The Canadian Muslim Community: The Need for a New Survival Strategy', in *The Muslim Community in North America* (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1983), pp. 75–92 (p. 76).

<sup>276</sup> McCloud; Abu-Laban.

<sup>277</sup> Abu-Laban, p. 76.

<sup>278</sup> Abu-Laban, p. 76; Sheila McDonough and Homa Hoodfar, 'Muslims in Canada: From Ethnic Groups to Religious Community', in *Religion and Ethnicity in Canada*, ed. by Paul Bramadat and David Seljak (University of Toronto Press, 2009), pp. 133–53 (p. 136).

slow. The 1931 census reveals that the number of Muslims decreased to 645 and were mainly of Arab origin, this decline in the population being a result of the pressure of Turks to return to Turkey at the onset of World War I.<sup>279</sup> In 1951, Canada had between 2,000 to 3,000 Muslim residents and by 1981 this number jumped to 100,000.

The most significant influx of Muslim migrants came after WWII, beginning the 1960s and 70s but then increasing rapidly as of around 1980.<sup>280</sup> In the 70s, Muslims were coming from South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, mainly as a result of political turmoil in their homeland.<sup>281</sup> Census data from 1981, 1991, and 2001 reveal the Muslim population nearly doubling every 10 years (98,165; 253,260; and 579,640, respectively). In 2011, according to the Canadian National Household Survey, there were 1,053,945 Muslims living in Canada with 28% of those Muslims having been born in Canada.<sup>282</sup> Unfortunately, census data do not reveal the diversity of religious affiliations within the Muslim faith; thus, it is difficult to determine how many Muslims affiliate with the Sunni, Shi'i, Ahmadiyya, Sufi, or other Muslim schools of thought.

Closer analyses are necessary to determine the diverse religious affiliations of Muslim migrants to Canada. According to Sheila McDonough and Homa Hoodfar, Shi'i Muslims would have been among the first Syrian and Lebanese Muslim migrants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and again in the 1970s from Africa, South Asia, Iran, and the Middle East.<sup>283</sup> The Shi'a Ismaili Muslims would have been included in these latter migrations.

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<sup>279</sup> Abu-Laban, p. 76.

<sup>280</sup> Baljit Nagra, 'Unequal Citizenship: Being Muslim and Canadian in the Post 9/11 Era' (unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2011).

<sup>281</sup> McDonough and Hoodfar, p. 136.

<sup>282</sup> Statistics Canada Government of Canada, '2011 National Household Survey: Data Tables – Religion', 2013 <<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/dt-td/Rp-eng.cfm?LANG=E&APATH=3&DETAIL=0&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=0&GC=0&GID=0&GK=0&GRP=0&PID=105399&PRID=0&PTYPE=105277&S=0&SHOWALL=0&SUB=0&Temporal=2013&THEME=95&VID=0>> [accessed 10 September 2017].

<sup>283</sup> McDonough and Hoodfar, p. 136.

## ISMAILIS IN CANADA

The first Ismailis arrived in Canada from Pakistan in the 1950s and many came to study at Canadian universities. According to Meghji, the first Ismaili to arrive in Canada was Pakistani-born Safarali Ismaily, who settled in Ottawa in 1952.<sup>284</sup> He was later joined by his younger brother Guljee Ismaily a few years later.<sup>285</sup> Azim Nanji asserts that the first Ismailis were highly skilled in the fields of law, engineering, medicine, and education.<sup>286</sup> Ismaili families and students continued to arrive in the 1960s and primarily sought educational and vocational opportunities in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver.<sup>287</sup> These Ismailis would observe their religious festivals amongst themselves and with other members of the Muslim *umma*, regardless of traditional affiliation.<sup>288</sup>

The second wave of Ismaili migration was initiated in the early 1970s by Tanzanian South-Asians who were migrating as a result of nationalization.<sup>289</sup> This important migration was overshadowed by the mass exile of South-Asians from Uganda in 1972, as discussed in the previous chapter. However, it is important to note that this Tanzanian migration was significant as it enabled a more organic resettlement for the major wave of Ismailis coming to Canada from Uganda two years later.

The Ugandan exile prompted the migration of other Ismaili communities in East Africa as many were uncertain about what their futures would be like in countries that were undergoing nationalization. Large numbers of Ismailis from Kenya and Tanzania followed suit due to political changes and social unrest. While the Africanization movement was a significant push-factor due

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<sup>284</sup> Sadru Meghji, 'Rediscovering a Lost Piece of Ismaili History — First Steps in the Migration of Tanzanian Ismailis to Canada', *Simerg*, 2014 <<https://simerg.com/literary-readings/rediscovering-a-lost-piece-of-ismaili-history-first-steps-in-the-migration-of-tanzanian-ismailis-to-canada/>> [accessed 11 December 2018].

<sup>285</sup> Sadru Meghji.

<sup>286</sup> Nanji, 'The Nizari Ismaili Muslim Community in North America', p. 156.

<sup>287</sup> Nanji, 'The Nizari Ismaili Muslim Community in North America', p. 150.

<sup>288</sup> Nanji, 'The Nizari Ismaili Muslim Community in North America', p. 156.

<sup>289</sup> Sadru Meghji.

to the uncertainty it brought, important pull-factors were the educational and professional advancement opportunities that Canada warranted.<sup>290</sup>

By the end of 1972, there were roughly 2,800 Ugandan Ismailis living in Canada. Noteworthy, is that the vast majority of Ismailis migrating from East Africa were highly skilled, educated, and English-speaking – all of which gave them an advantage in comparison to other refugees.<sup>291</sup> According to Tissa Fernando, there were approximately 3,000 – 4,000 Ismailis settled in western Canada alone in 1973.<sup>292</sup> By 1975, there were approximately 10,000 Ismailis living in Canada, and by 1981 there were approximately 20,000 Ismailis living in Canada.<sup>293</sup> Noteworthy is that today, according to Ismaili officials, there are approximately 80,000 Ismailis living in Canada, which means that the community has quadrupled in size since the 1980s.

It is noteworthy that in the early 1970s, the Aga Khan established a special fund to help with the Ismaili resettlement.<sup>294</sup> According to Shezan Muhammedi's research on the early settlement of Ugandan Ismailis in Canada, the Aga Khan vouched for "proficiencies of the Ismaili community as suitable immigrants" and "detailed the financial and social support extended by the Aga Khan to aid in the resettlement process."<sup>295</sup> This financial support, alongside the organizational support of the first Canadian Ismaili councils, which will be discussed in the section that follows, greatly contributed to the successful resettlement of the early community.

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<sup>290</sup> Nanji, 'The Nizari Ismaili Muslim Community in North America', p. 155; Abu-Laban, pp. 78–79.

<sup>291</sup> Vali Jamal; Alyshea Cummins, 'A Comparison of the Refugee Resettlement of Ugandan Ismaili Muslims and Cambodian Theravada Buddhists in Canada', *International Migration Research Centre and The Canadian Immigration and Historical Society*, Gunn Award for Best Historical Essay on International Migration in Canada, 2010, 23.

<sup>292</sup> Tissa Fernando, 'East African Asians in Western Canada: The Ismaili Community', *New Community*, 7.3 (1979), 361–68 (p. 361) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.1979.9975584>>.

<sup>293</sup> Nanji, 'The Nizari Ismaili Muslim Community in North America', p. 157.

<sup>294</sup> Muhammedi, pp. 123–24.

<sup>295</sup> Muhammedi, p. 124.

As their numbers grew, they began to organize themselves into *jama'ats*, or communities, and began to congregate together in larger cities like Vancouver and Toronto.<sup>296</sup> At this time, there were no purpose-built *jamatkhana*s,<sup>297</sup> thus, families would often meet together in the basement of someone's home for worship, or if the *Jama'at* was large enough they would rent spaces in schools or offices to observe their *tariqah* tradition. For example, a few of my interview participants recount holding *jamatkhana* services in their homes when they first arrived. According to one participant, *jamatkhana* services took place in the basement of their family's home in the Kitchener-Waterloo area from 1973-1986. Hosting *jamatkhana* is considered a great honour and privilege, bringing one's family divine *barakat*, abundance and blessings; thus, to be one of the early families to have opened their home for congregational worship is worthy of being recorded in Canadian-Ismaili history.

The first purpose-built *jamatkhana* was established in 1983 in Burnaby, British Columbia – this *jamatkhana* also serves as an official Ismaili Centre.<sup>298</sup> The foundation ceremony was held on July 26, 1982, and included many distinguished guests including His Highness the Aga Khan, Canadian Senator Ray Perrault, the Premier of British Columbia, and the Mayor of Burnaby. Such a high-profile event is noteworthy as it illustrates the power networks of a minority Muslim community in Canadian society.

The next major wave of Ismaili migration occurred in the 1990s, when Canada accepted refugees from Afghanistan.<sup>299</sup> Many Ismaili families privately sponsored Afghan-Ismailis despite cultural and language barriers and never meeting them. Further, this migration changed the face of Canadian-Ismaili identity not only because a new ethnic group was welcomed into the predominantly South-Asian milieu, but because the Central-Asian migrants brought with them

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<sup>296</sup> Nanji, 'The Nizari Ismaili Muslim Community in North America', p. 156.

<sup>297</sup> *Jamatkhana* translates roughly to "congregation house" and is where Ismailis go to pray and conduct other practices unique to their *tariqah* tradition.

<sup>298</sup> The Ismaili Centre Burnaby was later renamed, The Ismaili Centre Vancouver.

<sup>299</sup> Karim H. Karim, 'Pluralism, Migration, Space and Song: Ismaili Arrangements of Public and Private Spheres', p. 151.

their own unique Ismaili traditions; some of which were formally incorporated into Canadian Ismaili practice – not to mention the Afghan cuisine that is now served at many Ismaili celebrations.

While the Ismaili tradition no longer proselytizes, conversion to the Ismaili faith still occurs through marriage. Approximately 20% of Ismaili marriages are interfaith; however, it is important to note that spouses are not required to convert to the Ismaili tradition. Further, those interfaith marriages may choose to raise their children in multiple faith traditions.<sup>300</sup> That being said, the main factor for the population growth of Ismailism in Canada is migration, although more and more Ismailis are being born in Canada. While there is no definitive statistic on how many Ismailis are born in Canada, Statistics Canada estimates that 28% of the current Muslim population are born in Canada and the present study found that 40% of the participants were born in Canada; however, Ismaili officials estimate the number to be closer to 32%.

Again, there are approximately 80,000 Ismailis in Canada and around 80 *jamatkhanas* operating to serve them nationwide, which includes both space rentals and purpose-built *jamatkhanas*. In order to be able to serve the needs of this diverse and growing *jama'at*, Ismaili councils were formed in the mid-1970s. Noteworthy, is that such councils were already in place in other parts of the world, although there were none in Canada.

## ISMAILI ORGANIZATION

In order to accommodate the growing Ismaili *Jama'at* in Canada, a national Ismaili council was formed between 1975 and 1978.<sup>301</sup> The objective of the Canadian Ismaili Council, like other Ismaili councils, is “the social governance, administration, guidance, supervision and coordination of the

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<sup>300</sup> I, myself, grew up in an inter-religious household and my sisters and I were raised in the Ismaili tradition despite my father being culturally Catholic and a British Freemason. Two of my cousins were raised as both Hindu and Ismaili and often took part in both religious observances. They then both married Jain women and now their children participate in a variation of Ismaili, Hindu, and Jain traditions.

<sup>301</sup> Nanji, ‘The Nizari Ismaili Muslim Community in North America’, p. 157.

activities of the jamat and its institutions and organisations.”<sup>302</sup> The mandates of the Ismaili Councils, according to the Ismaili Constitution, are worth presenting here in full as they not only help us to understand the highly organized and social nature of the community but also, as we will see, how these mandates play into the present study. I have italicized those mandates that are important in navigating the present study:

- (a) serve the cause and protect the interests of Mawlana Hazar Imam, the Ismaili Tariqah and Ismailis;
- (b) *maintain and foster the unity of Ismailis and to preserve, protect and strengthen the Islamic social and cultural heritage;*
- (c) *strive to maintain unity with other tariqahs within the Muslim Ummah, and to seek co-operation and friendly relations with all other peoples;*
- (d) endeavour to secure continuing improvement in the quality of life of the jamat, through appropriate policies and programmes in the areas of education, health, social welfare, housing, economic welfare, cultural and women’s activities, youth and sports development;
- (e) *analyze fundamental problems confronting the jamat and their relationship to underlying trends in the national and international development process, and set short range and long range goals for the jamat;*
- (f) *preserve and foster the tradition of voluntary service and identify, motivate and develop leadership talent;*
- (g) *serve the needs of the jamat to enable it to make an effective contribution to the development of the societies in which it lives;*
- (h) *make available to the jamat and the public at large, information relating to the role and contribution of the institutions of the Imam and the jamat towards development in various regions of the world;*
- (i) strengthen the jamat and its institutions; and work in close collaboration with other Councils in different regions of the world and with the Apex Institutions.<sup>303</sup>

This type of administrative organization attracted Ismailis from other countries, such as Bangladesh and Myanmar (previously, Burma), to come and settle in Canada.<sup>304</sup> The existence of formal Ismaili institutions equipped the community with the means necessary to carry out their faith tradition in a more organized fashion, while simultaneously attending to the settlement needs of the community. Further, due to the nature of their *tariqah* tradition, these institutions were

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<sup>302</sup> *Ismaili Constitution.*

<sup>303</sup> *Ismaili Constitution.*

<sup>304</sup> Nanji, ‘The Nizari Ismaili Muslim Community in North America’, p. 157.

necessary to ensure that the migrant community would continue to get temporal guidance and assistance by their Imam.

Today the Ismaili Council for Canada tends to the Canadian Ismaili *Jama'at* through its six regional councils: Ontario, Ottawa, Prairies, Edmonton, British Columbia, and Quebec and Maritimes. These regional councils tend to the diverse needs of the Canadian-Ismaili *Jama'at* which is comprised of Arab, African, European, South-Asian, Central-Asian, and Iranian Ismailis. The Ismaili Council for Canada serves the *Jama'at* through various boards and portfolios that operate mainly on a voluntary basis. Further, these boards and portfolios assist in serving the secular and religious mandates listed previously. The boards and portfolios are the Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board (ITREB), the Aga Khan Education Board (AKEB), the Aga Khan Health Board (AKHB), the Social Welfare Board (SWB), the Economic Planning Board (EPB), the Aga Khan Youth and Sports Board (AKYSB), the Settlement Portfolio, the Quality of Life Portfolio (QoL), the Grants and Review Board (GRB), the Diversity and Inclusion Portfolio (D&I) (previously the Women's Portfolio), and the Ismaili Volunteer Corporation (IVC).

The Ismaili councils, alongside the various boards and portfolios, speak to the high organization of the Ismaili community and the Canadian-Ismaili *Jama'at*, specifically. The Canadian *Jama'at* has come a long way in the past few decades, despite being a minority migrant community. Ismailis see Canada as their home and today we are seeing the eruption of various centres, parks, and projects that reinforce their permanent presence in Canada (as illustrated in Table II.I, in Chapter 2).

## **ISMAILI ACTIVITY IN CANADA**

Since their humble beginnings, Canadian-Ismailis have helped to change the Canadian public landscape to be more representative of their faith and values. While purpose-built *jamatkhanas* are one example of the permanent presence of Ismailis in Canadian society, other important contributions, as introduced in Chapter 2, are the two Ismaili Centres in Vancouver (1985) and Toronto (2014), the Global Centre for Pluralism (2006), the Delegation of Ismaili Imamat building

in Ottawa (2008), the Aga Khan Museum and Park in Toronto (2014), the Aga Khan Garden in Edmonton (2018), and the first Multi-generational Housing unit (2019) in Calgary – the majority of which will be discussed in more detail in chapters 5 and 6.

These centres, parks, and gardens can be seen as indicators of the permanent presence of Ismailis in Canada and, arguably, indicators of their successful integration into Canadian society. Another key marker of successful integration is a community’s public and civil engagement. A significant number of Ismailis are elected officials, holding positions in the Senate and the House of Commons, and some have even made careers in public television (see tables IV.I and IV.II).

*Table IV.I: Ismailis in Politics*

Ismailis in Politics	
Name	Title/Position (Year)
Salma Lakhani	Lieutenant Governor of Alberta (2020-present)
Mobina Jaffer	Senator for British Columbia (2001-present)
Naheed Nenshi	Mayor of Calgary (2010-present)
Rahim Jaffer	Conservative MP for Edmonton–Strathcona (1997–2008)
Arif Virani	Liberal MP for Parkdale—High Park (2015-present)
Yasmin Ratansi	Liberal MP for Don Valley East (2004–2011, 2015–present)
Murad Velshi	Liberal MP for Don Mills (1987-1990)

Table IV.II: Ismailis in Television

Ismailis in Television	
Name	Occupation
Ali Velshi	Host, MSNBC
Nabil Karim	Anchor, ESPN SportsCenter
Faizal Khamisa	Anchor/Host, Sportsnet
Farah Nasser	Anchor, Global News
Omar Sachedina	Anchor and Journalist, CTV
Kamil Karamali	Digital Video Journalist, Global News
Rizwan Manji	Actor (best known for his role as Ray on Schitt's Creek)
Husein "Huse" Madhavji	Actor (best known for his role as Dr. Shahir Hamza on Saving Hope)
Aliza Vellani	Actor (best known for her role as Layla Siddiqui on Little Mosque on the Prairie)

This type of achievement, especially of a minority Muslim community, is noteworthy. Ismailis have internalized their "Canadian-ness" and have gone on to break superficial barriers, which can be seen in their presence on public television and in politics. These achievements were not without challenges, especially for those who initially paved the way for other Ismailis, and arguably other minorities, to enter into the realms of television and politics. However, these achievements may not have been realized without the help of the Aga Khan and the Ismaili institutions in enabling optimal (re)settlement in Canada.

The Aga Khan and his institutions have had many significant engagements over the years with various Canadian institutions. The timeline as presented in Figure IV.I outlines all significant activity that the Imam has had with, and within, Canada. Beginning with the Ugandan exodus, the timeline illustrates such events like the formation of the first Ismaili council in Canada, the

Aga Khan's various visits with his Canadian *Jama'at*, multiple agreements between the Imam and Canadian universities, Honorary Degrees His Highness the Aga Khan has received from various Canadian universities, the opening of Ismaili centres and other parks and projects, public television interviews, His Highness' Formal Address to the Canadian Parliament, Canadian government partnerships, and other important events related to Ismaili activity in Canada.

The events listed in this timeline illustrate how the Ismaili community has been engaging with Canadian institutions since the early 1970s. Noteworthy is that many of the university agreements are to help enhance the Imam's institutions overseas, such as the agreements between his newly built university in Tajikistan, the University of Central Asia, and the University of Toronto, the University of Victoria, the University of British Columbia, and Seneca College (see Timeline entries in 2016-2017). This timeline depicts various high-profile engagement with Canadian institutions, which is quite exceptional for a minority Muslim community. Further, no other such country compares with Canada in terms of Ismaili engagement and collective engagements. It is no wonder why the Aga Khan partnered with Canada to build the first ever centre for the study of pluralism.





Figure IV.I: Timeline of Imamat Engagement in Canada

## THE ISMAILI PLURALISM PROJECT

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*A cosmopolitan society regards the distinctive threads of our particular identities as elements that bring beauty to the larger social fabric. A cosmopolitan ethic accepts our ultimate moral responsibility to the whole of humanity, rather than absolutising a presumably exceptional part.*

*Perhaps it is a natural condition of an insecure human race to seek security in a sense of superiority. But in a world where cultures increasingly inter-penetrate one another, a more confident and a more generous outlook is needed. What this means, perhaps above all else, is a readiness to participate in a true dialogue with diversity, not only in our personal relationships, but in institutional and international relationships also...*

*I would emphasise that a cosmopolitan ethic is one that resonates with the world's great ethical and religious traditions.*

*A passage from the Holy Quran that has been central to my life is addressed to the whole of humanity. It says: "Oh Mankind, fear your Lord, who created you of a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered abroad many men and women..."<sup>305</sup>*

*– Aga Khan*

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*At the very heart of the Islamic faith is a conviction that we are all born "of a single soul." We are "spread abroad" to be sure in all of our diversity, but we share, in a most profound sense, a common humanity.<sup>306</sup> – Aga Khan*

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In the above excerpts, the Aga Khan alludes to the dissonance and discomfort that diversity can foster and the tendency 'to seek security in a sense of superiority' rather than 'a readiness to participate in a true dialogue with diversity'. The Aga Khan believes that this dissonance and discomfort can be remedied through the promotion of pluralism; a notion that is inspired by a cosmopolitan ethic. Thus, prior to discussing the Aga Khan's concept of pluralism, it is important to first examine the extent to which it is inspired by cosmopolitanism.

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<sup>305</sup> Aga Khan IV, 'Jodidi Lecture at Harvard University'.

<sup>306</sup> Aga Khan IV, 'Jodidi Lecture at Harvard University'.

The meaning and implications of the term cosmopolitanism have been widely debated.<sup>307</sup> The term originates in Greek (*cosmo polites*) and means, citizen of the world. This definition has been taken to mean both a literal citizen of the world and a symbolic one. There are obviously many issues if we were to understand the application of this concept in a literal sense versus a more symbolic one; however, the latter is also vulnerable to become obsolete if it is not clearly defined.

Some critiques of cosmopolitanism see it as an elitist construct that positions and privileges cosmopolitans and liberal ideologies above others.<sup>308</sup> Others see cosmopolitanism as an ethical doctrine and an ideal to be cultivated.<sup>309</sup> In his research, Ulf Hannerz contends that there are two major themes that arise in the various definitions of cosmopolitanism. The first one is cultural in nature and “has to do with a knowledge and even appreciation of human diversity” and the other is more political and “has to do with community, society, and citizenship at more or less global level.”<sup>310</sup> In Sahir Dewji’s doctoral thesis, which critically examines the Aga Khan’s ‘cosmopolitan ethic’, Dewji contends that the Aga Khan’s contemporary engagement with the term is more cultural than political and is rooted and inspired by the Islamic tradition.<sup>311</sup>

According to the Aga Khan, “[a] cosmopolitan ethic is one that welcomes the complexity of human society. It balances rights and duties, freedom and responsibility. It is an ethic for all

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<sup>307</sup> Ulf Hannerz, ‘Cosmopolitanism’, in *A Companion to the Anthropology of Politics*, ed. by David Nugent and Joan Vincent (John Wiley & Sons, 2008); Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers (Issues of Our Time)* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2010).

<sup>308</sup> Robert Pinky, ‘Eros against Esperanto’, in *For Love of Country*, ed. by Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp. 85–90; Michael Walzer, ‘Spheres of Affection’, in *For Love of Country*, ed. by Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp. 125–27; Richard A. Shweder, ‘Moral Maps, “First World” Conceits, and the New Evangelists’, in *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*, ed. by Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington, 1st ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), pp. 158–76.

<sup>309</sup> Marth C. Nussbaum, ‘Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism’, in *For Love of Country*, ed. by Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp. 3–17; Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*.

<sup>310</sup> Hannerz, p. 70.

<sup>311</sup> For more on how the Aga Khan’s notion is rooted in the Islamic tradition, see Sahir Dewji, ‘Beyond Muslim Xenophobia and Contemporary Parochialism: Aga Khan IV, the Ismā‘īlīs, and the Making of a Cosmopolitan Ethic’ (unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2018) <<https://scholars.wlu.ca/etd/2042>>.

peoples, the familiar and the Other, whether they live across the street or across the planet.”<sup>312</sup> By looking at this understanding of the cosmopolitan ethic, as well as the one cited at the beginning of this section, we see that the Aga Khan’s cosmopolitan ethic is more of a guiding principle for human societies to live by and is an ethic for all people, the ‘familiar and Other’, whether ‘they live across the street or across the planet.’ It does not ask the subject to give up their ‘particular identities’, but to instead adopt an ‘ultimate moral responsibility to the whole of humanity’.<sup>313</sup> This understanding is similar to Kwame Anthony Appiah’s notion of cosmopolitanism, which is comprised of two intertwined notions: first, “that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship” and second, “that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance.”<sup>314</sup> This latter notion coincides with the rationale behind the Muslim Literacy Project, to make space for non-Muslims (and Muslims as we will see) to learn about the Muslim ‘other’; the means by which the Ismaili community in Canada is making space for Muslim literacy will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Dewji notes that the Aga Khan deliberately adds the word ‘ethic’ to his notion of cosmopolitanism, so that others may come to see it as a value to aspire towards, thereby becoming a guiding principle to help humanity “exist amongst others... without sacrificing the particulars” that make up diverse identities.<sup>315</sup> This understanding helps us to situate the Aga Khan’s cosmopolitan ethic within his notion of pluralism. As Appiah contends, “One distinctively cosmopolitan commitment is to pluralism. Cosmopolitans think that there are many values worth living by and that you cannot live by all of them. So we hope and expect that different people and different societies will embody different values.”<sup>316</sup> Thus, the Aga Khan’s notion of a cosmopolitan

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<sup>312</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Address to Parliament of Canada, Ottawa’.

<sup>313</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Jodidi Lecture at Harvard University’.

<sup>314</sup> Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, p. xv.

<sup>315</sup> Dewji, ‘Beyond Muslim Xenophobia and Contemporary Parochialism’, p. 277.

<sup>316</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, ‘The Case for Contamination’, *The New York Times*, 1 January 2006  
<<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/01/magazine/the-case-for-contamination.html>> [accessed 6 February 2021].

ethic is an important prelude to not only understand his notion of pluralism, but to also see how these terms are intricately connected.

Over time, the term ‘pluralism’ has been used to describe a variety of circumstances and ideals, often in response to growing cultural and religious diversity.<sup>317</sup> The notion of pluralism is often conflated to simply mean religious diversity.<sup>318</sup> However, as Diana Eck notes, “pluralism is not just another word for diversity. It goes beyond mere plurality or diversity to active engagement with that plurality.”<sup>319</sup> Further, pluralism does not aim to “displace or eliminate deep religious commitments or secular commitments,” similar to the Aga Khan’s notion of the cosmopolitan ethic, but should rather be understood as “the encounter of commitments.”<sup>320</sup> Similarly, the Aga Khan’s pluralism aims to foster an environment where differing commitments can exist as one commitment amongst many.

The Aga Khan’s notion of pluralism encompasses an ethic of respect for human difference and all that it has to offer. This ethic is best described in the following excerpt from the Aga Khan’s convocation address, which he delivered at the University of Alberta:

Pluralism means not only accepting, but embracing human difference. It sees the world’s variety as a blessing rather than a burden, regarding encounters with the “Other” as opportunities rather than as threats. Pluralism does not mean homogenisation — denying what is different to seek superficial accommodation. To the contrary, pluralism respects the role of individual identity in building a richer world. Pluralism means reconciling what is unique in our individual traditions with a profound sense of what connects us to all of humankind.<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> See Chapter 3 of James A. Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>318</sup> See Chapter 3 of Beckford.

<sup>319</sup> Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a ‘Christian Country’ Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (Harper Collins, 2009), p. 70.

<sup>320</sup> Eck, p. 71.

<sup>321</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘University of Alberta Graduation Ceremony (Edmonton)’, *NanoWisdoms*, 2009 <<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9281/>> [accessed 10 August 2018].

For the Aga Khan, pluralism means adopting an ethic of respect for the multitude of diverse identities. Similar to his formulation of a cosmopolitan ethic, pluralism does not require the individual to surrender their ‘particular identities’, but instead to see the value that these diverse identities might offer. Further, while the cosmopolitan ethic invites the individual to adopt an ‘ultimate moral responsibility to the whole of humanity’, pluralism requires the human subject to make space for diverse identities to exist and to ensure that they are free to actively participate in society – another moral position.

In the quote at the beginning of this section, the Aga Khan justifies a cosmopolitan ethic using the Qur’an and his own religious authority as spiritual leader of the Ismaili Muslims. While the Aga Khan legitimizes pluralism in the Islamic tradition,<sup>322</sup> pluralism also serves some important practical functions. Karim contends that “pluralism encourages better ethnic and cultural cohesion within the Ismaili *jamats*; it promotes greater acceptance of Ismailis by other Muslim groups; and it provides a socio-political basis for the community’s participation in public spheres of the countries where they live.”<sup>323</sup> Further, one of the Ismaili Constitution’s mandates, as cited previously, is to “strive to maintain unity with other tariqahs within the Muslim Ummah, and to seek co-operation and friendly relations with all other peoples”.<sup>324</sup> Thus, the promotion of pluralism fulfills this mandate by implementing programs that foster the co-operation and engagement with non-Ismaili Muslims and non-Muslim communities – some of which will be discussed in the two chapters that follow. Further, as discussed in Chapter 3, part of the Imam’s duty to the Ismaili community is to protect the Ismaili community and enhance their quality of life. As we see across history and in the world today, diversity can pose some political challenges and erupt violent conflicts – the promotion of pluralism can be seen a creative and preventative solution to the issues and insecurities that diversity poses.

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<sup>322</sup> For a more elaborate investigation on how the Aga Khan’s notion of pluralism is rooted in the Islamic tradition, see Dewji, ‘Beyond Muslim Xenophobia and Contemporary Parochialism’; or for a more brief overview see, Sahir Dewji, ‘The Aga Khan’s Discourse of Applied Pluralism: Converging the “Religious” and the “Secular”’, *Studies in Religion*, 47.1 (2018), 78–106.

<sup>323</sup> Karim H. Karim, ‘Pluralism, Migration, Space and Song: Ismaili Arrangements of Public and Private Spheres’, p. 159.

<sup>324</sup> *Ismaili Constitution*.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that while the Ismaili community champions pluralism in the public sphere, some aspects of Ismaili identity are simultaneously suppressed in an effort to foster cohesion between them and other Muslim communities. Karim contends that this is likely to do with the vulnerability of the Ismaili community in some Muslim societies (such as in South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East), where they “have come under renewed threat of persecution.”<sup>325</sup> He further notes that “Global Ismaili institutional strategies of identity formation have therefore sought to de-emphasize what may seem to be connections with non-Islamic traditions—particularly in the context of *ginans*.<sup>326</sup> Therefore, even as the pluralism is promoted as a key value, the pluralist characteristic of the communal self’s own heritage are downplayed.”<sup>327</sup> Efforts to conceal certain aspects of Ismaili identity that may further marginalize them from other Muslim communities were also found at the individual level amongst survey and interview participants (this will be discussed in Chapter 8). Minority communities are in a burdensome position to try to create space for themselves in the consciousness of others, while simultaneously being sensitive to aspects of identity that may further marginalize them. Thus, while pluralism can be seen as a creative solution to the dissonance and discomfort that diversity brings, it is a work in progress and may take generations before communities feel comfortable fully expressing themselves.

## Why Canada?

While conflict can be the result of intolerance of religious difference, it is also the result of “territorial disputes; unstable oppressive institutions; economics and social inequalities; and

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<sup>325</sup> Karim H. Karim, ‘Pluralism, Migration, Space and Song: Ismaili Arrangements of Public and Private Spheres’, p. 159.

<sup>326</sup> *Ginans* are hymns of knowledge that originate in the *Satpanth* tradition (South Asia). They are recited as a form of religious expression and devotion. We will return to them later in Chapter 10.

<sup>327</sup> Karim H. Karim, ‘Pluralism, Migration, Space and Song: Ismaili Arrangements of Public and Private Spheres’, p. 159.

ethnic, cultural, and linguistic divisions.”<sup>328</sup> In countries that rate high in ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity such as in Canada, it is important to implement practices that decrease tensions between its various communities.

Canadian history is replete with examples of divisive and violent politics but, also, attempts to bridge these divides. To begin, the founding of our very nation is a story of intolerance, fear, degradation, and persecution. The cost of the new world was to the detriment of Indigenous land, culture, and peoples. While today Canada enters into an age of reconciliation for the atrocities of its past, these efforts are simply rhetoric without the implementation of standards and protocols to right the wrongs of the past and make space for Indigenous identity, history, and civil engagement.<sup>329</sup> These efforts, as we will learn, are examples of pluralism in action.

Some more documented examples of the institutionalization of pluralism in Canada can be observed out of the efforts to alleviate tensions between the two main colonizing parties: the French Catholics and the British Protestants. In an effort to respond the growing unrest amongst French Canadians in Quebec and seek ways to guarantee the preservation of French culture and language, Canada launched the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism Commission (1963–69). The products of this commission were the Official Languages Act (1969), which made English and French the official languages of Canada, and the department of multiculturalism, which sought ways to protect Canadian diversity. Noteworthy is that the multiculturalism policy was not originally “intended for non-European immigrants. It was initially demanded by, and designed for, white ethnic groups... And it was demanded under very specific conditions—namely, as a reaction to the rise of Québécois nationalism and the political reforms

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<sup>328</sup> Thomas Banchoff, ‘Introduction: Religious Pluralism in World Affairs’, in *Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics*, ed. by Thomas Banchoff (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 4  
<<http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195323405.001.0001/acprof-9780195323405>> [accessed 29 August 2019].

<sup>329</sup> The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was created in response to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA). The TRC has identified 94 Calls to Action to address some important issues that affect Indigenous communities and their quality of life. The full report can be found here: [http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls\\_to\\_Action\\_English2.pdf](http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf)

adopted to accommodate it.”<sup>330</sup> However, while the policy was adopted in response to white ethnic cultural insecurities, it would later benefit non-white European immigrants.

The Multiculturalism Act (1988) was designed “to break down discriminatory attitudes and cultural jealousies” that are understood to be “rooted in cultural insecurity.”<sup>331</sup> The multiculturalism theory suggests that ‘discriminatory attitudes’ and ‘cultural jealousies’ will decrease providing that all individuals are given the freedom to embrace their chosen religion and culture; however, while multiculturalism has been arguably successful in Canada, it has not always worked in other parts of the world.<sup>332</sup>

There are various critiques of multiculturalism. One criticism from anti-multiculturalists is that multiculturalism is essentially illiberal and goes against the “Enlightenment values of individual freedom, democratic citizenship and universal human rights.”<sup>333</sup> However, there is no evidence to suggest that western countries have repudiated liberal democratic values as a result of multicultural policies.<sup>334</sup> Unfortunately, this very criticism has been used by western European countries to fuel Islamophobia and backtrack on multiculturalism commitments under the rhetoric that multiculturalism enables illiberal practices.<sup>335</sup> Will Kymlicka contends that this fear of multiculturalism as “a vehicle for perpetuating illiberal practices is linked to the size or proportion of Muslim immigrants,” which might be why Canada has been successful in maintaining a multicultural policy as “Muslims are a small portion of the overall population (less than two percent).”<sup>336</sup> However, Canada is not immune to Islamophobia and populist rhetoric, thus, it too

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<sup>330</sup> Will Kymlicka, ‘Marketing Canadian Pluralism in the International Arena’, *International Journal*, 59.4 (2004), 829–52 (p. 840) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/40203985>>.

<sup>331</sup> Hugh Donald Forbes, ‘Chapter 1: Trudeau as First Theorist of Canadian Multiculturalism’, in *Multiculturalism and the Canadian Constitution*, ed. by Stephen Tierney (UBC Press, 2011), pp. 27–42 (p. 27).

<sup>332</sup> Kymlicka, ‘Marketing Canadian Pluralism in the International Arena’.

<sup>333</sup> Will Kymlicka, ‘The Essentialist Critique of Multiculturalism: Theories, Policies, Ethos’, in *Multiculturalism Rethought: Interpretations, Dilemmas and New Directions*, ed. by Varun Uberoi and Tariq Modood (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 209–49 (p. 210) <<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2441133>>.

<sup>334</sup> Kymlicka, ‘The Essentialist Critique of Multiculturalism’, p. 210.

<sup>335</sup> Kymlicka, ‘Marketing Canadian Pluralism in the International Arena’, p. 845.

<sup>336</sup> Kymlicka, ‘Marketing Canadian Pluralism in the International Arena’, pp. 845–46.

remains at risk of backtracking on multicultural commitments if efforts are not made to promote and preserve multiculturalism.

Another criticism comes from post-multiculturalists. They argue “that multiculturalist reforms have either failed to solve the problems for which they were intended, or inadvertently created new ones.”<sup>337</sup> Critics of liberal multiculturalism contend that it “involves essentialising the identities and practices of minority groups,”<sup>338</sup> which by consequence “exaggerates the internal unity of cultures, solidifies differences that are currently more fluid, and makes people from other cultures seem more exotic and distinct than they really are.”<sup>339</sup> However, Kymlicka argues that “[w]hen critics blame multiculturalism for causing or exacerbating essentialism, they typically conflate political theories, government policies and social practices in a way that makes it difficult to diagnose the real source of the problem, and impossible to identify appropriate remedies.”<sup>340</sup> Just as with the case of pluralism, multiculturalism is also a work in progress. Instead of abandoning it due to its shortcomings (or overhauling it as some critics suggest), more robust studies need to be completed to diagnose the underlying issues, identify how these issues are manifesting in Canadian society, and then take measured and informed steps to remedy them.

Since Canada has already put pluralistic ideals into practice through the Canadian Multiculturalism Act,<sup>341</sup> it makes a suitable headquarters for the Ismaili Pluralism Project. The Ismaili Pluralism Project (henceforth, IPP) stems out of an increasingly globalized context, in which our differences become more apparent, more public, and more personal. Again, the Aga Khan contends that pluralism is a creative response to the challenges of diversity, and uses the Global Centre for Pluralism to inspire, empower, and enrich the ethic of inclusion over exclusion

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<sup>337</sup> Kymlicka, ‘The Essentialist Critique of Multiculturalism’, p. 210.

<sup>338</sup> Kymlicka, ‘The Essentialist Critique of Multiculturalism’, p. 211.

<sup>339</sup> Anne Phillips, *Multiculturalism without Culture* (Princeton University Press, 2009) <<https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691141152/multiculturalism-without-culture>> [accessed 12 February 2021]; as cited in, Kymlicka, ‘The Essentialist Critique of Multiculturalism’, p. 211.

<sup>340</sup> Kymlicka, ‘The Essentialist Critique of Multiculturalism’, p. 212.

<sup>341</sup> The Multiculturalism Act was designed with the intent to support pluralism. Although it has been criticized for privileging some identities over others, it has also been championed as a more inclusive response to the growing diversity in Canadian society. See, Kymlicka, ‘Marketing Canadian Pluralism in the International Arena’.

globally, and in Canada specifically.<sup>342</sup> For the Aga Khan, pluralism does not mean “diluting” or “de-emphasizing” unique identities, but rather enhancing identity in order to be more confident in an increasingly diverse world.<sup>343</sup>

In the final analysis, the great problem of humankind in a global age will be to balance and reconcile the two impulses of which I have spoken: the quest for distinctive identity and the search for global coherence. What this challenge will ultimately require of us, is a deep sense of personal and intellectual humility, an understanding that diversity itself is a gift of the Divine, and that embracing diversity is a way to learn and to grow – not to dilute our identities but *to enrich our self-knowledge*.

What is required goes beyond mere tolerance or sympathy or sensitivity – emotions which can often be willed into existence by a generous soul. True cultural sensitivity is something far more rigorous, and even more intellectual than that. *It implies a readiness to study and to learn across cultural barriers, an ability to see others as they see themselves*. This is a challenging task, but if we do that, then we will discover that the universal and the particular can indeed be reconciled. As the Quran states: “God created male and female and made you into communities and tribes, so that you may know one another.” (49.13) It is our differences that both define us and connect us.<sup>344</sup> (emphasis mine)

Thus, according to the Aga Khan, pluralism is not about ‘diluting identity’ but to ‘enrich our self-knowledge’ and to ‘learn across cultural barriers’ to ‘see others as they see themselves’. This excerpt highlights how the Ismaili Identity Project (IIP) and the Muslim Literacy Project (MLP) fit into the IPP; the IIP aims to strengthen Ismaili identity in the multicultural Canadian context and the MLP, through educational and experiential efforts, aims to showcase to non-Ismaili ‘others’ (Muslim and non-Muslim) how Ismailis and other communities within the *umma* ‘see themselves’. Arguably, pluralism can neither be achieved until we are confident in expressing our own histories and identities, nor until others are literate and comfortable with those identities. I will elaborate on these points briefly later in this chapter and in the following two chapters.

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<sup>342</sup> Aga Khan, ‘Inaugural Global Pluralism Award Ceremony’, *Aga Khan Development Network*, 2017 <<http://www.akdn.org/speech/his-highness-aga-khan/inaugural-global-pluralism-award-ceremony>> [accessed 5 January 2018].

<sup>343</sup> Khan, ‘Inaugural Global Pluralism Award Ceremony’.

<sup>344</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Annual Meeting of the International Baccalaureate’, *Aga Khan Development Network*, 2008 <<http://www.akdn.org/speech/his-highness-aga-khan/annual-meeting-international-baccalaureate>> [accessed 13 June 2017].

Fear, prejudice, and discrimination yield inequality and inequality yields social problems such as envy, jealousy, intolerance, violence, and crime. Despite the challenges of diversity, in the words of William Connolly, “pluralism provides the most humane and promising agenda to pursue, even as we encounter strong pressures against it. To bypass pursuit of deep, multidimensional pluralism today would be to fail an elemental test of fidelity to the world.”<sup>345</sup> Again, it is important to note that promoting pluralism cannot simply be rhetorical, as we saw in the Canadian examples mentioned previously; actions need to be taken and policies need to be put into place to support it. According to Connolly, “[t]o the extent that [pluralism] is attained, it remains a fragile achievement to be cherished rather than an outcome to take for granted.”<sup>346</sup> Thus, pluralism is a work in progress and administrations need to actively foster environments where pluralism can flourish.

As a Muslim spiritual authority, the Aga Khan publicly promotes pluralism and uses religious scripture and other sacred narratives to support his vision for a common humanity. While he devotes much of his time to speaking about pluralism to public audiences, he also devotes substantial resources to make manifest his vision for a pluralistic planet.

### **The Global Centre for Pluralism**

The Global Centre for Pluralism (GCP) can be seen as the first attempt to institutionalize pluralism as both a Canadian and an Ismaili value. Ironically, the home for this centre is the old Canadian War Museum located at 330 Sussex Drive. The irony is that the site that once served to preserve war history and artifacts is now serving to promote peace and pluralism.

The GCP was established collaboratively in 2006 by the Government of Canada and the Ismaili Imamat and operated in the Delegation of Ismaili Imamat building on Sussex Drive from

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<sup>345</sup> William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Duke University Press, 2005), p. 10.

<sup>346</sup> Connolly, pp. 63–64.

2008 to 2017, up until it moved to its more permanent home at 330 Sussex Drive. The Aga Khan chose to build the centre in Canada because of its unique history in trying to foster the ethic of pluralism:

The history of Canada has a great deal to teach us in this regard, including the long, incremental processes through which quality civil societies and committed cultures of pluralism are built. One of the watchwords of our new Global Centre for Pluralism is that “Pluralism is a Process and not a Product.” I know that many Canadians would describe their own pluralism as a “work in progress,” but it is also an asset of enormous global quality.<sup>347</sup>

The GCP is not only a research institution but also offers various community outreach events to enhance the general public’s understandings about pluralism, including barriers to pluralism. According to the GCP, the center aims to: “Deepen understanding about the sources of inclusion and exclusion in Canada and around the world”; “Chart pathways to pluralism in specific places and cases”; “Catalyze knowledge exchange and learning about the policies and practices that support pluralism”; and “Build awareness of the benefits of inclusive societies.”<sup>348</sup> One example of the latter is giving a public platform for the work conducted by Bessma Momani and Jillian Stirk. In April 2017, the GCP hosted a public event called, “The Diversity Dividend: Canada’s Global Advantage”, which featured Momani and Stirk’s research where they found multiple benefits to ethnocultural diversity in the workplace.<sup>349</sup>

Another example of how the centre promotes pluralism worldwide, is through the Global Pluralism Award. This prestigious award is awarded every three years and “aims to recognize individuals, businesses, organizations, and government bodies that are tackling the challenge of

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<sup>347</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Address to Parliament of Canada, Ottawa’.

<sup>348</sup> *Corporate Plan | Global Centre for Pluralism* (Ottawa: Global Centre for Pluralism, 2019), p. 5  
<[https://www.pluralism.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/GCP\\_CorporatePlan2019\\_EN\\_FINALSINGLE.pdf](https://www.pluralism.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/GCP_CorporatePlan2019_EN_FINALSINGLE.pdf)>.

<sup>349</sup> Bessma Momani and Jillian Stirk, ‘Diversity Dividend: Canada’s Global Advantage’, *Centre for International Governance Innovation and The Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation*, 2017  
<<https://www.cigionline.org/publications/diversity-dividend-canadas-global-advantage>> [accessed 19 January 2018].

living peacefully and productively with diversity.”<sup>350</sup> The three winners are granted \$50,000 to further their work in pluralism. The nominees often include foreign examples of how local institutions, communities, and people are fostering pluralism in various ways.<sup>351</sup> This global award is important as it challenges the Westnocentric view that knowledge exchange is unidirectional; from west to east. This award embodies a truly pluralist approach by bringing to the West Non-Western solutions to intolerance, inequality, and conflict, so that these ideas might too be valued, appreciated, and respected.

Again, pluralism takes effort and “results from the daily decisions taken by state institutions, civil society associations and individuals to recognize and value human differences.”<sup>352</sup> For the GCP, “the goal of pluralism is belonging so that every individual is valued and enabled to contribute as a full member of society.”<sup>353</sup> For the Aga Khan and others, pluralism “has come to represent a powerful ideal meant to resolve the question of how to get along in a conflict-ridden world” and is seen as “the best path for proceeding into an admittedly uncertain future.”<sup>354</sup> The establishment of the GCP in Canada’s capital can be seen as the seeds of the Aga Khan’s greater pluralism project; seeds that if nurtured, will inspire the motivations of future generations.

Again, in order to create a society where pluralism can flourish, the society needs to address residual issues, narratives, and barriers that prevent pluralism. In Canada, in the context of

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<sup>350</sup> ‘Global Pluralism Award FAQs’, *Global Centre for Pluralism* <<https://award.pluralism.ca/faq/>> [accessed 10 December 2019].

<sup>351</sup> Although beyond the scope of this study, the centre awards institutions, communities, and individuals for “pluralism in action.” One example is the 2019 award winner, The Centre for Social Integrity which aims to promote pluralism through dialogue in Myanmar – where there is currently conflict between the Rohingya Muslims and other minorities and the majority Burmese Buddhists.

<sup>352</sup> *The GCP’s Corporate Plan 2019*, p. 7.

<sup>353</sup> *The GCP’s Corporate Plan 2019*, p. 4.

<sup>354</sup> Pamela Edith Klassen and Courtney Bender, ‘Introduction: Habits of Pluralism’, in *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement*, ed. by Courtney Bender and Pamela Edith Klassen (Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 1–28 (pp. 1–2).

Islamophobia and intra-*umma* dissonance, this includes correcting misinformation about Muslims and fostering environments where Muslims feel safe and secure about their Muslim identities.

### The Muslim Literacy Project

In order to promote a more inclusive society, it is important to remove barriers, address fears, and challenge “racist and discriminatory practices.”<sup>355</sup> Religious literacy efforts can serve to both alleviate irrational fears and foster environments of inclusion. The Muslim Literacy Project (MLP) is threefold: the education of Muslim diversity, the promotion of a collective Muslim identity as diverse, and the strengthening of Ismaili identity in the context of both Muslim and religious diversity. The latter aspect of the MLP is an internal-community effort and thus will be discussed in the Ismaili Identity Project chapter – but this illustrates how these projects are not entirely exclusive.

The promotion of knowledge about Muslim diversity can be observed at both grassroot and institutional levels. Further, this promotion of Muslim diversity to Muslim audiences can help generate pride in a collective Muslim identity – one that appreciates its internal diversity. Again, the IIP can be observed as an important component to the MLP – by showcasing an alternative version of Islam, in this case Ismaili Islam, one nuances the idea that there is only one way to be Muslim.<sup>356</sup> For clarity, I will use label “The Muslim Literacy Project” to speak only of ways in which the Ismaili community and their institutions are enhancing the understanding of Muslim diversity and a collective Muslim identity – fostering pride in intra-*umma* diversity.

The third part of the MLP entails the strengthening Ismaili Muslim identity internally, through their religious education programs and other subsequent programs mainly organized by the Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board (ITREB). It should come as no surprise that frequent face-to-face interactions with members of different cultural and religious traditions is probably the best way to have your pre-conceived perceptions challenged. It is for this reason that

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<sup>355</sup> Momani and Stirk, p. 3.

<sup>356</sup> The Ahmadiyya community also does this in their own projection of Islam; however, their response, like other responses, paint Islam as a monolith by saying “this is Islam” versus, “this is one way to be Muslim.”

like other Muslim communities in Canada, the Ismaili community, over the past few decades, has been proactive in strengthening their community's sense of self through various formal means – to which I have labelled the “Ismaili Identity Project.”

### The Ismaili Identity Project

Having a strong sense of Muslim identity is especially important in a climate of competing Muslim narratives. Following the tragic events of 9/11 many Muslims were faced with some difficult questions, to which many did not know how to respond. Part of the issue was that Muslims living in the diaspora were separated from traditional means of religious education and upbringing. Another issue is that being Muslim is a way of life, Muslims may have a hard time secularizing their public selves and, in many cases, taking for granted what being a Muslim actually entails. For many Muslims, the events of 9/11 have forced them to engage critically with their faith and find meaning in the diasporic context.<sup>357</sup> This has helped Muslims to become more informed ambassadors of the faith, enabling them to answer tough critical questions about their religious identity. However, this personal engagement has also yielded a somewhat Sunni-normative collective Muslim identity, due to the lack of availability and accessibility of minority Muslim literature. This is problematic because it glosses over minority Muslim identities, expressions, and histories, and wrongfully reinforces the idea of Islam as monolith. Even today you will see trends in survey and interview responses as a result of this homogenizing issue; Ithna'ashari Shi'as, Ismailis, and Sufis alike will sometimes speak of a Sunni-normative way of being Muslim, even if that model does not exist within their own traditions. Part of the IIP is to make space for the uniqueness of Ismaili Muslim identity, and other minority Muslim identities, and correcting misinformation about what being Muslim entails, thereby making 'foreign' ways of being a Muslim more legitimate. Further, Muslim identity projects, such as the Ismaili project, are a good means of offering alternative images of Islam than what is commonly presented in the media.<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> Muna Ali, 'Muslim American/American Muslim Identity: Authoring Self in Post-9/11 America', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 31.3 (2011), 355–81 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2011.599543>>.

<sup>358</sup> McDonough and Hoodfar, p. 134.

The Aga Khan has plainly stated that pluralism requires “that one’s individual identity is strong enough to engage confidently with those of other identities as we all walk together along the road to a better world.”<sup>359</sup> Thus over the last decade the Ismaili institutions have invested a great deal in their religious education; not only standardizing it, but also professionalizing. Part of the IIP is placing Ismaili Islam in the context of Muslim diversity and other religious diversities. I argue that the Ismaili institutions are investing in strengthening Ismaili identity in order that Ismailis become more confident ambassadors of their faith, especially when faced with competing worldviews, whether Muslim or non-Muslim.

Like other minority Muslim communities, Ismailis have a unique history. When people think of Muslim history, they may immediately think of Muslim empires, predominantly Sunni empires, which were far more prevalent than Shi‘i empires; however, acknowledging that all Muslims have unique cultures and histories is important for identity politics for recognition. Ismaili Muslims, including the Druze, and Musta’alis (Dawoodi Bohras), shared the first Shi‘i empire, the Fatimid Empire, which competed with the Sunni Abbasid and Christian Byzantine Empires from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Therein, there are reports of intra-*umma* dissonance and other sectarian intolerances, to which the Fatimid Imam-caliphs tried to respond. It was the first empire of its time to have diverse representation in its administration; Christians, Jews, Sunnis, and Shi’as. Other empires of its time were unable to succeed in creating a more tolerant and inclusive environment. This narrative is important as Ismailis today use the Fatimid example to justify their continued investment to pluralism, and the consequential benefits of such an ethic.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

Ismailis have had a significant presence in Canada since the 1970s. Their highly institutionalized tradition has enabled them to (re)settle and integrate well into Canadian society. Further, their

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<sup>359</sup> Aga Khan, ‘Inaugural Global Pluralism Award Ceremony’, *Aga Khan Development Network*, 2017 <<http://www.akdn.org/speech/his-highness-aga-khan/inaugural-global-pluralism-award-ceremony>> [accessed 5 January 2018]. Khan, ‘Inaugural Global Pluralism Award Ceremony’.

permanent presence in Canada is observed not only through the building of permanent *jamatkhanas*, but also through other public buildings, parks, and gardens, such as the Global Centre for Pluralism and the Aga Khan Museum and Park.

The IPP is a direct effort by the Aga Khan alongside the Ismaili community to bridge the superficial divide between diverse people. It is not just a humanity project, promoting collective harmony between people of different backgrounds in various societies, but also proposes that societies have the necessary programs and practices in place to accommodate vast diversity: such as a system that fosters the full participation of all members in society, regardless of race, class, gender, language, culture, or creed. This means eliminating all real and superficial barriers to full civil participation, such as poverty, fear of the other, and institutional discrimination. Further, it is important to note that the IPP serves the interests of the Ismaili community as well. As discussed in the introduction and in Chapter 3, the Ismailis are vulnerable to intolerance and persecution, thus promoting the ethic of valuing diversity can be seen as an effort to be able to preserve Ismaili identity and practice.

The IIP and the MLP are essential components of the IPP because they are part of the remedy to enable and foster a pluralistic society. These institutional efforts aim to counter the negative effects of Islamophobia and intra-*umma* dissonance on Muslim identities and help alleviate the growing irrational fear of Muslims and internal Muslim difference, through educational and experiential efforts. Further, as we will see in the chapters ahead, the MLP aims to alleviate the clash of ignorance not only between Muslims and non-Muslims, but between Muslims and Muslims, as well. For pluralism to work people cannot fear or distrust their neighbours and there needs to be effort to alleviate tensions and misunderstandings on both sides. There needs to be dialogue. There needs to be religious literacy. Further, for religious literacy efforts to be successful, Muslim identities need to be nurtured and strengthened in order to withstand outsider criticism and scrutiny, often coming from a place of ignorance and ethnocentrism – which is why the IIP is so instrumental.

The following two chapters will discuss and describe the MLP and the IIP more elaborately. Although these projects are primarily top-down efforts to promote literacy about Muslims and strengthen Ismaili identity, the subsequent chapters will look at how Ismaili identity shapes these two projects (Chapters 8 and 9) and how Ismailis themselves are participating in these projects by their own conviction (Chapter 10).

## V. THE MUSLIM LITERACY PROJECT

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*Let me mention one more specific issue where a sustained educational effort will be especially important. I refer to the debate — one that has involved many in this audience — about the prospect of some fundamental clash of civilisations between Islam and the West. In my view, the deeper problem behind any prospective “clash of civilisations” is a profound “clash of ignorances”. And in that struggle, education will be an indispensable weapon.<sup>360</sup> – Aga Khan*

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*It is important to note that what happens in North America, culturally, economically and politically, cannot fail to have worldwide repercussions — which is why the Museum will aim to contribute to a deeper understanding among cultures and to the strengthening of cultural pluralism: essential to peace, and to progress, in our world.<sup>361</sup> – Aga Khan*

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In the above quote, the Aga Khan alludes to the detrimental consequences Islamophobia can generate worldwide. The Aga Khan asserts that in order to combat what he refers to as a “Clash of Ignorances,” there needs to be a substantial religious literacy effort. For this reason, the Aga Khan, alongside his institutions, has invested a substantial number of resources in promoting literacy about Islam and Muslims in Canadian society.<sup>362</sup>

This chapter discusses how religious literacy<sup>363</sup> is being used as a tool by the Ismaili community to combat Islamophobia as well as intra-*umma* dissonance. It discusses the various

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<sup>360</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Jodidi Lecture at Harvard University’.

<sup>361</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Preface’, in *The Aga Khan Museum, Toronto*, ed. by Philip Jodidio (Munich: Prestel, 2008), pp. 6–11 <<http://archnet.org/publications/5217>> [accessed 26 January 2018].

<sup>362</sup> I use the term ‘the Muslim Literacy Project’ to describe these efforts. This term was selected based on Stephen R. Prothero’s argument that there are many ‘religious literacies’. The MLP aims to showcase diverse Muslim histories, identities, and experiences and so it is more fitting to use the term ‘Muslim’, as opposed to ‘Ismaili’. See, Stephen R. Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know--and Doesn't*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), p. 12.

<sup>363</sup> The term ‘religious literacy’ is often exclusively used to refer to education about religion in an educational setting (such as in schools or in cultural sensitivity training); however, I use the term more broadly to include experiential efforts (such as the Aga Khan Museum and the Aga Khan Garden), which aim to teach about Muslims and their diversity in history, in art, in culture, and in identity. While the Ismaili community is invested in promoting religious literacy in the educational setting (see the ‘Shaping of Pluralistic Dispositions in Education’ section of this chapter) this endeavour and its implications are far too nascent to study. Further, the Ismaili community is also promoting

national efforts taking place under the direction or influence of the Aga Khan alongside his Canadian institutions. The content reflected in this chapter is primarily derived through analysis of the literature surrounding the programs and projects of interest; however, it is also supported by interview data where appropriate. Before discussing the various efforts by the Ismaili community to combat Islamophobia and, as we will see, intra-*umma* dissonance, I will first discuss what religious illiteracy is, what the consequences of religious illiteracy can be, and how religious literacy can help alleviate both Islamophobia and intra-*umma* dissonance.

## RELIGIOUS ILLITERACY

Religious illiteracy can have harmful consequences for Muslims globally and locally. Diane Moore, the director of Harvard's program in Religion and Secondary Education, defines religious illiteracy as "lack of understanding about 1) the basic tenets of the world's religious traditions; 2) the diversity of expressions and beliefs within traditions that emerge and evolve in relation to differing social/historical contexts; and 3) the profound role that religion plays in human social, cultural, and political life in both contemporary and historical contexts."<sup>364</sup> Moore's approach stems from the discipline of religious studies, emphasizing the importance of interdisciplinary learning. The discussions that follow focus primarily on religious literacy from a religious studies approach as the initiatives of interest mainly nuance understandings of Muslims by showcasing examples of Muslim diversity, often through experiential forms of learning.<sup>365</sup>

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religious literacy about Muslims in their own Religious Education system; however, since this is an internal effort it will be discussed further in Chapter 6: the Ismaili Identity Project.

<sup>364</sup> Diane L. Moore, 'Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach', *World History Connected*, 4.1 (2006) <<http://worldhistoryconnected.press.uiillinois.edu/4.1/moore.html>> [accessed 30 July 2018].

<sup>365</sup> Again, much of the literature on religious literacy discusses it in an educational and classroom context. Although the Ismaili community is attempting to bring religious literacy into Ontario classrooms (see the 'Shaping of Pluralistic Dispositions in Education' section in this chapter) this effort is too nascent to observe and measure. Further, the majority of Ismaili efforts are primarily experiential in nature (as will be presented). For literature examining religious literacy in educational settings, see Adam Dinham and Martha Shaw, 'Religious Literacy through Religious Education: The Future of Teaching and Learning about Religion and Belief', *Religions*, 8.7 (2017), 119 <<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8070119>>; Robert Jackson, *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: Issues in Diversity and Pedagogy* (Routledge, 2013) <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203465165>>; Siebren Miedema, 'A Plea for Inclusive Worldview Education in All Schools/Een Pleidooi Voor Inclusieve Levensbeschouwelijke Vorming Op Alle Scholen', *Koers*, 77.1 (2012) <<https://doi.org/10.4102/koers.v77i1.35>>; John Valk, Mualla Selçuk, and Siebren Miedema, 'Worldview Literacy in the Academy and Beyond: Advancing Mutual Understanding

Moore warns us of the dangers of religious illiteracy, that it “has helped to foster a climate that is both politically dangerous and intellectually debilitating.”<sup>366</sup> According to Moore, the impact of religious illiteracy “include fueling the culture wars, curtailing historical and cultural understanding, and promoting religious and racial bigotry.”<sup>367</sup> American President Donald Trump’s Muslim travel ban, European and Quebec policies around religious veiling, the hesitancy of Western nations to accept Muslim refugees and immigrants into their countries, and the discrimination Muslims face in Myanmar and China, are other examples of the consequences of religious illiteracy.

Ali S. Asani offers another characteristic of cultural and religious illiteracy. Asani says that those lacking in religious literacy have “the tendency to attribute the actions of individuals, communities, and nations to simply ‘religion’.”<sup>368</sup> In terms of the Muslim faith, he argues that this lack of understanding of Islam and Muslims “leads to the ‘blame it all on Islam’ syndrome in which ‘religion’ is perceived to be chiefly responsible for all that defines or happens in a predominantly Muslim country” and that Islam is to blame for the “lack of democracy” in Muslim countries, their “economic underdevelopment”, and their “unjust treatment and marginalization of women.”<sup>369</sup> Religious illiteracy fuels ignorance about Muslims and Islam and without interventions that nuance these negative monolithic narratives, our shared future with Muslims of various backgrounds remains bleak.

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in *Diverse Societies\**, *Religious Education*, 115.3 (2020), 364–74  
 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2020.1768472>>; W. Y. Alice Chan and others, ‘Recognition of Context and Experience: A Civic-Based Canadian Conception of Religious Literacy’, *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 41.3 (2020), 255–71 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2019.1587902>>.

<sup>366</sup> Diane L. Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 4.

<sup>367</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, p. 3.

<sup>368</sup> Ali S. Asani, ‘Exploring Muslim Understandings of Islam’, *Centre for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Chicago*, 2009

<[https://cmes.uchicago.edu/sites/cmes.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/Ali%20S.%20Asani\\_Exploring%20Muslim%20Understandings%20of%20Islam.pdf](https://cmes.uchicago.edu/sites/cmes.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/Ali%20S.%20Asani_Exploring%20Muslim%20Understandings%20of%20Islam.pdf)> [accessed 17 February 2017].

<sup>369</sup> Asani, ‘Exploring Muslim Understandings of Islam’.

## The Importance of Religious Literacy

Many scholars of religious literacy believe that it can be instrumental in alleviating othering and discrimination and an important tool in the promotion of social cohesion.<sup>370</sup> Moore and Prothero define religious literacy as having a basic understanding of a religion and its beliefs, practices, and sacred narratives.<sup>371</sup> Since this simple definition tends to place too strong an importance on religious expression while neglecting the important role that context plays in engaging the believer, Moore further contends that religious literacy must also account for the internal diversity of religious observers and the important role context plays in shaping religion:

Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.<sup>372</sup>

Asani explains that religious literacy enables one to think critically about how religion is shaped by “complex cultural matrixes.”<sup>373</sup> Thus, although it is important to understand some ‘basic’ attributes of Muslims, which may vary according to a variety of historical and cultural factors, it is also essential to acknowledge the diversity that exists within Islam as a result of these ‘complex cultural matrixes’; how these unique cultural matrixes inevitably impact the ways in which ideas and beliefs are construed, which further influence the way we think and act in the world. Therefore, understanding Islam and Muslims in different contexts, including the influence of new contexts such as through migration and (re)settlement and the diversity that forms as a result of these historical and contemporary contexts, assists in humanizing Muslims, thereby eliminating

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<sup>370</sup> Moore, ‘Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach’; Prothero; Miedema; Jackson.

<sup>371</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, p. 5; Prothero, p. 14.

<sup>372</sup> Moore, ‘Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach’.

<sup>373</sup> Ali S. Asani, ‘Enhancing Religious Literacy in a Liberal Arts Education through the Study of Islam and Muslim Societies’, in *The Harvard Sampler: Liberal Education for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Jennifer M. Shephard, Stephen Michael Kosslyn, and Evelyn Maxine Hammonds (Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 1–31.

irrational fear of the other which may, in turn, foster a climate of inclusion and participation. Finally, this holistic approach to understanding Muslims challenges the narrative that Islam is homogenous – the audience is invited to ‘imagine’ Islam as a construction based on numerous variables, thereby opening the notion of a Muslim to all of its potential internal diversity.

In an increasingly diverse world, religious literacy efforts become more and more important. Religious illiteracy yields us to ‘other’ and often dehumanize those who are different from ourselves. Out of fear of the ‘other’, people compliantly accept the unjust discrimination of entire populations. This fear, arguably, stems from a lack of understanding and engagement. In a world where we are more connected to others from different ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious backgrounds, more informed understandings of our differences and similarities have never been so critical. Religious literacy has the ability to alleviate misunderstanding and bridge dialogue between different people. Further, religious literacy as an approach does not lend to Islamophilia. Unlike other responses to Islamophobia, it does not replace one homogenous exclusive narrative with another but, rather, asks the individual to think of Islam in terms of the context(s) in which it was shaped. Thus, religious literacy is not simply about knowing everything there is to know about a religious tradition and how it differs across time and place. Religious literacy is better understood as a framework for nuancing any generalizing claim about any one religious tradition or its people. Further, the religious literacy approach, by giving concrete examples to nuance pre-conceived understandings about Muslims and Islam, challenges the individual from equating religion, in and of itself, as solely responsible for problematic thinking and behaviours and enables them to observe religion as developing, adapting, and responding to unique contexts.

Religious literacy about Islam and Muslims equips the thinker with the framework necessary to draw rational and informed conclusions. In this sense, religious literacy has the ability to alleviate the ‘ignorance’ that the Aga Khan refers to. Although many religious literacy efforts are primarily developed for instruction in the classroom and to enhance understanding amongst educators, there are other creative means of dissemination.

### The Muslim Literacy Project: An Ismaili Initiative

Although the Ismaili community is interested in showcasing the diversity of beliefs and practices of Muslim communities – such as when they invited the Mevlevi Sufi Order, also known as the Whirling Dervish, to perform at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto – another focus is to illustrate the rich cultural diversity of the Muslim world and how context might have shaped that diversity. Religion, like other aspects of culture, is dynamic and constantly negotiating itself with other facets of society. By informing about the cultural diversity within the Muslim world, the Ismaili community not only challenges homogenous misunderstandings of Islam and Muslims, but also grants unique Muslim histories and accomplishments space within the context of greater world history. Further, as will become evident throughout this chapter, the Ismaili community is also interested in fostering an appreciation for the inherent pluralism within the *umma* – thereby nurturing a sentiment of pride in a collective Muslim identity in all its unique forms.

There are various important contributions to the greater MLP, such as the public speeches of the Aga Khan where he promotes literacy about the Muslim world, some of which are quoted throughout this chapter. Other significant high-profile contributions to the MLP are: the Aga Khan Museum and Park (Toronto), which showcases the diversity of Muslim tradition, art, and culture; the Aga Khan Garden (University of Alberta, Botanic Gardens), which illustrates Muslim ethics in terms of environmental stewardship and the diversity of Muslim cultures and civilizations; and the collaborative project between the Ismaili Imamat and the Government of Ontario entitled, *Shaping Pluralistic Dispositions in Education*, which aims to promote inclusion, pluralism, and literacy about Muslim diversity in Ontario classrooms. There are also numerous contributions to the MLP by individual members of the Ismaili community, which, as we will see, are mainly organized by members of the Ismaili intelligentsia.<sup>374</sup> These collaborative and grassroots initiatives

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<sup>374</sup> I use the term ‘intelligentsia’ as the Aga Khan has used it to refer to the knowledge society within the Ismaili community. The Ismaili intelligentsia has a moral obligation to share their knowledge and apply it towards the betterment of their communities. See the Aga Khan’s “Address at the 25th Anniversary Graduation Ceremony of The Institute of Ismaili Studies,” 2003, published on the Institute of Ismaili Studies website here: <https://iis.ac.uk/content/address-25th-anniversary-graduation-ceremony-institute-ismaili-studies>

will be discussed separately in Chapter 10: Ismaili Participation in the Muslim Literacy Project and the Ismaili Identity Project.

Prior to discussing the various top-down efforts by the Ismaili institutions in promoting literacy about Muslims and the Muslim world, especially in terms of diversity, I will first contextualize the need for such efforts, mainly that Canadians are often misinformed about the Muslim world or are unaware of the diversity that exists within Islam.

### The Clash of Ignorance

While negative and misinformed portrayals about Muslims pre-date the modern era, the Iranian Revolution (1979) and 9/11 (2001) are arguably the most influential events in shaping the image of Muslims today. In one study, Mahmoud Eid and Karim H. Karim found that about half of the U.S. and Canadian populations hold negative views of Islam.<sup>375</sup> Western mass media is a significant contributor for these general perceptions, as it often portrays Muslims as a monolithic entity,<sup>376</sup> and often in negative fashion.<sup>377</sup>

In a recent study, Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme found that media continues to significantly impact “closed views of Islam.”<sup>378</sup> According to Wilkins-Laflamme, although mainstream media is more critical of anti-Muslim rhetoric today, she argues that since 2016 “more extreme alt-right media outlets and their blatant anti-Muslim/anti-immigrant message have also become more visible to Canadian audiences.”<sup>379</sup> Further, in the last decade, we also see the rise of populism, often in the form of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant narratives, being used as a tool to gain

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<sup>375</sup> Eid and Karim.

<sup>376</sup> Carl W. Ernst, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Aziz Al-Azmeh and Effie Fokas, *Islam in Europe: Diversity, Identity and Influence* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>377</sup> Ismael and Rippin; Eid and Karim; Karim H. Karim, *Islamic Peril*; Poole; Paul Baker, Costas Gabrielatos, and Tony McEnery, *Discourse Analysis and Media Attitudes: The Representation of Islam in the British Press* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>378</sup> Wilkins-Laflamme.

<sup>379</sup> Wilkins-Laflamme, pp. 91–92.

popularity in political contexts.<sup>380</sup> As discussed in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, these negative portrayals have serious consequences for Muslims worldwide.

The interviews conducted with members of the Ismaili community and leadership revealed that most participants do not believe other Canadians are aware of the diversity that exists within Islam. Interview participant Sukayna, who will be more formally introduced in Chapter 8, recounted a story where her school would not excuse her from being late due to a religious observance that occurred the night before because they did not believe she was Muslim:

I had an experience in high school during Ramadan. The secretary was used to several children coming into the main office, because we had one designated office that was allocated for prayers throughout the day for Muslims. And I came late to school one day, it was after *Laylat ul Qadr*, which is our Night of Power and [for Ismailis] it occurs on the 23rd night of Ramadan. I had come to school late and went to the office to say that I was late and to please permit me into class. The secretary turned around and said she didn't believe that I was Muslim because I hadn't come into pray with the other kids all month. And I found that interesting because, again, she was branding... even though I tried to explain Ismailism and how there were different sects, she was just branding all Muslims to be the same.

The 'branding' that Sukayna refers to is the Sunni-normative construction of what it means to be Muslim, which excludes many minority Muslim historical traditions. Thus, Muslim literacy has the potential to create space for minority Muslim narratives both within the *umma* and outside of it.

The Ismaili institutions in Canada also recognize that Canadians, including many Muslims, are not fully aware of the diversity that exists within Islam or, if they are aware, they often attribute difference as an exception. In an effort to remedy this issue of ignorance, the Aga Khan Foundation Canada (AKFC), which is based in Ottawa, actively seeks to educate Canadians about Muslim diversity through their programming. In an interview with Hussein, an executive member of

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<sup>380</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Cosmopolitanism, Religion, Diaspora: Kwame Anthony Appiah and Contemporary Muslim Women's Writing', *New Literary History*, 49.2 (2018), 199–225 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2018.0011>>.

AKFC, he revealed that AKFC is both formally and informally presenting on Muslim diversity in Canada and in the Muslim world through their various programming. Further, Hussein contends that AKFC also symbolically represents Muslim diversity in how they present themselves as a Muslim organization:

I think we are [nuancing the image of Muslims] in two ways: in the first way is that we exist as a Muslim institution, as an institution inspired by Islam and with a global Muslim leader – the Institution of the Imamat – and therefore, [AKFC] represents a particular view and understanding of Islam in the contemporary world... So, I think the first thing is that the work that we're doing globally and its relationship to the Imamat, expresses a certain view, and a certain ethic of Islam in practice. The second thing is, of course, most of our work is in parts of the Muslim world, or parts of the world where there are Muslims present, and [while] they may not always be the majority, [we operate] where there are Muslim populations. And in working in that set of countries, I think we show the diversity of the Muslim world... [Muslims] by the way, in about half of those countries, are living side-by-side among people of many different faith backgrounds, who have lived historically in a context of deep heterogeneity. So, I think the nature of our work, and our kind of footprint is itself kind of an expression of the diversity of the Muslim world.

Through their work, AKDN not only recognizes Muslim diversity but honours it and seeks to preserve it through many of their programming and divisions, such as the Aga Khan Trust of Culture, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

While the AKDN's work is primarily situated internationally, Canadian presence can be observed through AKFC, the Global Centre for Pluralism, the Delegation of Ismaili Imamat, the Aga Khan Museum and Park, the Aga Khan Garden, and FOCUS Humanitarian Assistance Canada.<sup>381</sup> The presence of these institutions alone, inspired by the ethics of the Ismaili faith, nuance the homogenous image of what it means to be a Muslim in Canada. The Aga Khan Museum and Aga Khan Garden are of particular interest to the MLP and will be discussed further in this chapter. However, before getting into that discussion, it is important to note that the Ismaili Council

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<sup>381</sup> 'Canada | Aga Khan Development Network', *Aga Khan Development Network* <<http://www.akdn.org/where-we-work/north-america/canada>> [accessed 13 August 2017].

for Canada, which operates separately from the AKDN, is also involved in various local and national initiatives through their respective regional offices. The most influential of these local programs and initiatives will be discussed in Chapter 6: The Ismaili Identity Project, as the local councils actively engage outside audiences in getting to know the Ismaili community and their work better.

### Internal Community Efforts

Internal community efforts are very important for this project as it shows that the Ismaili community is not only interested in educating non-Ismailis about Muslim diversity and civilization, but Ismailis as well. Inner-community efforts primarily present themselves in terms of religious education classes. Ismailis have the option of enrolling in religious education from kindergarten to grade 12. There are also opportunities for adult learning too, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

The most significant of these inner-community efforts was the revamping of the Ismaili religious education system. In 2009, the Ismaili community professionalized their religious education system for grades 7 through 12 in two ways: first, by introducing a standardized curriculum and, secondly, by hiring Ismaili graduates from a fully funded program, the Secondary Teacher Education Programme (STEP). To teach the new curriculum, candidates had to complete a double master's degree in Muslim Civilizations and Education at the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) and the University of London in England, respectively.<sup>382</sup> Those who graduate then go back to their home countries and deliver the modules that were professionally developed at the IIS. The modules not only speak about Ismaili history, faith, and practice, but relate those themes to the history of the wider *umma*. Since many of the Muslim literacy efforts tie significantly into Ismaili identity formation, they will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter: The Ismaili Identity Project.

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<sup>382</sup> The program underwent some recent changes which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

We will now discuss the various high-profile Muslim literacy efforts by the Aga Khan and his institutions, which aim to reach both Muslim and Canadian audiences: the Aga Khan Museum, the two Islamic gardens projects, and a major collaborative public educational effort.

## THE AGA KHAN MUSEUM

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*The Aga Khan Museum will be a resource for the large Muslim population living in Canada and the United States. It will be a source of pride and identity, showing the inherent pluralism of Islam, not only in terms of religious interpretations but also in terms of culture and ethnicity. These aspects are important because there is no doubt whatsoever that the Muslims of North America will play an important role in their own societies and in the development of states and populations within the ummah.<sup>383</sup> – Aga Khan*

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*[The aim of the museum is to]... **foster knowledge and understanding both within Muslim societies and between these societies and other cultures** (emphasis added). The Aga Khan Museum and its collection reflect the plurality of the Muslim world, while the adjacent Ismaili Centre will create spaces for interaction and dialogue. Together, they will offer platforms for the search for mutual understanding among all communities and cultures.<sup>384</sup>*

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## Background

The Aga Khan Museum (AKM) is located off of the Don Valley Parkway at 77 Wynford Drive in Toronto. It is the first Islamic art and culture museum in North America. This is important because this initiative was brought to fruition by a minority Muslim community, one that continues to face persecution, intolerance, and discrimination. The museum opened its doors in 2014 but its concept

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<sup>383</sup> Aga Khan IV, 'Preface', pp. 9–10.

<sup>384</sup> 'Media Advisory: Aga Khan to Launch New Institutions in Toronto, Canada | Aga Khan Development Network', *Aga Khan Development Network*, 2010 <<http://www.akdn.org/press-release/media-advisory-aga-khan-launch-new-institutions-toronto-canada>> [accessed 10 September 2017].

had been in the making since the late 90s.<sup>385</sup> The museum's collection is comprised of the Aga Khan's personal collection alongside donations by his family members.<sup>386</sup>

The museum is sponsored by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), which operates under AKDN. It is important to see this Canadian museum in context with other AKTC projects happening around the world because they all share a common focus: “the physical, social, cultural and economic revitalisation of communities” primarily in the developing world where Muslims reside.<sup>387</sup> In brief, other AKTC projects include: the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme, which works on rejuvenation projects in the Muslim world;<sup>388</sup> Archnet.org, which works in collaboration with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and is an open access architectural library that focuses on Muslim cultures;<sup>389</sup> the Aga Khan award for Architecture, which awards “projects that set new standards of excellence in architecture, planning practices, historic preservation and landscape architecture” primarily amongst Muslim populations;<sup>390</sup> the Aga Khan Music Initiative, which “is an interregional music and arts education programme” working primarily in Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. This unique initiative aims “to support talented musicians and music educators working to preserve, transmit, and further develop their musical heritage in contemporary forms”<sup>391</sup> – an initiative that Wahabbi, Salafist, and other exclusivist Muslim schools of thought would consider heresy as these orthodox traditions forbid

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<sup>385</sup> ‘Press Release: Aga Khan to Establish Major Academic and Cultural Center and Museum in Canada’, *Aga Khan Development Network*, 2002

<[https://web.archive.org/web/20081207033210/http://www.akdn.org/press\\_release/551/Aga-Khan-to-Establish-Major-Academic-and-Cultural-Center-and-Museum-in-Canada](https://web.archive.org/web/20081207033210/http://www.akdn.org/press_release/551/Aga-Khan-to-Establish-Major-Academic-and-Cultural-Center-and-Museum-in-Canada)> [accessed 26 January 2018].

<sup>386</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Foundation Ceremony of the Ismaili Centre, the Aga Khan Museum and Their Park’, *Aga Khan Development Network*, 2010 <<http://www.akdn.org/speech/his-highness-aga-khan/foundation-ceremony-ismaili-centre-aga-khan-museum-and-their-park>> [accessed 16 December 2011].

<sup>387</sup> ‘Aga Khan Trust for Culture | Aga Khan Development Network’, *Aga Khan Development Network* <<http://www.akdn.org/our-agencies/aga-khan-trust-culture>> [accessed 1 March 2018].

<sup>388</sup> ‘Historic Cities | Aga Khan Development Network’, *Aga Khan Development Network* <<http://www.akdn.org/what-we-do/historic-cities>> [accessed 1 March 2018].

<sup>389</sup> ‘Archnet.Org | Aga Khan Development Network’, *Aga Khan Development Network* <<http://www.akdn.org/our-agencies/aga-khan-trust-culture/archnetorg>> [accessed 1 March 2018].

<sup>390</sup> ‘Aga Khan Award for Architecture | Aga Khan Development Network’, *Aga Khan Development Network* <<http://www.akdn.org/architecture>> [accessed 1 March 2018].

<sup>391</sup> ‘About the Aga Khan Music Initiative | Aga Khan Development Network’, *Aga Khan Development Network* <<http://www.akdn.org/our-agencies/aga-khan-trust-culture/aga-khan-music-initiative/overview>> [accessed 1 March 2018].

any cultural expressions that do not coincide with their exclusivist understandings of ‘true’ Islam. And finally the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, in collaboration with Harvard University and MIT, which aims “to improve the teaching of Islamic art and architecture; to promote excellence in advanced research; to enhance the understanding of Islamic architecture, urbanism, and visual culture in light of contemporary theoretical, historical, critical, and developmental issues; and to promote the knowledge of Islamic cultural heritage.”<sup>392</sup> Thus, the museum is part of a greater series of projects aimed at fostering, preserving, and promoting diverse Muslim identities and heritages – again, something that is not welcomed by exclusivist Muslim traditions, which is precisely why their success is so important.

According to the museum’s website, its mandate is “to foster a greater understanding and appreciation of the contribution that Muslim civilizations have made to world heritage.”<sup>393</sup> Further, it aims to “promote tolerance and mutual understanding among people” through dialogue, “education, research, and collaboration.”<sup>394</sup> According to the Aga Khan, the museum is part of a wider project to promote “an improved understanding of the many cultures and civilisations of the Islamic world” in major cities in the Western world.<sup>395</sup> Another important aspect of the museum is its intended audience – the museum not only aims to reach non-Muslim audiences, but Muslim audiences as well. The Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, Shelley Glover, expressed that, “[i]n its educational focus, the Museum will reach out to Muslim and to non-Muslims alike about peace, creativity, beauty and pluralism of Muslim history” which she contends “is needed more than ever.”<sup>396</sup> The fact that part of the mandate is to reach Muslim audiences is of particular interest and importance. Does the museum aim to proselytize the Muslim *umma* in some way shape or form? I argue that it does, but just not in the way one might think.

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<sup>392</sup> ‘Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture | Aga Khan Development Network’, *Aga Khan Development Network* <<http://www.akdn.org/our-agencies/aga-khan-trust-culture/aga-khan-program-islamic-architecture>> [accessed 1 March 2018].

<sup>393</sup> ‘Mission’, *Aga Khan Museum*, 2014 <<https://www.agakhanmuseum.org/about/mission>> [accessed 9 February 2018].

<sup>394</sup> ‘Mission’.

<sup>395</sup> ‘Press Release’.

<sup>396</sup> Malika Ladha and Rehana Rajabali, “A Vision Realized” in *Symbols of Enlightenment: The Ismaili Centre, Toronto and the Aga Khan Museum*, *The Ismaili, Canada*, 2014, pp. 9–17 (p. 13).

Although Muslim literacy is a fundamental aspect of the museum, the museum also aims to be a source of Muslim “pride and identity” with the desire to illustrate “the inherent pluralism of Islam, not only in terms of religious interpretations but also in terms of culture and ethnicity.”<sup>397</sup> Thus, the museum aims to be a centre of Muslim pride, honouring the diversity that exists across the Muslim world, thereby attempting to foster a cosmopolitan sentiment aimed at alleviating intra-*umma* dissonance. The museum plays a particularly important role in making sure that minority Muslim traditions are represented, while simultaneously attempting to foster pride in this diverse collective Muslim identity.

Aside from being a centre for collective Muslim pride, the museum, of course, aims to be an educational institution for non-Muslim audiences in the context of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim narratives. The Aga Khan forewarns that “[t]he need to bridge the growing divide of misunderstanding between East and West is pressing”;<sup>398</sup> for this reason, educational efforts such as the museum are becoming more and more paramount.

The museum has a budget of 15 million CAD and its revenue is a bit less than 5 million a year (based on an interview in 2016). The museum fundraises for the other 5 million and AKTC will fund the rest until their income increases. AKM is quite active in fundraising and have over 10,000 paid members, many of whom are Ismaili. The museum’s main donors are individuals but they are pushing to make it more broad-based to include more non-Ismaili community members. They are currently trying to unlock government funding by convincing the government that the museum is “vital to the city, to the province, and to the nation.”<sup>399</sup>

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<sup>397</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Preface’, pp. 9–10.

<sup>398</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Preface’, p. 6.

<sup>399</sup> Interview with an executive member of AKM

## Why Canada?

According to the Aga Khan, Canada was chosen to be the home of this museum because of the shared values of pluralism and multiculturalism:

Canada has for many years been a beacon to the rest of the world for its commitment to pluralism and its support for the multicultural richness and diversity of its peoples. It is precisely this diversity that sustains the moral and dynamic coherence in public life that Canada has so successfully constructed, and is predicated on the ethic of respect for human dignity. The country has fully embraced pluralism as a foundation for its strength and growth and I am convinced that this is absolutely necessary for the stability of an interdependent world.<sup>400</sup>

This is where we can see how the museum ties into the greater IPP; pluralism enables an environment that welcomes ethnic, cultural, religious diversity, and, in this case, Muslims and their diversity. With the national sentiment of multiculturalism in place, minority communities feel enabled, and maybe even encouraged, to allow non-community members into their historical and contemporary worlds – thereby, fostering and promoting a greater awareness and appreciation of difference. Further, in order to achieve a truly pluralistic society, there needs to be dialogue between communities – especially when a community such as Muslims are under such constant scrutiny. Thus, the IPP and the MLP go hand in hand, supporting each other to achieve their goals; to achieve a society that fosters the ethic of pluralism and to promote awareness and understanding of the Muslim ‘other’ to non-Muslim audiences, respectively.

In an interview with an executive from the museum, it was explained that Canada was chosen as the home for the museum due to a longstanding relationship with the institution of the Imamat and its commitment to fostering pluralism and multiculturalism:

Canada, I think, is a very inspired choice. When you look at this museum it could have been built virtually anywhere in the world. And the choice of Canada came down to a couple very important reasons. One of them was that there was a very strong relationship between the Imamat and Canada, and this dates back to the 1970s when

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<sup>400</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Preface’, p. 7.

Canada opened its doors to Ismaili refugees from Uganda. This is a very important humanitarian gesture which was never forgotten. And I think that the building of the museum here in Canada is very much a recognition of that very strong tie between the Imamat and the nation. I think beyond that there is also the importance of Canada as a multicultural society. Look, many countries are multicultural. Most countries can claim they are multicultural. But I think Canada has a different view of this. It's not simply multiculturalism based on statistics, it's actually multicultural based on the way people live. And I think that when we look at Canada, it is the most successful multicultural country in the world, not just because of statistics, but because of the way people approach multiculturalism: the way that they look at other views and opinions and how there's not just acceptance but a real understanding of those differences.

Multiculturalism remains an important factor in the decision to build the museum, and other Ismaili projects in Canada; however, the story of how Canada accepted Ugandan-Asian refugees in the 1970s, as described in Chapter 3: Know Your Neighbour, continues to influence Ismaili identity, belonging, and participation in Canadian society.

The following pages will explore the following questions: why is this museum important? What are its aspirations? What does the building itself represent? And how does it achieve its aspirations?

## Why a Museum?

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*All you have to do is to look at the news headlines and the news headlines of the last 15 years and you can see that the level of understanding of Muslims and Islam is tremendously low. There are events that are happening throughout the world that impact Muslims and Islam. And a lot of the reasons that are given behind the events that are happening are misguided, they're just not thought through, they're reactionary, they're xenophobic. They're based on ignorance. And this is where, I think, certainly when you look at the impact this museum can have on a country like Canada, it is basically giving people the information from a much fairer assessment so that a more balanced set of opinions can actually develop. – Executive of the Aga Khan Museum*

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The museum was built in direct response to the consequences of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim rhetoric. The Aga Khan asserts that throughout history, the “fear of ‘the other’ has torn apart communities along racial, religious, linguistic and ethnic lines,”<sup>401</sup> an issue that continues to plague contemporary societies around the world today. AKM aims to remedy the othering of Muslims and between Muslims. “Understanding ‘the other’,” the Aga Khan contends, “requires a level of dialogue and knowledge which educational institutions such as the museum can foster.”<sup>402</sup> Further, he says that “Museums have a strong educational impact: they present evidence of material cultures, without intermediaries, in a direct way that appeals to people both on emotional and intellectual levels.”<sup>403</sup> Again, the choice of a museum is particularly interesting because it not only acts as a space preserving identity and heritage but also as an educational hub where the public can interact with its content.

The Aga Khan’s younger brother, Prince Aynn Aga Khan, and Chair on AKM’s Board of Directors, said that “art and culture can have a profound impact in healing misunderstanding and in fostering trust even across great divides” and that the museum will serve as “a gateway into the history and artistic traditions of the Muslim world” for both non-Muslims and Muslims who wish

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<sup>401</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Preface’, p. 6.

<sup>402</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Preface’, p. 6.

<sup>403</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Preface’, p. 6.

to better understand that world.<sup>404</sup> In a speech at the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon, Prince Ayn Khan revealed that the social mission of the museum “will be to make the art of Islam in all its diversity better known. It will show the multiplicity of voices with which Islam has spoken. I hope, too, that it will show something of the dialogue that has existed between the arts and the aesthetics of the non-Muslim world and the Muslim world.”<sup>405</sup> Further, due to the fairly large Muslim population in North America he says that “it is important that people around Toronto are better educated about Islam in general through its culture. Through that will come more understanding that will... encourage tolerance.”<sup>406</sup> Thus, through this museum, it is intended that many misconceptions and prejudices about Muslims will be alleviated through this educational endeavour, thereby enabling the ethic of pluralism to fully flourish.

Unlike other museums which are primarily devoted to the display of Islamic art and culture, the AKM is amongst the few museums that are “entirely devoted to the acquisition, preservation, study and display of the arts of Muslim civilisations”<sup>407</sup> – thereby fulfilling AKTC’s mission. It is important to note that the museum not only wishes to preserve, study, and display *ancient* Muslim artifacts, but to showcase today’s lived expressions as well.

An executive of the museum revealed quite plainly that the museum was built to have an impact on people’s perception of Muslims and Islam:

When His Highness was looking at developing this museum, his thoughts went well beyond the simple question of finding a home for this wonderfully fine collection. For him, you know, a lot of people develop museums simply for that purpose but in truth I think that his idea was that it actually has impact – and that impact is imparting on

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<sup>404</sup> Prince Ayn Khan, ‘Opening of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto’, *Aga Khan Development Network*, 2014 <<http://www.akdn.org/speech/prince-amyn-aga-khan/opening-of-aga-khan-museum-toronto>> [accessed 9 February 2018].

<sup>405</sup> Prince Ayn Khan, speech at the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon, Portugal, 13 March 2008, as cited in Philip Jodidio, *The Aga Khan Museum, Toronto* (Munich: Prestel, 2008), p. 23 <<http://archnet.org/publications/5217>> [accessed 26 January 2018].

<sup>406</sup> Prince Ayn Khan, speech at the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon, Portugal, 13 March 2008, as cited in Jodidio, *The Aga Khan Museum, Toronto*, p. 23.

<sup>407</sup> Prince Ayn Khan, ‘Opening of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto’.

people a much better understanding of Islam and Muslims. And when you look at the timing of all this, you couldn't come up with a better time.

Because museums are permanent structures, it nourishes the idea that these ideas and histories are here to stay; that these foreign histories are important for Canadians to understand, so much so that they are given them a permanent space. Further, many Muslims of different cultures and communities have come to Canada to make it their permanent home. Thus, the museum is a reflection of the diversity of the Muslim world, but also Canadian-Muslim diversity.

Sharing Muslim histories through artistic expression in public places is not a modern idea. According to Prince Ayn Khan, publicly displaying artistic collections is not a new phenomenon but can be found in Muslim history, and Ismaili history specifically:

In the Muslim world, collecting and public displays of rare and beautiful objects were common. The notion of *Waqf* itself, of property given for the public good and for religious purposes, engendered a widespread movement to collect. Public displays of artefacts were a feature of the Fatimid period and precious objects from the treasure were publicly paraded through the streets of Cairo. In Central Asia, in the middle periods many Muslim rulers collected and displayed to visitors their finest objects. From as early as 1607, for instance, in Safavid Iran, Shah Abbas the Great organised public displays of his collection and made a *Waqf* donation to his ancestral shrine... thus making them available to be seen by visitors to that shrine.

Publicly displaying collections fosters a sense of pride and a collective identity, while reinforcing a grandeur narrative of political legitimacy and accomplishment. This theme of “continued heritage” is reiterated by the Aga Khan when he states that “[t]he arts have always had a special significance for my family. More than a thousand years ago my ancestors, the Fatimid Imams, encouraged patronage of the arts and fostered the creation of collections of outstanding works of arts and libraries of rare and significant manuscripts.”<sup>408</sup> It is clear that part of the museum's

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<sup>408</sup> Aga Khan IV, 'Introduction to 'Path of Princes: Masterpieces from the Aga Khan Museum', *NanoWisdoms*, 2008 <<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/?s=path+of+princes&cat=0>> [accessed 16 June 2017].

narrative is one of cultural continuity of Muslim expression – something that Muslims, regardless of their affiliation(s), can take great pride in.

The museum serves an important function in fostering collective appreciation and respect for diversity by giving communities the opportunity to engage and learn from each other, an essential component to the IPP:

Insofar as civilisations manifest and express themselves through their art, museums have an essential role to play in facilitating respect and appreciation of social structures, values and faiths that are an integral part of the societies which produced the art, thereby, ensuring that whole populations are given the opportunity to understand each other, using new, modern methods imaginatively and intelligently.<sup>409</sup>

AKM should be understood as an innovative effort to institutionalize the ethic of pluralism in Canadian public space. In order for pluralism to flourish one must have a general understanding of the ‘other’ and themselves. The museum accomplishes this through the promotion of religious literacy about Muslim diversity and fostering pride in diverse Muslim identities. The religious literacy effort aims to not only educate non-Muslims about the Muslim ‘other’, but to educate Muslims about the inherent diversity that has always existed within Islam – a narrative that is downplayed or amounted to heresy by exclusivist Muslim traditions. Through this latter effort, AKM aims to foster a sense of pride about the diversity of Muslim traditions, something that should be valued instead of feared.

## Religious Literacy

Again, religious literacy aims to give people a basic understanding of a particular religious tradition’s beliefs, practices, texts, histories, and worldviews.<sup>410</sup> Further, it nuances preconceived generalizations about a religious tradition by presenting the intra-faith diversity of beliefs,

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<sup>409</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Introduction to ‘Path of Princes: Masterpieces from the Aga Khan Museum’.

<sup>410</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, pp. 5–6; Asani, ‘Exploring Muslim Understandings of Islam’; Ali S. Asani, ‘Enhancing Religious Literacy’, *Harvard Magazine*, 2011 <<http://harvardmagazine.com/2011/09/enhancing-religious-literacy>> [accessed 26 February 2017].

practices, texts, histories, and worldviews. Moore writes that, “[h]aving a basic knowledge of the world’s religious traditions will deepen our understanding of multiculturalism and enhance our ability to embrace rather than fear our differences.”<sup>411</sup> Thus, religious literacy about the ‘other’ is a necessary component in fostering an environment for the ethic of pluralism. Having some understanding about the ‘other’ helps to alleviate unfounded suspicion, scrutiny, and fear.

In an interview with an executive employee of the museum, he contends that the majority of Canadians are not aware of the diversity that exists within Islam. Generally speaking, Canadians view Islam as a monolith; he said, yet “when you actually study it and realize both the geographic and cultural diversity of it, there’s a lot more, there’s a lot more diversity than I think anyone can possibly imagine.” He admitted that even he himself was not aware of the depth of the diversity until he started working on the museum project. He believes that the museum is a great way to bring about awareness of the diversity that exists within Islam but suggests that another good way to bring about the awareness is through mass media:

If you look at how public broadcasting can influence people’s opinions there has to be a lot more public programming that looks at what exactly ‘is’ the Muslim world. [Programming] that looks at the culture, the people, and the languages. This is something that I think is very much missing at this point. And if you want to create something that is objective, fair, rational, you know creating programs of the sort that are out there in the mass media is actually probably going to give you the biggest impact because there are 30 million people in this country, and we’ve only had 200,000 people come through this museum. It’s going to take a long time to change people’s perceptions that way but if you can get things out in the popular media this will make a big, big difference.

He also expressed that the museum often reaches out to the media but says that they do need much more coverage.

The Aga Khan has been very forward with his aspirations for the museum, specifically in regards to the aim of the museum, to foster “knowledge and understanding both within Muslim

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<sup>411</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, p. 6.

societies and between these societies and other cultures.”<sup>412</sup> Although many non-Muslims are not aware of the diversity that exists within Islam, an equally important issue is the present intolerance of Muslim diversity within the *umma*. Muslims may be aware that there exist different interpretations of the faith, but to appreciate, value, and tolerate this diversity are issues in and of themselves.

This sentiment of fostering pluralism both within and beyond the *umma* was reiterated by Prince Ayn Khan at the museum’s opening ceremony:

As I reflect on this diversity, the word “connection” comes to mind, for it will be the special opportunity of this Museum to connect a broad array of Muslim cultures with one another, while also connecting visitors from other cultures to the richness of the Muslim past. Cultural connection will be at the heart of the Museum’s mission: to increase and illuminate the dialogue *between different Muslim civilisations* themselves and *between those civilisations and non-Muslim civilisations*.<sup>413</sup> (emphasis added)

Fostering pluralism and dialogue within and outside of the *umma* is central to the museum’s mission. While it is apparent from the statements above that the museum was built in response to intra-*umma* dissonance and misunderstanding, it was, of course, also constructed due to a continued ignorance about and intolerance of Muslims, their cultures, and their unique histories by non-Muslims. According to Luis Monreal, the General Manager of AKTC:

The evolution of the political situation in the last few years, its resulting crises, and the additional factor of flows of emigration toward the West, have revealed – often dramatically – the considerable lack of knowledge of the Muslim world in Western societies. This ignorance spans all aspects of Islam: its pluralism, the diversity of the interpretations of the Qur’anic faith, the chronological and geographical extension of its history and culture, as well as the ethnic, linguistic and social diversity of its peoples. The supposed ‘shock of civilizations’ is in reality nothing more than the manifestation of the mutual ignorance that exists between two long-time neighbouring worlds. For this reason, the idea of creating a museum of Muslim culture, as an eminently educational institution with the aim of informing the North American public

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<sup>412</sup> Jodidio, *The Aga Khan Museum, Toronto*, p. 7.

<sup>413</sup> Prince Ayn Khan, ‘Opening of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto’.

as to the diversity and importance of Muslim civilization, naturally imposed itself in the AKTC's programmes.<sup>414</sup>

These statements echo, again and again, the importance of understanding the diversity that exists within Islam as a means to nuance the homogenous narrative of Islam in West. The museum intentionally tries to challenge the opinions of those who believe that Islam is a 'backwards' religion, a religion that is incompatible with Western modernity. They take a more indirect approach to this mission. They want people to see that Muslims have a rich, creative, artistic heritage. They want visitors to see the "connections between the Muslim world and the worlds around it, and to find a better sense of common ground within them."<sup>415</sup> They do not try to project a single Muslim narrative, but instead display multiple narratives through the showcasing of art and culture from the diverse Muslim world.

While serving as an educational hub for Muslim civilizations, both historic and contemporary, the museum has also actively responded to events that affect Canadians. One example of how the museum has organized its programming around current events is featuring an exhibit on Syrian art and culture. The exhibit entitled, "Syria: A Living History," which partnered with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), ran from October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016 to March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017. This exhibit was featured in direct response to the Syrian refugee crisis, a year after newly sworn in Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced Canada would be accepting 25,000 Syrian refugees – 10,000 by the end of 2016. On the museum's website, the caption for the exhibit warns against present media narratives which paint Syrians in a negative and helpless light and invites the public to learn about Syria, its history, and its resilience:

Few countries have captured the world's attention like Syria has today. Stories of conflict and displacement dominate the media and define people's awareness of the place. Syria: A Living History brings together artifacts and artworks that tell a different story — one of cultural diversity, historical continuity, resourcefulness, and resilience. For over five millennia, this region perched on the eastern Mediterranean has

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<sup>414</sup> Luis Monreal, *Splendori a Corte: Un'anteprima del Museo Aga Khan di Toronto*, Milan, Italy, 2007. As cited in Jodidio, p. 41-42.

<sup>415</sup> Interview with an executive member of AKM

witnessed great world civilizations comingling on its soil and producing art, literature, and culture that constitute the country's rich legacy. Strongly informed by a distinctive landscape and history, artists of Syria throughout the ages have made priceless contributions to world heritage. Syria: A Living History inspires new understanding of Syria's past and present, and invites new ways of thinking about its future.<sup>416</sup>

This sentiment is reiterated in the Exhibition Companion Book, *Syria: A Living History*, in the foreword written by the director and CEO of the museum, Henry S. Kim:

Today, Syria is a country in the global spotlight, associated with stories of conflict, raging wars and mass migration of people seeking refuge. There is another story of Syria — one ignored by current media coverage — and it tells of a resilient country and creative peoples, reflecting a rich history of multiculturalism.<sup>417</sup>

There is no question that this exhibit directly responds to the Syrian refugee crisis and aims to humanize and inform on the rich cultural heritage and resilience of Syrians. Intentionally, this exhibit also served to foster a sense of pride for Canadian-Syrians and newly arrived Syrian refugees. In fact, the museum provided free admission to Syrian newcomers from November 2016 up until the end of February 2017 as a means of welcoming them into the Canadian mosaic. In the official press release, Kim said that “Making art accessible to all has always been a key part of our mandate and this outreach program is no exception. We want Syrians to realize the value we place in their arrival in this country, and to understand that they are a vital part of the cultural mosaic of Canada.”<sup>418</sup>

Noteworthy is that the war in Syria enabled an environment for violent Muslim extremism to flourish. The rise of ISIS, with their exclusivist Muslim ideologies, poses a great threat to

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<sup>416</sup> ‘Syria: A Living History’, *Aga Khan Museum*, 2016 <<https://www.agakhanmuseum.org/syria-living-history>> [accessed 27 February 2018].

<sup>417</sup> Henry S. Kim, ‘Foreword’, in *Syria: A Living History*, ed. by Diane Watson (The Aga Khan Museum, 2016), pp. 6–8 (p. 6) <[www.agakhanmuseum.org](http://www.agakhanmuseum.org)>.

<sup>418</sup> ‘Press Release: Aga Khan Museum Offers Syrian Newcomers Free Admission to the Acclaimed Exhibition Syria: A Living History’, *The Aga Khan Museum*, 21 November 2016 <[https://www.agakhanmuseum.org/sites/default/files/downloadable/AKM\\_FreeAccess\\_PressRelease\\_11.21.16.pdf](https://www.agakhanmuseum.org/sites/default/files/downloadable/AKM_FreeAccess_PressRelease_11.21.16.pdf)>

Muslims whose traditions do not fit into ISIS's version of Islam. Further, ISIS has intentionally destroyed priceless artifacts and heritage sites as a means to erase diverse cultures and histories that have helped to shape religious identity over the ages.<sup>419</sup> Thus, Western ignorance combined with egregious actions on the part of extremist Muslim traditions makes the museum's mission even more challenging. As we will see shortly, the museum has a unique way of speaking about exclusivist Muslim traditions in the form of art.

Another timely display of support and inclusion came during the 2016 Gay Pride Parade, where the Aga Khan Museum erected six columns, each coloured with a colour of the rainbow, an internationally known symbol of pride. Although there was no official press release or statement on the art display, in an interview with an executive employee of the museum – a museum that represents Muslim civilizations – he responded with the following:

When you look at Toronto in the month of June, this is the month of celebrating pride and every cultural institution celebrates it in their own way. Ours was, I think, perhaps one of the most subtle, but also striking, of all of them. We didn't do the big parties that the Royal Ontario Museum and the Art Gallery of Ontario did, [instead] we simply put up something that I thought was simple, quiet, and beautiful... we didn't advertise it, we didn't caption it, we didn't put an explanation. It was just six very colourful cubes.

This display is of particular interest because although it supports LGBTQ inclusion, it is also symbolically promoting a particular version of Islam, a quite inclusive one. While the museum aims to foster an appreciation of Muslim diversity, some Muslim traditions may have found this display to be problematic and unrepresentative of their exclusive beliefs – thereby exacerbating intra-*umma* dissonance, which the museum aims to alleviate. This is likely the reason why this display was not advertised or captioned – so as to not bring too much attention to this feature, in order to not further exacerbate sectarian tensions within the *umma*.

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<sup>419</sup> See '10 Historical Sites Destroyed by ISIS and Why They Matter | CBC Radio', *CBC*, 13 March 2015 <<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/day6/episode-224-isis-war-on-history-nazi-royals-mcdonalds-in-decline-and-more-1.2990417/10-historical-sites-destroyed-by-isis-and-why-they-matter-1.2990449>> [accessed 20 July 2020].

Further, this subtle expression of support for members of the LGBTQ community also came shortly after the Pulse Nightclub shooting, June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016, where Omar Mateen, an allegedly queer Muslim, shot and killed 49 attendees. This tragedy sparked the discussion of homophobia and Islam, which, unfortunately, still exists as a problem in various Muslim communities today. Although the spokesperson from the museum said that this display had nothing to do with the tragedy, its presence speaks to a narrative of support and inclusion for LGBTQ members.<sup>420</sup>

There is one final art exhibit that is worth discussing as it was the first to directly respond to stereotypes about Shi'a Muslims, in Iran. The exhibition, "Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet: Contemporary Persians" premiered at the museum in February 2017 and then travelled to the United States later that summer. This exhibition was timely as it opened just as President Trump's Muslim travel ban was announced, which affected a number of Muslim communities, and particularly when Iranians were "making international headlines".<sup>421</sup> Prince Ayn Aga Khan said that the exhibit "touched a chord internationally at precisely the moment when its insights into contemporary Iran and Iranians were most needed."<sup>422</sup> The exhibit showcased the artwork of 23 "culturally rebellious" artists who chose "self-expression over silence" regarding issues such as gender, religion, and politics in Iran. The artwork ranged from oil-barrels covered with violent motifs to seductive imagery. One display, *Flying Carpet*, by Farhad Moshiri depicted "silhouettes of fighter planes cut into traditional carpets, reflecting on the threat of global conflict."<sup>423</sup> The artists were united in their efforts "to explore complex issues against a backdrop of political and

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<sup>420</sup> While there has been no official statement by the Aga Khan on LGBTQ understandings in the Muslim world, interviews with Ismaili participants reveal support for LGBTQ members, especially Muslim and Ismaili members. Many have called for assistance to support Ismaili LGBTQ members and now resources and services are being put in place to support these Ismaili members.

<sup>421</sup> 'Aga Khan Museum: A Year in Review 2017', *Aga Khan Museum*, 2018

<[https://www.agakhanmuseum.org/about/pdf/AKM\\_A-Year-in-Review-2017.pdf](https://www.agakhanmuseum.org/about/pdf/AKM_A-Year-in-Review-2017.pdf)> [accessed 1 August 2018].

<sup>422</sup> Prince Ayn Aga Khan, 'Aga Khan Museum: A Year in Review 2017', *Aga Khan Museum*, 2018, p. 3

<[https://www.agakhanmuseum.org/about/pdf/AKM\\_A-Year-in-Review-2017.pdf](https://www.agakhanmuseum.org/about/pdf/AKM_A-Year-in-Review-2017.pdf)> [accessed 1 August 2018].

<sup>423</sup> 'Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet: Contemporary Persians—The Mohammed Afkhami Collection', *The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston* <<https://www.mfah.org/exhibitions/rebel-jester-mystic-poet-contemporary-persians-mohammed-afkhami-collection>> [accessed 1 August 2018].

social unrest.”<sup>424</sup> This exhibit stood out as it was the first to showcase the contextual complexity of the Muslim world while offering a safe-space for dialogue, defiance, and awareness of social unrest. Just like that, normalized Muslim identity constructions of Iranians were challenged and given a space and platform to be represented and acknowledged.

## Muslim Identity

As mentioned previously, strengthening pride in Muslim identity is one of the mandates of AKM. Although an Ismaili Muslim initiative, this museum was created to be a source of pride in collective Muslim identity, especially for Muslims in North America who come from different Islamic schools of thought, cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and historical backgrounds. The museum attempts to achieve this ‘collective pride’ through the display of diverse artistic and religious expressions while simultaneously, although sometimes subtly, drawing the public’s attention to how these expressions are shaped by context, such as the “Rebel, Jest, Mystic, Poet” exhibit. The Aga Khan contends that this particular initiative is important because, he believes, that North American Muslims have an important role to play in participating in and contributing to their respective societies.<sup>425</sup> The Aga Khan not only envisions the museum as a centre for knowledge about the diverse Muslim world but also a medium for North American Muslims to engage with and disseminate this newly acquired literacy to their local communities, both secular and religious.

Loss of cultural and religious identity is a real threat to Muslims living in the diaspora and around the world, which may result from a multitude of factors such as the intricacies of Western globalization, modernization, war, and conflict. While the Aga Khan, alongside other Muslim leaders, recognizes the threat of identity loss, he also recognizes the challenges of living as a Muslim in the modern world. The Aga Khan does not believe that there is an inherent clash between the Muslim world and the modern world, but instead encourages Muslims to rediscover

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<sup>424</sup> ‘Aga Khan Museum: Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet: Contemporary Persians’, *Aga Khan Museum* <<http://www.agakhanmuseum.org/exhibitions/contemporary-persians>> [accessed 1 August 2018].

<sup>425</sup> Jodidio, *The Aga Khan Museum, Toronto*, pp. 9–10.

“ancient and newly inspired sources” that support modern values.<sup>426</sup> This effort requires a particular literacy.

The Aga Khan warns against those authorities within the *umma* who attempt to claim exclusivity over Islam. The Aga Khan contends that, “[t]he Muslim world’s two main tendencies, traditional and modern, will both have a role to play but if one attempts to achieve exclusivity at the expense of the other, the consequences will be predictable and highly damaging.”<sup>427</sup> It is for this reason that the Aga Khan, alongside the Ismaili community, is not propagating one single Muslim narrative, but instead creating space, tolerance, and acceptance for the various ways one can be Muslim. However, while the museum attempts to create space for all Muslim identities, it does not shy away from drawing attention to harmful exclusivist and extreme forms of Islam – it just does so through art.

Between May 29<sup>th</sup> and October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018, the museum presented the damaging social consequences of traditional Wahhabi Islam. The installation, “Suspended Together – (Standing Dove, Eating Dove)”, by Saudi-Arabia-born artist Manal AlDowayan, presented how private life in Saudi-Arabia is constricted by the religious administration.<sup>428</sup> A flock of 30 white doves was displayed “with copies of women’s travel documents imprinted on their wings” highlighting the travel restrictions women in Saudi-Arabia face, regardless of their age and social class.<sup>429</sup> “The youngest was six months old, the oldest 60, and among them are award-winning professionals and active pioneers in various fields in Saudi Arabia, such as science, engineering, journalism, education, and the arts.”<sup>430</sup> While women in Saudi Arabia were recently granted the ability to obtain driver’s licenses in 2018, the administration still enforces strict guardianship laws which prohibit women in many areas of life including the freedom to travel. This installation draws attention to

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<sup>426</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Address at the “Musée-Musées” Round Table Conference, Louvre Museum (Paris, France)’, *NanoWisdoms*, 2007 <<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/8283/>> [accessed 13 June 2017].

<sup>427</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Address at the “Musée-Musées”’.

<sup>428</sup> ‘Suspended Together’, *Aga Khan Museum*, 2018 <<http://agakanmuseum.org/exhibitions/suspended-together>> [accessed 20 July 2020].

<sup>429</sup> ‘Suspended Together’.

<sup>430</sup> ‘Suspended Together’.

the damaging consequences of extreme Muslim narratives, while simultaneously nuancing Saudi Arabian Muslims as complaisant.

Again, the Aga Khan contends that the modernists and the traditionalists schools of thought are each responding to the anxiety that accompanies the potential loss of identity through a Christianly-infused westernization process.<sup>431</sup> Each school of thought asks themselves the same question, “how to maintain and strengthen this identity in the future” with each, ultimately, choosing different paths.<sup>432</sup> While each community will respond uniquely to this challenge, the AKM serves as a permanent hub for Muslim art, culture, expression, and collective Muslim identity in its diverse forms – while simultaneously holding space for criticism. Thus, it is important that while Muslim communities build their efforts to strengthen Muslim identity they do not do so at the expense of other Muslim traditions.

An executive from the museum says that the museum is intentional in their attempts to bring the Muslim *umma* to the museum; that by doing so Muslims will then be exposed to the cultural and ethnic diversity of the Muslim world:

Another audience that I think is going to be very important is the Muslim community... I don't believe that all that many Muslims view Islamic art as something that is part of their own cultural heritage. They may [come to] view one of the areas of Islamic art, so Iranians will [come to] look at Iranian art, and they [will] view it very favourably, but there may not be a full understanding of the breadth of the arts and the creativity of the Muslim world... with Muslim audiences it is as much about highlighting the areas that they [already] know, as highlighting the areas that they don't know. So, in other words, a Muslim may understand the arts and culture of a particular region, but this museum will expose you to the wider whole. And from that you get a better understanding of the cultural diversity and the ethnic diversity of peoples within the Muslim world.

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<sup>431</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Address at the “Musée-Musées”’.

<sup>432</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Address at the “Musée-Musées”’.

He contends that it is important for Muslims to understand the diversity within the Muslim world, as this knowledge can foster a greater sense of collective pride in those unique histories and identities. Further, by showcasing political exhibitions and installations like those mentioned previously, Muslims are invited to be critical of their own backgrounds and histories that have shaped exclusivist depictions of Muslim identity. Thus, the museum also serves as a medium for dialogue and exchange between differing Muslim communities – directly responding to the challenge of intra-*umma* dissonance:

[When] you live within a country or community, you may not actually recognize the diversity because you don't encounter it. When you look at Canada, this is a wonderful blank canvas because you may be a Muslim coming from, let's say Indonesia, but in this city you are going to find Muslims that come from everywhere else in the Muslim world. And that's something very special about Canada and the grand population. And I think that museums like this museum have an important role in how they facilitate the dialogue – to get people from throughout the Muslim world in conversation with one another. To me, that's one of the great opportunities we have in front of us.<sup>433</sup>

The othering of Muslims by other Muslims takes place worldwide – especially in regions where exclusivist ideologies are prevalent. While you often have different Muslim communities living in one cultural area, there may not always be a healthy exchange between them. In the diaspora, Muslims are face-to-face with Muslims from different cultures, languages, ethnicities, and histories and often share spaces within the local mosque despite these differences. However, it is also noteworthy that Muslim identity in the diaspora is not only challenged by the diversity of other Muslim traditions, but by other religious traditions as well. Muslim communities are a minority in the diaspora and, thus, there needs to be a sense of unity in this diversity if they are going to successfully preserve their unique identities and challenge Islamophobia and anti-Muslim rhetoric.

The museum has high hopes for the Muslim communities of North America. With intentions to engage both traditionalists and modernists, the museum hopes that visiting Muslims

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<sup>433</sup> Interview with an executive member of AKM

will take back to their secular and religious communities the message of an “inherent pluralism of Islam, not only in terms of religious interpretations but also of cultural and ethnic variety” and to see that Muslims are “capable of adopting other people’s cultures and languages and making them [their] own” as they have throughout history.<sup>434</sup> In order for this aggressive goal to be realized, the diverse *umma* must first come and engage with the museum and its programs.

Officials at the museum revealed that they are actively trying to bring non-Ismaili Muslims to the museum but because each community operates differently, they have to be adaptable in their approach. The challenge is not enticing communities to come and view aspects of their own cultural heritage but getting them to come and see the heritage of foreign Muslim communities. Thus, while Muslims may already have a sense of pride in their unique Muslim identity, it is getting them to appreciate all the diversity that exists within the *umma* and taking pride in the diverse-collective. By bringing Muslims to the museum, they hope that Muslims will have a new appreciation for the diversity that exists within the Muslim world but also bring the inherent message of pluralism back to their communities, foster a collective pride in Muslim diversity, and alleviate discord within the *umma*.

In an interview with the museum’s executive, he remarks that those Muslims who have visited are appreciative and impressed by the museum and its contents but that there are many Muslims who have not yet visited. He says that since their opening they have probably received 200,000 visitors and maybe 20% have been Muslim. Further, he says that there are approximately half a million Muslims in the Toronto area, and only 10% of them have seen the Museum. They are actively working to bring the remaining 90% to the museum – which has been challenging thus far. One has to ask, why would Muslims not want to visit the first Museum in North America dedicated to Muslim art and culture? What is holding them back?

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<sup>434</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Address at the “Musée-Musées”’.

Not surprisingly, the museum has caused outrage for some Muslims. For one, this museum was founded by the Ismaili community, a minority tradition within Islam, and a minority tradition that has struggled throughout history to be recognized as a legitimate manifestation of the message of Islam. An example of hostility towards the development of this museum comes from a journalist, Sumayya Kassamali. The Museum is located in a neighbourhood with a high density of Muslims of lower socioeconomic status. While some may argue that the museum has elevated property value in the area, Kassamali believes that the museum serves “to gentrify the neighbourhood [rather] than to support the resident community.”<sup>435</sup> Further, with the Ismaili community often being attributed as a model migrant community, Kassamali criticizes this museum as a symbol of the “good” Muslims trying to evangelized the “bad” Muslims:

As for those of us whose Muslim communities are on the other side of this celebratory moment – those whose mosques are vandalized, whose religious scholars are regularly interrogated by state officials, whose youth are infiltrated by informants, whose charities are barred from operating – we don’t need a multi-million dollar museum. We need an end to Canadian support for war and occupation, an end to the policing of our communities, an end to surveillance and complicity in torture, an end to anti-Muslim legislation. And to Stephen Harper and the Aga Khan: we reject your glorification of a state that does not exist for our protection, and your pride in the close cooperation between your two institutions of power. The tradition of Islam is one of struggle, with submission only to God – and our struggles against what you represent are far too real to ever be placated by ancient artifacts.<sup>436</sup>

I sympathize with Kassamali’s frustrations as many of them are duly founded – Muslims are often racially profiled, and many have been victims of Islamophobia. The Ismaili community, because they are a Muslim community, also face these challenges. However, as will be discussed in Chapter 8, many Ismaili participants identified that another important issue that they face is intra-*umma* dissonance, a theme clearly embodied in Kassamali’s article. When she writes, “... your two institutions of power. The tradition of Islam is one of struggle, with submission only to God” she is directly pointing the Ismaili community’s allegiance to their Imam, the Aga Khan. Kassamali’s

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<sup>435</sup> Aga Khan, ‘Introduction to ‘Path of Princes: Masterpieces from the Aga Khan Museum’, *NanoWisdoms*, 2008 <<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/?s=path+of+princes&cat=0>> [accessed 17 June 2017].

<sup>436</sup> Kassamali.

article is a clear example of *takfirism*, the intolerance and hatred for the Muslim ‘other’. Kassamali ostracizes the Ismaili community from the greater *umma*, because they do not conform to her “Muslim” ideal. While the museum intentionally attempts to alleviate intra-*umma* dissonance, it will not be successful unless those who feel disenfranchised by the museum or those who are intolerant of Ismaili Muslims, actively participate with the museum.

### *Identity in Architecture*

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*Buildings can do more than simply house people and programmes. They can also reflect our deepest values; great architecture, like great art, captures esoteric thought in physical form. In Islamic thought, beauty and mystery are not separated from the intellect — in fact, the reverse is true.*<sup>437</sup> – Aga Khan

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Through its content and programming, the AKM showcases diverse Muslim identity expressions of past and present. However, the building itself has a particular role to play in how Muslim identity is portrayed. Architecture plays a crucial role in “codifying and reproducing social identities” and forging specific narratives.<sup>438</sup> Paul Jones, says that “architecture is one cultural space in which political projects attempt to become socially meaningful.” There is no doubt that this building is propagating social messages of pluralism, tolerance, and understanding, but it also narrates a story of belonging, privilege, and legitimacy.

Architecture is an expression of how a nation or community sees themselves and how they want to be seen by others.<sup>439</sup> Architecture is also expressive of its context and environment, through the use of certain materials, symbols, and design. The architecture of the AKM is full of apparent and hidden meanings, much like how Ismailis understand their faith and world. For Ismailis, the

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<sup>437</sup> Aga Khan IV, “‘Architecture in Islamic Arts’ Opening Ceremony – An Exhibition from the Aga Khan Museum (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)”, *NanoWisdoms*, 2012 <<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10055/>> [accessed 24 June 2017].

<sup>438</sup> Paul Jones, *Sociology of Architecture: Constructing Identities* (Liverpool Scholarship, 2011), p. 2.

<sup>439</sup> Jones, p. 2.

faith is comprised of the *zahiri*, that which is apparent, and the *batini*, that which is unseen or hidden. This very understanding can be found throughout the museum's architectural design.<sup>440</sup>

The AKM was designed by Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki. At first glance, the museum looks nothing like historical Muslim architecture – there are no domes or minarets – but upon closer observation, it does have traditional elements (see Figure V.I). For the Aga Khan, it was important that the museum expressed an Islam that is both traditional and modern – an Islam that is situated in the present modern context but still reflects a traditional Islamic narrative. The modern narrative is depicted in the building's outward appearance through the use of clean straight lines, glass, and concrete, but the tradition of Islam, at least from the Ismaili point of view, is captured throughout Maki's architectural design; primarily through the expression of geometry and light.



*Figure V.I: Aga Khan Museum*  
Credit: ©AgaKhanMuseum.org

Geometric symmetry can be observed throughout the Ismaili complex and is a motif that has been used in Islamic architecture throughout history (see Figures V.II and V.III). Geometry

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<sup>440</sup> The architecture is not limited to showcasing solely Ismaili Muslim identity, but I wanted to be careful to not speak on behalf of other Muslim communities. Other Muslims may find elements in the structure to be representative of their identity as well, while others, I'm sure, would prefer to be excluded from this narrative.

represents, “a sense of stability, tranquillity and equilibrium.”<sup>441</sup> In geometric expressions, no one feature dominates the other, all aspects are important for the whole. This is similar to how Ismailis understand diversity as depicted in the Qur’an, that diversity is an intentional divine manifestation, necessary for the material and spiritual progress of the collective.

The use of geometry throughout the AKM is particularly interesting because it represents a unified whole; each part on its own does not amount to the beauty that comes from viewing the collective whole. The same goes for the diversity that exists within Islam, that the beauty of Islam lies within its diverse manifestations and expressions. Something that should be observed with awe and not with dissonance.



*Figure V.II: Sacred Geometry – Aga Khan Museum  
Credit: ©Fahreen Kara*

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<sup>441</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Address to the Asia Society, “The Physical Structure of Islam”, “Islamic Architecture: A Revival” (New York, USA)’, *NanoWisdoms*, 1979 <<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/2010/>> [accessed 3 August 2018].



Figure V.III: Sacred Geometry – Shadow and Light  
Credit: ©Tom Arban (photographer) and Aga Khan Museum  
Source: Archnet

Another important feature that radiates throughout the museum is the concept of light. When the Aga Khan commissioned Maki to design the museum, he wrote him a letter outlining his thoughts and aspirations for the project. In the letter, the Aga Khan expressed that the design should incorporate the spiritual concept of light, *nur*, which is found in various religious traditions, not exclusively to Islam. The Aga Khan writes,

For the Aga Khan Museum, I thought that ‘light’ might be a concept around which you could design an outstanding museum. The notion of light has traversed nearly all of human history, and has been an inspiration for numerous faiths, going as far back of course to the Zoroastrians and their reverence for the Sun, to the *Sura* in the Holy Qur’an titled *al-Nur*. Decades of Western history are referred to as the ‘enlightenment’ for good reason.<sup>442</sup>

For Ismailis, the concept of light is very important to their religious tradition; not only in their understanding of the *nur* of Allah, but also the *nur* of Imamat – a light passed down from Imam to Imam (a theme discussed in Chapter 3). To symbolize the mysticism of light, rock crystal was incorporated into the architectural design.

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<sup>442</sup> Jodidio, *The Aga Khan Museum, Toronto*, p. 37.

Throughout Muslim history, rock crystal was a material used to make beautiful ornaments, jewellery, bottles, ewers, and other objects. In addition to using rock crystal for the design of the museum, Maki also used it in the design of the Delegation of Ismaili Imamats building, in Ottawa. For the Aga Khan, there is a very important thought-provoking reason behind the use of rock crystal: the reflection of divine majesty and the contemplation it extends:

Why rock crystal? Because of its translucency, its multiple planes, and the fascination of its colours – all of which present themselves differently as light moves around them. The hues of rock crystal are subtle, striking and widely varied – for they can be clear or milky, white, or rose coloured, or smoky, or golden, or black.

It is because of these qualities that rock crystal seems to be such an appropriate symbol of the profound beauty and the ever-unfolding mystery of Creation itself – and the Creator. As the Holy Quran so powerfully affirms, “Allah is the Creator and the Master of the heavens and the earth.” And then it continues: “Everything in the heavens and on earth, and everything between them, and everything beneath the soil, belongs to Him...

...And the more we discover, the more we know, the more we penetrate just below the surface of our normal lives – the more our imagination staggers. Just think for example what might lie below the surfaces of celestial bodies all across the far flung reaches of our universe. What we feel, even as we learn, is an ever-renewed sense of wonder, indeed, a powerful sense of awe – and of Divine inspiration.

Using rock crystal’s iridescent mystery as an inspiration for this building, does indeed provide an appropriate symbol of the Timelessness, the Power and the Mystery of Allah as the Lord of Creation.<sup>443</sup>

For the Aga Khan, the majesty of rock crystal is an example of divine magnificence and mystery and, as such, is worthy of our contemplation. This excerpt is reflective of how the Aga Khan, as the Imam, often speaks to his Ismaili followers. In this excerpt, the Aga Khan invites a particular contemplation to occur. Like Sufi poetry, there are multiple layers of meanings and some people will only grasp the *zahiri* layer. Thus, the analogy of rock crystal symbolizes not only the outward

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<sup>443</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Inaugural Ceremony of the Delegation of the Ismaili Imamats, Ottawa’, *Aga Khan Development Network*, 2008 <<http://www.akdn.org/speech/his-highness-aga-khan/inaugural-ceremony-delegation-ismaili-imamat-ottawa>> [accessed 15 June 2017].

dimensions of faith, but also the inward search for knowledge and understanding – two themes that significantly shape Ismaili identity, as we will see in Chapter 9.

Finally, on closing on the theme of light, it is important to reiterate that the Aga Khan does not believe that the light in which the Qur'an speaks of is exclusive to Islam. In his own words: "As we work towards that vision of the future, we will remember the Sura of Light from the Qur'an. It tells us that the oil of the blessed olive tree lights the lamp of understanding, a light that belongs neither to East nor West. We are to give this light to all. In that spirit, all that we learn will belong to the world — and that too is part of the vision I share with you."<sup>444</sup>

There is no doubt that the museum has a very important purpose in North American society, and Canadian society specifically. Many of the employees and volunteers were drawn to the museum because of its social messages of pluralism, understanding, and strengthening pride in Muslim identity. An executive employee of the museum says that their most important resources are human resources. He says that the museum has 60 paid employees and over 300 volunteers. Out of the 300 volunteers he says that approximately 75% are Ismaili. The volunteers believe in the social mission of the museum and are motivated by its mandates. The fact that approximately 75% of the museum's volunteers are Ismaili is not surprising, and this phenomenon, the tradition of selfless service, will be discussed further in Chapter 9.

The museum is clearly interested in engaging Canadian audiences in a Muslim literacy effort. Further, it aspires to be a beacon of Muslim pride – a hub of pride in the diversity that exists within the Muslim world. The very architecture of the building presents a Muslim identity that is both traditional and modern, embedding esoteric understandings using the concepts of geometry and light in the form of contemporary architecture. While the Ismaili community has been instrumental in donating their time and money to the museum, non-Ismailis too share in the social mission of the museum in promoting a more nuanced understanding of the Muslim world. Finally,

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<sup>444</sup> Aga Khan IV, 'Address to the Asia Society'.

according to an AKM executive, the museum is already involved in organizing travelling exhibits, so that they are not only viewed as a Toronto-based museum. The museum has intentions of not only showcasing their content and programs to western Canadian provinces but also intends to expand their reach internationally.

## ISLAMIC GARDENS

Other important projects that promote literacy about the Muslim world and foster pride in Muslim identity are the various Islamic gardens projects. Parks and Gardens have become an important revival project under the AKTC. They are a part of a larger project facilitated by AKTC “[t]o restore and create beautiful green spaces”<sup>445</sup> that reflect Islamic ideals and preserve and strengthen pride in Muslim identity. The Aga Khan states that these garden projects come because urbanization and urban architecture “has neglected the importance of open spaces in a healthy city landscape.”<sup>446</sup> He continues that, “[w]e keep crowding more buildings into dense concentrations while short-changing the enormous impact that well designed open spaces — green spaces — can have on the quality of urban life.”<sup>447</sup> The AKTC believes that “green spaces themselves could be catalysts for positive economic, social and cultural change.”<sup>448</sup>

According to the Aga Khan, parks and gardens are expressions of divine majesty and connect Muslims with a rich past:

...Gardens can serve as a symbol of “connection” in other ways as well. Among them are rich connections across time linking us to the past. The Garden has for many centuries served as a central element in Muslim culture. The Holy Qur’an, itself, portrays the Garden as a central symbol of a spiritual ideal — a place where human creativity and Divine majesty are fused, where the ingenuity of humanity and the

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<sup>445</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Aga Khan Park Opening Ceremony (Toronto, Canada)’, *NanoWisdoms*, 2015 <<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10903/>> [accessed 8 August 2018].

<sup>446</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Aga Khan Park, Toronto’.

<sup>447</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Aga Khan Park, Toronto’.

<sup>448</sup> ‘Parks and Gardens’, *Aga Khan Development Network* <<http://www.akdn.org/what-we-do/parks-and-gardens>> [accessed 8 August 2018].

beauty of nature are productively connected. Gardens are a place where the ephemeral meets the eternal, and where the eternal meets the hand of man.<sup>449</sup>

Gardens are particularly interesting as they serve as permanent public spaces that capture a particular time in history while paying homage to traditions of the past. Islamic gardens in particular connect us with the natural world while humbly reminding us that we are a part of the natural creation. The Aga Khan says that “[t]he tradition of Islamic Gardens places an emphasis on human stewardship, our responsibility to nature and to protect the natural world.”<sup>450</sup> He continues to say that gardens also serve as a place for contemplation and reflection; that they are “a place where — whatever difficult moments may come our way — we can always find, in the flow of refreshing water, a reminder of Divine blessing.”<sup>451</sup> This concept is reflective of the spiritual dimension of Islam, and reflective in Ismaili identity and practice as we will see in Chapter 9.

Gardens are a theme in the Qur’an and have been incorporated in Islamic architecture throughout Muslim history.<sup>452</sup> One depiction of the garden in the Qur’an reflects the primordial garden where Adam and Eve first ‘lived’; from which they were expelled; and to which they long to return. The Qur’an also discusses the gardens in paradise, *jannah*. *Jannah* is described as having four gardens and four streams of flowing water, milk, honey, and wine.<sup>453</sup> Shaded gardens and trees that bear fruits are also present in *Jannah*.<sup>454</sup> We see many of these Qur’anic themes reflected in the architecture and design of past and present Islamic gardens.

A central theme found in many of the Canadian-Ismaili building projects is the garden. These gardens reflect traditional Islamic themes while simultaneously harmonizing them within a contemporary environment. Through the harmonization of traditional design within the modern

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<sup>449</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Aga Khan Park, Toronto’.

<sup>450</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Aga Khan Park, Toronto’.

<sup>451</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Aga Khan Park, Toronto’.

<sup>452</sup> D. Fairchild Ruggles, *Islamic Gardens and Landscapes* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

<sup>453</sup> Ruggles, *Islamic Gardens and Landscapes*, p. 89.

<sup>454</sup> Ruggles, *Islamic Gardens and Landscapes*, p. 89.

context, Islamic gardens invite us to learn about the Muslim histories, traditions, and contemporary experiences that influence their design. Further, these green spaces are historical markers of the presence of Muslims in Canada – spaces that will be preserved for future generations. While the buildings listed in Table II.I in Chapter 2 have some aspect of a garden, such as the court garden at the Delegation of the Ismaili Imam in Ottawa, there are two particular gardens that stand out: they are the Aga Khan Park, which connects the AKM and the Ismaili Centre in Toronto, and the Aga Khan Garden at the Botanic Gardens at the University of Alberta.<sup>455</sup>

### Aga Khan Park (Toronto)

The Aga Khan Park (AKP) connects the AKM and the Ismaili Centre in the Wynford Drive complex and is approximately 2.5 acres in size. The park was designed by Lebanese artist, Vladimir Djurovic, who competed in an international competition for the role.<sup>456</sup> This particular garden embodies the theme of the traditional Islamic garden as reflected in the gardens of the Mughal Empire and Alhambra in Spain, “which flourished during the great era of Spanish history when Muslims, Jews and Christians lived together in creative harmony.”<sup>457</sup> Thus, the garden embodies a narrative through the use of these traditional elements, which tells a story of pride in Muslim civilizations and their historical legacies.

After winning the prize, in a later consultation with the Aga Khan, Djurovic agreed to visit various Islamic gardens around the world prior to finalizing his plans. He recounts that it was during his trip around the world that he realized that a crucial element was missing in his original design:

“After our design was selected as the winning scheme,” explains Vladimir Djurovic, “His Highness asked me to take an extensive trip around the world to visit remarkable

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<sup>455</sup> There was meant to be another garden built in Burnaby, BC but that project has been put on hold for logistical reasons.

<sup>456</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Ismaili Centre, Toronto, the Aga Khan Museum and Their Park Foundation Stone Ceremony (Toronto, Canada)’, *NanoWisdoms*, 2010 <<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/9425/>> [accessed 24 June 2017].

<sup>457</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Aga Khan Museum, Ismaili Centre, and Park Foundation Stone Ceremony’.

places that he has selected for me. I remember vividly him telling me, ‘After your visit, you can resubmit your scheme as is and we’ll build it, or present any changes that you imagine as a result of your trip’. I was not told anything about the reasons or motives behind the trip, and was left wondering as I travelled from continent to continent. I went from the truly timeless Alhambra in Grenada to the Cordoba Mosque, and on to some sublime monuments and gardens across Egypt and India, where I encountered the enchanting Fatehpur Sikri in Agra. Towards the end of this journey, while I was at Humayun’s Tomb in Delhi, a magical Mughal garden, it all became clear to me. The goal of His Highness is not only anchored in meaningful projects for the present. He thinks also about the generations to come... I realized there and then, in that captivating Mughal garden, that anything in our approach that strayed from such noble goals, any detail that we had designed that could not stand the test of time, at all levels, had to be changed or omitted, and we presented a new scheme. I must admit that since that time, these values and aspirations have remained with us in each and every project that we take on...<sup>458</sup>

The concept of time is of utmost importance to the Imam of the Time, who must not only enhance the quality of life of the present Ismaili community, but also include future generations in his forecast. While the concept of time will be discussed further in Chapter 9, it is noteworthy that many of the Aga Khan’s projects are merely stepping-stones to fulfill greater aspirations. These various parks and gardens projects can be seen as the attempt to have a lasting memory in North American society – a memory that will bring pride to the Muslim *umma*, not only in the Americas, but around the world. In that, Muslims will have a marker of their presence and contribution to North American society for generations to come.

Djurovic’s design incorporates various concepts about the paradise garden as described in the Qur’an, one of which is the four-part paradise garden known as the *chahar bagh*. The *chahar bagh* is found in many traditional Persian and Mughal gardens, although, according to D. Fairchild Ruggles, the *chahar bagh* predates the advent of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>459</sup> Walkways or water streams often separate the four quadrants, at the AKP the gardens are separated by water basins and walkways.

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<sup>458</sup> Philip Jodidio, ‘The Aga Khan Park in Toronto’, in *Heritage of the Mughal World*, ed. by Philip Jodidio (Munich: Prestel, 2015), pp. 275–83 (pp. 276–77).

<sup>459</sup> Ruggles, *Islamic Gardens and Landscapes*, pp. 89–90.

The five water basins are reflective pools made from dark granite. Granite was used to withstand the climate and they were designed with “their edges angled out to allow expanding ice to fall out and reduce ice pressure on the walls.”<sup>460</sup> Water is an essential feature of the paradise garden. Traditionally, water is featured through various means such as “a vertical jet in fountains, a reflective surface in rectangular pools, a complex texture as it flows over scalloped stone slabs called *chadars*, or running in channels that give axial structure to the space.”<sup>461</sup> The element of water is an important theme in the paradise garden as it is the sustainer of life and symbolizes divine abundance. These reflective water basins bring tranquility to the garden and can also be seen to symbolize how we must too reflect on the Self in search for greater truths.

Another Qur’anic element that Djurovic incorporated into the park was the concept of the fruit bearing trees. The serviceberry tree was chosen because it can withstand the Canadian winter. Other local trees were included in the design and were chosen to attract certain birds and butterflies to the park.<sup>462</sup> All these components, the four-quadrants, the reflective pools, and the plants collectively are meant to stimulate all senses, giving the visitor a greater emotive experience throughout the Canadian seasons, while simultaneously connecting the observer to important Qur’anic myths.

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<sup>460</sup> Jodidio, ‘The Aga Khan Park in Toronto’, p. 281.

<sup>461</sup> D. Fairchild Ruggles, ‘An Islamic Garden in Edmonton’, in *Heritage of the Mughal World*, ed. by Philip Jodidio (Munich: Prestel, 2015), pp. 267–71 (p. 267) <<http://archnet.org/publications/10508>> [accessed 10 August 2018].

<sup>462</sup> ‘About - Aga Khan Park’, *Aga Khan Park* <<https://www.agakhanpark.org/about>> [accessed 22 January 2020].

## Aga Khan Garden (Edmonton)

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*The notion of the Paradise Garden is not well known in the west. The construction of one of these gardens in Edmonton has to be seen in the context of a global strategy that His Highness the Aga Khan has developed to facilitate a better understanding of Muslim societies and cultures from the western world and their citizens.<sup>463</sup> – Luis Monreal*

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The Aga Khan Garden (AKG) is almost five times the size of the AKP. AKG was gifted to the University of Alberta Botanic Garden and was officially opened to the public in 2018. AKG was designed by Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects (NBW) and was also inspired by traditional Islamic gardens. As with Djurovic, the Aga Khan “insisted that the firm’s principal, Thomas Woltz, go to see the great historic Islamic and especially Mughal gardens.” Prior to planning the garden’s design, “Woltz went to Cairo to see Azhar Park and to India to see the majestic Taj Mahal and nearby Ram Bagh on the banks of the Yamuna River in Agra.”<sup>464</sup> From the very beginning of the project, it was intended to link past Muslim civilizations within the present, often frigid, Canadian context.<sup>465</sup> Because of the challenges of Canadian climate, the firm “could not simply copy existing historic gardens but had to find new solutions appropriate for Canada.”<sup>466</sup> Thus, the garden reflects two synchronized identities, traditional-Islamic and contemporary-Canadian.

The 12-acres, 25 million-dollar, garden was a gift to the university from His Highness the Aga Khan to honour and acknowledge the long-standing, reciprocal relationship between AKDN and the University of Alberta. In his address to the graduating class of 2009, the Aga Khan stated that the Islamic Garden project will serve as a space for aesthetic value, public reflection, and the education of Muslim cultural diversity.<sup>467</sup> Further, the garden was designed to not only “show a

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<sup>463</sup> ‘Islamic Gardens - Catalysts for Change’, *YouTube*, 2018 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWL5doh7wFE>> [accessed 16 November 2018].

<sup>464</sup> Ruggles, ‘An Islamic Garden in Edmonton’, p. 267.

<sup>465</sup> Ruggles, ‘An Islamic Garden in Edmonton’, pp. 267–68.

<sup>466</sup> Ruggles, ‘An Islamic Garden in Edmonton’, p. 268.

<sup>467</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘UAlberta Graduation Ceremony’.

different aspect of [Islam]”<sup>468</sup> but to also be a space for international and intercultural “dialogue that will unite diverse publics”<sup>469</sup> while fostering a better understanding of the inherent diversity of Muslim civilizations. The garden is expected to benefit the economy for the region as it is anticipated “to more than double the number of annual visitors (from 75,000 to 160,000) to the University of Alberta Botanic Garden”.<sup>470</sup>

As previously stated, the architects took into consideration how they could harmonize the traditional Islamic garden to suit a contemporary Canadian space. Further, because the garden would be open to the public year-round, the architects had to ensure that the garden is not only functional and beautiful during all four seasons but also that the structure of the garden was recognizable even if under a blanket of snow.<sup>471</sup> The space allotted for the garden consisted of a Calla pond and a woodland valley, thus the design needed to accommodate the natural environment along with uneven terrain (see Figure V.IV).



*Figure V.IV: Aerial View of Aga Khan Garden Prototype*  
 Credit: ©Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architecture / Aga Khan Trust for Culture

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<sup>468</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘The Ismaili Imamat and the Province of Alberta “Agreement of Co-Operation” Signing Ceremony (Edmonton)’, *NanoWisdoms*, 2012 <<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10258/>> [accessed 10 August 2018].

<sup>469</sup> Ruggles, ‘An Islamic Garden in Edmonton’, p. 271.

<sup>470</sup> ‘Parks and Gardens in Canada’, *Aga Khan Development Network* <<http://www.akdn.org/where-we-work/north-america/canada/parks-and-gardens-canada>> [accessed 8 August 2018].

<sup>471</sup> Ruggles, ‘An Islamic Garden in Edmonton’, pp. 268–69.

Like AKP, the design of AKG is also inspired by the paradise garden and features the four-quadrant garden, water fountains and basins, and fruit bearing trees. The water that fills the basins in the garden are naturally derived from the pond at the bottom of the garden. Unlike in traditional Islamic architecture, where plans were in place to ensure water could be stored in scarce environments, water at in this particular landscape is plentiful. Interestingly, the designers realized that “the same system that was developed historically to obtain, store and transport water in conditions of scarcity could also be used to drain it and manage it in conditions of plenitude.”<sup>472</sup> Thus, the designers were able to honour traditional techniques by inverting them to suit the needs of the contemporary Canadian landscape.

The paradise garden would not be complete without fruit bearing trees. At the AKG, this concept takes the form of the *bustan*, or orchard. The *bustan* surrounds the Calla pond and consists of trees bearing apples, pears, cherries, and plums.<sup>473</sup> While the fruits of these trees are all edible, one important function of the *bustan* itself is to remedy the environmental effects of tar sand mining – a contemporary environmental issue in Alberta. This coincides with the notion in Islam where humankind are to be custodians of their environment. The seeds of the *bustan* will be used for planting new wetlands, thus, the garden itself will be a “machine of ecological change and improvement... helping the larger regional landscape recover from environmental stress.”<sup>474</sup>

As with other Ismaili projects, the AKG was brought to fruition with the help of Ismaili volunteers. Ismail (whose profile can be read on the right) was one of the volunteers that served on the local board responsible for the garden project. Ismail says that the Islamic garden symbolizes the presence of Muslim traditions in a different form: “like the Aga Khan Museum, using a platform like a garden allows people to appreciate Islam through a different form... through

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<sup>472</sup> Ruggles, ‘An Islamic Garden in Edmonton’, p. 270.

<sup>473</sup> Ruggles, ‘An Islamic Garden in Edmonton’, p. 270.

<sup>474</sup> Ruggles, ‘An Islamic Garden in Edmonton’, pp. 270–71.

nature, design, and architecture.” He said that the garden was not only designed to captivate Canadian audiences, but Muslim audiences as well.

According to Ismail, the garden was intended to be a hub for dialogue and pluralism and serve as a place where Islam can be appreciated through artistic expression and through the Islamic ethic of land-conservation – which can be seen in the function of the *bustan*. Ismail said that they worked collaboratively with other members of *umma* in all of the planning stages:

Ismail is a 33-year-old, *Standard Religious* Ismaili male (a category that will be explained further in Chapter 7). Ismail, like many other *Standard Religious* Ismailis, says that the faith is “vital to his existence” and that it guides him in his everyday life. Like other Ismaili participants, Ismail elects to volunteer inside and outside of the community. In his own words, Ismail says that “volunteering is one of the core tenants of the faith; so, giving back, making this world better, and improving quality of life of other people is one of the most key aspects of being an Ismaili or Muslim... volunteer work is rooted in the faith.” Ismail has volunteered for many years and has served on various boards and portfolios within the community. Currently, Ismail serves on the local Ismaili council helping with the development and outreach of the Aga Khan Garden. Ismail is primarily responsible for outreach, programming, working with different groups and stakeholders, and creating awareness for the garden. Ismail will be referred to again in Chapter 9.

We have representation from the different Muslim groups and they are consulted on the designs, and the overall vision for the garden, the programs, and the programming that will happen throughout the years at the garden. They’ve been very involved and they will continue to be. *This is not an Ismaili garden this is an Islamic garden* (emphasis mine) for the purpose of the fact that it’s meant to represent Islam and Islamic architecture.

It was important from the very beginning of the project that other members of the diverse *umma* participated in this auspicious project; that they felt a part of this historical project because this project is meant to represent the entirety of the Canadian *umma*, including future generations.

While the space itself serves to acquaint the audience with Muslim history and architecture, the programming is also important in serving the Muslim literacy effort. Much of the programming

in the garden presents Muslim art and culture by bringing in actual artists and musicians from different traditions in the Muslim world. Through this experiential encounter, the audience sees a different side of Islam, one rich in artistic and cultural diversity.

Ismail revealed that they aspire to bring traffic to the garden through the informal creation of ambassadors; it is their hope that visitors of the garden will become ambassadors for this Islamic garden project, much like many have become for AKM. Through their various efforts, they hope that the garden will be a site of education, dialogue, and exchange about the diversity that exists within Islam,<sup>475</sup> and a centre of pride for Muslims living in North America.

Before concluding this section, it is noteworthy that the Ismaili community has another garden project in the Western world, one that can be found in the United Kingdom. The garden spaces are part of the Aga Khan Centre in London's Kings Cross, which functions as a centre "for education, knowledge, cultural exchange and insight into Muslim civilisations."<sup>476</sup> There, the gardens can be seen at different building levels since there is limited space to be found in this busy urban centre. Each garden's design is "inspired by a different region of the Islamic ummah"<sup>477</sup> (see figures V.V to V.IX). This project is worth mentioning because these garden projects can be seen as the first of many, aimed to build awareness of the diverse *umma* in the West, and to also foster a sense of collective pride in the vast diversity that shapes the *umma*.

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<sup>475</sup> 'Islamic Gardens - Catalysts for Change'.

<sup>476</sup> 'Aga Khan Centre', *Aga Khan Centre* <<https://www.agakhancentre.org.uk/>> [accessed 23 July 2020].

<sup>477</sup> Aga Khan IV, 'The Aga Khan Centre Opening Ceremony (London, United Kingdom)'.



*Figure V.V: The Garden of Reflection by Vladimir Djurovic Landscape Architecture*  
Source: ©<https://www.agakhancentre.org.uk>



*Figure V.VI: The Garden of Light by Nelson Byrd Woltz*  
Source: ©<https://www.agakhancentre.org.uk>



*Figure V.VII: The Garden of Life by Madison Cox  
Source: ©<https://www.agakhancentre.org.uk>*



*Figure V.VIII: The Garden of Tranquility by Maki & Associates  
Source: ©<https://www.agakhancentre.org.uk>*



Figure V.IX: The Terrace of Unity by Vladimir Djurovic Landscape Architecture  
 Source: ©<https://www.agakhancentre.org.uk>

AKM and the two main Islamic garden projects discussed here invite the public to come and engage with their content, events, and programming. Other important ways that the Ismaili institutions are promoting literacy about Muslims and their diversity is in the classrooms. One example is through a joint program between the Centre for the Comparative Study of Muslim Societies and Cultures at Simon Fraser University (SFU) and the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilizations (ISMC) at the Aga Khan University entitled, “Expressions of Diversity: An Introduction to Muslim Cultures.” Teachers, journalists, students, and other professionals are invited to apply to take part in the one to two-week summer program that aims to educate on the diversity that exists within Islam. Noteworthy is that in their fifth rendition of the course, they marketed the program as responding to the need for greater literacy about Muslims from unbiased perspectives.<sup>478</sup> While this program requires candidates to pay an enrollment fee, there is another project aimed at making Muslim literacy more accessible to Ontario students, the *Shaping Pluralistic Dispositions in Education* project.

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<sup>478</sup> ‘Diaspora: Expressions of Diversity: An Introduction to Muslim Cultures (e-Mail) - Alyshea.Cummins@gmail.Com - Gmail’, 7 December 2011.

## SHAPING PLURALISTIC DISPOSITIONS IN EDUCATION

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*Giving students the tools to better understand the complex and powerful roles that religions play in human experience has the potential to help mitigate bigotry based on misrepresentation, while simultaneously enhancing empathy and understanding across differences of all kinds. In our current climate of extreme partisanship (a climate that today's students experience as "normal"), we need all the empathy and understanding we can muster.<sup>479</sup> – Diane L. Moore*

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In 2016, the Government of Ontario signed an agreement with the Ismaili Imamat to develop and implement a more inclusive curriculum into the public-school systems, that, among other things, nuance perceptions of Muslims and Islam. The *Shaping Pluralistic Dispositions in Education* (henceforth, SPDE) project is multifaceted and includes three main areas of engagement. The first facet, *Ontario Teacher Secondments to Aga Khan Academies*, invited Ontario teachers to attend Aga Khan Academies in Mombasa (Kenya), Maputo (Mozambique), and Hyderabad (India) “to build strong professional learning networks between teachers in Ontario and the Aga Khan Academies” and with the special aim to “promote the exchange of knowledge and expertise.”<sup>480</sup> While in their placements, Ontario teachers participated in professional development workshops, contributed to curriculum planning and development, coached and mentored Aga Khan academy teachers, and co-taught in the classrooms. In this facet of the SPDE project, it was anticipated that teachers would return to Canada with a greater appreciation and understanding cultural diversity, particularly in education.

The second feature of the SPDE project is a collaborative effort between the Government of Ontario and the Aga Khan Council for Canada and is entitled, *Aga Khan Museum Curriculum-Linked Resources*. This project is of particular significance as it works directly with the AKM to

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<sup>479</sup> Diane L. Moore, ‘Public School Students Need to Study Religion - Education Week’, *Education Week*, 10 October 2018 <<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2018/10/10/public-school-students-need-to-study-religion.html>> [accessed 12 October 2018].

<sup>480</sup> ‘Shaping Pluralistic Dispositions in Education: Ontario Teacher Secondments to Aga Khan Academies (Internal Document)’.

help inform on Muslim diversity in Ontario classrooms. The mandate of this facet aimed “to create curriculum-linked resources that draw upon the collections, artifacts, exhibits and expertise from the Aga Khan Museum (AKM) in partnership with Subject/Division Associations.”<sup>481</sup> In this facet of SPDE, the Aga Khan Council for Canada partnered with the following educational institutions: Ontario Elementary Social Studies Teachers Association (OESSTA), International Languages Educators’ Association of Ontario (ILEA), Ontario Music Educators’ Association (OMEA), Ontario Family Studies Home Economics Educators’ Association (OFSHEEA), Ontario Art Education Association (OAEA), Council of Ontario Drama and Dance Educators (CODE), and Ontario Classical Association (OCA). It is evident that this part of the SPDE project wanted to use the AKM as a medium of education but, by doing so, presents a particular narrative of how to think about Islam and Muslims – through the diversity of Muslim traditions that exists within the Muslim world.

All of the teaching resources developed through this initiative aimed to include Muslim civilization, art, culture, and diversity into the classroom. A summary of the resources developed can be found in Table V.I below:<sup>482</sup>

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<sup>481</sup> ‘Shaping Pluralistic Dispositions in Education: Aga Khan Museum Curriculum-Linked Resources (Internal Document)’.

<sup>482</sup> ‘SPDE: Aga Khan Museum Curriculum-Linked Resources’.

Table V.I: SPDE Teaching Resources

SPDE Teaching Resources	
Level	Description of Material
Grades 2, 4, 6	These materials are designed to investigate early Muslim societies, traditions, and cultures through museum artifacts, showcasing diversity, and through the promotion of inclusiveness grounded in Canadian identity.
Grades 1 - 4	This unit invites students to learn about different musical instruments within the Muslim world and includes medians such as “storytelling through painting” and educating on various “legends, customs, fashion, [and] heroes” at the AKM.
Grades 1 - 12	This unit presents on the AKM collection, engages Ontario students in lessons in music, and highlights how “the music of Asia and the Islamic world” corresponds well the Ontario Music curriculum.
Grades 11 & 12	This combination of units teaches on “anthropology, families in Canada, fashion, world religions, food and culture with connections to Islamic culture and AKM artifacts and exhibits.”
Grades 4 - 12	These units are delivered in person and through e-learning lessons, particularly for grades 4 and 6, and “highlight historic and contemporary Islamic art, culture, geometric and figurative design, calligraphy, floral imagery, pattern and light.”
Elementary grades	These units “explore notions of community and culture through drama and dance and the teaching of His Highness the Aga Khan. The secondary units explore Islamic art and artifacts through drama and dance”.
For Teachers	“A Teacher Resource Guide to the AKM” was developed to work in conjunction with “the secondary Classical Studies and History curriculum and explores the connections between Graeco-Roman and Islamic cultures through AKM artifacts.”

Evidently, the desire of this initiative was to incorporate learning about the Muslim world into Ontario classrooms using highly engaging and professional material. The use of AKM is of particular importance as it legitimizes the museum as a hub for learning about the diverse Muslim world in both historical and contemporary contexts. These curriculum-linked resources were made available for Ontario teachers through the Subject/Division Associations’ networks in the early spring of 2018.

For the third and final feature of the SPDE project entitled, “Policy Dialogue on Pluralistic Dispositions in Ontario’s Publicly Funded Education System,” the Ministry of Education and the Aga Khan Council for Canada brought together around 250 academics, equity experts, and educators from over 55 Ontario school boards, to take part in a “Pluralism policy dialogue” at the Ismaili Centre in Toronto in September 2016. The focus of this conference was, “How can pluralistic dispositions support children and youth to become caring, responsible and productive global citizens?”<sup>483</sup> This facet is of particular interest as it directly coincides with the aspirations of the greater IPP – to foster an environment for the ethic of pluralism to manifest in society.

The discussions for that day centered around the theme of global inclusiveness such as, “Pluralism, Islamophobia, Equity and Inclusive Education (EIE), Black Lives Matter, Inclusive Design and community engagement”. The final steps for this aspect of the project include developing curriculum-linked resources that engage with AKM and its materials, enhancing anti-racism and anti-oppression professional learning for system leaders, and developing training materials for Ontario educators on “culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy.”<sup>484</sup> This final segment reinforces the argument that the MLP is an important facet for the greater pluralism project – that literacy about the Muslim other is imperative in fostering a cosmopolitan society where the fear of the other is diminished through greater literacy and engagement.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

Moore stresses that “religious illiteracy has helped to foster a climate that is both politically dangerous and intellectually debilitating.”<sup>485</sup> The effects of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim rhetoric are real and can have detrimental consequences. In order to alleviate this ignorance of the Muslim ‘other’, the Aga Khan alongside his Ismaili institutions have implemented various Muslim literacy

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<sup>483</sup> ‘Shaping Pluralistic Dispositions in Education: Policy Dialogue on Pluralistic Dispositions in Ontario’s Publicly Funded Education System (Internal Document)’.

<sup>484</sup> ‘SPDE: Policy Dialogue on Pluralistic Dispositions in Ontario’s Publicly Funded Education System’.

<sup>485</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, p. 4.

projects that not only aim to combat religious illiteracy about Muslims, but also foster a sense of pride in a collective Muslim identity, in all of its internal diversity – the latter is a direct response to intra-*umma* dissonance, a condition that plagues the *umma* and prevents Muslims from truly embracing the ethic of pluralism.

The AKM is a high-profile Ismaili institution that aims to challenge misperceptions of Muslims and Islam to Canadian audiences. Further, through its efforts, it aims to foster a sense of Muslim pride in the inherent diversity in the Muslim world, thereby helping to alleviate intra-*umma* dissonance. While the museum showcases Muslim art and culture from various parts of the Muslim world, it is also political in that it engages in contemporary Muslim issues and debates to challenge normative understandings of Muslims being backwards, victims, or complaisant in the politics of their societies.

The two Islamic garden projects discussed in this chapter not only foster a sense of Muslim pride, but also invites members of the public to learn about Muslim civilization and culture through an artistic outlet. As with the Islamic gardens of the past, they draw on Islamic principles, symbols, and design while harmonizing those concepts within the contemporary Canadian landscape – depicting that, like the garden, Muslim expression is also fluid, and able to harmonize with its environment.

The final project of interest in this chapter was SPDE. By first inviting Ontario teachers to come to the Aga Khan Academies in Hyderabad, Maputo, and Mombasa, this aspect aimed to take teachers out of their comfort zones and experience other cultures through the academy setting. The second aspect of SPDE aimed to bridge AKM with various educational institutions, thus enabling the museum to bring Muslim literacy into Ontario classrooms. The third aspect of the program aimed to promote the importance of instilling a cosmopolitan ethic in the classrooms by inviting educators and policy experts to take part in a conference at the Ismaili centre. While one of the topics of interest was Islamophobia, other topics of importance were Black Lives Matter, inclusive education and design, community engagement, and pluralism. While SPDE is an important

contributor to the MLP, collectively with AKM and the Islamic gardens projects they serve to promote pluralism in Canadian society.

The MLP is in its infancy stages and new projects are constantly arising. For example, another project that is underway in the US is a Master of Arts program that is a collaboration between the graduate school of arts and sciences of Columbia University and the Aga Khan University Institute for the study of Muslim Civilizations in London.<sup>486</sup> The students study at Columbia for the first two semesters and then AKU for two more semesters; the fifth semester is done writing their thesis in either New York or London.<sup>487</sup> Upon completion, graduate students will be awarded two degrees, one in Islamic Studies at Columbia University's Middle East Institute and the other in Muslim Cultures at AKU's ISMC.<sup>488</sup> The Ismaili institutions are constantly looking at ways to improve education about the Muslim world, and this often includes collaborative projects between other educational institutions like the joint program at SFU discussed earlier. It will be interesting to see, in the years ahead, how these existing projects develop and evolve to adapt to the changing context and to measure the impact of the MLP in shaping Muslim identity and impressions of Muslims in Canada and elsewhere.

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<sup>486</sup> 'Aga Khan University and Columbia University Announce the Launch of a Dual Master's Degree', *Aga Khan University* <[https://www.aku.edu/news/Pages/News\\_Details.aspx?nid=NEWS-002036](https://www.aku.edu/news/Pages/News_Details.aspx?nid=NEWS-002036)> [accessed 2 February 2020].

<sup>487</sup> Serena White, 'University Senate Addresses Lack of Housing for Graduate Students, Faculty at Plenary', *Columbia Daily Spectator*, 25 November 2019 <<https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2019/11/25/university-senate-addresses-lack-of-housing-for-graduate-students-faculty-at-plenary/>> [accessed 26 November 2019].

<sup>488</sup> 'Aga Khan University and Columbia University'.

## VI. THE ISMAILI IDENTITY PROJECT

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*The third important observation we can make about the Ummah today is that the two main tendencies, traditional and modern, are trying to maintain, indeed to develop, their Islamic legitimacy. Loss of identity, anxiety about the risk of being caught up in a process of Westernisation that is essentially Christian and is perceived as becoming less and less religious, are deep and very real concerns. Where the two tendencies diverge is on the question of **how to maintain and strengthen this identity in the future** (emphasis added).<sup>489</sup> – Aga Khan*

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The Ismaili Identity Project (Henceforth, IIP) can be seen as part of the literacy project and the greater pluralism project, which aims to create an environment for the ethic of pluralism to flourish by, amongst other things, alleviating Islamophobia, anti-Muslim rhetoric, and intra-*umma* dissonance. The IIP, along with other Muslim identity projects, contribute to the greater MLP as they offer alternative narratives of being Muslim to both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences. The IIP aims to preserve, instill, and promote a particular understanding of Canadian Ismaili Muslim identity to both Ismaili and non-Ismaili audiences in the contexts of inter and intra-religious diversity, Islamophobia, and intra-*umma* dissonance. Further, because Ismailis understand their faith to be only one example of the diversity that exists within Islam, the IIP creates space for other Muslim traditions to be represented and acknowledged. Thus, through the crystallization of Ismaili identity in the Canadian context, the IIP nuances homogenous understandings about Islam and Muslims and creates space for Muslim diversity.

This chapter will discuss three main initiatives that fall under what I am calling, the IIP: the crystallization and strengthening of Ismaili Muslim identity, the building of confident Ismaili Muslim ambassadors, and the public presentation of Ismaili Muslim identity to wider audiences. The internal community efforts that aim to strengthen and solidify Ismaili identity are mainly achieved through the Ismaili religious education (RE) program and other periodic programming. Through the Ismaili RE system, teachers are able to nourish and strengthen Ismaili identity in the contexts of Islamophobia and intra-*umma* dissonance, equipping Ismailis with the literacy

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<sup>489</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Address at the “Musée-Musées”’.

necessary to speak confidently about their faith to various audiences. Further, the ambassadorial program is specifically designed to create confident ambassadors of the faith and equip them with the Muslim literacy necessary to engage with the outside community in formal and informal settings. The chapter will conclude with a discussion about how the Ismaili community is presenting their identity to wider Canadian society and how they are nuancing the image of Islam and Muslims in Canada through the presentation of their own unique Muslim identity.

The Ismaili RE system, the creating confident ambassadors' program, and the public presentation of Ismaili identity can all be seen as a branch of the MLP and, therefore, the greater Ismaili Pluralism Project (IPP). Together these projects nourish Ismaili identity as a legitimate expression of Islam amongst many others; thereby, nuancing the monolithic image of Muslims and Islam. Collectively, through their educational and outreach efforts, these initiatives aim to build a tolerant Canadian society where Muslims are understood and not feared, thereby enabling the ethic of pluralism to flourish.

The discussion that follows is mainly informed by the analysis of texts, but is also supported by data from the present study's survey and interview responses where appropriate. Further, this chapter is important as it presents various initiatives that respond to the issues faced by Canadian Ismailis, which will be presented in Chapter 8. Also, as we will see in Chapter 9, the Ismaili identity that is being projected is fairly reflective of the identity measured in the present study. Thus, this chapter helps us to understand how Ismaili identity, as presented further in chapters 8 and 9, is instrumental in shaping the IIP. Since that discussion follows this chapter, I will include context for the various programs and initiatives by bridging in data derived from the surveys and interviews.

## STRENGTHENING ISMAILI MUSLIM IDENTITY

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*Some people make the mistake of thinking that pluralism requires them to dilute or de-emphasise their own distinctive identities. That's not true. What it requires is **to ensure that one's individual identity is strong enough to engage confidently with those of other identities as we all walk together along the road to a better world.***<sup>490</sup> (emphasis mine) – Aga Khan

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Experiencing religious diversity in one's lifetime has become inevitable in the Canadian context. There are various opportunities to engage with the religious other in various dimensions of the public sphere. In Canada, it has become commonplace, particularly in major cities, to have diversity in the workplace, especially considering there is a policy, the Employment Equity Act, that encourages it. In this growing diverse society, we begin to realize that, in many cases, our own identities have been taken for granted. Today, everyone is expected to have come from somewhere, which means that everyone is expected to know their history and what makes them, them. As described by Anthony Giddens, "In a cosmopolitan world, more people than ever before are regularly in contact with others who think differently from them. They are required to justify their beliefs, in an implicit way at least, both to themselves and others."<sup>491</sup> As Muslims migrate to the Western world, and Canada in particular, they too are faced with these personal questions of believing and belonging – to which many may not be literate enough to respond appropriately.

Many Ismailis in Canada are faced with questions concerning their religious identity and many have expressed that they are not adequately equipped to respond in a confident articulate manner (see chapters 8, 9, and 10). To make the task more difficult, Ismailis are not only posed questions by the religious 'other' about their Muslim identity, but also by the Muslim 'other' about their Ismaili identity. While many Canadians will have heard of Sunni Muslims, often self-referred to as simply 'Muslim,' very few have heard of Shi'a Muslims in particular, unless in the context of the Iranian Revolution, a movement that resulted in the oppression of Iranian citizens under the

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<sup>490</sup> Aga Khan IV, 'Inaugural Global Pluralism Award Ceremony (Ottawa, ON)'.

<sup>491</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World* (Profile Books, 2011), p. 103.

authoritarian rule of Ayatollah Khomeini, who appropriated Shi'a Ithna'ashari Islam to justify his reforms.

Further, to make matters more complicated, Muslims in the diaspora are subject to external identity constructions, including in academia but more often by mainstream media depictions. External narratives are often imposed on minority Muslim communities and the burden is on the Muslim individual to contest these misinformed narratives.

As Chapter 8 will illustrate, while there is a mild hesitation to speak about Ismaili identity with the religious 'other', there is an even greater hesitation amongst Ismailis to engage with the Muslim 'other'. Ismaili participants in the present study reported that they were not confident enough in their own identity to have conversations related to identity, beliefs, and practices with non-Ismailis, especially with Muslims from different traditions. This lack of confidence and, in some cases, experiences of judgement and intolerance by other Muslims, has forced many Ismailis to disengage entirely from the rest of the *umma* in order to avoid potential confrontations.

The present study found that Ismaili participants often recognized their own self-withdrawal from the rest of the *umma*; however, there were some participants who are still hopeful for reconciliation. Survey participant Aziz, who identifies as religious and is 37 years old, contends that pluralism, in the context of Muslim diversity, is inherent in the Muslim tradition: “[Ismailism] is a Shi'a branch of Islam versus the Sunni [branch] and has a living Imam in the direct decent from the Prophet Muhammed through the first Imam 'Ali. It respects other interpretations of Islam and has an emphasis on Muslim unity through Shahada.” Other participants, like Aziz, respect the diversity within the *umma* and aspire to be recognized as legitimate members – this will be discussed further in Chapter 8.

Other Ismaili participants also stressed unity of the *umma* and a few even criticized themselves and the Ismaili institutions for not doing enough to unite the *umma*. For example, Zulfiqar, who is 50 years old and identifies as spiritual but not religious, does a lot of community engagement with members of the *umma*. Zulfiqar says that this disengagement that we see today

was not always the case. He says that back home in East-Africa Ismailis would also attend the Mosque for Friday prayers which was encouraged by the former Imam, Sultan Mohamed Shah, Aga Khan III:

[W]e are viewed by other Muslims suspiciously. I think this is because we don't participate. We don't go [to their events]. I was told in east Africa that there was a *Hidayat*<sup>492</sup> from [Imam] Sultan Mohamed Shah, that asked our Ismailis to go to the *masjid* on Fridays – it was an open thing. He was like, “You know what? You guys should go to *masjid* on Fridays.” He didn't say don't go to *Jamatkhana*, but to go to *masjid*. So many Ismailis would do that, they would go for *juma* [Friday] prayer. They may be Ismaili but they would still go for *juma* prayer – this kind of outreach has been completely absent from us [in the diaspora]. [How] Muslims view us is by no fault of their own... They view us the way we represent ourselves. If they see us as not hanging out with them, not coming to their things, and only building bridges and inviting them to come to our [things]... how else will they view us, you know?

Like other participants, Zulfiqar believes that the Ismaili community can do a lot more to engage with the diverse *umma*; however, as it will be discussed in Chapter 8, many Ismailis have experienced intolerance from other members of the *umma*, which explains why they are hesitant to engage.

Again, part of the mandate for the Ismaili councils, according to the Ismaili constitution, is to “strive to maintain unity with other tariqahs within the Muslim Ummah, and to seek co-operation and friendly relations with all other peoples.”<sup>493</sup> Whether or not they are doing a good job in building bridges is relative to different contexts. In order for this co-operation to be successful, Ismailis must first feel adept in talking about their faith with other Muslim and non-Muslim religious traditions.

As stated previously, Muslim communities living in the diaspora face threats to the legitimacy of their religious and cultural identity. Generally speaking, a major issue for Muslim

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<sup>492</sup> A *Hidayat* is an edict intended for the leaders of the Ismaili *Jama'at* and various Imamate institutions. The content of a *Hidayat* is confidential and meant to inspire, direct, and guide the leaders in their various efforts.

<sup>493</sup> *Ismaili Constitution*.

communities living in the diaspora is preserving their unique religious and cultural identities and values while living amongst religious and cultural ‘others,’ while further living in a society that is shaped by Western culture, values, and ideals. However, for minority Muslim communities like the Ismailis, the issue extends to also living amongst the Muslim ‘other’. Like many other Muslim communities living in the diaspora,<sup>494</sup> the Ismaili *Jama‘at* is investing in maintaining and strengthening their religious identity through various initiatives.

### **Religious Education: A Unique Approach to Faith Based Education**

One of the mandates of the Ismaili constitution is to “maintain and foster the unity of Ismailis and to preserve, protect and strengthen the Islamic social and cultural heritage”<sup>495</sup> The Ismaili Councils do this through many community events and social gatherings but also through RE, which is governed and led by each country’s respective Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board (ITREB).

Muslim schools in the diaspora serve as means for preserving Muslim identity in different contexts. In Jasmine Zine’s research on Islamic schools in Canada, she describes them as having the objective of developing “a knowledge base and ethos rooted in Islamic beliefs, traditions, and thought.”<sup>496</sup> Zine says that Islamic schools in Canada mainly cater to the Sunni school of thought and are rigid in that they are not organized to cater to the Canadian-Muslim community but are instead “organized according to Islamic principles as outlined in the Qur’an and in accordance with the behaviours and actions of the Prophet Muhammed as documented in the sunnah.”<sup>497</sup> This could pose a problem depending on who is doing the interpreting of these religious histories and texts, as each person has their own biases and agenda. Further, Muslim RE is not always free from

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<sup>494</sup> Zine, *Canadian Islamic Schools*.

<sup>495</sup> *Ismaili Constitution*.

<sup>496</sup> Zine, *Canadian Islamic Schools*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>497</sup> Zine, *Canadian Islamic Schools*, p. 7.

propaganda and biases surrounding historical or contemporary social conflicts.<sup>498</sup> At the First World Conference on Muslim Education in Mecca (1977), the conference promoted a Muslim RE system that ‘others’ the west in terms of secularization and their Western education system.<sup>499</sup> Exclusive interpretations of Islam can be harmful as they not only reinforce the othering of other faith communities, but different Muslim traditions as well. It is for this reason that it was important for the Ismaili community to develop an inclusive Muslim curriculum – one that neither excludes diverse representations of other Muslim communities nor other faith communities. In a modernizing world, where diversity is increasingly apparent, it becomes essential to produce a RE that responds to modernity and diversity in inclusive ways.

Another important concern about Muslim RE is examining how one can teach about Muslim RE in the context of anti-Muslim rhetoric, intra-*umma* dissonance, and the violent actions of some Muslims in the name of Islam. A modern Muslim RE must be able to readily respond to the contemporary issues faced by Muslims today, while simultaneously acknowledging and responding to the atrocities committed by Muslims in the name of the faith.<sup>500</sup> As Tasnim Dharamsi writes in her dissertation on the Ismaili RE system:

If Islam is commonly associated with descriptors such as archaic, outdated, irrelevant, fundamentalist, narrow-minded, incompatible with modernity and progress, how can any individual take pride in their heritage and draw comfort and inspiration from their faith?... Ismaili Muslim children, too, need to understand the rich diversity that exists amongst the Muslim ummah... They need to understand religion against the wider backdrop of culture and society. They need to develop awareness of the similarities and distinctions amidst the various communities of interpretations within Muslim traditions and within the Abrahamic traditions. And most importantly, they need to internalize, as Asani reminds us, that religions do not have agency, people do.<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>498</sup> Shiraz Thobani, ‘The Dilemma of Islam as School Knowledge in Muslim Education’, *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 27.1 (2007), 11–25 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02188790601145382>>; *The Subtle Subversion: The State of Curricula and Textbooks in Pakistan*, ed. by A. H. Nayyar and Ahmad Salim (Islamabad: Sustainable Development Policy Institute, 2002) <<http://unesco.org.pk/education/teachereducation/reports/rp22.pdf>>.

<sup>499</sup> Wilna Meijer, ‘Islam versus Western Modernity: A Contrast in Educational Thought’, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 21.3 (1999), 158–66 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0141620990210307>>.

<sup>500</sup> Adil Mamodaly, ‘Challenges and Perspectives of Teaching Muslim Religious Education in the 21st Century’, *Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East*, 7.3 (2016), 427–91.

<sup>501</sup> Dharamsi, p. 21.

How Muslim educators and curriculum developers adapt and respond to the growing anti-Muslim climate will have lasting effects on Muslim identity and their sense of belonging. Thus, having a standardized curriculum and professional teachers to teach the curriculum become even more pertinent as this best equips educators to respond to such sensitive issues while simultaneously fostering a sense of collective pride in a pluralist Muslim identity.

The Ismaili RE was designed to respond to the challenges of the modern world, the growth of anti-Muslim sentiment, and intra-*umma* dissonance. In order to raise the bar, the Ismaili community took two major steps in revitalizing their RE: they standardized the global Ismaili RE curriculum and they professionalized their secondary RE educators. These two initiatives could not have been done without first building the foundation to which all this was possible – establishing the Institute of Ismaili Studies (London, UK).

### *The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS)*

The Institute of Ismaili Studies (henceforth, the IIS) was established in 1977. It was envisioned by the Aga Khan to promote the study of historical and contemporary Muslim cultures and societies and to study the relationships between those societies and those of different faiths.<sup>502</sup> Further, the IIS is particularly interested in developing the scholarship on Shi‘ism and Ismailism, specifically. It should come as little surprise that the reason why the Aga Khan was interested in building the scholarship on Shi‘ism and Ismailism is because it pales in comparison to the vast scholarship that exists on Sunni Muslim faith and civilization. There is much less on Shi‘ism and other minority Muslim communities such as the Ismailis, and the scholarship that does exist on these communities often cite polemic sources. As such, the IIS has taken it upon themselves to serve as an academic institution dedicated to representing minority Shi‘i Muslim communities, their histories in relation to other histories, and their unique cultures and traditions. Thus, the very nature of this institution

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<sup>502</sup> ‘The Institute of Ismaili Studies, About Us’, *The Institute of Ismaili Studies* <<http://iis.ac.uk/about-us>> [accessed 5 September 2017].

serves to legitimize and preserve these minority faith traditions, while simultaneously giving them representation in academia for further study and engagement.

The main benefactors of this academic institution are quite clearly the Ismaili community. According to former director of the IIS Karim H. Karim, the IIS “has particular objectives to further knowledge about Ismailis and the Ismaili faith.”<sup>503</sup> Further, in Steinberg’s study, he says that the IIS, along with other Ismaili institutions, “are significant in encouraging a certain degree of uniformity and homogeneity in the practice of Isma‘ilism across the planet.” Steinberg contends that this is important “because it engenders a sense of social connectedness and commonality between practitioners of Isma‘ilism from distant areas.”<sup>504</sup> This global connectedness not only promotes deep pluralism within the community, but also promotes a shared responsibility for Ismailis around the world. This shared responsibility can be observed in how the main contributors to the Imam’s transnational projects are Ismailis from various positions within their respective societies.

Steinberg argues that this goal of creating the discipline of “Ismaili Studies” is partly “an effort to gain public legitimacy and recognition; to institutionalize it as an academic discipline requiring its own educational apparatus, bestowing upon Ismailism a special epistemological status that reinforces the view that it has objective historical significance.”<sup>505</sup> In the Muslim world where *takfirism* and intolerance have harmful consequences, legitimizing one’s faith against religious scrutiny has become commonplace; however, this particular establishment of such a high profile institution also reflects the power, privilege, and foresight of the Ismaili community. Again, while the main benefactors of the IIS are the Ismaili community themselves, other minority Shi‘i and Sufi communities are also gaining legitimacy and space within the academic world.

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<sup>503</sup> Badruddin.

<sup>504</sup> Jonah Steinberg, p. 87.

<sup>505</sup> Jonah Steinberg, p. 90.

### *Ta'lim Curriculum*

Two important tasks of the IIS are to make “available the intellectual heritage of Ismailism to the academic world and educate the public” and to create “educational programs to train Ismailis to relate the tradition to the modern world.”<sup>506</sup> As such, the IIS developed the *Ta'lim*, education, curriculum to be suitable for Ismaili students between the ages of 5 to 17. According to Eboo Patel, this formal means of religious education aims to not only to prepare students to experience and value diversity in the modern era, but to also give them a solid foundation in their own worldview.<sup>507</sup>

It is important to understand, that in the early stages of (re)settlement in Canada, Ismaili religious education was usually taught by untrained volunteer teachers on Saturdays and was called Mission Class. These classes would take place in rented school halls, family homes, and at the local *jamatkhana*. Once the community grew and became more organized, purpose-built *jamatkhanas* were designed with classrooms therein. Also noteworthy is that there was no unified formal curriculum present in the early stages of (re)settlement until the establishment of the *Ta'lim* primary curriculum in the late 1980s, and the subsequent curriculums produced thereafter.

Ismaili students continue to attend RE once a week at their respective local institutions. Some classes take place in purpose-built classrooms, others within the *jamatkhana* space, and others in rented halls, offices, or schools. Teachers, traditionally, have been volunteers within the community with many having little to no teaching experience. Today, teacher volunteers receive some training through professional development workshops and are supported by their local ITREB members to ensure that they have the resources they need to successfully deliver the curriculum.

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<sup>506</sup> Eboo Patel.

<sup>507</sup> Eboo Patel.

The present RE system is divided into primary RE and secondary RE. The primary RE is known as *Bayt ul-Ilm* (BUI), which means House of Knowledge, and is designed for ages 5-11. These students may also receive other forms of RE through additional optional programming such as summer camps. In the past decade, the secondary curriculum was revamped to cater to the growing needs and challenges of its secondary students. Secondary students aged 12-15 attend the newly developed Encounters<sup>508</sup> program and those aged 16-17 attend the new al-Azhar<sup>509</sup> program. These two secondary RE programs are not only using a newly standardized curriculum developed by the IIS, but they are also being instructed by professional teachers.

### *Secondary Teachers Education Program (STEP)*

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*Over the years the concern has been, to enable young people to find their place in the larger Muslim community through a more pluralistic approach to Islam... There has also simultaneously been a strong emphasis on helping young people to feel at home in the wider social, political, cultural context of their daily lives and to integrate their sense of being Muslim with being 'Indian' or 'Canadian' or 'Kenyan' or 'Tajik'. These concerns and emphases have informed the development of the curriculum.<sup>510</sup> – IIS*

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In 2002, the IIS founded the Secondary Teachers Education Programme (STEP), aimed at professionalizing Ismaili secondary RE teachers. STEP can be seen as a direct attempt to train teachers to strengthen Ismaili Muslim identity in the contexts of both the Muslim and the religious 'other', and to guide students to live in accordance with their faith in their respective societies.

Again, the STEP curriculum was developed by the IIS to strengthen Ismaili Muslim identity and promote greater understanding of inner-Ismaili diversity, intra-*umma* diversity, and

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<sup>508</sup> This name is reflective of the content taught in this program where students learn about Ismaili and other Muslim history through their various 'encounters' with people of different backgrounds and traditions.

<sup>509</sup> The name al-Azhar is important as it is derived from the first known learning institution in the Muslim world which served as an institution to learn Ismaili *fiqh* and was created by the Ismaili Imam-Caliphs. Thus, the name itself claims rights over the Al-Azhar university in Cairo, Egypt, which is currently an institution for Sunni Muslims to learn *fiqh*.

<sup>510</sup> IIS 'Proposal to Potential Partner Institutions', (2003) as cited in Kadiwal, p. 13.

inter-faith diversity, in both historical and contemporary contexts.<sup>511</sup> STEP was piloted in 2009, in Canada (Toronto and Vancouver), the United States (Houston), India (Mumbai), Pakistan (Karachi), and Tajikistan (Khorog) but has expanded its reach to Portugal, Madagascar, France, Dubai, Syria, Afghanistan, Tanzania, and the UK. Again, prior to the development of this program, teachers were mainly volunteers within the community – many with little to no prior classroom experience. The STEP program is the first attempt to professionalize Ismaili RE educators and entices Ismailis to apply with a fully funded scholarship. Candidates used to receive a Master of Arts in “Education in Muslim Societies and Civilisations” by the IIS and awarded by the Institute of Education (IOE), and a Master of Teaching awarded by IOE. Today, however, they graduate with a Master of Arts in “Muslim Societies and Civilisations” at the IIS and awarded by the SOAS University of London, and then receive a Post-Graduate Diploma in Teaching and Reflective Practice (PGDip) by the University College London Institute of Education (UCL IOE). This change came as a result of a program review, which determined that graduates needed more practical experience before teaching their own classes. As a result of the program review, the STEP program came to a halt and there was no cycle for 2017-2018 while administrators prepared and implemented program revisions. The discussion below is based on the original STEP program as the new program is still in its infancy stages.

To receive their MA Education in Muslim Societies and Civilisations, graduate students needed to complete core modules in: *History and Secondary Education*, which aims to “examine Muslim history from the dawn of Islam to the fall of the Ottoman Empire”; *Revelation, Hermeneutics, Pluralism and Practice*, which seeks to “situate Islam within the Abrahamic religions and examines revelation, the emergence of different Muslim communities, and examines central thematic concepts of the Qur’an”; *Literature of Muslim Societies*, which covers the literary traditions of the diverse Muslim world in their local languages; *Traditions of Enquiry*, which showcases Muslim civilizations in their pursuit of knowledge with a particular focus on “epistemology, theology, ethics, science and mysticism”; *Modernity and Muslim Societies*, which

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<sup>511</sup> Kadiwal.

examines contemporary phenomena of Muslim communities such as the diverse responses to modernity; and *Cultural Encounters, Material Culture and Narratives*, which explores Islam as a dynamic cultural phenomenon.<sup>512</sup> Aside from equipping teacher-candidates with the religious literacy necessary to teach Ismaili RE, these modules also sought to prepare teacher-candidates to teach in the context of inter- and intra-religious diversity, enabling them to respond to contemporary ailments – such as the discrimination and fear of Muslims and the violent-extremism that plague Muslim communities around the world.

In Canada, and around the world, the Aga Khan has invested many resources in the promotion of pluralism, as discussed in Chapter 4. Interestingly, this ethic is embedded in the newly revamped secondary curriculum, and amongst teacher-candidates. In her doctoral research, Laila Kadiwal found that there was a direct effort to crystallize a “tradition of pluralism” within the Ismaili community through the STEP program.<sup>513</sup> Kadiwal argues that claiming this tradition of pluralism “is a contemporary response... to contemporary concerns” although she agrees that “the community has rooted pluralism in its past and religious texts, thus building a sense of continuity with its history.”<sup>514</sup> Further, Kadiwal argues that through the STEP training program, the ethic of pluralism is becoming internalized by teachers, and thus their subsequent students, as an important aspect of contemporary Ismaili identity.<sup>515</sup> In an interview with one of the STEP teachers, Maryam said that teaching youth about pluralism is less about the definition and more about engaging them in the experience: “I don’t think many people understand what [pluralism] means and I think part of what we’re trying to do is not just teach the concept of pluralism as a word but engage with it and try to experience it. We’re trying to create experiences for the kids rather than teaching at them. And the only way to do that is by being engaging and, I guess, being open.”<sup>516</sup> This intended internalization of the ethic of pluralism was also found in the present research and will be discussed more in Chapter 9.

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<sup>512</sup> Kadiwal, pp. 13–14.

<sup>513</sup> Kadiwal, p. 27.

<sup>514</sup> Kadiwal, p. 27.

<sup>515</sup> Kadiwal, p. 27.

<sup>516</sup> Interview with Maryam.

After graduation, graduates are placed back into their home countries to deliver the curriculum to Ismaili secondary students. STEP teachers receive a salary with benefits to teach their courses and run other educational programs. Further, although recent graduates are committed to work within the community for at least three years, there are plans in the future to have graduates teach in their local secular settings as well.<sup>517</sup> If this happens, this would enable the Ismaili community to instill the ethic of pluralism and promote literacy about Muslim diversity and Islam within their secular classrooms. With this in mind, there are also talks to make the program even more competitive by potentially requiring applicants to have already completed a teaching designation in their respective countries; however, at this time, no decision has been finalized on this.

### Secondary Curriculum

The greater vision of the secondary RE is that Ismaili youth will be grounded in the values of their faith, become confident ambassadors for their community, feel a sense of pride and belonging, and be inspired to contribute to enhance the quality of life of their respective communities. In order to achieve this vision, the curriculum is designed with various aims and values in mind: to strengthen Ismaili identity and confidence by equipping Ismaili students with knowledge about Ismaili history, tradition, and culture in relation to other Muslim and non-Muslim histories, traditions, and cultures; to encourage the ethic of pluralism through fostering the respect of other faith traditions, both Muslim and non-Muslim; to understand contemporary issues facing Muslims and non-Muslims today and the factors that create and respond to those issues; and to foster a sense of belonging to the Ismaili tradition, calling on students to live a life inspired by their faith. A summary of the educational aims, values and outlooks of the secondary curriculum can be found in Figure VI.I.<sup>518</sup>

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<sup>517</sup> Dharamsi, p. 1 (see footnote 1).

<sup>518</sup> *Introduction to the Curriculum, Teacher's Guide* (IIS Department of Curriculum Studies), pp. 4–19 (p. 7).

### Educational aims

The specific aims of the secondary curriculum are to:

- develop in students a sound knowledge and understanding of their Ismaili tradition, history and culture, and encourage them in the practice of the faith;
- help students understand the concept of authority in Shia Islam, and in other Muslim traditions;
- nurture in students an intellectual and ethical commitment to their own faith, while also encouraging them to understand and respect the traditions and beliefs of other people;
- acquaint students with social and ethical issues facing Muslim communities, religious traditions, and other societies in the contemporary world;
- assist students to examine and reflect on their present and future roles in their family, community and society;
- enable students to become sensitive to the spiritual dimension in human existence, and to find meaning in and draw inspiration from their faith;
- encourage students to pursue life-long learning that will enable them to broaden their intellectual horizons.

### Values and outlooks

The curriculum seeks to assist students to reflect on their role in, and relation to, the diverse social contexts of which they are an integral part. Students will be invited to:

- affirm their loyalty to the Imam of the Time, and their belonging to the global Ismaili community;
- contribute actively to the welfare and progress of their family;
- adopt positive relations with peer groups inside and out of school;
- partake in the activities and life of their local Ismaili Jamaat;
- acquire and exercise civic values as responsible citizens of the countries in which they live;
- develop awareness of issues and concerns that Muslim communities and societies face around the world;
- share experiences, interests and ideals held in common with students of other religious traditions;
- engage with issues and dilemmas that affect the wider society, and humanity as a whole.

Figure VI.I: Educational Aims and Values and Outlooks  
Source: ©IIS Department of Curriculum Studies

Currently there are six curriculums that have been developed for secondary students and two more in the development stages: *Muslim Societies and Civilisations*; *Encounters in Muslim History*; *Muslim Devotional and Ethical Literature*; *Faith and Practice in Islamic Traditions*; *Ethical Pathways to Human Development*; *The Qur'an and its Interpretations*; *Muslims in the Contemporary Period* (forthcoming); and *Intellectual Traditions in Muslim Contexts* (forthcoming). Table VI.I presents the aims of each of these modules as depicted in the IIS Department of Curriculum Studies' Teacher's Guide.<sup>519</sup>

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<sup>519</sup> *Introduction to the Curriculum, Teacher's Guide*, pp. 8–9.

Table VI.I: Secondary Curriculum Module Descriptions

Secondary Curriculum Module Descriptions	
Module	Description
Muslim Societies and Civilisations	This module introduces the rise and development of Islam, from the period of Prophet Muhammad in the sixth and seventh centuries to the rule of the Fatimid Imam-Caliphs from the tenth to the twelfth century. Students are introduced to people, places and events of significance that came to shape the first six centuries of Islam, beginning with its genesis in Mecca and the establishment of the early caliphate in Medina, and tracing the growth of dynastic empires in Damascus, Baghdad, Cordoba and Cairo. Using the city as a space of dynamic creativity, the content presents the flowering of Muslim civilisations in all their manifold aspects. The development of Shia traditions, and the emergence of the Ismailis in this phase of history, features as an integral part of the broader Muslim narrative.
Encounters in Muslim History	This module forms a sequel to Muslim Societies and Civilisations which covers developments from the sixth to the twelfth century. It picks up the various narratives at the beginning of the eleventh century and presents encounters and exchanges, both among Muslims and with other societies, until the beginning of the modern period at the end of the eighteenth century. It highlights key events and figures, major achievements and challenges, the interplay of forces and influences, and unfolding dynamics in the political, economic, social, intellectual, and cultural arenas. Significant aspects of the history, thought and culture of diverse Ismaili communities during this period are interwoven into these narratives of exchanges, detailing their interactions and interdependencies within these systems.
Muslim Devotional and Ethical Literature	This module is based on the subject of devotional and ethical literature in Muslim societies. Through an examination of a range of texts across changing periods and contexts, from the formative age of Islam to contemporary times, students are led to explore the diversity and richness of literature that has developed in Muslim societies over time. Examples from a wide variety of literary forms and genres are used to illustrate the creative application of language in Muslim writings, including Ismaili contributions, in diverse contexts and cultures. The anthological content in this module highlights selections from the Qur'an and the hadith, passages from works attributed to the early Shia Imams, and excerpts from the writings, speeches and Farmans of the contemporary Imams. Also presented here are examples of literature from historical biographies, moral fables, mystical poetry, and devotional hymns. Drawing from diverse Muslim sources, and particularly Shia and Ismaili literature, this collection yields insight into the creative ways in which

	religious, devotional, spiritual, and ethical themes have found inspiring expressions in Islam.
Ethical Pathways to Human Development	Students are led in this module to engage with the issue of social development by examining the impact of poverty, illness, illiteracy, homelessness, and social injustice on communities across the world. A contextual approach is adopted to issues of development, and their impact on the quality of life of people in different regions. The major part of the module is devoted to examining the institutions and projects of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) as case studies of innovative approaches to development in selected parts of the world. Particular attention is paid to the spiritual and ethical ideals which underpin the concept of development upheld by Imamate institutions. Students are led to a deeper appreciation of the long, historical tradition in the Ismaili Tariqah of Imams giving institutional realisation to the ethical calling of Islam.
Faith and Practice in Islamic Traditions	This module focuses on the dimensions of religious meaning and practical expressions in a community of faith, as understood in the Shia Ismaili and other Muslim traditions. These aspects are approached from a variety of perspectives by exploring the significance and functions of faith, prayer, ritual, devotion, and spaces of worship in Muslim contexts. Students are guided to reflect on their own experiences as members of the Ismaili community, while also making reference to other religious traditions. The exploration here is intended to enable young Ismailis to appreciate the significance of their faith and practice as a source of ultimate meaning in their life.
The Qur'an and its Interpretations	This module acquaints students with the diversity of understandings of the Qur'an al-Sharif which have developed in Muslim traditions over different historical periods and across various cultural contexts. It presents a historical and contextual study of significant concepts related to the Qur'an, including prophethood, revelation and authority as interpreted in Shia Islam and other Muslim traditions. Students are led to reflect on the multitude of interpretations of the Qur'an that have come to be expressed by Muslim traditions and scholars over the centuries. They learn of the variety of ways in which the Qur'an has been applied in Muslim contexts, from theological and juridical readings to literary and aesthetic renderings. The ethical and spiritual aspects of the Qur'an are highlighted in terms of their relevance to the contemporary context.
Muslims in the Contemporary World	The Muslim world in the contemporary period serves as a central reference point for this module. The Ismaili community as it emerged and developed in modern times is used as a case study to help students gain a better understanding of the issues discussed in the module. Students learn about the transition of Muslim societies from the pre-industrial age into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the nature of the social, political, and cultural

	dilemmas and opportunities that arose for them. They are made aware of modern movements and ideologies that had an impact on societies globally, and the implications raised for Muslim contexts. Special attention is devoted to the role of Imam Sultan Mahomed Shah and Mawlana Hazar Imam in guiding the Ismaili community through this period of rapid and far-reaching change.
Intellectual Traditions in Muslim Contexts	This module focuses on the development of key intellectual traditions in Muslim history. Students are led to explore the legal, philosophical, and mystical schools of thought that arose historically, and the underlying factors behind their emergence. They are acquainted with some of the historical debates that engaged the minds of Muslim thinkers in the past, including Ismaili philosophers, and the diverse sets of intellectual strategies that were formulated as creative responses to these issues. Special attention is paid to the contribution of notable Ismaili thinkers, scientists and scholars to Muslim intellectual history. Students are led to reflect on the need for renewed thinking to address political, social, and ethical concerns facing Muslim societies today.

These modules reflect a shift in the teaching of Muslim RE from a traditional theological approach to a cultural religious literacy approach; one that attempts to understand the diversity of Muslim traditions through the development and evolution of Muslim civilizations and their engagement with other societies. Further, it situates Ismaili Islam in relation to the development of other Islamic traditions, such as in the *Muslim Societies and Civilisations* and the *Muslim Devotional and Ethical Literature* modules; thereby legitimizing Ismaili history, tradition, and faith and practice amongst others. The *Encounters in Muslim History* module nuances the understanding that Muslims had little to no cultural or economic exchange with non-Muslim societies by presenting an alternative narrative, one rich in cultural and economic exchange with the Muslim and non-Muslim ‘other’. Further, these modules clearly aim to foster pride in Ismaili Muslim identity, particularly in the *Ethical Pathways to Human Development* module, where it highlights how the work of the AKDN responds to various social ailments of society, and also how AKDN initiatives are informed by the Muslim ethical tradition. While the aim to strengthen and foster pride in Ismaili and other Muslim identities can be found throughout the modules, it can also be found particularly in the *Faith and Practice in Islamic Traditions* module, where they first present the diversity of Muslim faith expressions and then give particular attention to the Ismaili tradition; specifically, how this tradition continues to be ‘a source of ultimate meaning’ in Ismaili life today. This theme of

fostering pride in – and literacy about – Ismaili identity can also be found in the *Intellectual Traditions in Muslim Contexts* module, where they explore the “legal, philosophical, and mystical schools of thought” across the Muslim world, but pay homage specifically to Ismaili philosophers, scientists, and scholars, thereby equipping Ismaili students with the tools necessary to articulate concrete examples of Ismaili contributions to modern-thought to both non-Ismaili Muslim and non-Muslim audiences.

Dharamsi contends that the IIS secondary curriculum “strives to engender an expression of faith that is both contemporary and still rooted in historical tradition,”<sup>520</sup> thereby legitimizing the new Ismaili RE curriculum as authentic as it remains inspired by Islam but suitable for the modern age. Further, the religious literacy approach is embedded within the secondary curriculum through how it deals with “[b]inaries such as tradition and modernity, faith and world, individual and community, religious and secular” by examining them in their unique cultural contexts.<sup>521</sup> Again, this pedagogical approach coincides with the religious literacy approach by examining religion in their unique cultural matrixes, enabling the student to see how culture and society affect diverse manifestations of Islam. Further, in their examination of the secondary curriculum, both Dharamshi and Kadiwal found key messages fostering inter- and intra-religious diversity and the promotion of pluralism;<sup>522</sup> specifically, that diversity is something to be valued and that pluralism is a necessary ethic to cultivate in the modern world and must be actively pursued.<sup>523</sup> Drawing on the Canadian context, this secondary curriculum becomes of particular value in equipping Ismailis with the knowledge and confidence necessary to articulate their faith in the contexts of Islamophobia and *takfirism*.

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<sup>520</sup> Dharamsi, p. 114.

<sup>521</sup> Dharamsi, p. 114.

<sup>522</sup> Dharamsi, p. 114; Kadiwal, p. 104.

<sup>523</sup> Kadiwal, p. 104.

### Secondary Teachers in Canada

STEP teachers are of particular importance to the Ismaili RE system. The first cohort of STEP teachers trained together at the IIS and IOE from 2007-2009. The Canadian graduates returned to teach in Toronto and Vancouver, where there was a greater population of secondary students. Later graduates would expand the national reach of the program, allowing for RE to take place in smaller cities and even remote areas via online instruction. There is one individual that has significantly contributed to the implementation of the STEP program in Canada, Tasnim Dharamsi.

Dharamsi served as the Canadian Academic Director and was responsible for both overseeing the Ismaili RE system from Kindergarten to Grade 12 and also the development of the secondary RE system.<sup>524</sup> Dharamsi later wrote a dissertation, *Living within the Hermeneutic Circle: Interpreting the Curricular Inquiry of Canadian Secondary Ismaili Religious Education Teachers*, which examined STEP teacher experiences in Canada; specifically, how teachers understand “the curriculum text, their rendition of the curriculum text in light of the lived experience of classroom teaching and, more broadly, how these understandings and interpretations of the curriculum shape and are shaped by faith community sensibilities.”<sup>525</sup>

Dharamsi’s participation in a historical Ismaili endeavour is not unique but reflects a general sentiment in the Ismaili community to serve the Imam, the *Jama ‘at*, and his institutions – which will be discussed more elaborately in Chapter 9. In her own words, Dharamsi proclaims, “my faith tradition is an inescapable and integral part of my being and it is that entry point in which I wish to ground my investigation.”<sup>526</sup> According to Dharamsi, to play a part in such an important Imamat project is both exciting and weighty, “[w]e have all entered this new beginning seeking a freshness to the meaning of education, of religious education, of working within community, of our identities as Shia Ismaili Muslims.”<sup>527</sup> As we see here, have seen, and will see in subsequent

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<sup>524</sup> Dharamsi, p. 3.

<sup>525</sup> Dharamsi, p. v.

<sup>526</sup> Dharamsi, p. 3.

<sup>527</sup> Dharamsi, p. 4.

chapters, this ethic of service can be quite demanding in terms of time and commitment, yet it remains an important aspect of Ismaili identity.

The STEP teachers play an important part in the IIP. More often than not, those who apply to the STEP program do so out of a sense of purpose and privilege to serve the Imam's vision of secondary RE. According to Dharamsi, Canadian STEP teachers have internalized the importance of the new secondary RE, particularly in how it can help respond to the impact of "secular forces" on one's faith; how it strengthens Ismaili identity in relation to other Muslim and non-Muslim identities; how it fosters the ethic of pluralism and appreciation for diversity; and how it engages with Ismailism as a living tradition – one that must adapt and respond to its contexts while remaining inspired by the Islamic tradition.<sup>528</sup>

In her interviews with teachers enrolled in the STEP program, Kadiwal found that the program not only strengthened Ismaili Muslim identity amongst the teachers, but also helped them to develop an appreciation for intra- and inter-religious diversity.<sup>529</sup> Kadiwal contends that RE rooted in religious pluralization can help alleviate intra-*umma* dissonance, and exclusivist and extremist ideologies.<sup>530</sup> However, for this type of RE to make an impact, other Muslim communities would also need to implement this ethic of pluralism within their respective RE curriculums. Again, part of the rationale for the STEP initiative was to help situate Ismaili Muslim identity in the greater context of Muslim history and help Ismaili youth harmonize their Muslim identity in their respective diverse societies; however, in order to do so, first the teachers must be well rooted in the identity they are trying to foster.

STEP teachers must be prepared to teach the RE in an evolving context. Thus, it is not just about delivering the curriculum but "understanding the nature of faith in the lives of individuals, of a living tradition in the life of a community, and how education and specifically a civilizational

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<sup>528</sup> Dharamsi, pp. 175–81.

<sup>529</sup> Kadiwal, p. 3.

<sup>530</sup> Kadiwal, pp. 10, 20.

and humanistic approach to Muslim education can sustain and give new and enduring expressions to a living tradition.”<sup>531</sup> In order to be able to respond to the changing context, STEP teachers reveal that “[t]hey wish to construct new paradigms for the teaching of religious education, paradigms that are true to the tradition and that embrace modernity. They desire to educate the Ismaili students, the community and larger society on the diversity of perspectives and interpretations of Islam, as well as represent with confidence and humility the principles of the Shia Ismaili Muslim living tradition.”<sup>532</sup> Again, the desire to take up this vocational endeavour is tied to the teacher’s own personal relationship with the Imam and how they see themselves as Shi’a Ismaili Muslim.

In an interview with Maryam, a STEP teacher in Ontario, she expressed to me that she felt called to become a STEP teacher. Her desire to enroll in the program stems from a lifelong desire to become a teacher and serve the Imam. Being a STEP teacher has brought her life new meaning and purpose. Maryam is deeply committed to nurturing a more pluralistic Ismaili identity, and she believes that the new secondary curriculum will help Ismaili youth become more confident ambassadors of their faith, to help nuance stereotypes about Muslims and Islam, and about Ismailis themselves.

In Canada, Maryam revealed that ITREB is always looking for creative ways to deliver the secondary curriculum. In her own city, they host

Maryam is a *Standard Religious* 28-year-old and has volunteered within the Ismaili community throughout her life. She sees this ethic as pertinent to her religious identity – an ethic that will be supported further in Chapter 9. Maryam knew from a young age that she wanted to be a teacher so when the STEP program was introduced, she knew immediately that this program was meant for her. In her own words, “I’ve always been involved in the community since I was young, from being a volunteer in the religious community setting, being a camp counselor... and then helping out with religious education classes at BUI [Bayt ul-Ilm] on Saturdays when I was 16. [Volunteering] has kind of been part of who I am... But now I’m able to make [serving] more professionalized, which is kind of cool. I’m not just doing voluntary work now, I’m actually contributing in a professional way, which is great that there’s an opportunity to do something like that.” She was a part of the last few cohorts before the IIS made changes to the program.

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<sup>531</sup> Dharamsi, p. 5.

<sup>532</sup> Dharamsi, p. 128.

various ‘episodic’ programming aimed to engage secondary students outside of the classroom. These periodic events are not only a means of disseminating the curriculum to students enrolled in the RE system, but also a means to engage Ismaili students who do not normally attend RE classes. ITREB is actively trying to increase participation in the RE system, and is even considering adding online classes to engage students who may not be attending RE classes for various reasons such as participation in other extra-curricular activities, living outside the reach of in-person classes, or other logistical or personal reasons. Noteworthy is that due to the coronavirus pandemic of 2019, the Ismaili community has already moved some of their primary and secondary classes to some sort of online format so that students can continue to receive RE in extraordinary circumstances. Thus, the making of online delivery more permanent, particularly for secondary students, has become even more possible.

The secondary curriculum is important in equipping Ismaili youth with the knowledge necessary to nuance stereotypes about Muslims while simultaneously building their confidence in articulating their faith in Muslim and non-Muslim contexts. Further, the curriculum is designed to foster the ethic of pluralism, appreciating the diversity that exists throughout the Muslim and non-Muslim world – thereby helping to alleviate intra-*umma* dissonance within the Ismaili community as well. Another important outcome of the curriculum is for the youth to see themselves as a part of the Muslim *umma*, fostering a sense of pride in its inherent diversity. These values are necessary to live in the modern age, less we remain in constant conflict with those who we fear out of ignorance.

## **Adult Programming and Youth Camps**

### *Adult Programming*

While RE is primarily disseminated in the classroom, ITREB is also developing programming to ensure that adults have access to the new standardized content. Through a series of local programs,

the secondary curriculum is being delivered to an adult audience by STEP teachers, *Waezeen*<sup>533</sup>, and other IIS graduates. This initiative enables those adults who were not able to receive RE due to the lack thereof in early settlement days or due to the poor quality of early RE programs, to get caught up on important content related to their Ismaili Muslim identity. These programs aim to equip adults with the education necessary to better understand their faith relative to inter and intra-religious contexts. The adult RE is especially helpful for those who come from multi-faith families or have multi-faith families of their own – a trend that is growing within the Canadian Ismaili *Jama'at*. Further, adult participants are able to have their questions about the Ismaili faith answered by trained professionals, a feature that has been absent for many *jama'ati* members.<sup>534</sup> Further, as a result of the 2019 coronavirus outbreak and the potential threat of other pandemics, the Ismaili community is currently exploring an online delivery format for adult RE, which would make this program much more accessible on a national scale.

### *Youth Camps*

Youth Camps are another creative means for students to engage with the RE in a more playful way. There are four different camps, based on age groups, organized by ITREB and the Aga Khan Youth and Sports Board (AKYSB). *Discovery* is a day camp that runs for 11 days for those between the ages of six and nine years old. Then there is *Camp Mosaic*, a one-week residential camp for 10 to 12-year-olds. Thirteen and 14-year-olds participate in *Venture*, another “one-week residential camp held in partnership with Outward Bound”<sup>535</sup> – a Canadian organization that

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<sup>533</sup> *Waezeen*, or preachers, are members of the *Jama'at* who have been educated and trained by the IIS to deliver inspiring *waezs*, sermons, and pastoral care to the *Jama'at*.

<sup>534</sup> Some interview participants revealed frustration when trying to get their questions answered by their local leadership. They expressed that there was a great delay in receiving a concrete answer or that sometimes they would not even get an answer. ITREB has been working on improving this issue to ensure that questions are getting answered in a timely fashion by professionals who have the answer. In 2020, they launched a remote program called, “Ask the Waezeen,” which allows community members to pose their questions in a one-on-one session with Canadian waezeen. This program was launched as a result of the 2019 coronavirus outbreak is still in its infancy stages. Thus, whether this program will be permanent or temporal is subject to various factors.

<sup>535</sup> ‘Ismaili Summer Camps in North America Teach Youth about Building Communities That Care’, *The.Ismaili*, 2011 <<https://the.ismaili/our-stories/summer-camps-north-america-teach-youth-about-building-communities-care>> [accessed 5 March 2020].

specializes in outdoor experiences. And, the last camp is a 17-day residential camp for 15 to 17-year-olds called, *Horizons Al-Ummah*.

The camps are designed “to develop happy, healthy, excelling Ismaili youth who are well-grounded in the principles and ethics of the faith.”<sup>536</sup> While the camp activities might include a combination of swimming, rock climbing, martial arts, drama, architecture, and public speaking, the curricula is specifically designed to be interwoven throughout the day. “The activities encourage Ismaili youth to be more comfortable with who they are, to embrace their faith, to appreciate the relationship between the religious and secular aspects of their lives, and to live within the ethics and values of the faith.”<sup>537</sup>

Finally, the camp counsellors themselves play a particularly important role to the whole camp experience. Before candidates become counsellors, they are interviewed and then receive formal training. The hope is that the counsellors will also benefit from this experience and go on to become mentors, role-models, and future leaders in the *Jama‘at*. Through their own experience, “counsellors learn the importance of giving back to the community and mentoring younger generations of Ismailis”;<sup>538</sup> thereby instilling the ethic of service at an important age.

## Rays of Light

Another IIP effort can be seen in the Rays of Light (RoL) exhibition. The RoL travelling exhibition aspired “to promote both a better understanding of the concept of Imamatus, as well as the institutional capacity of this office.”<sup>539</sup> RoL is one of the Golden Jubilee<sup>540</sup> projects and “depict[s]

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<sup>536</sup> ‘Ismaili Summer Camps’.

<sup>537</sup> ‘Ismaili Summer Camps’.

<sup>538</sup> ‘Ismaili Summer Camps’.

<sup>539</sup> ‘Rays of Light: Glimpses into the Ismaili Imamatus (Points of Light Training Manual)’ (A Golden Jubilee International Programme, 2011), p. 2.

<sup>540</sup> Ismailis commemorate the time the Imam has spent in office through official Jubilees. His Highness, the Aga Khan often travels to visit his *Jama‘at* around the world during these historic anniversaries. Also, Jubilee anniversaries are seen as a good time to launch various new projects aimed to enhance the quality of life of the

the work of His Highness the Aga Khan through 60 years of his Imamatus<sup>541</sup> and provides greater insight to how the “Imam has provided a contemporary and relevant manifestation of the ethical underpinnings of the faith of Islam.”<sup>542</sup>

As discussed in Chapter 3, the Imamatus is central to Ismaili identity and is the foundation for Ismaili belief, practice, and participation. This exhibition is of particular significance as it offers to reaffirm the central role that the Imam plays in the lives of the *Jama'at* around the world. However, while RoL offers to give Ismailis practical examples of how the Imam is continuing to fulfill his role to his followers, it also provides an opportunity for non-Ismailis to see the global work of the Imamatus, challenging narratives of what it means to be a Muslim authority in today's world.

The exhibition was inaugurated by the Aga Khan and his family in Paris on December 11, 2008. The RoL exhibition was then copied and constructed to be able to tour around the US and Canada and other countries. Both copies contain the same content with only minor adjustments to the structure made to accommodate travel and set-up. This section explores the exhibit in the Canadian context, where I was fortunate enough to visit while it was in Ottawa.

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*Jama'at* around the world. The anniversaries are as follows: The Silver Jubilee marks 25 years as the Imam, the Gold Jubilee marks 50 years, the Diamond Jubilee marks 60 years, and the Platinum Jubilee marks 70 years.

<sup>541</sup> ‘Visiting Rays of Light’, *The Ismaili* <<https://the.ismaili/visiting-rays-light>> [accessed 22 February 2020].

<sup>542</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 5.



*Figure VI.II: Rays of Light Exhibition*  
 Source: ©the.ismaili

The Delegation of Ismaili Imam at building hosted the RoL exhibition in Ottawa. While it was primarily open for Ismailis (and multi-faith family members) to visit and tour, other community members and government officials were also invited to visit the exhibition. The circular exhibition was approximately 4,000 square feet and displayed over 250 photographs, quotes, video clips, and audio segments (see Figure VI.II).<sup>543</sup> Colour played an important role in the exhibition. The walls were black to promote a peaceful ambience. The writing on the walls were either in white, silver, or gold. Anything written by the exhibition team was displayed in white writing. References to the Aga Khan's Silver Jubilee were written in silver. Noteworthy, is that all quotes from the Aga Khan were written in gold, the same colour as excerpts from the Qur'an, reaffirming the Shi'a belief that the Imam and the Qur'an cannot be separated as described in Chapter 3, and that the Imam's words hold as much, if not more, authority as what is understood in the Qur'an. As this exhibition is primarily intended for an Ismaili audience, having both sayings from the Imam and Qur'an in the same colour poses no issue and many might not even have

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<sup>543</sup> 'Rays of Light', *The.Ismaili* <<https://the.ismaili/microsite/rays-light>> [accessed 22 February 2020].

noticed. However, as mentioned, it was also open to non-Ismaili persons. For example, in Ottawa, community members, government officials and ambassadors from different countries were invited to attend and observe the exhibition. Regardless, this aesthetic depiction aims to legitimize the authority of the Imam as the rightful custodian of the Revelation.

The exhibition has four-quadrants, each quadrant encompasses a particular theme: *Inspiring Hope*, *Reaffirming Identity*, *Engaging in Dialogue*, and *Fostering Harmony* – all of which will be discussed further in the pages that follow. There were various subthemes under each umbrella theme; these were often presented on their own wall. In the very centre of the exhibition, where the four-quadrants meet, was a lit-up dome. This dome represented the theme of *Enlightenment*; specifically, the spiritual advancement of the Imam’s *murīds*, and him as the guide to their spiritual enlightenment (see Figure VI.III). The position of the enlightenment dome at the centre symbolically emanated the four Rays of Light, and their respective themes. The dome symbolizes the “Imam’s spiritual guidance, which lightens his murids’ paths to spiritual advancement.”<sup>544</sup> Noteworthy is that this theme of the ability to advance spiritually in this world was predominant in the survey data, more on this will be discussed in Chapter 9. The RoL exhibition’s “layout demonstrates the physical connection of each of the four ‘secular’ themes with the central enlightenment section, thus conveying the mandate of the Office of the Imam,”<sup>545</sup> thereby illustrating the inseparability of *dīn* and *dunīya*, faith and world, even in the Imam’s work.

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<sup>544</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 9.

<sup>545</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 9.



*Figure VI.III: Rays of Light Enlightenment Dome*  
*Source: ©the.Ismaili*

As you enter the exhibition there is white text that situates the Imam in the context of over 1400 years of Muslim history. This text legitimates the Imam's authority by tracing his lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad, through the progeny of Hazrat Fatima and Imam 'Ali. The entry is full of pictures of the Aga Khan at different ages and notable family members. Once in the RoL exhibition you can go into any thematic area, in any given sequence, including the kids wall. We will now explore some of the thematic areas and how they coincide with the IIP, and in some cases the MLP and the greater IPP. I have selected quotes from the exhibition walls to capture key messages in each thematic area.

## *Inspiring Hope*

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*“The right to hope is the most powerful human motivation I know.”<sup>546</sup> —Aga Khan*

*One of the central lessons I have learned after a half century of working in the developing world is that the replacement of fear by hope is probably the single most powerful trampoline of progress.<sup>547</sup> —Aga Khan*

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The first thematic area is, *Inspiring Hope*, and primarily showcased the AKDN’s work; how it provides hope to the communities that it serves, and how this development network is rooted in the Islamic ethical tradition. This theme is particularly important as it reaffirms one of the Imam’s commitments to his *Jama‘at*, to improve their quality of life, a mandate of the Imamatus which was discussed in Chapter 3. The subthemes in this area were the Pursuit of Knowledge, Communities and Health, A Dignified Life, and Paths to Progress. Many of the photos that served the Pursuit of Knowledge theme were of the Aga Khan schools, academies, and universities. For example, one of the photos was of students and teachers learning together at the Aga Khan School in Osh, Kyrgyz Republic. The photograph’s caption read, “In the face of deteriorating standards of education following the independence of the Kyrgyz Republic, the Aga Khan School in Osh not only provides quality education but also ensures that special attention is paid to the teaching of the Kyrgyz language and the appreciation of its rich history, literature and culture.”<sup>548</sup> This particular caption is important because it not only shows that one of the priorities of the AKDN is to provide quality education in societies where the educational standards are inadequate, but also that the AKDN is interested in preserving that society’s language, history, culture, and literature – thereby preserving and strengthening pride in identity, which is another theme central to this exhibition.

Under the subtheme, A Dignified Life, there was an image of a cut-out from Daily Nation, a newspaper owned by the Aga Khan in Kenya. “The photograph shows two headlines from 1972:

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<sup>546</sup> Baccalaureate address at Brown University, May 29, 1996 as cited in ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 17.

<sup>547</sup> Address to the Tutzing Evangelical Academy upon Receiving the ‘Tolerance’ Award, Tutzing Germany, May 20, 2006 as cited in ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 21.

<sup>548</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 18.

‘Canada to take 6,000 Asians’ and ‘Waldheim,<sup>549</sup> Prince Sadruddin in Talks on Asians.’<sup>550</sup> The caption speaks about how the Aga Khan helped to resettle Ugandan Asians in Canada and elsewhere,<sup>551</sup> thereby being a beacon of hope for the community in times of turmoil. This piece is also important because, as described in Chapter 3, this particular narrative continues to play an important role in the construction of a Canadian Ismaili identity.

Through a multisensory experience, the theme, *Inspiring Hope*, presented how the Imam has been ‘inspiring hope’ in the *jama’ats* around the world; highlighting how the Imam continues to inspire hope through the AKDN and other means, thereby fulfilling his role as Imam to secure the *Jama’at*’s wellbeing, as we saw in the example of the resettlement of Ugandan Ismailis in Canada.

### *Reaffirming Identity*

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*Without cultural identity, social cohesion gradually dissolves and human groups lose their necessary point of reference to relate with each other, and with other groups.*<sup>552</sup> – Aga Khan

*I believe, therefore, that the past has the potential to inspire the future positively, and in the wisdom of investing in its protection, particularly the protection of cultures under threat.*<sup>553</sup> – Aga Khan

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The second thematic area is *Reaffirming Identity*. This theme aimed to foster a collective pride amongst Ismailis by showcasing how “[t]he Imam has revived and reaffirmed pride and identity

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<sup>549</sup> Kurt Joseph Waldheim was the UN Secretary General during the expulsion of South Asians. He received an alarming letter from Idi Amin, where Amin expressed how he was sympathetic to Hitler’s treatment of the Jews. This reaffirmed the seriousness of the situation and helped mobilize resettlement efforts. See, Hasu H. Patel, ‘General Amin and the Indian Exodus from Uganda’, *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, 2.4 (1972), 12–22 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/1166488>>.

<sup>550</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, pp. 20–21.

<sup>551</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 21.

<sup>552</sup> Keynote Speech Concluding the Prince Claus Fund’s Conference on Culture and Development, Amsterdam, Holland, September 2, 2002 as cited in ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 23.

<sup>553</sup> Speech made at the Royal Toledo Foundation Award Ceremony, Toledo, Spain, March 2, 2006 as cited in ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 24.

amongst Muslims” through “interventions in cultural heritage and intellectual traditions.”<sup>554</sup> This section highlighted various Imamati initiatives that aim to strengthen and preserve diverse Muslim identities, and Ismaili identities in particular. The subthemes here were Culture and Heritage, Preserving Muslim Heritage, and Celebrating Muslim Cultural Expressions, which had the following subsections: Continuing an Intellectual Tradition, Spaces of Worship, and the Ethic of Voluntary Service.

The *Reaffirming Identity* thematic space presented how the Imamati is investing in various cultural projects aimed at reviving and preserving diverse Muslim identities. For example, the Preserving Muslim Heritage wall section had a photo of an Afghan man making musical instruments in his workshop with the caption reading, “Reviving Central Asian Musical Traditions.”<sup>555</sup> Again, music is quite a controversial topic in the Muslim world, as there exists Muslim authorities who claim it to be *bid‘a*, heretical innovation, or *haram*, forbidden.<sup>556</sup> The Wahhabis for instance, go as far as labelling Muslims *kafir*, infidels, because of their use of music,<sup>557</sup> which as discussed in the introductory chapter can have harmful consequences. Thus, it is quite interesting to see the Aga Khan take a very stern stance against such divisive and exclusivist ideologies. It is apparent that the Aga Khan is investing a significant amount of resources in the preservation and restoration of diverse Muslim traditions, even those seen as controversial to exclusivist Muslim traditions. We will return to this theme of music in the Muslim world again in Chapter 10, when we look at how some ordinary Ismailis are also contributing to its preservation and revival in their own way.

Through the display of various photographs, this space reminded the Ismaili audience of the internal diversity that exists within Islam, and also the Ismaili tradition. This concept was

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<sup>554</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 23.

<sup>555</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 24.

<sup>556</sup> Michael Frishkopf, ‘Music’, in *The Islamic World*, ed. by Andrew Rippin (Routledge, 2013), pp. 510–26 (p. 513).

<sup>557</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari‘ah in the Modern Age* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), p. 230.

echoed in the following excerpt from the space's central written message, "The Ismailis share a common identity, an ethos of self-reliance and unity based on their spiritual allegiance to the Imam of the Time."<sup>558</sup> This message reflects that, despite the unique identities of Ismailis around the world, they are united under their spiritual allegiance to the Imam of the Time.

In referring to the IIS, the message continued, "Mawlana Hazar Imam's institutions have also paid great attention to preserving and documenting Ismaili history. With this history being subject to some of the harshest polemics over the last millennium, this attention to history writing has enabled many to develop a better understanding of Ismaili identity."<sup>559</sup> An example that captures how this section wants to depict the preservation of Muslim heritage is a picture of male and female students looking at books together in a library with the caption: "Institution for the Study of Muslim Civilizations, London, England – Established in 2002 as part of the Aga Khan University, the Institute aims to strengthen research and teaching on the heritage of Muslim societies in all their historic diversity as a way of creating understanding amongst Muslims as well as between Muslims and non-Muslims."<sup>560</sup> While this caption clearly coincides with the efforts of the MLP, by promoting literacy about diverse Muslim societies, it also aims to make the community aware that efforts are being made to create 'understanding amongst Muslims' and 'between Muslims and non-Muslims' – both efforts being of utmost importance to Ismailis in Canada, as we will see in Chapter 8. Thus, this piece directly responds to issues that the Ismaili *Jama'at* is facing, intra-*umma* dissonance and Islamophobia.

Another noteworthy example is an entire subsection of this thematic space being devoted to the ethic of volunteering in the Ismaili community. On the black walls of the exhibition there is a text written in white which reads, "Voluntary service is an integral ethic of the Ismaili interpretation of Islam. The collective efforts of Ismaili men and women, young and old, contribute

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<sup>558</sup> 'Rays of Light Manual', p. 23.

<sup>559</sup> 'Rays of Light Manual', p. 23.

<sup>560</sup> 'Rays of Light Manual', p. 24.

towards the betterment of both their communities and the societies within which they live.”<sup>561</sup> In this area of the exhibition, were photographs of Ismaili volunteers around the world, showcasing the inherent diversity of the Ismaili tradition. One photo was of a veiled Iranian woman in her volunteer uniform serving something to members of the *Jama‘at*.<sup>562</sup> Another photo was of a group of young Boy Scouts in Northern Pakistan, wearing their uniforms and smiling. The ethic of service continues to present itself within the chapters of the present study. This ethic becomes even more apparent in Chapter 9, when Ismaili participants reveal that volunteering is an integral aspect of their identity, which leads them to serve in many of the Imam’s projects and initiatives. We will also see this ethic later in this chapter, when we discuss the Ismaili CIVIC initiative.

### *Engaging in Dialogue*

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*In my own role as Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims over the past half century, I have come to appreciate the importance of pluralism in ever-expanding ways... Much of my work over this time has dealt with highly diverse societies in the developing world, often suffering from poverty, violence and despair. In such circumstances, a commitment to pluralism comes as no accident.*<sup>563</sup> – Aga Khan

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In the above quote, the Aga Khan reveals quite plainly that the pluralism project, as discussed in Chapter 4, is ‘no accident’; as the hereditary Imam of the Ismaili Muslims, the Aga Khan promotes pluralism in order to enhance their wellbeing, and the wellbeing of others in the societies in which Ismailis live. As such, the *Engaging in Dialogue* section was centred on showcasing the theme of pluralism, and pluralism in action. This theme was supported using excerpts from the Qur’an and the Imam’s speeches. The central message also called attention to the Imam’s Golden Jubilee

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<sup>561</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 29.

<sup>562</sup> While the practice of veiling was eradicated by the Aga Khan III as presented in Chapter 3, Ismaili women also don the veil in societies where veiling persists; such as in Iran and Afghanistan.

<sup>563</sup> Baccalaureate Address at Brown University, May 29, 1996 as cited in ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 31.

Emblem (see Figure VI.IV), which quotes Surah 4, Ayat 1 from the Qur'an, a verse used by Muslims to justify the notion of pluralism in Islam:<sup>564</sup>

O mankind!  
 Be careful of your duty to your Lord  
 Who created you from a single soul  
 And from it created its mate  
 And from them twain hath spread abroad  
 A multitude of men and women



*Figure VI.IV: Golden Jubilee Emblem  
 1957-2007  
 Source: ©the.Ismaili*

One wall presented pictures of the Aga Khan with other world leaders and religious figures. The photographs show the Aga Khan “with world leaders from the ‘West’ and the ‘East,’” and “with religious leaders from different communities,” including “with imams and muftis from other interpretations within Islam”.<sup>565</sup> Some notable photos of the Aga Khan with world leaders can be found in Table VI.II.<sup>566</sup>

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<sup>564</sup> ‘Golden Jubilee emblem’, *the.Ismaili*, 2007 <<https://the.ismaili/ar/golden-jubilee/golden-jubilee-emblem>> [accessed 24 February 2020].

<sup>565</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 33.

<sup>566</sup> The table was developed using the list of photos in ‘Rays of Light Manual’, pp. 33–35. It should be noted that there may have been additional photos displayed or omitted during the actual exhibition in Ottawa.

Table VI.II: Rays of Light – List of Photographs of the Aga Khan with World Leaders

Photographs of the Aga Khan with World Leaders	
Name of World Leader	Position
Pierre Trudeau	Prime Minister of Canada, 1968-1979, 1980-1984
Brian Mulroney	Prime Minister of Canada, 1984-1993
John F. Kennedy	President of the United States, 1961-1963
Bill Clinton	President of the United States, 1993-2001
Queen Elizabeth II	Queen of the United Kingdom, 1952-Present
Baroness Margaret Thatcher	Prime Minister of Great Britain, 1979-1990
Angela Merkel	Chancellor of Germany, 2005-present
François Mitterand	President of France, 1981-1995
Kofi Annan	Secretary General of the United Nations, 1997-2007
Jose Manuel Barroso	President of the European Commission, 2004-2014
General Muhammad Zia ul-Haqq	President of Pakistan, 1977-1988
Benazir Bhutto	Prime Minister of Pakistan, 1988-1990, 1993-1996
Indira Ghandi	Prime Minister of India, 1966-1977, 1980-1984
A.P.J. Abdul Kalam	President of India, 2002-2007
Vladmir Putin	President of Russia, 2000-2008; and Prime Minister, 2008-present
Muhammad Hosni Mubarak	President of Egypt, 1981-2011
Suharto	President of Indonesia, 1967-1998
Abdullah Ahmed Badawi	Prime Minister of Malaysia, 2003-2009
José Sócrates	Prime Minister of Portugal, 2005-2011
King Juan Carlos	King of Spain, 1975-2014
Mwalima Julius Nyerere	1st President of Tanzania, 1964-1985

Benjamin Mkapa	President of Tanzania, 1995-2005
Mzee Jomo Kenyatta	1st President of Kenya, 1964-1978
Daniel arap Moi	President of Kenya, 1978-2002
King Hussein	King of Jordan, 1952-1999
Emomali Rahmonov	1st President of Tajikistan, 1994-present
Hamid Karzai	President of Afghanistan, 2004-present

These photos represent the effort to engage in diplomacy with world leaders regardless of political views and positions – setting an example for Ismailis to engage in dialogue efforts to achieve common goals. Noteworthy is that many Canadian Ismailis trace their origins back to the countries represented in the photos; particularly East-Africa, South-Asia, and Central Asia. Further, the photographs of former Canadian Prime Ministers, Pierre Trudeau and Brian Mulroney are of particular significance as they represent the Ismaili migrant experience from the early 1970s through to the 90s; where PM Trudeau aided to resettle Ugandan Asian refugees and PM Mulroney accepted Afghan and Tajik refugees – thereby crystallizing these events in the Canadian Ismaili collective conscious.

There were also a few examples of the Aga Khan meeting with various religious leaders from different faith backgrounds and different schools of thought within Islam. These photographs can be seen as an attempt to showcase the ethic of pluralism in action through engaging in dialogue between different faith community leaders. Table VI.III presents a summary of the displayed photographs.<sup>567</sup>

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<sup>567</sup> The table was developed using the list of photos in ‘Rays of Light Manual’, pp. 33–35 It should be noted that there may have been additional photos displayed or omitted during the actual exhibition in Ottawa.

Table VI.III: Rays of Light – List of Photographs of the Aga Khan with Religious Leaders

Photographs of the Aga Khan with Religious Leaders	
Name of Religious Leader	Position/Role
Rabbi Rene Sirat	Chief Rabbi of France, 1981-1987
Alexius II	Patriarch of Moscow and all-Russian Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, 1990-2008
Dom Maurillo Jorge Quintal de Gouveia	Archbishop of Evora
Sheik Ahmed Kufaro	Grand Mufti of Syria, 1963-2004
Dr. Mohammed Burhanuddin	52 <sup>nd</sup> <i>Dai al-Mutlaq</i> of the Dawoodi Bohra Shia Ismaili Muslims
Sheikh Maktoum and Sheikh Mohammed	Sons of Sheikh Rashid al-Maktoum, Ruler of Dubai, 1958-1990
Photographs of the Aga Khan with Unnamed Religious Leaders	
Other Religious Leaders	
Mufti of Tajikistan	
Imam of Djingareyber Mosque, Timbuktu	
Religious leader in Gilgit, Pakistan	
Sikh delegates at the World Faiths and Development Dialogue at the World Bank	
Russian Orthodox priests	

The other sections in this quadrant consisted of the following two subthemes: Centres of Confluence and Ismaili Centres. The subtheme, Ismaili Centres displayed photographs of the various Ismaili Centres around the world and aimed to highlight their religious function in the community Ismaili and their worldly function as ambassadorial hubs between the Ismaili community and other communities. The Centre of Confluence wall presented photographs of four buildings, three of which were Imamat buildings, which play ambassadorial roles between the

Imamat and the wider community. For example, one of the photos was of the Delegation of Ismaili Imamat building in Ottawa, which “serves as a sanctuary for peaceful, quiet diplomacy and discussion on international development.”<sup>568</sup> Another one was of the Ismaili Centre in Lisbon, which serves “as a diplomatic and representational role for the Imamat in Portugal.”<sup>569</sup> The other Imamat building was the Global Centre for Pluralism and the last photograph was of the Académie Diplomatique Internationale (ADI) in Paris. This latter institute was founded in 1926 and was the first independent organization dedicated to the promotion of “dialogue and respect for international laws.”<sup>570</sup> Since 2000, when the Aga Khan was elected ADI’s president, he has realigned the institute’s mission, programs, and activities to focus on enhancing modern diplomacy. Collectively, the photos in this theme illustrate that pluralism requires effort and willingness to engage with people from diverse backgrounds to work towards common goals.

### *Fostering Harmony*

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*Islam does not deal in dichotomies but in all encompassing unity. Spirit and body are one, man and nature are one. What is more, man is answerable to God for what man has created.*<sup>571</sup>  
 – Aga Khan

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The central theme of the *Fostering Harmony* section was to showcase how “the work of the Imamat is underpinned by the Qur’anic principle of man’s stewardship on earth.”<sup>572</sup> Inspired by this principle, much of the work of the Imamat aims to foster harmony between humankind and the natural world, humankind and their built environment, and between diverse people.<sup>573</sup> As such, the section is divided into three sub-themes: Man and Man; Man and Nature; and Man and the Built Environment. The latter theme is further divided into two subsections: “Monuments of the Past”

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<sup>568</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 35.

<sup>569</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 35.

<sup>570</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 36.

<sup>571</sup> Speech at the Inauguration of the Ismaili Jamatkhana and Centre, Houston, Texas, June 23, 2002 as cited in ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 38.

<sup>572</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, pp. 38–39.

<sup>573</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 38.

and “Building of the Present”.<sup>574</sup> Collectively, the photographs presented here not only aim to display how this Qur’anic principle manifests into various Imamat programs and projects, but also to “negate any misconceptions of Islam promoting gender inequalities or that of lost hope for a people in devastated regions”<sup>575</sup> – a theme of particular importance in the modern world as Islam has often been attributed to the subjugation of women.

The first sub-theme, Man and Man, seeks to exhibit how people from different backgrounds can work together towards common goals. For example, there is a photo of men and women from Muslim and Hindu backgrounds participating in a village meeting in Andhra Pradesh, India. This photograph challenges the notion that women in Islam are excluded from civic participation. In the Ismaili example, the Aga Khan III spent much of his work encouraging women to go to school and to participate in politics, as we saw in Chapter 3. Further, this picture also challenges the notion that Muslims and Hindus do not get along – the picture displays that people from different religious upbringings can work together towards collective objectives.

The second sub-theme, Man-Nature, reflects the Islamic notion of human stewardship over the natural environment. Many of the photographs depict AKDN efforts to restore and preserve the natural environment through the development of gardens – as we saw in the last chapter. Perhaps the most significant photograph portrayed the development of Al-Azhar Park in Cairo, Egypt (see Figure VI.V for an aerial view of the park). Al-Azhar inherits its name from Fatimid times, where the Al-Azhar mosque primarily served the Ismaili community, although it later became the first university in the world.<sup>576</sup> Conceptualized in 1984, this park was designed “to serve as a green ‘lung’ for the city.”<sup>577</sup> Noteworthy is that the space upon which it was built was formally a 500-year-old garbage dump, that upon excavation, revealed 1.5 kilometres of the 12<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>574</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 38.

<sup>575</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 39.

<sup>576</sup> Daftary, *The Isma’ilis*, p. 159.

<sup>577</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 40.

Century Ayyubid city wall.<sup>578</sup> The park and adjacent sites aim to improve training and employment for people in the area as part of the Historic Cities program under AKTC. This one photograph skillfully captures the sub-theme by depicting the rehabilitation of a man-made problem into a man-made oasis.



*Figure VI.V: Aerial view of the Al-Azhar Park in Cairo  
Credit: ©Gary Otte, retrieved from AKDN.org*

The third and final sub-theme, Man and the Built Environment, aimed to depict the importance of Muslim identity being reflected in the built environment. While the first subsection here, “Monuments of the Past”, primarily highlights the restoration projects of historical Muslim sites, such as Masyaf Citadel in Syria, the second subsection, “Buildings of the Present”, showcases contemporary structures which encompass the ethos of Muslim identity such as the Ishkashim bridge over the Pyanj River which connects Tajikistan with Afghanistan – communities that were historically separated due to war and conflict (see Figure VI.VI for a photograph of His Highness the Aga Khan at the Inauguration Ceremony). The caption under the RoL photograph cites the Aga Khan during the Inauguration of the Ishkashim bridge: “It has always seemed to me that bridges are among the most powerful and important symbols in human society – symbols of

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<sup>578</sup> *Al-Azhar Park, Cairo and the Revitalization of Darb al-Ahmar* (Aga Khan Development Network, 2005), p. 16 (p. 2) <[https://www.akdn.org/sites/akdn/files/Publications/2007\\_aktc\\_egypt.pdf](https://www.akdn.org/sites/akdn/files/Publications/2007_aktc_egypt.pdf)>.

connection, of cooperation and of harmony.”<sup>579</sup> This section presents the notion that the cities in which we build, must be reflective of the ethics and priorities of Islamic faith; mainly a shared humanity driven by the needs of civil society.



Figure VI.VI: Ishkashim bridge Inauguration Ceremony<sup>580</sup>  
Credit: ©Gary Otte, retrieved from *The.Ismaili*

This theme of *Fostering Harmony* inspires much of the community’s outreach programs and initiatives. This is particularly evident when examining the Ismaili Centres and the Ismaili CIVIC initiative; both of which will be discussed later in this chapter.

### *Enlightenment*

The final theme of the RoL exhibition is *Enlightenment*. This theme is showcased in the centre of a 12-foot-high, seven-sided dome connecting all four quadrants. Unlike the other sections, here “the pictures are transparencies that are lit from behind, allowing the pictures to be infused with

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<sup>579</sup> Speech at the Inauguration of the Ishkashim bridge, October 2006 as cited in ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 43.

<sup>580</sup> Photograph of the Aga Khan with President Rahmanov of Tajikistan (right) and the Second Vice President Abdul Karim Khalili of Afghanistan (left) at the Inauguration Ceremony of the Ishkashim bridge

light.”<sup>581</sup> Near the top of the dome are the names of the 49 Ismaili Imams, written in gold calligraphy. In the dome there is a seven-sided seat for visitors “to sit and view the pictures, listen to the music or just contemplate”,<sup>582</sup> a practice important to esoteric forms of Islam, Ismailism included. All the quotations in the dome are *farmāns* from the present Imam or past Imams, all referring to the relationship between the Imam and his *murīds*.<sup>583</sup> The photographs in this section are of the various *dīdars*<sup>584</sup> the Imam has had with his *Jama‘at* over the last 50 years. This section aimed to highlight the connection the Imam has with his diverse Ismaili followers. It also reaffirmed the tradition and centrality of the Imam through the depiction of the names of the Imams of the past. With the Imam being the central authority of the Ismaili tradition, this section aims to strengthen Ismaili identity through the forms of love and devotion. The centrality of the Imam to the Ismaili tradition will be further supported in chapters 8 and 9, when discussing Canadian Ismaili Identity.

As I stood as a witness to many members of the Ottawa *Jama‘at* walking through the exhibition, I will always remember what one *murīd* recalled to me. He was sitting in the *Enlightenment* Dome with his eyes closed for contemplation. He started to recite the names of the 49 Ismaili Imams as a form of *dhikr*, remembrance, but kept stumbling on the name of the 40<sup>th</sup> Imam, Mawlana Nizar. Each time he stumbled he would start from the beginning, Mawlana ‘Ali, Mawlana Hussein, Mawlana Zain al-Abidin... After stumbling multiple times, he opened his eyes and right above him was the name, Imam Nizar. For him, the spirit of the Imam was calling him. Recalling this experience brought tears to his eyes. As other Ismailis walked around the exhibition, many of them had their own unique experiences, some recalling when some of the photographs were taken, where they were during significant events, and sharing stories about the Imam. This

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<sup>581</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 45.

<sup>582</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 45.

<sup>583</sup> ‘Rays of Light Manual’, p. 45.

<sup>584</sup> “The Persian word *didar* is derived from *didan* means meeting, beholding or seeing. In Ismaili terminology, it denotes the beholding the Imam of the age. It is a means to strengthen the heart, cooling the eyes, refresh the faith and earn guidance and blessings of the Imam.” Quoted from Mumtaz Ali Tajddin Sadik Ali, *Encyclopedia of Ismailism* (Islamic Book Publisher, 2006).

exhibition reaffirmed what was already in many of their hearts, that their Imam is truly God's viceregent on earth.

The entire design of this exhibition was carefully thought out, from the colours used, to the organization of the quadrants, to the photos, videos, and audio excerpts that were selected. As with the AKM and the Islamic garden projects, this exhibit wanted to convey the themes in an experiential format, aspiring to touch the guest on both intellectual and emotional levels. Further, as with most of the other projects, this exhibition relied on the help of Ismaili volunteers who worked to create the exhibit, travel with the exhibit, and train local volunteers to serve as “Points of Light”; a term dedicated to the volunteers who served as points of references for the RoL content. Overall, more than 10,000 Ismailis have volunteered to help with the RoL exhibition.<sup>585</sup> RoL showcased much of the work the Aga Khan has done, and continues to do, to improve the quality of life of his *murīds* and the communities in which they live. Further, it aims to strengthen Ismaili identity, especially surrounding the concept of the Imam. While this exhibition was primarily designed for the Ismaili audience, it is important to note that many community members and government officials were invited to view the exhibition in the various cities in which it was showcased; thereby, presenting a nuanced image of what it means to be a Muslim in modern-day society.

We will now turn to another inner-community effort, which not only educates its participants in better understanding Ismaili identity, but also trains them to be able to articulate and present that identity to wider-Canadian audiences.

## ISMAILI MUSLIM AMBASSADORS

Since 9/11, many Muslims find themselves in an unsolicited position to speak on behalf of all Muslims about the Islamic faith. Muslims who exhibit identifiable stereotypical features often

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<sup>585</sup> ‘Rays of Light Comes to Pakistan’, *The Ismaili*, 2018 <<https://the.ismaili/pakistan/rays-light-comes-pakistan>> [accessed 22 February 2020].

unwillingly become spokespersons for Islam, even if they know little about their history, faith, and identity. Further, veiling Muslim women are often approached to answer unsolicited questions, due to their identifiable dress.<sup>586</sup> When Muslims are asked questions about their faith, they will often speak about Islam in favourable terms, saying that Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance,<sup>587</sup> rarely acknowledging the diversity that exists within Islam. This portrayal of Islam in positive terms is quite problematic as it completely ignores the predominately negative image depicted by the media, which often presents Muslims as violent, oppressive, and uncivilized. Nevertheless, Muslims today are expected to be able to answer tough questions about their faith and actions of other Muslims. This has lent some Muslims to self-educate to better understand their particular expression of Islam, and for others, to understand their particular faith in relation to other Muslim understandings.

The Ismaili community, through their various RE efforts, has responded to this phenomenon by equipping Ismailis with the knowledge necessary to be able to answer tough questions about Muslims and Islam. Through their unique approach to RE, Ismaili students are able to speak about the Ismaili faith in relation to the religious ‘other’ and the Muslim ‘other’. Further, they are able to draw upon concrete examples dispelling mass generalizations while also acknowledging violent expressions of Islam. Through the various forms of RE, Ismailis become equipped to be confident ambassadors of Islam.

Interestingly, the present study found that 63% of all participants self-identify as ambassadors of their faith. Further, the more ‘religious’ one self-identifies as, the more likely they are to see themselves as an ambassador; however, this will be discussed further in chapter 10. While many Ismailis already see themselves as ambassadors of Islam, this section highlights the

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<sup>586</sup> Roxanne D. Marcotte, ‘Muslim Women in Canada: Autonomy and Empowerment’, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 30.3 (2010), 357–73 (pp. 368–69) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2010.515816>>.

<sup>587</sup> Caitlin Downie, ‘Negotiating Perceptions and Constructing Identities: Muslim Strategies in St. John’s, Newfoundland’ (unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, University of Ottawa, 2013); Annalisa Frisina, ‘Young Muslims’ Everyday Tactics and Strategies: Resisting Islamophobia, Negotiating Italianness, Becoming Citizens’, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 31.5 (2010), 557–72 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2010.513087>>.

direct efforts by the Ismaili Council for Canada and ITREB specifically, to build confident ambassadors, not only through the use of the secondary RE system, but through other creative efforts.

While many Ismailis have taken it upon themselves to become ambassadors of their faith, it is important to note that the Aga Khan alongside other Ismaili leadership have made this a call to action. In a letter printed in *The Ismaili* magazine in 2014, Malik Talib, former President of the Ismaili Council for Canada, asked if the *Jama 'at*, like the Ismaili Centres, can also serve “to inspire others in the Jamat, and in Canada, as ambassadors of a faith which represents humility, compassion, wisdom, peace, and tolerance?”<sup>588</sup> Since then, and most significantly during the Aga Khan’s Diamond Jubilee (2017), organized efforts were initiated to create confident ambassadors of the Ismaili faith.

### Educational Programming

In July 2018, Canadian al-Waez<sup>589</sup> Hussein Charania hosted a webinar, “Being an Ambassador of Islam: Religious Literacy, Understanding and Action” as part of the Diamond Jubilee educational initiative, *Becoming Ambassadors of Islam: Understanding our Contemporary Context*.<sup>590</sup> This greater educational effort was made available to the Canadian-Ismaili community through the website, *the.ismaili*,<sup>591</sup> which is the official website for Ismailis. Under this educational theme, were five sub-themes: (1) “Misperceptions and Misrepresentations of Islam”; (2) “Clash of Ignorance and the Education Gap”; (3) “Understanding Violence Committed in the Name of Islam”; (4) “Being Ambassadors of Islam”; and (5) “Responses of the Ismaili Imamat to the Clash

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<sup>588</sup> Malik Talib, “Message from the President of the Ismaili Council for Canada” in Symbols of Enlightenment: The Ismaili Centre, Toronto and the Aga Khan Museum’, *The Ismaili, Canada*, 2014, pp. 4–5.

<sup>589</sup> al-Waez (male) or al-Waeza (female) is the title given to an Ismaili preacher who received formal training through the Waezeen Training Programme.

<sup>590</sup> ‘Diamond Jubilee International Education Themes’, *The Ismaili*, 2017 <<https://the.ismaili/diamond-jubilee-international-education-themes>> [accessed 23 August 2018].

<sup>591</sup> ‘The.ismaili | The Official Website of the Ismaili Muslim Community.’, *The Ismaili* <<https://the.ismaili/>> [accessed 18 February 2020].

of Ignorance and Promoting More Peaceful Coexistence.” Collectively, these programs aimed to make Ismailis more literate about the issues facing Muslims today; how to dispel common misconceptions using concrete examples; and how Ismailis can become ambassadors of Islam. For example, in the sub-theme, “Being Ambassadors of Islam,” the website invites the community to not only become ambassadors of their faith by “educating others about Islam and the Shi’a Ismaili Tariqah” but also by simply “living and acting in accordance with the values and ethics of the faith in our everyday lives.” It continues,

This applies equally to the Jamat living in Western societies and the Jamat living in the Muslim world. In living these ethics and values, we demonstrate an alternate face of Islam to the people around us.

One way to do this is to live within the ethics of the faith, to act in accordance with the values of peace, compassion, mercy, and tolerance. Another way is to live life in the pursuit of excellence. Islam urges its believers to serve others and to acquire knowledge to be used in service of Allah’s creation. This is a face of Islam that is not always seen in the media today.<sup>592</sup>

The webpage goes on to give examples of how Muslim excellence is rooted in Muslim history, and also how the Imam has publicly spoken about Muslim contributions to Western knowledge. Thus, while there is a direct effort to create ambassadors, how one can become an ambassador is up to the individual; by example or through dialogue. Noteworthy is that this understanding that one can be an ambassador by either educating others about ‘Islam and the Shi’a Ismaili Tariqah’ or ‘living and acting in accordance with the values and ethics of the faith’ has been internalized by community members; however, we will return to this later in Chapter 10.

In addition to the webinar and website, a subsequent local seminar was held in Calgary for those who could not attend the webinar. The seminar explored “the widespread religious illiteracy about Islam”, how various Imamat institutions were responding to this illiteracy, and “how

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<sup>592</sup> ‘Education Theme 6-4: Being Ambassadors of Islam’, *The Ismaili*, 2018 <<https://the.ismaili/canada/education-theme-6-4being-ambassadors-islam>> [accessed 5 August 2019].

individual responses can manifest in daily life.”<sup>593</sup> These efforts are part of a greater initiative that aims to formally train ordinary *jama'ati* members to be able to speak about their faith to diverse audiences.

### **Jamati Ambassador Program (JAP)**

Under the Ismaili Council for Canada’s Communications team, there is a project called, the “Jamati Ambassador Program” (JAP), which was created in response to guidance by the Aga Khan to help Ismailis to become ambassadors of the faith “through ethical living, and to be able to articulate with confidence, the Ismaili interpretations of Islam.”<sup>594</sup> The primary goal of JAP is to “[p]rovide selected Jamati members with the content and training needed to navigate frequently asked questions regarding the Shia Ismaili Tariqah of Islam and the Ismaili Community, enabling them to feel confident in articulating their religious identity to their friends, colleagues, and others in the Canadian society at large.”<sup>595</sup> Further, the secondary objective is to provide Ismaili “institutions with a pool of Jamati members who are equipped to fill volunteer positions involving outreach and communication, including leadership positions.”<sup>596</sup> Thus, while this program aims to create articulate ambassadors of the Ismaili faith, participants who agree to take part in this program are also agreeing to be a volunteer resource for various outreach events, should they be available.

This program was first piloted in Edmonton and Calgary and consisted of various in-person workshops and meetings. Each person is carefully selected based on various criteria as reflected in Table VI.IV.<sup>597</sup> The contents of the table reveal that careful consideration was taken when

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<sup>593</sup> ‘Facebook Page: TheIsmaili Prairies’, *Facebook*, 2018  
<<https://www.facebook.com/theismailiprairies/photos/a.1393900980678297/1792861754115549/?type=3>>  
[accessed 18 February 2020].

<sup>594</sup> Samir Manji, ‘Invitation to Participate in the Jamati Ambassador Program by the President of the Ismaili Council for British Columbia, Samir Manji’, 2020.

<sup>595</sup> ‘Ambassador Program: Canada (Internal Document)’, 2020, p. 3.

<sup>596</sup> ‘Ambassador Program: Canada’, p. 3.

<sup>597</sup> The contents of the table are cited from ‘Ambassador Program: Canada’, p. 3.

selecting candidates for the program. Further, as the table depicts, an array of participants would be selected based on their ‘Outreach Benefits,’ thereby ensuring the outreach scope of this internal effort. Gender equality and diversity are also important considerations in order to ensure that the participant pool is reflective of the make-up of the Canadian *Jama* ‘at.

Table VI.IV: Jamati Ambassador Program Selection Criteria

Jamati Ambassador Program Selection Criteria	
Criteria	Description
Dedicated & Reliable	The participant should be “willing to enroll, participate” and make constructive recommendations. Exhibit “[p]otential to assist as a mentor for future iterations” of the program
Outreach Benefits	The participant should be “able to utilize skills in their personal and/or professional life” such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• those whose work “involves regular interaction with the external community”</li> <li>• those who hold “an institutional role that includes opportunities for community outreach”</li> <li>• those who hold a “frontline volunteer role that includes opportunities to regularly interact with Jamati members”</li> <li>• those who have “immediate family members who are of other faiths”</li> </ul>
Gender Balance	Participant pool should have “equal gender representation”
Effective Interpersonal Skills	The participant should have good communication skills and able to effectively deliver key messages
Action Oriented & Motivated	The participant should be “willing to open up and share their learnings, ideas, and experiences with the broader community”
Culturally Representative	“The candidate pool should reflect the cultural make-up of the region in which the program is being implemented”

Each JAP meeting is organized by topics that were composed based on frequently asked questions by outsiders, such as, “How are Ismailis different from other Muslims?” or “Who is the Aga Khan?”. Noteworthy is that participants from the present study were posed similar questions to see how they would respond; however, we will return to this discussion in Chapter 9.

The first two topics, “Introduction” and “Media Interview Skills” set the program’s expectations for participants; that they will develop the skills and confidence necessary to be able to articulate this newly acquired knowledge, even under the presence of media. This is of particular importance because as the Ismaili community becomes more active publicly – which they are – being interviewed by the media becomes ever more probable. JAP participants are even trained to respond on the spot to sometimes difficult questions; such as the recent controversy surrounding Prime Minister Trudeau’s family vacation to the Aga Khan’s private Island.<sup>598</sup>

Interestingly, this very question about Prime Minister Trudeau’s family vacation appears as one of the FAQs upon which the JAP content programming is built.<sup>599</sup> According to the FAQs document, the participant is reminded that it was Prime Minister Trudeau who was found in violation of the Conflict of Interest Act, and not the Aga Khan. Further, it goes on to explain that the Aga Khan’s relationship with Canada goes back generations up until the first Ismaili settlement, and that Canada’s financial support for AKFC goes to AKDN projects, not to the Aga Khan himself. The document then goes on to list all the contributions the Ismaili community has made to Canadian society such as the Aga Khan Museum, the two Islamic gardens, and the Global Centre for Pluralism. While this response is factual, it is constructed in such a way to move away from the controversy and instead highlight the Ismaili community’s various national and global efforts.

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<sup>598</sup> Elizabeth Thompson, ‘RCMP Owe the Aga Khan’s Island More than \$56,000 for Trudeau Vacation | CBC News’, *CBC*, 2019 <<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/trudeau-aga-khan-bahamas-rcmp-1.5382374>> [accessed 10 March 2020].

<sup>599</sup> ‘Short Listed FAQs: Jamati Ambassador Program’ (Jamati Ambassador Program).

The other themes are, the AKDN & Social Consciousness of Islam, Ismaili History, Imamat, Contemporary Muslim Landscape, His Highness the Aga Khan, and Beliefs and Practices. In order to cover all the topics, each region will have around 8-10 weekend sessions depending on speaker availability.<sup>600</sup> Further, after each class participants will be put into small groups to ensure they are comfortable articulating confidently what they just learned in their own way – this process may also be done via one-on-one coaching.<sup>601</sup> Participants will also be sent home with “reflection questions based on the FAQs” document, that are “related to the previous and next topics.”<sup>602</sup> Again, while the program is currently limited to Edmonton and Calgary there are intentions for it to be implemented across Canada starting with Ontario and British Columbia. Waezeen and STEP teachers will be key contributors to this effort.

Through these few initiatives, the Ismaili community is adamant about dispelling negative stereotypes about Muslims and Islam in Canada through their various “ambassadorial” projects and programs. These projects aim to equip Ismailis with the knowledge necessary to respond to sometimes difficult questions about Islam and the Ismaili faith, while also encouraging Ismailis to be proud and confident in their identity, and to become ambassadors through example. Again, the present study asked participants if they consider themselves to be ambassadors of the faith, but their responses will be discussed more elaborately in Chapter 10. The next section will turn to how the Aga Khan, the Ismaili institutions, and ordinary Ismailis are publicly presenting Ismaili Islam to wider audiences, both Muslim and non-Muslim.

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<sup>600</sup> ‘Ambassador Program: Canada’, p. 4.

<sup>601</sup> Manji.

<sup>602</sup> ‘Ambassador Program: Canada’.

## PRESENTING ISMAILI IDENTITY

### The Aga Khan's Public Address to the Parliament of Canada

In February 2014, the Aga Khan was invited to address the Parliament of Canada – making him the first faith leader to ever be accorded the privilege. This historic occasion serves to legitimate Ismaili Islam as an authentic expression of Muslim diversity and solidifies the Imam's privilege in the Canadian consciousness. In his address, the Aga Khan spoke about the diversity of the Muslim community, shared values between Ismailis and Canadians, how Canada has been instrumental in progressing many AKDN programs and initiatives, and the importance in nurturing civil society.

The Aga Khan began his address by authenticating himself as a Muslim authority, specifically the hereditary Imam of the Shi'a Ismaili Muslim community – thereby creating space for the Ismaili faith as a legitimate interpretation of Islam – and then spoke a bit about the Ismaili tradition of Imamate while situating it in the greater context of Muslim diversity:

I was born into a Muslim family, linked by heredity to the Prophet Muhammad (may peace be upon him and his family). My education blended Islamic and Western traditions, and I was studying at Harvard some 50 years ago (yes 50 years ago actually 56 years ago!) when I became the 49<sup>th</sup> hereditary Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims.

The Ismaili Imamate is a supra-national entity, representing the succession of Imams since the time of the Prophet. But let me clarify something more about the history of that role, in both the Sunni and Shia interpretations of the Muslim faith.

The Sunni position is that the Prophet nominated no successor, and that spiritual-moral authority belongs to those who are learned in matters of religious law. As a result, there are many Sunni imams in a given time and place. But others believed that the Prophet had designated his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, as his successor. From that early division, a host of further distinctions grew up — but the question of rightful leadership remains central. In time, the Shia were also sub-divided over this question, so that

today the Ismailis are the only Shia community who, throughout history, have been led by a living, hereditary Imam in direct descent from the Prophet.<sup>603</sup>

Aside from legitimizing his ‘rightful’ position as the hereditary spiritual leader of the Shi‘i Ismaili Muslims, the Aga Khan simultaneously legitimizes the diversity that exists within Islam which initially resulted due to disagreements over the Prophet Muhammad’s succession, and later disagreements on the succession of Shi’a Imams, which was briefly discussed in Chapter 3. Later in his address, he spoke about the conflict between the Sunni and Shi’a communities – thereby making Canadians more literate about the diversity that exists within Islam and how this diversity has unfortunately led to intolerance and sectarian violence – something the Ismaili community knows all too well.

In the same address, the Aga Khan explains that “Islam believes fundamentally that the spiritual and material worlds are inextricably connected” and that “[f]aith does not remove Muslims – or their Imams – from daily, practical matters in family life, in business, in community affairs.”<sup>604</sup> As such, he explained that this is why so much of his focus “has been committed to the work of the Aga Khan Development Network” where the ethics of Islam are the source of inspiration for its various development projects, aimed to alleviate poverty and improve the quality of life of those where the AKDN is active.<sup>605</sup> This notion of the harmony between *dīn* and *dunīya*, faith and world, also becomes important when we examine Ismaili identity in later chapters, particularly how it is the inherent faith identity that motivates Ismaili action. Whether that is through voluntary service in the various Imamats projects and institutions, like what we have already seen with Ismail (Chapter 5) and Maryam and we will later see with other participants, or by contributing financially to them – as we saw with the donors of the Aga Khan Museum.

Again, this address to the Parliament of Canada is of particular importance as it was the first, and only, address to ever be delivered by a faith leader or authority. Further, the address was

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<sup>603</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Address to Parliament of Canada, Ottawa’.

<sup>604</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Address to Parliament of Canada, Ottawa’.

<sup>605</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Address to Parliament of Canada, Ottawa’.

delivered by a Muslim authority who represents a minority Muslim community; a community that has been historically persecuted by other Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Thus, while this address is historical, one cannot deny the privileged position of the Aga Khan in being able to speak to the leaders of Canada in such a grand setting. Importantly, the Aga Khan used this public platform to not only give space to Ismaili Islam as a legitimate Muslim faith, but he also used the opportunity to highlight the Ismaili community's commitment to pluralism in Canada through the Global Centre for Pluralism, and their efforts to alleviate intolerance of Muslims, between them and beyond them, through the establishment of the Aga Khan Museum.

This historical address presented Ismaili Islam as both traditional and modern; a contemporary expression of Islam rooted in Islamic principles. It presented the Muslim faith as being inseparable from this world and, as such, that the actions of Ismailis and their various institutions are inextricably driven by Islam. While this address, and other speeches by the Aga Khan, are important contributions to the public presentation of Ismaili identity, there are other more permanent representations and active engagements with civil society.

## Ismaili Centres

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*[W]e hope and trust that people of all faiths and backgrounds will gather here for educational and cultural events – for seminars, lectures, recitals and exhibitions. We will seek to demonstrate that spiritual insight and worldly knowledge are not separate or opposing realms, but that they must always nourish one another, and that the world of faith and the material world are the dual responsibilities of humankind.<sup>606</sup> – Aga Khan*

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There is a high-profile effort to bring awareness to the Ismaili Muslim community in Canada. The most prominent example of this can be observed through the Ismaili Centres. Currently, there are six Ismaili centres around the world: London (1979), Vancouver (1985), Lisbon (1998), Dubai (2008), Dushanbe (2009), and Toronto (2014). Soon, three more will open in Houston, Los Angeles, and Paris. Of particular interest to the present study are the two Ismaili Centres in Vancouver (ICV) and Toronto (ICT) (see figures VI.VII<sup>607</sup> and VI.VIII).

As with other Ismaili buildings in Canada, their architecture and design serve to reflect the harmonization of tradition and modernity, while simultaneously “dispel[ing] misperceptions of Islam, promot[ing] pluralism, and foster[ing] the exchange of culture and knowledge.”<sup>608</sup> Further, both centres in Canada have gardens to complement their design. As discussed in Chapter 5, the Aga Khan Museum and the Ismaili Centre are joined together by the Aga Khan Park, which features traditional Islamic garden elements in its contemporary design. The centre in Vancouver has a garden within the courtyard, which is encased by trees. Interestingly, the Ismaili Centre Vancouver (ICV) only subtly stands out from its surrounding environment. The design purposely made it so that you could only see its magnificence upon peeking through the trees.<sup>609</sup> This was

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<sup>606</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Ismaili Centre, Dushanbe’, *The Ismaili*, 2009 <<https://the.ismaili/ismailicentres/speeches/speech-opening-ceremony-dushanbe>> [accessed 20 February 2020].

<sup>607</sup> ‘Ismaili Centres: Our Ambassadorial Buildings around the World’, *The Ismaili*, 2017 <<https://the.ismaili/centres-our-ambassadorial-buildings-around-world>> [accessed 20 February 2020].

<sup>608</sup> ‘The Ambassadorial Role of the Ismaili Centres’, *The Ismaili*, 2017 <<https://the.ismaili/ambassadorial-role-centres-0>> [accessed 20 February 2020].

<sup>609</sup> Karim H. Karim, ‘Pluralism, Migration, Space and Song: Ismaili Arrangements of Public and Private Spheres’, p. 155.

likely done to not upset neighbouring communities, especially since this would serve as a ‘Muslim’ cultural centre.



*Figure VI.VII: Ismaili Centre Vancouver  
Credit: ©Gary Otte*



*Figure VI.VIII: Ismaili Centre Toronto  
Credit: ©Alyshea Cummins*

The Ismaili centres are symbolic markers of the permanent presence of Ismailis in their respective societies. They serve as ambassadorial hubs for the Ismaili community, providing “opportunities for Ismailis to engage with non-Ismailis through social, cultural and intellectual exchange.”<sup>610</sup> The Ismaili centres also serve as a place of worship for the Ismaili community, thereby reflecting the notion of the inseparability of *dīn* and *dunīya*, faith and world. While they serve as centres for dialogue and exchange, they also serve as centres for civic organization and participation.

The Ismaili centres develop programming for public audiences and host various community events. The centres work collaboratively with local communities and organizations and the centre in Vancouver even assisted with the Winter Olympic Games in 2010. Since 2015, deliberate programming was implemented to combat Islamophobia and dispel misconceptions about Muslims and Islam. Under the guidance of the Imam, outreach events steadily increased and detailed records started to be collected from those events describing the nature of the event, the targeted audiences, attendance of Ismailis versus non-Ismailis, collaboration with an external partner, media coverage, financial outcome, and feedback. These diaries are reviewed quarterly to assess impact. A few of those diaries will be highlighted below.

The diaries reveal that there are various examples of outreach events that aim to foster a sense of collective belonging amongst members of the diverse *umma*. One example is the “Voices of Muslim Women” event, which was held on October 4, 2018, in collaboration with Voices of Muslim Women (VMW), a non-profit organization in Vancouver. Through the viewing of films, this event brought diverse groups of Muslim women together to discuss “how digital media can act as a transformative and educational medium which can counter harmful and popular misconceptions about Muslim women.”<sup>611</sup> A photograph of the event can be seen in Figure VI.IX.

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<sup>610</sup> ‘The Ambassadorial Role of the Ismaili Centres’.

<sup>611</sup> ‘ICV Diary: Voices of Muslim Women (Internal Document)’ (Ismaili Centre Vancouver, 2018).



*Figure VI.IX: Voices of Muslim Women Event at the Ismaili Centre Vancouver*  
 Credit: ©Ismaili Centre Vancouver

Another event that targeted a Muslim audience was the “TogethArt” event. On February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Syrian refugee children and Ismaili *Bayt ul- ‘Ilm* students came together to create art at ICV in collaboration with Children of Art, “a local non-profit whose missions is to help bring art into children’s lives through programs for refugee centres, children’s hospitals, mental health facilities, community centres, and schools.”<sup>612</sup> The aim of the workshop was to foster a safe space for children to explore their artistic potential in group and individual art projects.<sup>613</sup> In total, there were 45 people present for this event, around 40% of which were from outside of the Ismaili community. Overall, the outcome of this event was deemed successful. This particular event is important as it is not only an example of the Ismaili community trying to create relationships with other Muslim communities, but also because this particular community is a newly resettled community who will likely remember the hospitality of the Ismaili community for years to come. A photo of the event can be seen in Figure VI.X.

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<sup>612</sup> ‘ICV Diary: TogethArt (Internal Document)’ (Ismaili Centre Vancouver, 2019).

<sup>613</sup> ‘ICV Diary: TogethArt’.



Figure VI.X: Children enjoying an art activity in a workshop led by Children of Art  
Credit: ©Zahir Rajani

An example of an event that took place at both of the centres in Toronto and Vancouver was the *Connect Create Cairo: Build a City with History and Technology* exhibition. Between 2014 and 2016, youth from public schools and faith-based schools were invited to take part in a series of workshops aimed at exploring the contemporary issues facing urban cities using the historical example of Cairo and 3D printing. The objectives for this program were to expose the Ismaili Centres to external communities, particularly students; to build relationships “between Ismaili youth and youth from other faith-based communities”; and to expose 3D printing technology to students in the surrounding areas.<sup>614</sup> A photograph of the event at ICT is presented in Figure VI.XI. Noteworthy is that Al-Azhar Park was part of the 3D printing experience,<sup>615</sup> exposing the participants to Ismaili contributions in contemporary Cairo.

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<sup>614</sup> ‘Cities of Arrival: Connect, Create Cairo (Power Point Presentation)’ (Ismaili Centre Burnaby, 2016).

<sup>615</sup> ‘Students Become Urban Planners for a Day in Connect Create Cairo 3D Exhibition and Workshop’, *the.Ismaili*, 2016 <<https://the.ismaili/fr/ismailicentres/burnaby/students-become-urban-planners-day-connect-create-cairo-3d-exhibition-and-0>> [accessed 11 March 2020].



Figure VI.XI: Connect Create Cairo at the Ismaili Centre Toronto  
Credit: ©Ismaili Centre Toronto

The Ismaili Centres have also offered their spaces for civil ceremonies. For example, on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2017, ICT hosted the Institute for Canadian Citizenship (ICC) ceremony, welcoming 50 new Canadian citizens. Events such as this expose newcomers to a more hospitable image of Muslims, especially if they may be arriving from countries that have negative pre-conceived notions about Muslims and Islam. The Ismaili Centres are an important contributor to the MLP and the IIP as they not only aim to nuance the image of Muslims, but also actively seek to engage with the external community in meaningful ways and inspired by the Ismaili faith. Further, their very design nuances traditional Muslim architecture highlighting that Muslim experiences adapt to and are shaped by the current context. Through collaborative programming with other Muslim and faith-based communities, Ismailis are not only alleviating Islamophobia and intra-*umma* dissonance in Canada, but they are also presenting the ethos of Ismaili identity.

### Civic Engagements

Ismailis have been actively engaging in Canadian society through various programs and initiatives. Civic engagement is important as through these efforts, Canadians get to know the Ismaili community through civic action. Many of the efforts are driven by the ethic of service, such as raising money or volunteering for various not-for-profit organizations or other local community

initiatives. All efforts symbolically represent what it means to be an Ismaili Muslim, and an Ismaili Muslim in Canada in particular. This section aims to highlight some of these local and national initiatives, and how they present a particular narrative of Ismaili Muslim identity.

The very first organized effort began in 1985 when a small group of Ismaili women in Vancouver decided to raise funds for the Aga Khan Foundation Canada by organizing a charity walk. The women themselves came from African and Asian backgrounds and mobilized “to give back to the communities they left behind.”<sup>616</sup> Collectively, the women persuaded 1,000 Canadians to walk with them and they raised \$55,000 to help alleviate global poverty.<sup>617</sup> This small gesture impressed the Imam so much that it became an annual event known as the World Partnership Walk (WPW), which now takes place in 10 cities across Canada: Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver, Victoria, Regina, Toronto, Kitchener-Waterloo, London, Ottawa, and Montreal. Today, WPW “has raised more than \$120 million – making it the largest event in Canada in support of international development.”<sup>618</sup> Further, because this event has been so successful, there is now a World Partnership Golf (WPG) event that takes place annually in eight Canadian cities. Noteworthy is that WPG “is Canada’s only national golf event dedicated to raising funds and awareness to fight global poverty.”<sup>619</sup>

In Calgary, the local Ismaili community is also quite involved in the annual Stampede festival. Stampede is a celebration of Canadian Western heritage and identity and brings Calgaryans from different backgrounds together to honour their diverse community. Since 1996, Ismailis have hosted an annual Stampede breakfast, which features various community activities and games. They also participate in the Stampede Parade by marching together in their Ismaili volunteer uniforms alongside their own float (see the 2017 float in Figure VI.XII). Today, the

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<sup>616</sup> ‘World Partnership Walk - 2020 - Who We Are’, *Aga Khan Foundation* <<https://www.worldpartnershipwalk.com/en/about-us/who-we-are>> [accessed 5 March 2020].

<sup>617</sup> ‘About the WPW’.

<sup>618</sup> ‘About the WPW’.

<sup>619</sup> ‘World Partnership Golf’, *Aga Khan Foundation* <<https://www.worldpartnershipgolf.com/about-the-tournaments/>> [accessed 5 March 2020].

Ismaili community is one of the premier supporters of Stampede and a documentary was made to commemorate their participation.<sup>620</sup> The documentary, *East Meets Western*, “is a story about volunteerism, commitment and support between two disparate cultures” and showcases the involvement of the Canadian-Ismaili community in this annual cultural celebration.<sup>621</sup> This documentary captures what it means to be a Canadian Ismaili; living out the ethics of the faith through civil service.



Figure VI.XII: Ismaili Stampede Parade Float in 2017  
Credit: ©TheIsmaili Prairies

Other local annual outreach events include the Mayor’s Breakfast (Ottawa), *Milad-I-Nabi* (select cities), and *Yaw’m-e-‘Ali* (select cities). *Milad-I-Nabi* is the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday and each year local dignitaries invite government officials and other members of the *umma* to observe the celebration.<sup>622</sup> *Yaw’m-e-‘Ali* celebrates the first Shi’i Imam ‘Ali’s birthday and is usually done in unison with other Shi’i *tariqahs*. While these latter two

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<sup>620</sup> ‘East Meets Western – Blog’, *Calgary Stampede Blog*, 2009  
<<https://www.calgarystampede.com/blog/2009/06/27/east-meets-western/>> [accessed 5 March 2020].

<sup>621</sup> ‘East Meets Western’.

<sup>622</sup> McDonough and Hoodfar, p. 137.

outreach events are significant as they help to bring members of the *umma* and wider-Canadian community together to commemorate, and better understand, these important Muslim celebrations, the Ismaili community has also organized itself to be more engaged in charity efforts outside of their community.

In September 2017, to commemorate Canada's 150<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration, the Ismaili community pledged 1 million hours of community service to improve the quality of life of Canadians. This initiative was known as CIVIC 150 (#CIVIC150) and the Ismaili community surpassed their pledge of 1 million hours within the first nine months. After the year ended, CIVIC 150 was rebranded as Ismaili CIVIC and the community continues their civil engagement efforts in a more organized fashion. Ismaili CIVIC works “with organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Terry Fox Foundation, the Food Bank, and Canadian Blood Services, amongst many others.”<sup>623</sup> Ismaili CIVIC's areas of focus are Health, Education, Pluralism, and Economic development and their efforts target vulnerable populations, the weak, the elderly, and youth.

At first Ismaili CIVIC was reaching out to organizations to offer volunteers but now that they are known in their locales, they are often called upon to assist in various local community efforts. Volunteers wear a branded t-shirt that is red with a white Canadian flag (see Figure VI.XIII). In 2018, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau recognized Ismaili CIVIC during his Address at the annual *Navroz*, Persian New Year, celebration at the Ismaili Centre in Toronto. Trudeau referred to the Ismaili community as “an extraordinary example of the very best of Canada,” and thanked the community for achieving “over one million hours of community and volunteer service to mark Canada's 150th anniversary.”<sup>624</sup> Further, he said that Ismaili CIVIC “is a beautiful

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<sup>623</sup> ‘Canadian Ismaili Community Surpasses Pledge of 1 Million Service Hours | News’, *Daily Hive: Toronto*, 21 March 2018 <<https://dailyhive.com/toronto/canada-ismaili-civic-150-service-hours>> [accessed 12 March 2020].

<sup>624</sup> Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, ‘Prime Minister Trudeau Delivers Remarks for Navroz at the Ismaili Centre in Toronto’, *Prime Minister of Canada*, 23 March 2018 <<https://pm.gc.ca/en/videos/2018/03/23/prime-minister-trudeau-delivers-remarks-navroz-ismaili-centre-toronto>> [accessed 12 March 2020].

testament to the dedication to this country and to all its citizens.”<sup>625</sup> Such prestigious attention enhanced public recognition of the Ismaili community and their efforts nationwide.<sup>626</sup>



Figure VI.XIII: PM Justin Trudeau with Ismaili Civic (Ismaili Centre Toronto)  
Source: ©The.Ismaili

As a result of its national success, the fourth Sunday in September is now being recognized by the Canadian *Jama'at* as Ismaili CIVIC day, where local Ismaili community members organize with external organizations to assist with local causes. Volunteers are told to be open and proud about their Canadian Ismaili Muslim identity, something they have not always been vocal about due to their unique histories of being victims of intolerance or prejudice. Further, through this initiative, Ismaili CIVIC actively attempts to dispel misunderstandings about themselves and other Muslims: “Through Ismaili CIVIC, we will not only make a difference in the lives of others, but establish the Jamat as a model of voluntary service and help to address common misperceptions about Islam and Muslims.”<sup>627</sup>

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<sup>625</sup> Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

<sup>626</sup> Ismaili CIVIC was recognized by various Canadian news media outlets such as the Globe and Mail, Vancouver Sun, and the Toronto Star.

<sup>627</sup> ‘Ismaili CIVIC’, *The.Ismaili*, 2017 <<https://the.ismaili/civic>> [accessed 12 March 2020].

Although Ismaili CIVIC started in Canada, it is now a transnational Ismaili initiative and is present not only in Western countries such as the US and the UK, but also in the other countries: India, Pakistan, Syria, and Afghanistan. Through this transnational effort, Ismaili CIVIC aims to present a more civically engaged version of Islam, a tradition that is inspired by the ethics of Islam.

## Online and other Public Presence

### *Online Presence*

In a digital world, where one has a vast amount of information available at their fingertips, it becomes ever more important to have an online narrative that is self-represented; especially, in the context of anti-Muslim rhetoric and *takfirism*, where these narratives erase unique identities and experiences. For decades, the only Ismaili website was AKDN.org, which primarily focused on AKDN efforts worldwide, and hosted various public speeches of the Aga Khan. Since 2017, however, the Ismaili community in Canada has started to have a greater online presence. Today, the.Ismaili<sup>628</sup> is the official website for the global Ismaili community and also provides and presents information about Ismailis to the general public. For example, the website's "about us" section offers information about the Ismaili Community, the Ismaili Imamat, His Highness the Aga Khan, Speeches, and an Imamat Timeline that highlights important moments and achievements of the Aga Khan's Imamat. Other web-sections include News, Ismaili Centres, Our Community, Institutions and Programmes, Multimedia, and the Ismaili Shop where you can buy commemorative items depicting the Imam's Diamond Jubilee like *tasbihs* (prayer beads), bookmarks, picture frames, photo albums, cufflinks, jewellery, shawls, and mugs. The Ismaili community also has a significant online social media presence through various outlets such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. These efforts are particularly significant as the Ismaili community has always been private and quite hesitant to 'put themselves out there,' a sentiment that will be discussed further in chapters 8 and 9.

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<sup>628</sup> Prior to The.Ismaili there was also iiCanada.org, an official website for the Canadian *Jama'at* that soon merged into The.Ismaili.

Again, having official online public presence is new and significant for the Ismaili community in Canada. Prior to these official websites and social media accounts, a few Ismailis took it upon themselves to create online spaces for the Ismaili community, and later for the public, to better understand their identity. These individual efforts will be discussed further in Chapter 10 as the present chapter only looks at the institutional efforts aimed to crystallize and present Ismaili identity; however, it is noteworthy that these unofficial websites ran despite requests by Ismaili leadership to take them down in fear that they might have global consequences.<sup>629</sup>

In July 2017, the then President of the Ismaili Council for Canada, Malik Talib, invited the Canadian Ismaili *Jama'at* to publicly use the hashtag, #ProudToBeACanadianIsmaili to celebrate Canada's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the Aga Khan's Diamond Jubilee (see Figure VI.XIV).



Figure VI.XIV: Tweet by Malik Talib, the President of the Ismaili Council for Canada  
Credit: ©Malik Talib (@malikztalib)

<sup>629</sup> Canadian Ismailis are in privileged positions to speak openly about their faith without violent repercussions. However, an online presence, if the content is not carefully moderated, can put Ismailis in other parts of the world at risk, mainly due to intolerance of diverse expressions of Islam within the *umma*.

For the first time in history, Ismailis were encouraged by the Ismaili Council for Canada to be open and public about their Canadian Ismaili identity, a privilege only enjoyed by Canadian Ismailis.<sup>630</sup> Tables VI.V and VI. VI highlight some of the tweets from Ismailis in public positions.

Table VI.V: Tweets by Ismailis in Canadian Politics

Tweets by Ismailis in Canadian Politics	
Twitter Handle	Tweet
BC Sen. Mobina Jaffer (@SenJaffer) <sup>631</sup>	I am #ProudToBeACanadianIsmaili as it gives me the opportunity to practice my faith freely #Canada150 #SenCA <a href="https://youtu.be/N9llyt51zmQ">https://youtu.be/N9llyt51zmQ</a>
Arif Virani, MP (@Viraniarif) <sup>632</sup>	Here are a few of the reasons I am #ProudToBeACanadianIsmaili! #Ismaili #Canada150 #Canadian #DiversityIsOurStrength #Multiculturalism
Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi (@nenshi) <sup>633</sup>	Wishing all of my fellow Ismaili Muslims #DiamondJubilee Mubarak – the 60 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Aga Khan’s Imamat! #ProudToBeACanadianIsmaili

<sup>630</sup> To date, there has not been another social media campaign to publicly identify as an Ismaili. Canada remains an exception.

<sup>631</sup> Senator Mobina Jaffer, *What Does Being an Ismaili Canadian Mean to Me?* (@SenJaffer, Twitter, 2017) <<https://youtu.be/N9llyt51zmQ>> [accessed 30 June 2017].

<sup>632</sup> Arif Virani, *Here Are a Few of the Reasons I Am #ProudToBeACanadianIsmaili! #Ismaili #Canada150 #Canadian #DiversityIsOurStrength #Multiculturalism* (@Viraniarif, Twitter, 2017).

<sup>633</sup> Naheed Nenshi, *Wishing All of My Fellow Ismaili Muslims #DiamondJubilee Mubarak – the 60th Anniversary of the Aga Khan’s Imamat! #ProudToBeACanadianIsmaili* (@nenshi, Twitter, 2017).

Table VI.VI: Tweets by Ismailis in Canadian Media

Tweets by Ismailis in the Media	
Twitter Handle	Tweet
Riaz Meghji, Breakfast Television (@RiazMeghji) <sup>634</sup>	The one thing Canada gave our family in the 70s to get us to where we are today. Thank you #Canada #ProudToBeACanadianIsmaili #Canada 150
Global News Toronto (@GlobalNewsTo) <sup>635</sup>	Ahead of #Canada150 Global News anchor @FarahNasser opens up about the country that gave her family the gift of opportunity.
Nabil Karim (@NabilKarimTSN) <sup>636</sup>	In '72, Canada opened up its home to more than 7,000 Ugandan Asians. Truly thankful. Let's celebrate #ProudtoBeACanadianIsmaili #Canada150

Many of the tweets cited in Tables VI.V and VI.VI reflect a particular narrative of gratitude towards Canada for opening its doors to Ismaili refugees in the 1970s – a story that continues to shape the Canadian Ismaili collective consciousness. However, this was not the only occasion Ismailis have used their public platforms to speak about their faith more openly.

### *Other Public Presence*

Aside from the examples that appear in Tables VI.V and VI.VI, other members of the community have also used their public positions to speak about Ismaili Islam and their Ismaili Muslim identity: Calgary's Mayor Naheed Nenshi, BC Senator Mobina Jaffer, Aly Velshi (MSNBC), Nabil Karim (TSN), Farah Nasser (Global News), and Faizal Khamisa (Sportsnet). For example, in a *Sports*

<sup>634</sup> Riaz Meghji, *The One Thing Canada Gave Our Family in the 70s to Get Us to Where We Are Today. Thank You #Canada #ProudToBeACanadianIsmaili #Canada 150* (@RiazMeghji, Twitter, 2017).

<sup>635</sup> Farah Nasser, *Ahead of #Canada150 Global News Anchor @FarahNasser Opens up about the Country That Gave Her Family the Gift of Opportunity.* (@GlobalNewsTo, Twitter, 2017).

<sup>636</sup> Nabil Karim, *In '72, Canada Opened up Its Home to More than 7,000 Ugandan Asians. Truly Thankful. Let's Celebrate #ProudtoBeACanadianIsmaili #Canada150* (@NabilKarimTSN, Twitter, 2017).

*Illustrated* interview discussing Islamophobia in sports media, Nabil Karim expressed that he feels quite comfortable discussing his faith on public platforms, despite the hostile climate and experiencing prejudice himself:

I'm very comfortable speaking about it. I am a proud Ismaili Muslim. Our Imam, His Highness the Aga Khan, is one of the most respected world leaders having received a number of honorary degrees, awards and prestigious distinctions from countries around the world—including becoming an honorary Canadian back in 2010. Our faith teaches us that Islam is [a] practice of tolerance, peace, intellect and service, among other pillars. The Aga Khan's mandate is not only to help those in our community, but to also help those in need in the developing world. That's the goal of AKDN (Aga Khan Development Network) which works in over 30 countries around the globe, by building institutions and providing essential services. It's that type of philanthropy and humanity that sets the example for the roughly 15 million Ismailis across the world. I could talk about my faith and our principles all day.<sup>637</sup>

In his quote, Nabil not only speaks about some of the principles of the Ismaili faith, but also about the Aga Khan and his philanthropy through the AKDN, something that other Ismaili ambassadors do to nuance the image of Islam and Muslims as we will see in Chapter 10. Similarly, Senator Mobina Jaffer used the #ProudToBeACanadianIsmaili social media launch to speak publicly about her Canadian Ismaili identity in a video she posted:

This is a very auspicious year for Canadian Ismailis as this is the Diamond Jubilee of His Highness the Aga Khan becoming the 49th Imam of Shi'a Ismaili Muslims and Canada's 150th birthday. I am just filled with gratitude. I am grateful to His Highness Karim Aga Khan for giving me incredible opportunities by providing Uganda with Aga Khan schools and letting me receive the best education in the world. I am grateful to His Highness the Aga Khan for insisting that girls have the same opportunities in education as boys. I know that I am who I am because of His Highness the Aga Khan's vision for equality between girls and boys. I am grateful to Canadians for giving me, a Ugandan refugee, the same opportunities to thrive in Canada as Canadians. I am grateful to Canadians for giving me 16 years to serve you as your senator and I look forward to serving you. I wish you all a happy Canada day and Kushali Mubarak for the Diamond Jubilee of His Highness the Aga Khan.<sup>638</sup>

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<sup>637</sup> Richard Deitsch, 'Roundtable with Muslim Members of the Sports Media', *Sports Illustrated*, 2017 <<http://www.si.com/tech-media/2017/02/26/roundtable-muslims-sports-media-donald-trump-election-twitter-politics>> [accessed 27 February 2017].

<sup>638</sup> Jaffer.

In Senator Jaffer's video transcription cited above, you will notice the following: she speaks about AKDN schools and the importance of education; she draws upon the 'Ugandan refugee' narrative, which continues to makeup Canadian Ismaili identity; and she nuances the stereotype that gender equality is antithetical to Islam, to which she says, 'I am who I am because of His Highness the Aga Khan's vision for equality between girls and boys.' Senator Jaffer's address, like Nabil's interview excerpt, both follow a particular way of presenting Ismaili identity: Ismaili identity is the Imam and the Aga Khan, it is the AKDN and their global efforts to enhance the quality of life for communities in those regions, and it is inspired by Islamic ethics such as gender equality, service, tolerance, peace, and education – all of which are reiterated by ordinary members of the Canadian Ismaili *Jama'at* as we will see in chapters 8 and 9.

We are currently witnessing a more public presentation of Canadian Ismaili identity. Over the last few years, the Ismaili community has not only enhanced their online presence, but various members in the community who hold public positions are becoming more open about their Ismaili identity and experience, arguably to bring more attention to the Ismaili understanding of Islam in order to help alleviate Islamophobia and create space for intra-*umma* diversity.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter discussed the various internal community efforts to crystallize and strengthen Ismaili identity in Canada. Through religious education, camps, and the Rays of Light exhibition, Ismailis become more literate about their history and tradition in relation to others, are inspired to live in accordance with the principles of their faith, and are encouraged to reaffirm allegiance to their Imam, who remains central to their living tradition.

As part of the IIP, Ismailis are encouraged to be ambassadors of their faith, which contributes to the MLP by nuancing the image of Muslims and Islam in Canada, by showcasing an aspect of the diversity that exists within *umma*. By either living by example or outwardly engaging with members of the wider community to dispel misconceptions about Muslims and

Islam, Ismailis are presenting a different ‘Islam’ than what is commonly depicted by mass media. Through the Jamati Ambassador Program in particular, Ismailis are not only given the literacy necessary to articulate their faith and identity to various audiences but are also encouraged to actively seek opportunities to do so.

Finally, the Ismaili community is actively presenting a particular image of Islam, inspired by their unique Ismaili identity. While the Aga Khan has been actively nuancing the image of Islam and Muslims through his various public addresses for decades, his Address to the Parliament of Canada is of particular significance as he is the first and only faith leader that has been invited to speak to the parliament. There he spoke about the diversity in Islam and how much of his global development work is inspired by Islamic principles. The Aga Khan also spoke about the inseparable connection between *dīn* and *dunīya*, faith and world, which lends to the various motivations behind the Ismaili centres and other civic initiatives.

The Ismaili Centres and the Ismaili CIVIC initiative present a different understanding of Islam than what is often portrayed by the media. The Ismaili Centres present Ismaili identity as modern but rooted in traditional ethics. Further, in more recent years, the Ismaili Centres have been mandated to help alleviate Islamophobia and intra-*umma* dissonance through Muslim literacy efforts and collaborative programming between Muslim communities. Ismaili CIVIC also presents Ismaili Islam as civically engaged, which is inspired by the ethic of service. Together, these efforts are helping Canadians to become more literate about Muslim diversity through the example of Shi‘a Ismaili Muslims.

Finally, the Ismaili community now has a greater online and public presence due to the decades of hard work by members of the Canadian Ismaili community. The Ismaili community has now been in Canada for over 50 years. Their successful (re)settlement can be observed through the various public positions Ismailis hold in politics and media, their various buildings, their purpose-built *jamatkhanas*, and their various boards and portfolios that aim to serve the Ismaili *Jama‘at*. Much of their success is due to the guidance of the Aga Khan and the Imamāt’s

relationship with Canada; however, none of this potential could have been realized without the tireless efforts of ordinary Ismaili Muslims through their ethic of service.

Before closing the chapter, I want to present an interview excerpt from Sukayna on how she thinks Ismailis are viewed by other Canadians:

Well going back to the question of how Ismailis are viewed by Canadians... I think that with our various institutions that are popping up in Canada, and the work that the Aga Khan is doing, I think that Canadians are more open to Ismailis... Having Ismailis involved in other areas like parliament and politics is creating awareness overall in different areas. I think it's definitely helping us assimilate into the Canadian society a lot better and I think people are being exposed to the [Ismaili] faith.

## VII. MEASURING CANADIAN ISMAILI IDENTITY

### MEASURING CANADIAN ISMAILI IDENTITY AND PARTICIPATION

Ismaili Muslim beliefs, practice, and identity are understudied topics and the extant of research is primarily in master's and doctoral theses archives.<sup>639</sup> Of the theses that did qualitative research, the researchers conducted their studies through local interviews with members of the Ismaili community and used a small sample set. The present study not only conducted interviews nationwide, but also gathered data through an online survey, thereby enabling the examination of a larger nationally derived sample.

The present study wanted to examine how Ismaili identity affected Ismaili participation in the MLP and the IIP as discussed in chapters 5 and 6, respectively. Thus, in the autumn of 2015, I launched a national online survey entitled, and designed to measure, "Ismaili Identity and Participation in Canada." Ismaili identity, like all identities, is contingent on various factors such as geography, culture, language and other intimate factors such as gender, race, socio-economic status, ability and accessibility, and other individual differences. Ismaili identity in Canada, thus, will likely manifest differently from Ismaili identity in Syria, Kenya, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, China, the United Kingdom, and even closer to home, the United States. Environment and experience are both important factors in shaping Ismaili identity and, thus, the findings cannot be generalized to other Ismaili communities.

As discussed in the methodology chapter of this thesis, recruitment for the present study was primarily advertised via social media outlets, such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter. However, I also travelled to various metropolises with high concentrations of the Ismaili Muslim community to gain more participants: Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver, Toronto, and

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<sup>639</sup> Dossa; Kadiwal; Miraly; Karmali; Versi; Shamsah J. Mohamed; Schroff; Lalji; Gova; Rizwana Jiwa; Matthews; Muhammedi.

Ottawa. In addition to the survey, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with ordinary *jama'ati* members as well as leadership within the community in Toronto, Ottawa, Edmonton, Calgary, Vancouver, and Halifax. Those whom I identify as leaders were not all official leaders within the *Jama'at*, such as leaders in the *jamatkhana* or other Ismaili institutions; they include those who are in privileged positions within society whom independently carried out initiatives that relate to the objectives of the IIP and MLP on their own accord.

The present chapter as well as chapters 8-10 present original findings from the survey and interviews. While this chapter primarily focuses on the survey and interview design and some general findings, Chapter 8 will present on how Ismaili identity is presented and negotiated in different contexts and why this negotiation is important to understanding the rationale behind the MLP and the IIP. Further, Chapter 9 will specifically look at how Ismaili Islam differs from 'mainstream Islam' in Canada to better understand why the Ismaili community may be viewed as outsiders to the *umma*, and why, then, they take a more inclusive approach to combating anti-Muslim sentiments. And finally, Chapter 10 will discuss how ordinary Ismailis are participating in this nation-wide movement. Further, the survey discussion will be supported by findings from the interviews in order to give more depth to the survey results. Together the data offers a generous portrayal of Canadian Ismaili Muslim identity and participation.

## **SURVEY DESIGN**

As mentioned briefly in the methodology chapter, the structure for the present survey was derived from Beyer's survey, which examined religious and cultural identity in Canada.<sup>640</sup> Beyer's survey was designed to pick up on nuanced identities that may not have otherwise been identified using traditional survey methods. The hypothesis guiding the present survey's design was that not all Ismailis practice their religion the same and, thus, the design sought to capture these nuances relative to one's degree of religiosity. Unlike traditional survey methods, Beyer's survey makes as

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<sup>640</sup> Beyer, Cummins, and Craig.

few assumptions as possible and allows participants to elaborate on their answers. While the present survey was derived from Beyer's survey, amendments were made in order to account for speculative external perceptions of the Ismaili community from both other Canadians and members of the *umma*, as well as the community's esoteric and activist natures. Further, additional questions were added in order to measure the negotiation and presentation of Ismaili identity in different social contexts and, also, the participation of Ismailis in Canadian society.

The first part of the survey questionnaire asked for participant demographics such as age, gender, ethnicity, cultural background, province of residence, country of birth, education, household income, and occupation. Each of these questions offered a space for the participant to elaborate on their responses if they wished. These demographics were then analyzed to see if they influenced the construction of Ismaili religious identity in Canada.

All "tick-box" questions in this survey were also followed by a "textbox," which enabled participants to elaborate or clarify their responses if they wanted to. Some questions were formulated specifically to elicit a qualitative response where "tick-box" options were poorly suited.

Like Beyer's survey, the design of the present survey funnelled participants into three different silos depending on how they answered the following question: "Do you consider yourself to be religious?" They were then given a range of options from "1" being "Not at All" to "5" being "Very." If participants answered 3, 4, or 5, they were channeled into the "Religious Silo." The follow-up question for everyone was, "Do you consider yourself to be spiritual?" Those who answered 1 or 2 to the Religious Question and 3-5 for the Spiritual Question were funneled through to the "Spiritual Silo." Those participants who answered 1 or 2 to both the Religious and Spiritual Questions were directed to the "Not-Religious Silo" (see Figure VII.I). Only 11 participants ended up in this third silo (2.8% of the entire sample).

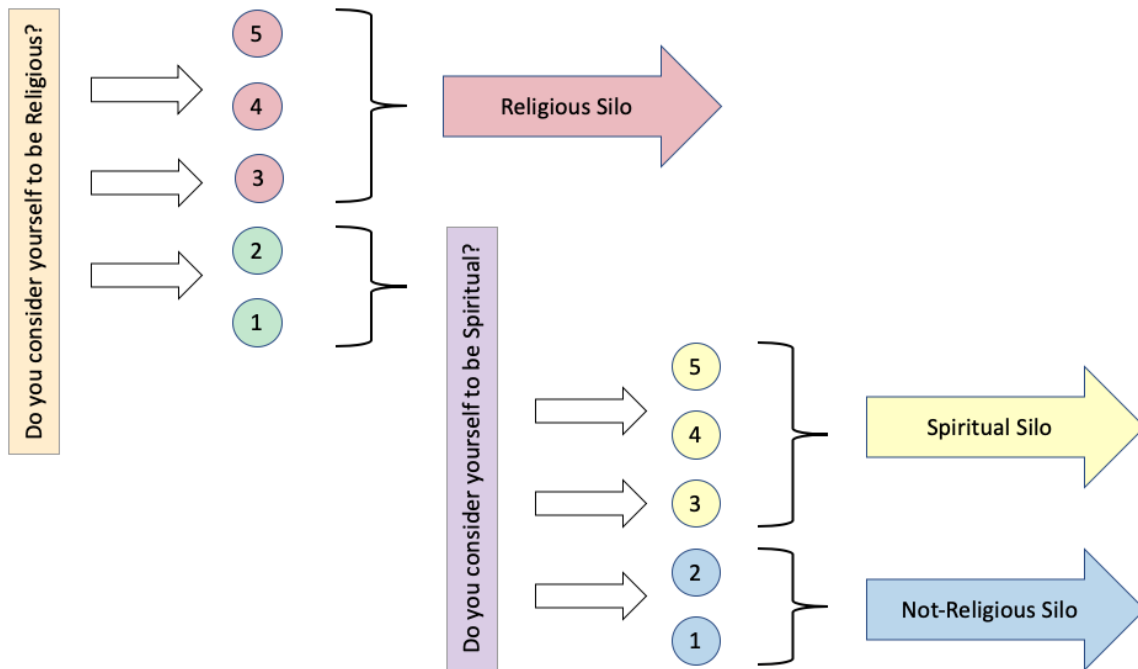


Figure VII.I: Survey Silos  
Credit: ©Alyshea Cummins

The reason for the silos was to better understand how one's degree of religiosity affected identity and participation. As will be elaborated in the pages that follow, one's degree of religiosity and spirituality were influential factors in identity expression and in determining one's level of participation in public and private spheres. These silos were later analyzed to formulate identity categories.

As discussed in the methodology chapter, the present sample is one of convenience. Any Ismaili in Canada that wanted to participate was able to. However, because the majority of recruitment efforts were primarily done online, marginalized community members, especially new migrants, those suffering economic insecurity, and those who are not fluent in the English language, might not have been able to access the study. Further, as we will see in this chapter, the sample was not at all representative of the diversity that exists within the Canadian Ismaili demography, which includes Ismailis from all parts of the world, ranging in privilege, class, and

accessibility. The participants were mainly from East-African or South Asian backgrounds, which, while reflecting the majority of Ismailis in Canada, do not by any means represent how Ismailism has been construed and practiced by other members of the global *Jama'at*.

The social media recruitment efforts proved successful as the majority of respondents identified that they heard about the study through these means, mainly through Facebook. Others identified that they found out about the survey through email and word of mouth; however, most participants identified Facebook, Twitter, Ismaili Gnosis, and an advertisement in IsmailiMail,<sup>641</sup> as the primary sources of visibility.

## IDENTITY CATEGORIES

As previously discussed, the survey was designed to funnel participants into three distinct categories based on how they answered the “Religious” and “Spiritual” questions: The Religious Silo, the Spiritual but not Religious (SBNR) Silo, and the Not-Religious Silo. Following Beyer’s example, and after further analysis, four profiles were generated: The *Standard Religious* (religious 4s and 5s), the *Moderately Religious* (religious 3s), the *Spiritual but not Religious* (religious 1s and 2s and spiritual 3-5s), and the *Not-Religious* (religious 1s and 2s and spiritual 1s and 2s).<sup>642</sup> Table VII.I summarizes how many participants were categorized into each of these profiles.

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<sup>641</sup> ‘Take the Canadian-Ismaili Identity and Participation Survey Online’, *Ismailimail*, 2015  
<<https://ismailimail.blog/2015/10/06/take-the-canadian-ismaili-identity-and-participation-survey-online/>> [accessed 9 April 2020].

<sup>642</sup> Beyer, Cummins, and Craig; Peter Beyer and others, *Cultural and Religious Identity among 18 to 45 Year-Olds in Canada: A Survey, Summary and Selected Findings* (Ottawa, Ontario: Religion and Diversity Project, 2017)  
<[http://religionanddiversity.ca/media/uploads/cultural\\_and\\_religious\\_identity\\_summary\\_&\\_selected\\_findings\\_final\\_online\\_version\\_july\\_31.compressed.pdf](http://religionanddiversity.ca/media/uploads/cultural_and_religious_identity_summary_&_selected_findings_final_online_version_july_31.compressed.pdf)>.

Table VII.I: Religious Identity Categories

Religious Identity Categories				
Category	Total (n)	Percentage	Male	Female
Standard Religious - SR (R4/5)	235	60.4%	126	104
Moderately Religious - MR (R3)	110	28.3%	52	58
Spiritual but not Religious - SBNR (R1/2 & S3-5)	33	8.5%	19	14
Not-Religious – NR (R1/2 & S2)	11	2.8%	5	6
TOTAL	389		202	182

The majority of the sample were categorized as *Standard Religious (SR)*, meaning that their beliefs and practices coincided with the Ismaili “Ideal;” they prayed regularly, attended the *jamatkhana* regularly, were active in *seva* or volunteer efforts, and paid the Shi’i tithe, *Khums*, known to Ismailis as *Dasond*. The *Moderately Religious (MR)* group could be further divided into two groups based on how they answered the spiritual question; however, they were much more similar than they were different. Fifty percent of *MRs* identified as “More Spiritual than Religious” (*MSTR*) and were 10-30% more spiritual in their beliefs than the other *MRs*. The *MSTRs* were 50% more likely than other *MRs* to practice the esoteric practices of their faith. *MSTRs* were also more likely to practice their faith privately than other *MRs*. However, collectively, these two groups had more in common with one another than they had differences. They were similar in age with the average age of *MSTRs* being only slightly older than other *MRs* (37 vs. 32 years old). Further, they both placed importance on prayer and attending *jamatkhana* regularly, however they were not as regular in the practice of their faith when compared to *SRs*. When analyzing the two groups’ degree of practice and degree of belief, *MRs* were only slightly higher than *MSTRs* on both scales (2.8 vs 2.25; 3 vs 2.7 out of 4). Thus, they still fit neatly in between *SRs* and *SBNRs* in this category (3.2 and 3.4 for *SRs* and 1.8 and 1.8 for *SBNRs*). Further, collectively they placed less importance on

paying the tithe when compared to the *SRs*. Since these groups were more alike than not, they will be categorized collectively as *MRs*.

The *Spiritual but Not-Religious (SBNRs)* were significantly less practicing and less believing than both the *SR* and *MR* categories but still embodied the “spirit” of Ismailism in their daily lives. The *Not-Religious (NR)* were non-practicing Ismailis but still followed some of the ethics and values of the faith such as pluralism, education, and service.

The importance placed on one’s religious identity strongly correlated with one’s degree of religiosity with the *SRs* placing the most importance on their religious identity (4.7 out of 5), followed by the *MRs* (4.2) and then the *SBNRs* (3.3). The *NRs*, not surprisingly, placed the least importance on religion in shaping their identity (2.2). This correlation was also found in Beyer’s study.<sup>643</sup>

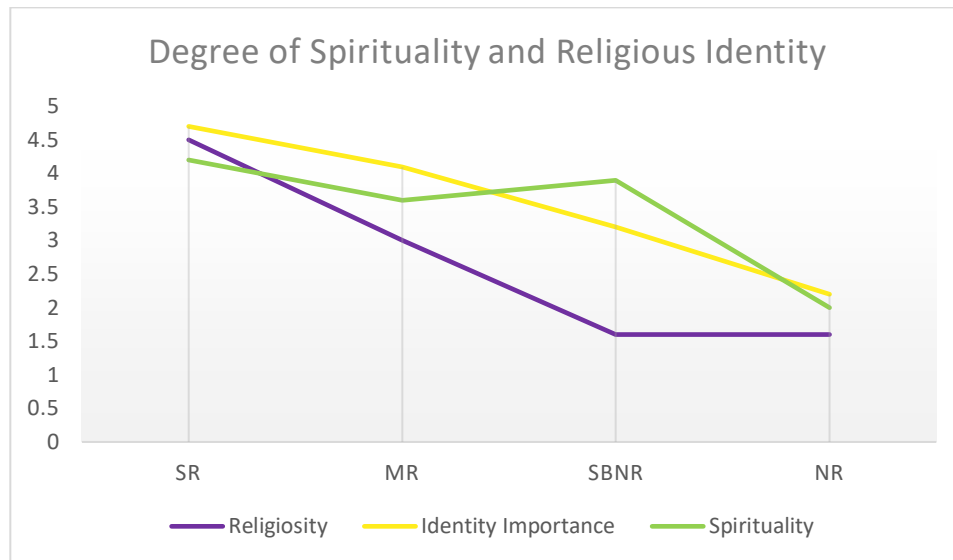
One’s degree of spirituality correlated with their degree of religiosity with the exception of the *SBNRs* (See Chart VII.I) The *SRs* considered themselves to be more spiritual than the *MRs* (4.1 and 3.6 out of 5, respectively), and the *SBNRs* fell in between the *SRs* and the *MRs* (3.9 out of 5). All of the participants in the *NR* category identified as being 2 out of 5 on the spiritual scale; thus, no one identified as being “1-Not at All” spiritual. This unique finding may have been a result of the small sample size of *NRs*. Had there been more participants to identify as *NR*, there may have been more varying results. One possible reason for the smaller sample size of *NRs* may have to do with whether they identify as Ismaili: recruitment efforts targeted those who identify as Ismaili and there was even a question on the survey that asked you if you identified as Ismaili. If you answered “no” to this question, the survey would have closed. This question was designed to filter out non-Ismailis from the survey, however this may have excluded Not-Religious Ismailis from participating. Nevertheless, these correlations coincide with the results of Beyer’s research,

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<sup>643</sup> Beyer and others.

examining cultural and religious identity in Canada – that as one’s degree of religiosity decreases, so does one’s degree of spirituality.<sup>644</sup>

Chart VII.I: Degree of Spirituality and Religious Identity



Age also correlated with degree of religiosity. The youngest group was the *NRs* who had an average age of 27.8, this was followed by the *SBNRs* (34.3), the *MRs* (34.6), and then the *SRs* (39.3). The older one was, the more likely they were to be religious. This trend was also found in Beyer’s research; that the young adult population is increasingly identifying with non-religious categories, mainly *SBNR* or *NR*.<sup>645</sup> Further, it is important to note that the younger members of the sample were also more likely to be born in Canada than older members. Thus, the data also, reveals that place of birth correlates significantly with one’s degree of religiosity.

<sup>644</sup> Beyer, Cummins, and Craig.

<sup>645</sup> Beyer and others.

## SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

The online survey yielded 389 Ismaili participants across Canada: 202 males, 182 females, and 5 who either identified as ‘other’ or preferred not to identify. The average age of those who participated was 37.2 with the youngest participant being 18 and the eldest being 84. The female participants were slightly younger than the male participants; 34.9 and 39.4, respectively (see Table VII.II).

Table VII.II: Survey Demographics – Gender and Age

Survey Demographics		
Gender	n (%)	Average Age
Male	202 (51.9%)	39.4
Female	182 (46.8%)	34.9
Other	5 (1.3%)	n/a
TOTAL	389	37.7

## Origins

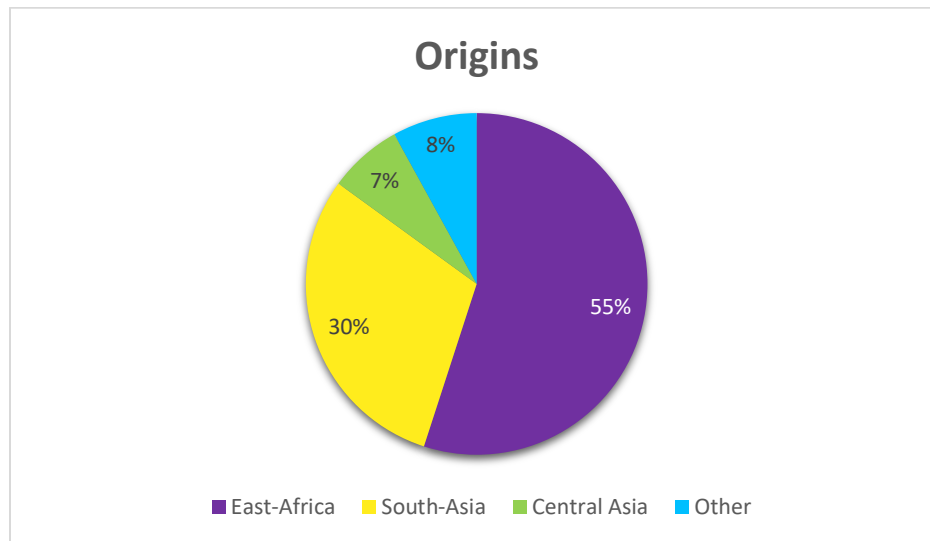
When looking at the survey sample, approximately 40% of participants were born in Canada, while 60% were born outside of Canada. This percentage is similar to other studies about Muslims in Canada, in which the data estimates that 72% of Canadian-Muslims were born outside of Canada.<sup>646</sup> As stated previously, being born outside of Canada had an effect on one’s degree of religiosity. As religiosity increased, so did the likelihood of participants to be foreign-born. Thus, those participants born in Canada were far less likely to be categorized as *SR*, and more likely to

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<sup>646</sup> Wilkins-Laflamme.

be categorized as either *SBNR* or *NR*. For those who were not born in Canada, the primary place of origin was East-Africa (55%), mainly from Uganda, Kenya, or Tanzania; then South-Asia (30%), India or Pakistan; Central-Asia (7%), Tajikistan or Afghanistan; and the other 8% (n=21) of respondents were born in Europe (UK, France, Austria and Belgium), Africa (Congo and Rwanda), Australia, the UAE, and the USA (see Chart VII.II). When comparing places of origin to national survey data, national data reveals that Muslims are mainly coming from North-Africa, East-Africa, Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia.<sup>647</sup> Comparatively, when looking at the transnational history of the Ismailis, as briefly outlined in Chapter 3, it makes sense that the majority of Ismailis are coming from East-Africa.

Chart VII.II: Survey Demographics – Origins



Another growing ethnic community is the Central-Asian *jama'at*, who are primarily arriving as refugees to escape war and other economic hardships. The majority of these migrants are settling in Canadian metropolises in Alberta and Ontario, with a significant settlement community in Quebec – a population of around 7,000.<sup>648</sup> Central-Asians who participated in this

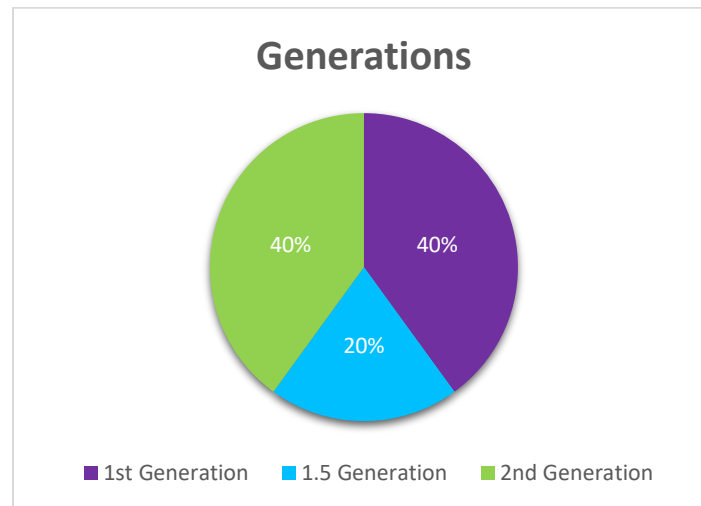
<sup>647</sup> Wilkins-Laflamme.

<sup>648</sup> Number based on the Montreal *Mulaqat* 2017 registrations.

survey mainly reside in Ontario (43%), Alberta (29%), Quebec (14%), Manitoba (4%), and Saskatchewan (4%) (6% did not disclose). Further, while the Central-Asian *jama'at* is quickly growing, they are still an ethno-cultural minority within the Ismaili community in Canada; especially compared to the ethnically South-Asian population. Further, although no question blatantly asked if participants identified as Canadian, 68% of participants self-identified as Canadian and this was often in addition to their ethnic origins.

Finally, the average age at migration to Canada in the present study was 17.4 years, meaning that the average migrant arrived after the typical high school age. Thirty-four percent of the sample that was born outside of Canada identified as being less than 11-years-old when they migrated, putting them into the 1.5 generation category (20% of entire sample). This puts the majority of the sample in either the 1.5er and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation categories (see Chart VII.III). Interestingly, irrespective of age of migration, the participant sample was highly educated, especially in comparison to Muslims in other Canadian studies.

Chart VII.III: Survey Demographics – Generations



## Education

The present sample was on average highly educated, with 85% of participants, irrespective of gender, holding at least a college diploma or university degree (see Table VII.III). Further, 45% of the sample reported having completed either a professional designation or graduate degree. Of those who reported completing high school, 77% of them declared that they were currently enrolled in college or university programs. This phenomenon is not unique to the Canadian Ismaili Muslim community but has been found in other studies about Muslims in Canada.<sup>649</sup> However, in other studies, it is estimated that only 35% of adult Canadian Muslims hold a university degree which pales in comparison to the present sample.<sup>650</sup> Further, out of the foreign-born participants (60% of the sample and averaging 44 years in age), 85% attained at least a college diploma or university degree, while 45% identified as having either a professional designation or graduate degree (see Chart VII.VI). It is evident that Canadian-Ismaili Muslims, and Muslims more generally, place a very high importance on higher education. This theme is also reflected in the interviews.

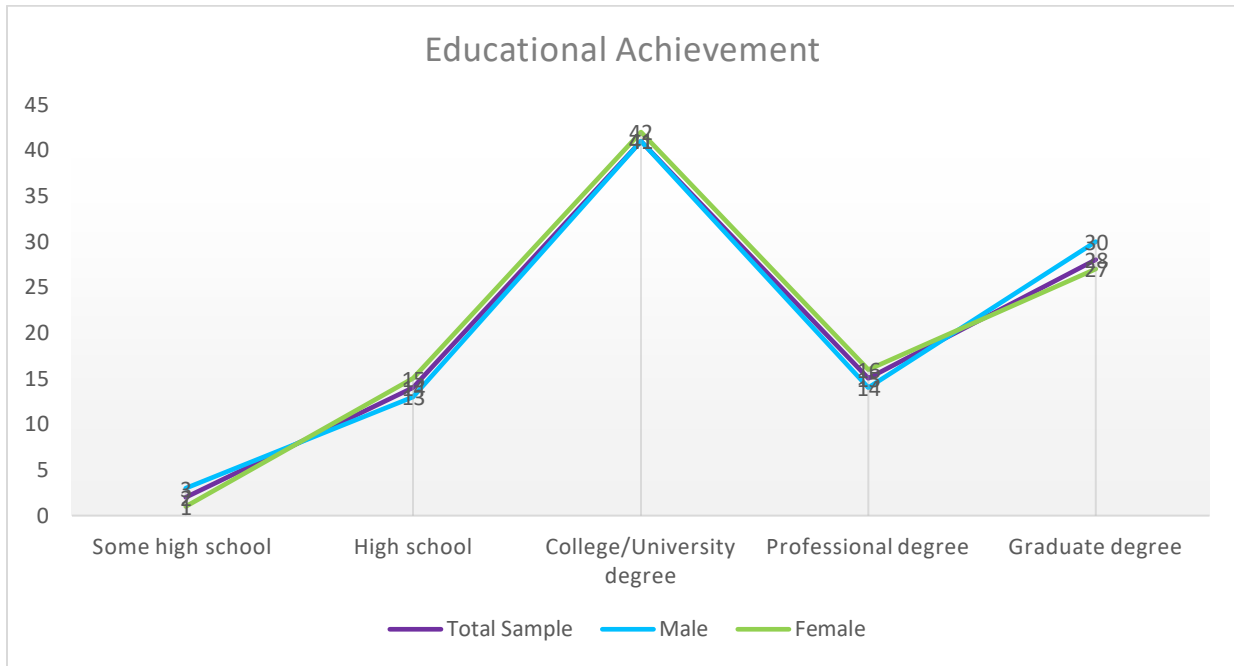
Table VII.III: Survey Demographics – Educational Achievement

Educational Achievement			
	n = 377 (%)	Male (n=195)	Female (n=179)
Some high school	6 (2%)	5 (3%)	1 (1%)
High school	52 (14%)	26 (13%)	26 (15%)
College/University degree	156 (41%)	79 (41%)	75 (42%)
Professional degree	57 (15%)	27 (14%)	29 (16%)
Graduate degree	106 (28%)	58 (30%)	48 (27%)

<sup>649</sup> Peter Beyer, 'From Atheism to Open Religiosity: Muslim Men', in *Growing Up Canadian: Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists* (McGill-Queen's University Press); Peter Beyer, 'Religious Identity and Educational Attainment among Recent Immigrants to Canada: Gender, Age, and 2nd Generation', *Journal of International Migration and Integration/Revue de l'integration et de La Migration Internationale*, 6.2 (2005), 177–99; Miles Corak, 'Immigration in the Long Run', *IRPP Choices*, 14.13 (2008), 1–32; Wilkins-Laflamme.

<sup>650</sup> Wilkins-Laflamme.

Chart VII.IV: Survey Demographics – Educational Achievement by Gender



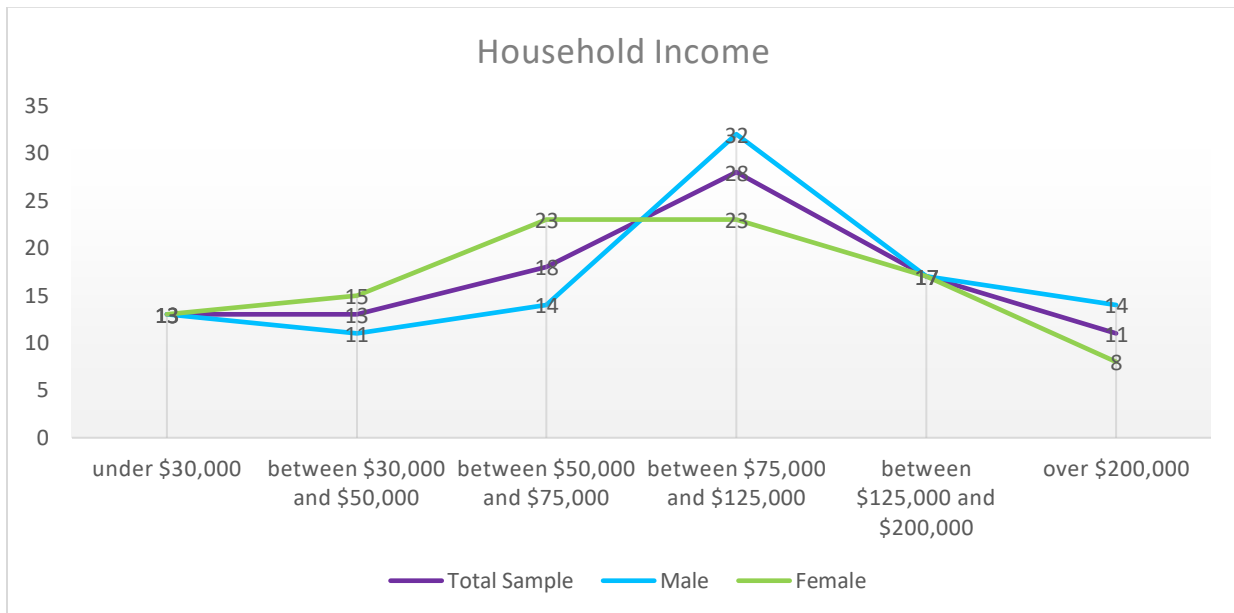
### Socio-Economic Status

Finally, to better understand the socio-economic status (SES) of the present sample, the survey asked participants to declare their annual household earnings. The average annual household income was approximately \$80,000 with the male participants reporting slightly higher household incomes than female participants (approximately \$90,000 versus \$70,000) (see Table VII.IV). The income discrepancy should be seen as a reflection of Canadian earning inequality, as both men and women in the community were quite similar in their educational achievements (see Chart VII.IV).

Table VII.IV: Survey Demographics – Household Income

Household Income				
	N=355	(%)	Male (n=184)	Female (n=167)
under \$30,000	46	13%	23 (13%)	22 (13%)
between \$30,000 and \$50,000	45	13%	20 (11%)	25 (15%)
between \$50,000 and \$75,000	65	18%	26 (14%)	39 (23%)
between \$75,000 and \$125,000	98	28%	59 (32%)	38 (23%)
between \$125,000 and \$200,000	61	17%	31 (17%)	29 (17%)
over \$200,000	40	11%	25 (14%)	14 (8%)

Chart VII.V: Survey Demographics – Household Income by Gender



Noteworthy is that this sample reported earning a higher household income than other studies on Canadian Muslims.<sup>651</sup> In Beyer's study on recent migrant identity and educational attainment, he found that despite having a high degree of education, Muslims were earning significantly less when compared to other migrant communities (earning a personal income of \$30,000 or less annually).<sup>652</sup> While Beyer's finding suggests that Muslims overall may be facing racial and religious barriers when it comes to attaining a job, this was less the case with the present sample, possibly due to their social class which will be discussed further shortly (see Chart VII.VI). Ismaili Muslims appear to be an outlier in that they may not be facing as much discrimination in the workplace in comparison to the rest of the Canadian *umma*. While Ismailis may experience discrimination due to their names, race, or ethno-cultural backgrounds, since they have no religious dress requirements and no outward identifying characteristics that suggest they are Muslim (aside from, perhaps, the colour of their skin), they are less likely to experience discrimination based on their "religious" appearance. For example, a symbol that has come to be associated with all Muslim women in the Western world is the headscarf, even though not all Muslim women wear one. For Ismailis, there is no religious requirement for women to veil nor is there a requirement for Ismaili men to grow beards or for either to wear other cultural garments. As discussed in Chapter 3, the abolition of the requirement to veil for Ismaili women dates back to the Imamate of Aga Khan III (r. 1885-1957), where he ended this practice amongst Ismailis transnationally, attributing the gesture as a step towards the full emancipation of Muslim women.<sup>653</sup> Thus, unlike Muslims who see religious dress as important to their religious practice, this is not the case for Ismaili Muslims. Thus, it appears that Ismailis are less likely to experience religious-based discrimination from other Canadians in comparison to other Muslims. They do, however, experience discrimination from other members of the *umma*, which will be discussed in more detail later in the next chapter.

*Chart VII.VI: Income and Education Comparison*

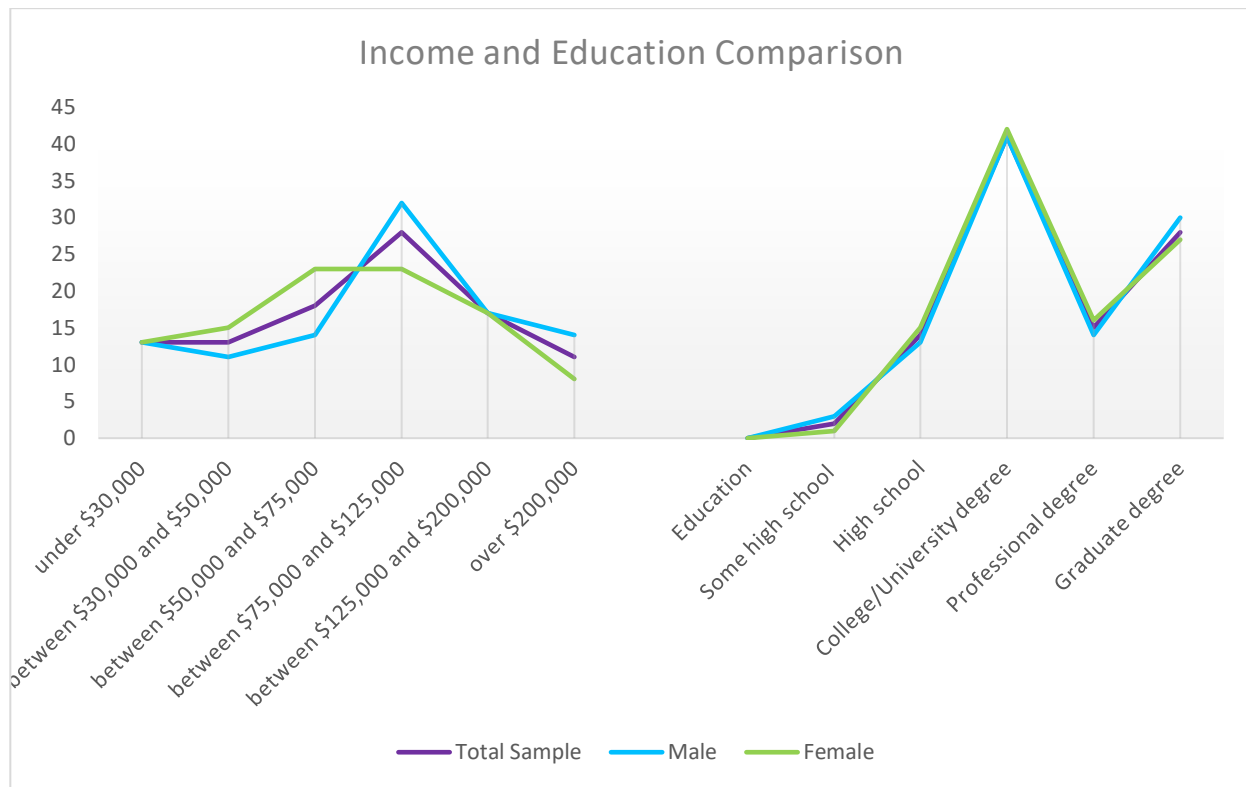
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<sup>651</sup> Haideh Moghissi, Saeed Rahnama, and Mark Goodman, *Diaspora by Design: Muslim Immigrants in Canada and Beyond* (University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 37; Sarah Shah, *Canadian Muslims: Demographics, Discrimination, Religiosity, and Voting*, Institute of Islamic Studies Occasional Paper Series (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2019), p. 19

<[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336285184\\_Canadian\\_Muslims\\_Demographics\\_Discrimination\\_Religiosity\\_and\\_Voting](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336285184_Canadian_Muslims_Demographics_Discrimination_Religiosity_and_Voting)> [accessed 10 April 2020].

<sup>652</sup> Beyer, 'Religious Identity and Educational Attainment among Recent Immigrants to Canada'.

<sup>653</sup> Aga Khan III, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan*.



Another factor that may contribute to the higher SES of the Ismaili community, is that Ismaili Muslims, particularly those of East-African and South-Asian backgrounds, occupy a higher social class in comparison to other communities within the wider-*umma*. Prior to migration, many East-African Ismailis were successful business owners, entrepreneurs, and other skilled professionals.<sup>654</sup> In Canada, Ismailis have often been depicted as the model migrant community, having attained business success and public positions in Canadian society.<sup>655</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4, there are also a significant number of Ismailis occupying spaces in media and politics. Further, East-African Ismailis, which comprise the majority of the sample, fall into the category of ‘twice-migrants’ – a criterion that argues that communities who have had to migrate more than

<sup>654</sup> Muhammedi.

<sup>655</sup> Adriana Barton, ‘BCBusiness’, *BCBusiness*, 1 July 2006 <<https://www.bcbusiness.ca/ismaili-success-made-in-vancouver>> [accessed 9 September 2017]; Rahim Mohamed.

once have developed the skills necessary to successfully adapt and (re)settle in new environments.<sup>656</sup> The majority of the sample, the East-Africans, would fall into the category of twice-migrant, which may also contribute to the higher social class of Ismailis in Canada. Another reason for the greater success of the community may be due to the high organization and institutional support of the Ismaili community. Again, as discussed in Chapter 4, the Ismaili *Jama'at* has multiple boards and portfolios at national and local levels aimed to address the various needs and segments of the *Jama'at*, such as: the Education Board, the Health Board, the Youth and Sports Board, the Economic Planning Board, the Settlement Portfolio, the Diversity and Inclusion portfolio, and the Social Welfare Board. Thus, the community not only has the social capital to enable optimal (re)settlement, but also the institutional support in place to foster economic and educational success. Nevertheless, this sample cannot be generalized to reflect the characteristics of entire Ismaili community in Canada, as there are micro-communities within the *Jama'at* that may not share the privileges and advantages of this particular sample.

## Settlement

The majority of participants live in either Ontario (55%), Alberta (23%), or British Columbia (12.4%) (see Table VII.V). Further, it is not surprising that 85% of the participants identified as living in one of Canada's largest cities (Montreal, Ottawa-Gatineau, Toronto, Edmonton, Calgary, or Vancouver) (see Chart VII.VII), which was precisely the reason recruiting efforts were targeted therein (less Montreal).<sup>657</sup> According to the 2011 national survey data, approximately 62% of all Canadian Muslims live in the metropolises of Montreal and Toronto.<sup>658</sup> Each of these metropolises has at least one purpose-built *jamatkhana* and both Vancouver and Toronto are the homes to the two Canadian Ismaili Centres. Further, as discussed in previous chapters, adjacent to the Ismaili Centre in Toronto is also the first Islamic art and culture museum in North America, the Aga Khan Museum, and Ottawa hosts both the Delegation of Ismaili Imamat building and the Global Centre

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<sup>656</sup> Parminder Bhachu, *Twice Migrants: East African Sikh Settlers in Britain* (London: Tavistock Pub, 1985).

<sup>657</sup> The only major city where I did not travel to recruit participants was Montreal. This was primarily because the survey and interview questionnaire were in English.

<sup>658</sup> Wilkins-Laflamme.

for Pluralism. More recently in Alberta, Calgary and Edmonton are now home to two other unique projects. Calgary is now the first city to have a multi-generational housing community, *Generations*, which aims to help improve the quality of life of the elder members of the Canadian-Ismaili *Jama'at*.<sup>659</sup> Further, as discussed in Chapter 5, Edmonton now hosts the Aga Khan Garden at the University of Alberta's Devonian Gardens. These buildings, gardens, and projects are symbolic representations of Ismaili identity, diversity, and the permanent presence of Ismailis in Canada. More discussion on these recent developments can be found in chapters 4, 5, and 6.

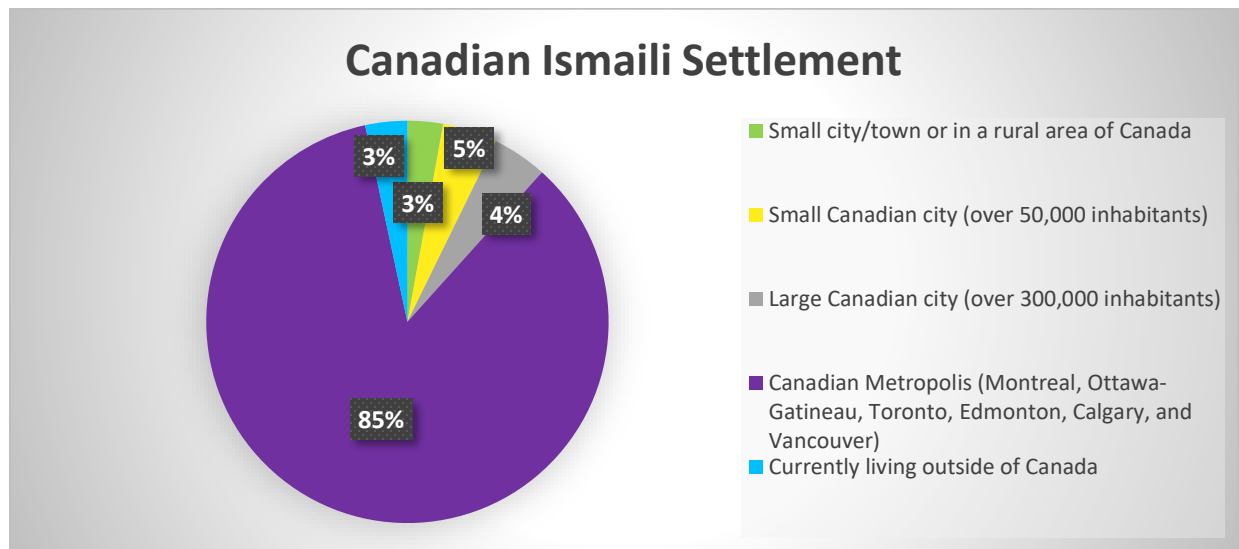
Table VII.V: Survey Demographics – Settlement (Provinces/Territories)

Canadian Ismaili Settlement		
Province/Territory	N=386	%
Alberta	89	23
British Columbia	48	12.4
Manitoba	2	0.5
Nova Scotia	1	0.2
Nunavut	1	0.2
Ontario	212	55
Quebec	13	3.4
Saskatchewan	1	0.2
Yukon	1	0.2
Currently living outside of Canada	17	4.4

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<sup>659</sup> Malika Ladha, 'Generations: A Multigenerational Community | the.Ismaili', *The.Ismaili*, 2017 <<https://the.ismaili/generations-multigenerational-community>> [accessed 29 April 2019].

Chart VII.VII: Survey Demographics – Settlement (Cities)



## INTERVIEW DEMOGRAPHICS

### Canadian-Ismaili Interviews

Of the 19 interview participants, 6 were female, 13 were male, and all were either East-African or South-Asian. In addition, the women that were willing to be interviewed were much younger on average than the men interviewed: the women interviewed averaged 26.8 years of age compared to the men who averaged 48.5. When looking at the sample of female participants, they were either young professionals or completing graduate degrees, while the male sample consisted of men who were either retired or well into their careers. Only a few of the men interviewed were young professionals or students.

### Leadership Interviews

While I reached out to a representative in each of the Ismaili institutions stated previously in Chapter 2 (see Table II.I), I did not always get a response. In total, I managed to obtain interviews from 11 individuals. Of those 11 interviewees, 4 were women and 7 were men. The women averaged 38.5 years old and the men's age averaged 44 years.

Another important finding, which was also found in the Canadian Ismaili Interviews, was that all except for one of the leadership interviewees came from South-Asian, mainly East-African backgrounds. This is likely due to the high number of ethnically South-Asian Ismailis in Canada compared to other Ismaili ethnic minorities. Further, East-African Ismailis were part of the first major wave of Ismaili migration in the 1970s, thus they have been here longer and have had to establish themselves, and the Ismaili council in Canada, in their early (re)settlement years. Also, this particular population occupies a higher social class when compared to other ethnicities within the Canadian-Ismaili community, which, arguably, many held even before migration. While there is a growing Central-Asian Ismaili population in Canada, the vast majority of these members are coming through refugee sponsorship programs and, thus, are not as privileged as other immigrant communities. Through my own experience, I know that there are a number of Central-Asians holding leadership positions in areas to do with (re)settlement, and in those positions, are mainly assisting members of their own ethnic group (re)settle into Canadian society. Further, in informal discussions with Ismaili council members, I was told that they are aware of the lack of diversity in the Ismaili institutions and that they are putting initiatives and protocols into place to get more participation from diverse members of the *Jama 'at*; particularly Iranian, Syrian, and Central-Asian members.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

Designing an online survey that captured variances in religiosity allowed me to see how religion played a role in belief, practice, and participation. Further, an online survey enabled me to not only get a higher participation rate, but also capture quantitative and qualitative responses from Ismailis from across Canada.

Through the structure of the survey, I was able to formulate four distinct categories: the *Standard Religious*, the *Moderately Religious*, the *Spiritual but Not-Religious*, and the *Not-Religious*. As we will see in the chapters that follow, these categories were influential in determining trends in belief, practice, and participation.

As discussed, the majority of the survey and interview participants were either East-African or South-Asian in origin, with some from Central-Asia. The average age of the sample was 37.7, classifying the sample as mostly young adults. The participants were highly educated with 85%, irrespective of gender, holding at least a college or university degree, and 45% holding either a professional designation or graduate degree. This high degree of education corresponded to the household earnings of the sample, which was approximately \$70,000 for female participants, and \$90,000 for male participants. Finally, it was not surprising that the majority of participants resided in one of Canada's metropolises, where we find significant Ismaili presence, not only in the form of population, but in permanent Canadian-Ismaili structures.

Now that we have an understanding about the sample demographics and the various identity categories, we will now turn to some of the research findings. The following chapters will highlight some key findings from the survey and interviews; specifically, how Canadian Ismaili identity is projected and negotiated in different social spheres (Chapter 8) and, later, how the identity categories help to inform on belief and practice (Chapter 9). Further, Chapter 10 presents Ismaili participation in the various projects of interest: specifically, the literacy project and the identity project.

## VIII. ISMAILI IDENTITY: THE NEGOTIATION AND PROJECTION OF CANADIAN ISMAILI IDENTITY

This chapter presents how Ismaili Islam is negotiated and projected in two different contexts: in the context of Islamophobia and in the context of *takfirism* – both fueled by dissonance of the ‘other’. The rationale for this inquiry was to better understand why the MLP and the IIP, as discussed in chapters 5 and 6, take the form that they do; that is, why does the Ismaili community take a religious literacy approach to alleviate Islamophobia and, at the same time, intra-*umma* dissonance? What about the IIP? How is the IIP important in alleviating these two contemporary issues? What is it about Ismaili identity and experience that lends to these unique approaches? As we will see in the pages that follow, Ismaili identity and experience are instrumental in informing the religious literacy approach to alleviating these two ailments. In order to combat intolerance and ignorance in these different contexts, it is important to be well-rooted and articulate in one’s own identity, in this case Ismaili identity.

### ISMAILI IDENTITY IN CONTEXT

In the context of the rise of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim narratives, alongside Ismailism being a minority manifestation of Islam with a history of persecution, questions were designed to peel back layers of identity: Ismaili identity, Ismaili Muslim identity, and Canadian identity. To better understand how identity is negotiated and articulated in different contexts, a series of qualitative questions were formulated as part of the online survey questionnaire.

The first set of qualitative questions were formulated to uncover the trepidation that may occur as the result of having to explain one’s own Ismaili identity to a non-Muslim, whose perception may be solely informed by media representations. I asked the following set of questions in the order presented, “How would you describe Ismaili Islam to a non-Muslim Canadian? What are the most important characteristics you would mention?”. The next question was, “Is there anything that you would not mention?”. These questions allowed me to better understand if Ismailis were actively trying to counteract a preconceived narrative of what being Muslim entails,

whether they dissociated themselves from that preconceived narrative, and if they consciously would not mention particular aspects of their faith in fear of being judged on them.

The next series of questions were designed to reveal the underlying apprehension that may result when confronted by another Muslim from a different tradition. Similar to the questions posed previously, I asked the following series of questions, “How would you describe Ismaili Islam to a Muslim who is not Ismaili? What are the most important characteristics you would mention?” followed by, “Is there anything that you would not mention?”. I wanted to better understand how Ismaili Islam is presented and understood in the context of being a Muslim and/or a Muslim ‘other’, where another Muslim might openly dismiss them due to their tradition’s beliefs or practices. Of particular importance to this study was whether the participant would conceal something about themselves or their faith in this interaction – what a participant would not talk about is just as important as what they would. And why they would not mention certain characteristics informs on certain apprehensions Ismailis may or may not have when confronting non-Ismaili Muslims.

In case these questions fell short in uncovering unconscious constructions of Ismaili, Ismaili-Muslim, and Ismaili-Canadian identity constructions, I followed up by asking, “Is Ismaili Islam different from other Islams? If so, please explain some of the differences.” This question was designed to see how Ismailis see themselves in relation to other Muslims. The responses to this question, however, are presented in Chapter 9: Ismaili Identity in Comparison to Sunni-Normative Constructions.

Combined, these questions aimed to understand how Ismaili Muslims negotiate their identity in the contexts of Islamophobia and *takfiri* ideology. The presentation below is divided into sections: Ismaili identity negotiations and projections in the context of an Islamophobic climate (in discussion with a non-Muslim Canadian) and Ismaili identity negotiations and projections in the context of *takfiri* ideology (in discussion with another Muslim). Comparing and contrasting participant responses in these two social scenarios supports the notion that Ismailis see themselves as both Canadian and Muslim. Further, through the analysis of responses, the data

reveals that Ismailis have also internalized their otherness in both Canadian and wider-*umma* contexts, which is evident in how they express their desire to be accepted in both communities.

## THE NEGOTIATION AND PROJECTION OF ISMAILI IDENTITY

### Ismaili Identity in the Context of an Islamophobic Climate

Eighty-eight percent of Ismailis in the survey sample reported that the image of Muslims in the media has had a negative impact on their identity. Participants revealed that they are more hesitant than ever to openly identify with their faith in case it leads to intolerance, harassment, or discrimination. Some even expressed how they have started to internalize these stereotypes, forcing them to repress their religious identity.

In an interview with Sukayna, a *Moderately Religious* 30-year-old Ismaili, she expressed how the media influences the way she thinks about herself and how frightening it is to be a Muslim in this day and age:

When there's negative news events that occur, I'm often ashamed to be branded as a Muslim. However, when there are positive events, I feel proud. I know, ultimately, I shouldn't be swayed by the media but it's a little nerve wrecking. Like, to be honest, one of my major fears right now is if Donald Trump were to get elected, I don't know how that would work for Muslims everywhere. Canada is so hand-in-hand with the US, I don't know if that will affect us too. I want to say it won't because of our current Prime Minister, but I don't know. Media influences people. And people are as easily swayed just as I am in terms of how I feel about my own religion, I'm sure other people are swayed as well. So, I don't know how others will perceive me going out into my local community... I could face discrimination and that's scary.<sup>660</sup>

With this anti-Muslim climate in mind, Ismailis remain cautious about how they present themselves to other Canadians – as we saw in Chapter 6: The Ismaili Identity Project, the Ismaili institutions are also actively trying to present Ismailis as a community aligned with various

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<sup>660</sup> Sukayna's interview, like the majority of interviews, was conducted before the 2016 US presidential elections. Sukayna's profile can be found in the "Not Muslim Enough" section of this chapter.

Canadian values. This trend is also reflected in how Ismaili respondents present their Ismaili identity to other Canadians, as we will soon see.

There is one thing that continues to shape Ismaili identity around the world and that is the Imam. When asked how participants would describe their faith to a non-Muslim Canadian, they overwhelmingly responded that they would talk about the Imam (66% of entire sample) and the contemporary guidance they receive from him (51% of entire sample). The fact that Ismailis have contemporary authoritative guidance is the most influential factor in the making of a modernized Muslim community and the ability to be authentically Ismaili Muslim in any given context. In their survey responses, 49% of participants presented themselves as belonging to a modern Muslim community, pointing out commonalities between their faith tradition and Canadian values such as pluralism, diversity, gender equality, democracy, education, and service to humanity.

As mentioned previously, 68% of respondents self-identified as Canadian. Although this number is high, it is actually slightly lower in comparison to other studies that examined Canadian-Muslim identity.<sup>661</sup> However, it is important to note that there was no question on the survey that expressly asked whether the participant identifies as Canadian. Instead the questions asked, “How would you define your ethnic/cultural origin?” and “How would you describe your cultural identity?”.

Participants seemed to share an appreciation for Canada and the hospitality that East-African Ismailis received as a result of their migration from Africa and South Asia; as discussed in Chapter 3, this history continues to play an important role in shaping Canadian Ismaili identity and a sense of belonging. Hakīm, a *Standard Religious* 68-year-old man, said that that he is very proud of both his ethnic and Canadian identity and that his behaviour and choices are influenced by their harmonization. Further, he said that the Canadian multicultural landscape allows him to harmonize his multiple identities and that he “respects and admires what Canada offers to its

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<sup>661</sup> Shah; *Environics: Survey of Muslims in Canada 2016*.

citizens, especially to its immigrants.” Others, again, expressed shared values such as pluralism, diversity, education, equality, and helping others, which they say shape and guide their Canadian-Ismaili identity.<sup>662</sup>

This finding suggests that Ismailis are cognizant of how Muslims may be perceived negatively by other Canadians so they, therefore, offer evidence to support the contrary: having contemporary authoritative guidance to guide the community in the current day and age and how their spiritual values coincide with Canadian values.

Another way that participants attempted to nuance preconceived notions of Islam and Muslims is by mentioning the diversity that exists within Islam (55% of all survey participants did this). Participants expressed that they felt Canadians were not aware of the diversity that exists within the Muslim world – being literate about this could inhibit them from making mass generalizations about Muslims and Islam, a theme discussed in Chapter 5: The Muslim Literacy Project. In an interview, Ali-shah, a 28-year-old *Not-Religious* woman, expressed this issue of ignorance:

I think people hear ‘Muslim’ a lot, and they don’t often hear that there are different types of Muslims. I think that has a lot to do with the media and the way people talk about people who are Muslim. I mean, there are lots of sects in Christianity that I’ve probably never heard of either, but I think I’ve probably heard of more than other people who have heard of different Muslims. So, I think it’s easier for people to say “oh, it doesn’t matter what sect you’re from, it’s all ‘Muslim’.”

It is important to note here that ordinary Ismailis are recognizing that the underlying problem feeding into Islamophobia and anti-Muslim narratives is illiteracy about Muslims and Islam. This is why the MLP, as discussed in Chapter 5, is so important; it directly targets the perceived issue at hand – ignorance about Muslims and Islam. However, until the MLP has had a significant impact

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<sup>662</sup> The harmonization of ‘Western’ values into modern Muslim identities was also found in a number of other studies. See, Adis Duderija, ‘Literature Review: Identity Construction in the Context of Being a Minority Immigrant Religion: The Case of Western-Born Muslims’, *Immigrants & Minorities*, 25.2 (2007), 141–62 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02619280802018132>>.

on the collective Canadian consciousness, we find Ismailis, and other Muslims, disassociating themselves from the undesirable image of Muslims portrayed by the media and associating themselves instead with desired Canadian values.

In an effort to build bridges with the greater Canadian community, participants both disassociated themselves from the general image of Muslims in the media and associated themselves with shared Canadian values. For example, Sitt al-Mulk (*SR*), a 30-year-old Ismaili woman, explained, “We have a living spiritual leader. We do not cover our heads with *hijabs*. We believe in pluralism and education, [and we have] very high standards for women, their education and well-being.” Sitt al-Mulk’s response can be seen as a direct attempt to nuance the image of Muslim women, who are often negatively depicted as oppressed and uneducated. A few participants even brought up the persecution of Ismailis by other Muslims in an attempt to illustrate that they too are victims of violent Muslim extremism.

Another example of disassociating oneself from the media’s construction of Muslim identity can be taken from survey participant, Zainab (*SR*), another 30-year-old woman:

It’s awful that all I want to do is defend the fact that we are different than other Muslims. But that’s not fair – other Muslims are wonderful as well. I just find myself unknowingly belittling ‘Muslims’ in an effort to show the difference between extremists and Ismailis. I know that is wrong of me. I just feel that I can have trust in the Ismaili community to uphold this good reputation because of the Imam’s guidance but I’m not entirely sure I should tie my identity to the entire Muslim community in case I have to answer questions I don’t know that I can.

In Zainab’s response, she acknowledges the harm that may result in the disassociating process. She is aware that the majority of the Muslim *umma* is misrepresented in the media but also acknowledges that Ismaili beliefs and practices are united under one authority, their living Imam, and can therefore make general assertions about the Ismaili *Jama’at*. In other responses, the dilemma of disassociation is addressed with the ethic of pluralism in mind.

In his response, Ja’far, a 59-year-old *SBNR*, took a more pluralistic approach to build bridges between different faith communities. Ja’far maintains that “every religion has its own merit

and ways in which it is practiced.” He invites us to “look at all religions of the world and choose the best in all of them.” Ja’far essentializes that “all religions preach kindness, humility, love and peace amongst mankind,” and how one can “live happily spiritually by embracing these good values that all religions offer...”. Ja’far, like other survey participants, expressed the importance of building bridges with their fellow Canadians in an effort to bring about mutual respect in a multicultural society – an ethic we observed in Chapter 4 when discussing the IPP.

One answer that encompasses the various ways in which participants responded to the question “How would you describe Ismaili Islam to a non-Muslim?” is best depicted by survey participant, Karim, a 35-year-old *SR*. To summarize his response, Karim first alludes to the diversity that exists within Islam by situating Ismailism as part of the Shi’i tradition and how it resembles Sufism due to the importance Ismailis place on the ineffable and mystical aspects of the faith. He then authenticates Ismailism as a legitimate manifestation of Islam by explaining that Ismailis have a living Imam, who acts as a temporal spiritual guide and is the direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad through the progeny of Imam ‘Ali and the Prophet’s daughter, Hazrat Fatima. After, Karim contends that the community’s progressive nature is guided by their beliefs and practices, which he argues are “solidly rooted in Islamic ethics and values.” Further, despite a history of persecution, he continues, Ismailism has survived into the current age. Karim finishes off his explanation by drawing on the importance of tolerance, saying that the community “immensely values pluralism and the interpretations of others, both Muslim and non-Muslim.” This statement directly reflects the words of the Imam, that it is within the promotion of pluralism that fear and intolerance can be remedied.

Overall, the *SRs* were more likely to mention the Imamate compared to any other group (73% compared to the *MRs* at 62%; the *SBNRs* at 50%; and the *NRs* at 43%). The same trend continued when looking at the number of times they mentioned contemporary guidance (*SR*=58%, *MR*=51%, *SBNR*=27%, and *NR*=14%) and legitimating their faith (*SR*=37%, *MR*=34%, *SBNR*=18%, and *NR*=14%). The only variant that stood out significantly was that 86% of the *NRs* mentioned the diversity that exists within Islam more often than any other group (*SR*=56%, *MR*=51%, and *SBNR*=50%). This may be because the *NR* participants were less knowledgeable or

confident in explaining characteristics of the Ismaili faith and, thus, presenting Muslim diversity was seen as an effective way of nuancing the image of Muslims to non-Muslim audiences. However, this could also be because the *NR* category was the smallest group amongst the four, which makes extreme or divergent responses more likely. As with all the categories, these findings may not be representative of all *NR* Ismailis in Canada.

Another interesting find was that the *MRs* were much more likely to bridge their religious values with Canadian values than any other group (58% compared to *SR*=47%, *SBNR*=36%, and *NR*=43%). At first I thought this finding might be because more *MRs* are born in Canada than their *SR* counterparts (48% of sample vs 31%); however, *SBNRs* and *NRs* are even more likely to be born in Canada (58% and 55%, respectively), thus there must be another reason for this discrepancy. Despite being less likely to be born in Canada than their counterparts, the *SRs* and *MRs* were more likely to self-identify as Canadian compared to the *SBNRs* and *NRs* (*SR*=67%, *MR*=65%, *SBNR*=55%, *NR*=55%). Thus, it is possible that this unique finding has to do with the combination of being born in Canada and identifying as a Canadian.

### *Concealment*

The present study was interested in understanding what Ismailis choose not to divulge about their faith when speaking with other Canadians, as this may reveal aspects of their identity that may be misunderstood as contentious. Arguably, what a participant does not disclose is just as important as what they do disclose. Intentionally leaving out information not only reveals the hesitations one has in conversing with the ‘other’, but also other aspects of their identity that they do not want to ‘perform’. Thus, to better understand the construction and presentation of Ismaili identity in a non-Muslim context, I asked participants if there was anything they would intentionally not mention when describing Ismaili Islam to a non-Muslim. I am aware that the very nature of this question alludes that Ismailis would conceal some aspects of their faith and was prepared to face the possibility that the participant, if they would conceal information, would likely not admit that in the survey. To my surprise, 28% of all survey participants revealed that they would conceal some

information related to their faith-identity – although I suspect that this number may be much higher in reality.

Out of those participants who admitted they would conceal some aspects of their faith and identity, 87% said that they would not go into details about Ismaili theology and practice as that is unique to their *tariqah* tradition; for example, many responded that they would not discuss the practical and esoteric aspects of their faith. Twenty-seven-year-old, Sinan, a *Standard Religious* man explained, “I would not mention certain spiritual theology such as the concept of the Intellect or the concept of the Command of God, only because they are advanced concepts that are not easily understood by all. I also would not explain certain practices of the *tariqah*, such as *jama’ati* ceremonies as these practices are understood for the initiated...”.

Aspects of the faith that occur within the *jamatkhana* are unique to the Ismaili *tariqah* and are only meant to be understood for those initiated into the Ismaili faith – just as with other *tariqah* traditions. One example of a *tariqah* practice, not necessarily unique to the Ismaili tradition, is the practice of meditation between the hours of 4 and 5 am, known as *bundagi* or *ibadat*. This practice is best understood as a spiritual search conducted by meditating on one of the names of Allah. This practice is not obligatory for Ismailis and those who participate in this aspect of the faith are obliged to practice humility and, thus, not speak of their personal spiritual experiences.

Thus, in terms of concealing certain Ismaili attributes, participants revealed that they would abstain from going into details about practices and theology unique to their *tariqah* tradition – as they are obliged to do as initiated members into the Ismaili faith. In this case, participants did not opt to conceal anything that may be interpreted as contentious, they simply did not go into the details about their beliefs or practices that are unique to their *tariqah* tradition, thereby honouring the sanctity of the Ismaili faith. We will now turn to the discussion on how Ismailis present their identity to non-Ismaili Muslims and how this differs from how they present themselves to non-Muslims.

### Ismaili Identity in the Context of *takfirism*

In various interactions with members of the Muslim *umma*, I am confronted with the statement that Ismailis are not considered ‘real’ Muslims. Further, even my Sunni Muslim friends and colleagues admit that this sentiment exists within their respective communities, even if they personally disassociate themselves from this divisive rhetoric. Those who propagate this ideology are likely to have learned it from friends, family, or religious leaders, which is quite disconcerting. This harmful ‘othering’ rhetoric is passed down from generation to generation, without thoughtfully considering its implications – just take a look at the sectarianism across the Muslim world, some of which was discussed in Chapter 1. It is for this reason that I wanted to explore whether Ismailis would present themselves differently when in contact with non-Ismaili Muslims. They did.

When talking about their faith with other members of the *umma*, Ismaili participants identified that they would mention the Imamate (77% compared to 66% in the non-Muslim scenario) and the contemporary guidance that accompanies this concept (65% versus 51% in the other scenario). Having a living authority who inherits his legitimacy through the Prophet’s bloodline is the most significant attribute that makes Ismailis different from other Muslims – 45% of participants actually mentioned this in their own words. Nizari Ismailis are the only Shi‘i community that continues to be led by one of the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, through the Husseini-lineage of Imams. Forty-five percent of participants legitimated their faith tradition by placing their tradition in the context of Shi‘ism and tracing the lineage of Imams back to the Prophet Muhammad. For example, survey participant Sinan presented the Ismaili faith as an authentic manifestation of Islam by recounting the concept of Imamate, universal to all Shi‘i traditions, and how Ismailis are the only Shi‘i community with a living and present Imam.<sup>663</sup> He also mentioned the esoteric dimension of the Ismaili faith, similar to Sufi traditions, and how there is diversity within the *umma* and within the Ismaili community as well:

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<sup>663</sup> Versus having an Imam in Occultation like the Ithna‘ashariyya

The Ismailis are part of the Shi'i branch of Islam. They accept Imam 'Ali as the successor to the Prophet, as well as they accept the need for constant guidance of the faith by the descendants of the Prophet and Imam 'Ali. Ismailis are further classified based on their acceptance of Imam Ismail and his descendants. The Ismailis accept His Highness the Aga Khan as the 49<sup>th</sup> Imam of the community and sole interpreter of the faith. The Ismailis have a spiritual interpretation of the faith and believe in the paradigm that for every exoteric (*zahir*) aspect there is an esoteric (*batin*) one. I would also explain a bit more about the concept of Imamatus as elucidated by the Imam Jafar-as-Sadiq. This includes *imami* theology including the concept of *Isma* (infallibility), *nass* (spiritual designation), and *ilm* (knowledge). Modern Ismailis are united by their allegiance (*bay'ah*) to the Imam and his interpretation of the faith as founded on the teachings of the Prophet and Imam 'Ali. Ismailis may differ in their practice based on linguistic and cultural history. This may come across as disunited, however, it is with this diversity that there is strength.

Sinan also mentions Ismaili allegiance "to the Imam and his interpretation of the faith..." which is important because this allows for generalizations to be made about Ismailism, based on what *Hazar Imam*, the Imam of the Time, has prescribed to his community. It also allows for changes to be made to the *tariqah* tradition, such as how to pray, how to live ethically, how to serve the Imam and humanity, etc.

Similar to how participants responded to this question in the context of Islamophobia, 51% of participants said they would talk about Muslim diversity which can be seen as a direct effort to make space for their minority interpretation of Islam. Again, we also see this trend in the MLP, as discussed in Chapter 5; the MLP not only aims to nuance the image of Islam by presenting Muslim diversity, but through this they are creating space for minority interpretations of Islam, namely Ismailism. Further, just as there was an attempt to bridge commonalities with other Canadians, we also see participants presenting commonalities between Ismailis and other Muslims; 30% of respondents presented commonalities between their interpretation of Islam and other interpretations. For example, participants mentioned shared pillars of faith, the belief in Allah and the Prophet Muhammad, and the authority of the Qur'an; however, this building of common ground was not meant to gloss over the uniqueness of the Ismaili community. Their responses usually followed further explanations as to how they differ from other Muslims. Some even mentioned how Ismailis live out their faith through *sewa*, service – a characteristic also found in the greater IIP such as with the Ismaili Civic initiative as discussed in Chapter 6 – and mentioned

the Aga Khan Development Network as an example of this ethic in action – another trend that was also found in the national IIP. Further, a few respondents were brave enough to confront the elephant in the room, *takfiri* ideology.

When asked how she would define her faith to another Muslim, Zahra, a *Standard Religious* 27-year-old woman, responded:

[I would] work through how the Ismaili faith addresses the pillars of Islam in order to establish commonality: interpretation of the Qur'an based on context; the concept that the Ismailis believe that the Book cannot exist without the Teacher (the Imam); and that without one guide, there would be thousands of interpretations of the Qur'an. If the person was a Shi'a Muslim, [I would] make correlations of the Aga Khan's work/words to the work and words of Hazrat Alī. [I would] emphasize the philanthropic work of the Aga Khan as being part of the natural Islamic identity as well as the tie into Sufism. [Further, I would] draw particular attention to the Amman Conference, where Islamic scholars from around the world *agreed that the Ismailis are Muslims*. (emphasis mine)

Zahra clearly recognizes that Ismailis may not be considered Muslim by other Muslims. As bold as Zahra's response is, many participants opted to conceal certain attributes of their belief system in order to not further marginalize themselves from the rest of the *umma*. But before we get into the discussion about what participants would conceal, we will turn to the categorical differences.

Not surprisingly, the differences found here were similar to those mentioned previously when describing Ismaili Islam to non-Muslims; however, in comparing the two contexts, we see a general increase in the responses when speaking about the Imamate and the temporal guidance they receive (see table VIII.I). The *NRs*, surprisingly, were more likely to mention the Imamate than any other group, who followed the previous trend (*SR*=86%, *MR*= 65%, *SBNR*= 52%, and *NR*= 88%). Perhaps the *NRs* were more likely to mention the Imamate as a means to legitimate their differences in being Muslim. In the previous context, they may not have felt it necessary to discuss the Imamate to non-Muslims because non-Muslims already find Islam foreign and the concept of Imamate would only add confusion. Further, perhaps the internalization of Muslim stereotypes led them to not speak in detail about the specifics of their Muslim faith to non-Muslims. Another possibility is that *NRs* also internalized mainstream-Muslim stereotypes about Ismailis not being 'real' Muslims.

Thus, their responses are more informative about what makes them different than other Muslims. It is even possible that these internalizations, both media stereotypes about Muslims and stereotypes by members of the *umma*, led to their *NR* identification. While there could be a number of reasons for this trend, it is difficult to make general conclusions as a result of the smaller sample of *NRs*. All that can be said is that with this particular sample, *NRs* were more likely to talk about the Imamatus when speaking with Muslims than they were with non-Muslims.

The *SRs*, *MRs*, and *SBNRs* seem to follow similar trends when speaking about the contemporary guidance of the Imam (*SR*=72%, *MR*=55%, *SBNR*=52%) – the *NRs*, clearly start to find these discussions more important with other Muslims (63% compared to 14%). Even the *SBNRs* were more likely to mention contemporary guidance with Muslims than they were with non-Muslims (52% compared to 27%). Again, this would make sense if Ismailis are entering these discussions with the assumption that Muslims may not view them as “Muslim enough” because of their differences in belief and practice. These trends could be seen as direct attempts to legitimize their version of Islam against what may be considered “Mainstream Islam.”

The sample was much more likely to legitimate their faith with other Muslims, which supports the previous hypotheses. *NRs* were the most likely out of the sample to legitimate their faith tradition with *SRs* following suit (*NRs*=63%, *SRs*=52%, *MRs*=35%, and *SBNRs*=21%). Overall, when describing their faith to non-Muslims, legitimizing their beliefs was much less important; especially with the *NRs* (*NRs*=14%, *SRs*=37%, *MRs*=34%, and *SBNRs*=18%).

While the topic of Muslim diversity generally decreased in comparison to the previous scenario, the overall trend changed significantly. Like before, *NRs* were the highest in speaking about Muslim diversity with *MRs* following second and the *SBNRs* following third (*NRs*=88%, *MRs*=60%, *SBNRs*=52%, and *SRs*=45%). Again, I suspect that the *NRs* have internalized some of the negative rhetoric about Ismailis reproduced by some religious authorities, thus they feel the need to create space for their minority tradition – even if they have removed themselves from it. The same can be said for the *MRs* and *SBNRs*. One reason why the *SRs* were less likely to speak

about Muslim diversity may be because they are more confident in their identity than the other groups so felt less of a need to create space for their beliefs when speaking to other Muslims.

In the other scenario, it was found that respondents attempt to bridge their values system with the Canadian values system. Likewise, here, we see the participants actively attempt to bridge their beliefs with the beliefs of other Muslims. The *SRs* were more likely to do this with the *MRs* following second, and the *NRs* and *SBNRs* following third and fourth (*SR*=38%, *MRs*=22%, *NRs*=13%, *SBNRs*=9%). Interestingly, while we see an effort by some respondents to find common ground with other Muslims, it is important to note that 5% of the entire sample said they would not even attempt to speak with other Muslims about their faith out of hesitation that their efforts would be met with hostility. This leads us to the next discussion, what Ismailis would conceal about their faith when speaking with other members of the *umma*.

### *Concealment*

Thirty-seven percent of participants admitted that they would conceal certain aspects of their faith tradition (compared to 28% in the other scenario). This is almost a 10% increase when compared to how many would conceal aspects of their faith to a non-Muslim. As previously discussed, 87% of respondents to the former question revealed that they would not discuss aspects of their *tariqah* tradition because this information is for the initiated. However, when asked what they would conceal to a Muslim audience, 74% of participants said they would not only not divulge *tariqah* related traditions, but they would also not disclose beliefs and practices that differ from ‘mainstream’ Islam in order to not further marginalize themselves from the *umma*. For example, Ismaili participants opted to not disclose that they pray three times a day instead of five, that the esoteric, in many cases, supersedes the exoteric, that they have seven pillars instead of five, or how Ismaili women pray next to Ismaili men, are in positions of leadership, and do not wear the *hijab*. Noteworthy, is that all these examples were readily disclosed when speaking to a non-Muslim Canadian audience, as a way to nuance preconceived images of Muslims. In addition, 34% actually said that they would not mention anything that may make them appear “Not Muslim Enough” – a topic that warrants further discussion. Table VIII.I summarizes the differences in how Ismaili

Islam is presented to Muslims and non-Muslim audiences and Table VIII.II presents differences in concealment.

Table VIII.I: Presenting Ismaili Islam to non-Muslims vs Muslims

Presenting Ismaili Islam to non-Muslims versus Muslims		
Coding	Non-Muslim Audience	Muslim Audience
Imamat	66%	77%
Contemporary Guidance	51%	65%
Muslim Diversity	55%	51%
Bridging Common Canadian Values	49%	19%
Legitimizing the Faith	33%	45%
Bridging Commonalities between Muslim traditions	21%	30%

Table VIII.II: Differences in Concealment with non-Muslims vs Muslims

Differences in Concealment		
Coding	Non-Muslim Audience (28%)	Muslim Audience (37%)
Practical/Theological Differences	87%	74%
Not Muslim Enough	20%	34%
Esoteric	10%	16%

## NOT MUSLIM ENOUGH

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*Perhaps the most important area of incomprehension, outside the Ummah, is the conflict between Sunni and Shia interpretations of Islam and the consequences for the Sunni and Shia peoples.*

*This powerful tension is sometimes even more profound than conflicts between Muslims and other faiths. It has increased massively in scope and intensity recently, and has been further exacerbated by external interventions. In Pakistan and Malaysia, in Iraq and Syria, in Lebanon and Bahrain, in Yemen and Somalia and Afghanistan it is becoming a disaster... **It is of the highest priority that these dangerous trends be well understood and resisted, and that the fundamental legitimacy of pluralistic outlooks be honoured in all aspects of our lives together — including matters of faith.**"<sup>664</sup>*

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The quote above was taken from the Aga Khan's Address to the Parliament of Canada in February 2014. In his address, he clearly acknowledges theological differences between Muslim communities and the importance of legitimizing 'pluralistic outlooks' of the Muslim faith. Ismailis, like other minority Muslim communities, have been the targets of intolerance, polemics, and persecution for centuries. Theologically speaking, the very existence of the Imam poses a direct threat to the legitimacy of other Muslim authorities – if the Shi'i premise of 'Alid authority and lineage is true, and the current Imam, the Aga Khan, is the intended Imam for the entire *umma*, this challenges the legitimacy of other religious authorities and other Muslim institutions of power. Thus, it is no wonder certain Muslim persons have taken action to discredit, marginalize, and verbally attack the Ismaili community (these defensive behaviours are Self-preserving and are a consequence of cognitive dissonance as discussed in Chapter 2). Examples for this can even be seen in the Canadian press.

One member from the non-Ismaili Muslim community, Sumayya Kassamali, wrote an article, "Why we don't need an Islamic Art Museum (Especially not courtesy the Aga Khan and Stephen Harper)"<sup>665</sup> in response to the newly built Aga Khan Museum in Toronto. Kassamali paints

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<sup>664</sup> Aga Khan IV, 'Address to Parliament of Canada, Ottawa'.

<sup>665</sup> Kassamali.

the Ismaili community as the Muslim elites and positions herself as a Muslim on the other side of this “celebratory moment.” She speaks from a place where her own community members are discriminated against and clearly resentful of Ismaili prosperity in Canada, a community she admits as highly successful both economically and politically. The article presents Ismailis as the Muslim ‘other’, who do not, and cannot, represent the *umma* because of their success in Canadian society. She is quick to criticize the museum without thinking about the long-term benefits of having an Islamic art museum in Canada; such as the various literacy efforts it aims to achieve, through the showcasing and reviving of Muslim art, music, and performance, from around the Muslim world.

The article fails to acknowledge hostilities towards Ismailis and other religious minorities in their countries of origin. Ismailis in the diaspora are finally safe to practice their spiritual tradition without the threat of aggressive *takfiri* persecution. The writer wrongfully assumes that the Ismaili community is trying to boast their success through this museum, even though this museum aims to educate the public about the diversity of Muslim civilizations throughout history to today, by showcasing of Muslim art and culture. Furthermore, the author assumes that Ismailis are not targets of Islamophobia and intolerance, which she reserves only for non-Ismaili Muslims. It is a lose-lose situation for Ismailis. Ismailis, it appears, can neither be successful in the diaspora because that offends Muslims who are struggling (and other Muslims do not see Ismailis as Muslim anyway), nor can they be free to be Ismaili in their countries of heritage in fear of being targets of sectarian violence.

This article is an example of the presence of dissonance within the *umma*. Although Ismailis in Canada do face racism and discrimination due to their religious affiliation, my research reveals that participants were more likely to be discriminated against based on their religious affiliation by other Muslims than by non-Muslims.<sup>666</sup> The following pages are examples of some of the intolerance Ismailis have encountered by other members of the *umma*.

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<sup>666</sup> Kim Matthews found similar trends in her doctoral research. See chapter 5 in, Matthews.

*Abu Ya'qub*

Abu Ya'qub (*Standardly Religious*) is a 31-year-old PhD candidate in Islamic Studies. His parents are both East-African, but he was born and raised in Edmonton. In his interview, he told me about a very uncomfortable experience he had with multiple members of the Muslim Student Association (MSA) at his university:

I can recall for you, in the year 2008 I was at a [university] event, where I did my undergrad, that was organized by the Muslim Student Association... I attended the event with an Ismaili person who was dating one of the MSA members and he was a Sunni Muslim and she came to me because she kept being attacked in terms of her beliefs by her boyfriend, so I attended this event with her, and afterwards I got into a huge adversarial discussion with about 30 members of this MSA and they were all challenging my legitimacy as a Muslim, they were challenging the Aga Khan's position as the Imam. It was a real assault on the Ismaili faith by these people, but I stood up to them because I am familiar with these different sources of the Sunni and Shia tradition. But what was striking to me, at the end ... I said, look spell it out for me, why do you guys consider Ismailis as *kafirs*, as unbelievers, and the answer that was given at the end was, we consider you guys to be *kafirs*, who are destined to go to hell, because you are pluralistic. Because you guys say that all non-Muslim are not necessarily going to hell. So, I repeated this, let me get this straight, you're telling me that I am destined for hell because I don't believe everybody else is destined for hell. And what struck me from that was that this was not necessarily about theology, it's about a tribalistic cycle, where you could be of any faith tradition or any ideology, Marxist or whatever... But if you're thinking is my tribe is the best one and everyone else is condemned then that's really the problem. It's not really about being Sunni or Shia, Ismaili or Christian.

Abu Ya'qub's experience is not unique and other participants shared similar experiences with their respective MSA's. What is important to note from Abu Ya'qub's experience is that he did not let this experience deter him from further engagements with the *umma*, but instead made a career around correcting misconceptions about Ismailis; this will be discussed further in Chapter 10: Ismaili Participation in the Muslim Literacy Project and the Ismaili Identity Project.

### *Sukayna*

Sukayna is 30 years old and was born grew up in the greater Toronto area. Her parents immigrated to Canada from Tanzania and Uganda. At the time of the interview she worked for an Islamic organization that provided relief for natural and man-made catastrophes around the world. Like other Ismaili Muslims living in Canada, Sukayna does not wear the *hijab*. Although this did not impact her obtaining a job within her organization, she said it made a lot of her Sunni Muslim co-workers “uncomfortable.” She told me that another non-veiling Sunni Muslim woman started working for the same organization shortly after her and said that her co-workers would not let her pray with them because she does not wear the *hijab*.

This is a good example of another kind of intolerance within the *umma*. Unlike sectarian intolerance, such as that amongst Shi’a and Sunni communities, this type of intolerance and discrimination takes place within the sect. It plays into the “Not Muslim Enough” discourse, where Muslims are judged for not living up to another Muslim’s ‘ideal.’ Further examples of this include, being too ‘liberal’, irregular mosque attendance, not being of the ‘right’ race,<sup>667</sup> ‘immodest’ clothing, or not conforming to exclusive gender or sexual ideologies. All of these qualifications are subjective in nature but impact the lives of many Muslims who do not conform to someone else’s ‘ideal.’

This was not Sukayna’s first experience of intolerance. During her undergraduate degree at an Ontario university Sukayna also served as the President for the Ismaili Student Association (ISA). She was looking to organize the commonly observed Muslim holidays with the university’s MSA. Sukayna reached out to the MSA’s President to see if they would be interested in collaborating on an *iftar* during Ramadan. She said that the MSA’s President was not at all interested in collaborating with the ISA due to sectarian differences. Sukayna said that was the first time she experienced intolerance within the *umma*.

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<sup>667</sup> Arab supremacy is not a modern phenomenon but has existed for centuries. In the Abbasid Empire, Arab Muslims were treated better and had more privileges than non-Arab Muslims.

Sukayna said that working for this Muslim relief organization was a bold move for her; especially considering her past experience with intolerant members of the *umma*. But she says it is her way of trying to unite the *umma*:

In joining the company I'm with, I would have to say that that was a very tough decision for me. It's interesting... technically being a Muslim I shouldn't have any hesitancy working for an Islamic company, however one of the fears that I had when I first joined was 'how will they perceive me because I'm an Ismaili?' – I'm not a Sunni Muslim. Also, from a global standpoint with all of the news events on terrorism with Donald Trump running for president and his anti-Islam propaganda I guess I was very fearful of joining such a company; however, now that I've joined, I feel like it's a small step towards joining forces with other Muslims [to fight intolerance]. I think it's a great way for them to get to know me as a person to see the similarities and commonalities between us. Of course, there will always be some differences, however, I think my experience working for this company has been very humbling and to see that they are out to achieve what we [Ismailis] are as well – from both communities it's definitely a small step in the right direction.

Despite being the victim of intra-*umma* intolerance, Sukayna felt it was important to not let past experiences with Muslims interfere with her judgement about all Muslims. Further, she seeks to foster harmony within the *umma* by ameliorating what it means to be an Ismaili – something that will be discussed further in Chapter 10. Other survey participants shared their own stories of intra-*umma* discrimination, and some shared the stories of friends and family. Many participants contended that they wanted to strengthen relations with other members of the *umma*, despite having prior negative experiences.

### *Khadijah*

Khadijah is a 49-year-old *Standardly Religious Kamadianima*,<sup>668</sup> which is a priestess-like leadership position that one can only acquire if they have been appointed by the Imam. There is

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<sup>668</sup> In the *jamatkhana*, there are both male and female representatives who loosely fit into the category of priest/priestess. The *Mukhisahab* (1<sup>st</sup> ranked male leader), the *Kamadiasaheb* (2<sup>nd</sup> ranked male leader), the *Mukhanima* (1<sup>st</sup> ranked female leader), and the *Kamadiama* (2<sup>nd</sup> ranked female leader).

usually at least one married couple serving as the priest and priestess in the local *jamatkhana* – they are responsible for facilitating the *tariqah* practices, such as rites of passage, and all other functioning of their respective *jamatkhana*.

Khadijah shares a story about a discriminatory situation that her husband, Muhammad, faced at work due to his Ismaili spirituality. One of the clients that Muhammad's company services found out that he was an Ismaili and demanded that he be removed from the project. The person went as far as to say that Ismailis should be exterminated. Khadijah narrates,

Muhammad works in a company, and they have a lot of Sunni Muslims working there, and they're very, very hard-core in terms of saying *Namaz* 5 times etcetera, etcetera. And he knows to not engage in a religious discussion with them because they don't like the Aga Khan and they don't like the Ismailis. They know Muhammad is an Ismaili, but they also know that he's one of the bosses, so they don't get on his bad side. There are customers that he works with in North Africa who do not like Ismailis, and they don't know he's an Ismaili, otherwise they would drop the contract. And again, it's never come up in discussion, so he doesn't bring it up. But that's because he knows their attitude. There's one particular company where only recently an employee named Umair said, I want Muhammad off of this project because you did not disclose to me that he was an Ismaili. So, of course the CEO said, "Well, I'm sorry that you are taking this personally, but our company does not care about anyone's race or religion, we get the job done, so if you don't want Muhammad on this project, then you know what, we will not be engaging any further with you." And Umair was going on and on about Ismailis are this, and Ismailis are that, and we're going to get rid of all of those Ismailis and, yea... so of course this went further because he [the CEO] took it to the top at the guy's company and I don't think Umair works there anymore.

I then asked Khadijah, why she thinks some Muslims have issues with Ismailis? She believes it is because Ismailis are modern and that that can be seen as a bad thing by some Muslim communities. She continued that the best way to mutual understanding is through dialogue. She said that it is important that *murīds*, Ismaili believers in this case, become more literate about their history and faith in order to be able to engage in more meaningful dialogue with other members of the *umma*. Khadijah says that the Imam and Ismaili leadership are already actively working on making Ismailis more confident ambassadors of their faith, as we saw in the IIP through the faith education system and the ambassador programs as discussed in Chapter 6. However, what is fascinating is that the present study found that many respondents, like Khadijah, already see themselves as

ambassadors of the faith. Khadijah and other Ismaili ambassadors will be discussed more in Chapter 10.

Through interviews with Ismaili participants, I realized that either experiencing intra-*umma* intolerance themselves or hearing stories of intolerance through friends and family, was enough to deter some from interacting with the *umma* altogether. In order for reconciliation to happen there needs to be dialogue. If one or both sides are avoiding dialogue, or not intending to have an open mentality going into that dialogue, sectarianism, instead of pluralism, is fostered.

### *Narratives of the Ismaili Intelligentsia*

Ismaili academics studying Islam and Muslims have also experienced prejudice by other Muslims throughout their careers. The narratives below were derived from interviews except that of Ali S. Asani, whose experience of intolerance was found in a paper he published at the IIS. The stories below speak of personal experiences concerning the challenging of one's academic integrity based on their Ismaili identity, the harmful internalization of these polemics, and the lingering effects of this collective trauma.<sup>669</sup>

#### *Ali S. Asani*

Ismaili academics studying Islam and Muslims are often confronted with another consequence of intolerance – the de-legitimation of their ideas and scholarship based on their personal religious affiliation. Professor Ali S. Asani of Harvard Divinity School recounts the first time he experienced intolerance because of his Ismaili identity:

I personally became aware of issues concerning tolerance for religious diversity within Islam when, many years ago, I left my home in Kenya and came to the United States

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<sup>669</sup> I refer to this as a collective trauma because Ismailis seem quite aware of the perceptions of other Muslims, whether or not they have experienced prejudice or discrimination by the *umma* themselves. There is a collective fear and hesitation to engage with the *umma* because of the experiences of other Ismailis; whether those experiences occurred long in the past or present.

to attend Harvard College. During my first year of undergraduate study, I enrolled in an intensive course in Arabic taught by a visiting professor from Lebanon. One day, during the second semester of the course, the professor, who was a Sunni Arab, asked me to which denomination of Islam I belonged. When I replied that I was a Shi'a Muslim, an Ismaili, he looked stunned and exclaimed in Arabic, "*la hawla wa la quwwat illa billah*" ("There is no protection or strength except with God"), a remark usually made when someone is truly shocked or seeks God's protection from evil. That moment was the first time that my identity as a Muslim had been challenged. Three decades later, after having taught a variety of courses on Islam at Harvard, I still overhear remarks by a few Muslim students that impugn my ability to teach Islam, not on the basis of my academic qualifications or publications, but simply because of the particular Muslim community to which I belong. Even a prominent and highly-respected Sunni Muslim scholar of Islamic Studies remarked publicly at an academic conference, "What does he know about real Islam? He is Ismaili." The intent of such comments is clear: they are intended to marginalise and hence de-legitimise, whatever thoughts, opinions and ideas I have about Islam because I am judged not to be a "proper" Muslim.<sup>670</sup>

Like Professor Asani, other Ismaili professors have experienced similar intolerance. I myself have been judged as 'Not Muslim Enough' to be taken seriously when lecturing on Muslims and Islam. To further allegations of my alleged incompetence, not only do I identify with a minority tradition within Islam, but I am also a Muslim woman who does not wear a veil. These ideologies are major disqualifiers of my academic competency to the narrow-minded.

### Fatima

Being a woman in and of itself is seen as a disqualifier for being academically qualified to speak about Muslims and Islam because women are often excluded from positions of leadership and scholarship in some parts of the Muslim world. One of my interviewees, Fatima, a 45-year-old *Not-Religious* professor who teaches about Islam and Muslims at a university in Canada, pointed out that she mainly receives intolerance from members of the Sunni Muslim community when delivering lectures and has even received a death threat:

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<sup>670</sup> Ali S. Asani, 'On Muslims Knowing the Muslim Other: Reflections on Pluralism and Islam | The Institute of Ismaili Studies', *Institute of Ismaili Studies, IIS*, 2007 <<http://iis.ac.uk/muslims-knowing-muslim-other-reflections-pluralism-and-islam>> [accessed 7 November 2017].

[They] say that you are teaching the wrong type of Islam. And one time, in my entire career, I've actually had a death threat that was called in... I was told that I would be killed if I actually spoke about Islam. When I showed up for the presentation, I actually came with two security guards and there were four Imams sitting in the front row making sure that I was saying the things they wanted to hear. It's a little disconcerting but at the same time, *you're fighting fear not just in the general Western public, but also in Muslim audiences.* (Emphasis mine)

Fatima did not let this event curtail her academic career. After receiving a death threat, she realized just how important it was to continue her scholarship and fight fear not only in non-Muslim audiences, but Muslim audiences as well. Another academic I interviewed, Hasan, a 60-year-old *Standardly Religious* professor at another Canadian university also shared his experiences of intra-*umma* dissonance, and how this dissonance has been internalized by Ismailis.

### Hasan

Hasan grew up in a small town in Kenya. In the interview I asked him if he felt that Ismaili Muslims feel marginalized by other Muslims due to their unique beliefs and practices. Hasan contends that while it is true that some Ismailis feel marginalized, another concerning issue is that some Ismailis have actually internalized their 'otherness':

... growing up in East Africa, I still remember having moved from a smaller town to Nairobi to be at an Aga Khan primary school, and the teacher asked in a class that was more than 75% Ismaili, how many Muslims are there in the class? So, I put up my hand right away and I was told [by peers] "put it down, put it down." Coming from a smaller town, what did I know? So, I put my hand down, and of course, the teacher was trying to make the point that Ismailis were also Muslims, but that [not being Muslim] was a perception of the class, and it was quite widespread. So even today, I don't know how many people, but I think it's a substantial number of people who may at certain level know that Ismailis are Muslims, but because of this embeddedness of the Sunni-normative conception [of 'Islam'], either think that we are not fully Muslim or we have sort of an oppositional kind of perspective... There's that whole group of [Ismaili] people who have internalized themselves as non-Muslim. And since the [Aga Khan's] Silver Jubilee, there has been, because of this [internalization], a constant push for a better understanding of other Muslims and our engagement with them.

Hasan, as both an academic and a leader within the Ismaili community, points to one of the consequences of ‘othering’ the Ismaili community; that the Ismaili community has started to internalize this ‘otherness,’ setting themselves apart from the Sunni-normative understanding of what it means to be a Muslim. He also points out that the Aga Khan and his office have made this issue one of the priorities of the Silver Jubilee initiatives. We see examples of this attempt to mend Ismaili Muslim identity in various organized religious educational projects, many of which were discussed in Chapter 6; such as the RE program, the Rays of Light exhibit, and the ambassador programs – the two latter, interestingly, were Golden Jubilee initiatives. Another such program is the International Waezeen Training Program.<sup>671</sup>

### Al-Waeza Rabia

Rabia is a 32-year-old, *Standardly Religious* academic and al-Waeza,<sup>672</sup> which is an Ismaili faith scholar and preacher. Al-Waeza Rabia says that there are a lot of misconceptions about Ismailis, which are in great need of reparations:

I think there are a lot of misconceptions about Ismailis. In some cases, some Muslims don’t even know we exist... And in other instances, I think there’s a sense that, at best, we’re “Muslim Lite”... that we’re not quite ‘Muslim.’ I think this is usually the most common version. And I think at worst it’s that we’re not *really* Muslim. So, it’s not that those opinions don’t exist, I think they do, but I don’t think that that’s going to be repaired unless we face it head on. We can’t keep avoiding it.

Like other Ismaili participants, Rabia does not think that Ismailis are equipped with the knowledge necessary to present themselves in the context of the wider diverse *umma*. In her interview, Rabia says that this sense of being “not Muslim enough” is displayed by how defensive Ismailis can be in their articulation of the faith:

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<sup>671</sup> The Waezeen Training Program is facilitated by the IIS and aims to train *Wazeen*, or preachers, to deliver inspiring *waezs*, sermons, and offer pastoral care to their local *jama’ats*.

<sup>672</sup> Al-Waez is the title given to those who have completed the IIS Waezeen Training Program. (Al-Waez = single masculine; al-Waeza = single feminine; and Waezeen = plural)

One of the other projects that I'm involved in is a Jewish-Muslim women's dialogue group. And I'm normally the only Shi'a, and the only Ismaili in the room, and the only non-hijabi in the room, which for me is fine. I had suggested to the organizer, was that we should do one session at the *jamatkhana*... And initially it was fine, the approvals [to the Ismaili council] went through, it wasn't a problem and then a week before the council got involved. And it became this big thing and they said they really wanted to have more Ismaili representation... And, so, they did it with more Ismaili women and the take-away for me was how much we struggle with feelings of inadequacy. I think we're always trying to be like, "no, no, we're Muslim too" and "let me prove to you how Muslim I am." And like there's just... I feel like we're always coming at it from a very defensive position... Instead of being grounded in an identity that is equally valid, and we know that from history, we know that from theology, and there's all sorts of ways that we can ground that that are completely legitimate, but I think historically we have a really hard time with feeling like we're a part of the *umma*...

Rabia says that part of the problem within the community is that there is a hesitancy to engage with other members of the *umma*. While she agrees that part of the issue is not being versed enough in Ismaili history and theology, another part is the community's own hesitancy to accept the pluralism of the *umma*:

Part of it is just a sheer ignorance about the *umma*. I think we're terrible that way, we don't know about anyone beyond our own bubble and I think that's really... that makes it hard to have useful conversations. So, I think that's one part of it. I think [another] part of it is having a deeper understanding of pluralism. The Imam talks about pluralism all the time and we like to throw it around like a buzzword but we're actually really terrible at implementing it, like we don't seem to understand that other Muslims are allowed to have their interpretations and those interpretations are valid within their contexts and that that is ok... and that doesn't make our interpretation less valid... I think the other part of it is that we need to engage more; I think we're bad at participating in the *umma*. We don't go to Eid festivals, we don't go to events that are organized by other members of the *umma*... we're sort of only consciously part of the *umma* when we're the ones inviting people in, rather than us being the ones that go out to their events too. So, I think that's the other big piece of it, that we don't, because we're so uncomfortable articulating, and we don't seem to feel like we really fit in, we're very uncomfortable going into spaces that are not our own and owning that identity.

Rabia believes that one of the best ways to overcome this obstacle of misunderstanding is to engage with members of the Canadian *umma*, to talk with other Muslims who have different traditions and beliefs, and to take it a step further and have friends from different Muslim traditions.

Arguably, this is precisely why the IIP is so important. Without taking this crucial step in forming a confident Ismaili Muslim identity – equipping Ismailis with the tools necessary to understand their faith in relation to other faiths within the *umma* – Ismailis will remain marginalized from the rest of the *umma*.

Rabia is actively trying to nurture Ismaili identity and help Ismailis to become more grounded in their faith through various educational efforts; however, these efforts will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 10.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter discussed how Ismailis negotiate and project their religious identity in two different contexts: the context of Islamophobia, with non-Muslim Canadians, and the context of *takfirism*, with non-Ismaili Muslims. In the former context, Ismailis speak about their religious identity with efforts to bridge commonalities between themselves and non-Muslim Canadians. Further, participants disassociate themselves from negative narratives of Muslims in an effort to show that they are different than the image commonly depicted in the media. They speak about Muslim diversity to show that not all Muslims are the same, to create space for their particular Islamic tradition. In the projection of their identity, they conceal certain aspects of their spiritual practice, not in an effort to deceive non-Muslim Canadians, but to respect the sanctity of their faith tradition.

In comparison, when Ismailis speak to non-Ismaili Muslims about their identity, they are more likely to speak directly about what makes them different than other Muslims: mainly the Imamate and the contemporary guidance they receive that shapes their belief and practice. They are also more likely to legitimize their faith tradition as authentic and create space for their narrative by speaking about Muslim diversity. Further, they actively try to bridge their Muslim tradition with other Muslim traditions, to show that they are more similar than they are different; however, in discussions with Muslim audiences, they are more likely to conceal aspects of their tradition that might be interpreted as contentious, primarily the beliefs and practices unique to their *tariqah* tradition. Further, they are hesitant to reveal anything about their identity that could further

marginalize them from the wider-*umma*. Thus, Ismailis are quite aware about how other Muslims, mainly Sunni Muslims, might see them – that Ismailis are ‘not Muslims enough’ – and are therefore cautious and mindful in how they present themselves.

This chapter discussed another important issue within the Ismaili community – the feeling of not being ‘Muslim enough’ in the eyes of their co-religionists. Some participants shared stories of prejudice and discrimination and expressed the desire to heal and feel a part of the Muslim *umma*. They outlined various issues that hindered their ability to engage in meaningful conversations such as their lack in confidence about their own identity in relation to other Muslim identities; the prejudices they experience when they have engaged with the ‘other’; and their resistance to engage because of perceived understandings about how other Muslims see them.

Participants outlined some suggestions that they believe would help mend their relationship with the wider-*umma*: Ismaili identity strengthening efforts; literacy about other Muslim communities; and more engagements with the wider-*umma* so that other Muslims can get to know them on personal levels, thereby becoming more literate about Ismaili Muslims. Noteworthy is that these recommendations are already being implemented through the MLP and the IIP. As discussed in chapters 5 and 6, the MLP not only aims to make Canadians and Muslims more literate about Islam and Muslim diversity, but Ismailis as well through their religious education (RE). Further, Ismaili RE has been designed to strengthen Ismaili identity in the contexts of both religious diversity and Muslim diversity. Since these efforts are in their infancy stages, the present sample is representative of the generation that will not directly benefit from these internal and external literacy efforts. A study 10 and 20 years from now will be more informative of whether these MLP and IIP initiatives were influential in mending the issues presented in this chapter: Islamophobia, intra-*umma* dissonance, and the internalization of an Ismaili ‘otherness’. Also, while efforts are being made to engage with the wider-Canadian *umma*, a lot more work needs to be done *now* in order to have a significant impact on *jama'ati* and *umma* relations the future.

Finally, it is clear that Ismaili academics, too, see their work in response to these two contexts: one of Islamophobia which they aim to alleviate through religious literacy about Muslims

and Islam, and the second of othering within the *umma*, which they aim to alleviate through identity strengthening initiatives and religious literacy about the Ismaili faith and other Muslim faiths. How can the *umma* unite against Islamophobia and anti-Muslim narratives if, internally, Muslims struggle with Muslim diversity? It is an educational project that is going to be hard met if Ismaili academics are also struggling to get a seat at the discussion table. But how exactly are Ismailis different than other Muslim traditions? How are they the similar? I asked these questions to my survey and interview participants to see how they see themselves in comparison to the Muslim 'other'. The results will be discussed next, in the following chapter.

## IX. ISMAILI IDENTITY: IN COMPARISON TO SUNNI-NORMATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF MUSLIM IDENTITY

What constitutes a ‘real’ Muslim? This theological debate is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it is important to note that the answer to this very question leads to the inclusion and exclusion of some Muslim communities over others – and as described in the Introduction chapter of this thesis, can have harmful consequences. In Evelyn Leslie Hamdon’s research on the Muslim Coalition in Canada, she found an internal debate about what constitutes a ‘real’ Muslim, with Shi‘i Muslims and Ismaili Muslims in particular, continuing to be marginalized by the larger Sunni Muslim community.<sup>673</sup> Hamdon asserts that in the Coalition’s attempt to be inclusive they had to exclude members who were being exclusive;<sup>674</sup> however, the Coalition continues to exclude Ahmadiyya and Sufi Muslims from participating.<sup>675</sup> Acceptance of Muslim diversity continues to be a topic of contention within the Muslim *umma*. But why are Ismailis systematically marginalized by some communities within the *umma*? What makes Ismailis so different than mainstream Sunni Muslims?

This chapter aims to identify the self-perceived differences and similarities between Ismaili and non-Ismaili Muslims in Canada, according to the participants of this study and another comparative survey – Beyer’s survey, “Cultural and Religious Identity among 18-45 Year-olds in Canada” (henceforth, *Cultural and Religious Identity in Canada*). This discussion is important as it helps us to understand what makes Ismailis different, in terms of important beliefs and practices, relative to other Muslims – mainly Sunni Muslims. The analysis is also important as it helps to nuance what it means to be a Muslim by illustrating the diversity that exists within the *umma*. Although the discussion is primarily on Ismailis, it is imperative to recognize that other minority Muslim communities, and even some members within what we have come to know as ‘mainstream

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<sup>673</sup> Evelyn Leslie Hamdon, *Islamophobia and the Question of Muslim Identity: The Politics of Difference and Solidarity* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2010), pp. 46–48.

<sup>674</sup> Hamdon, pp. 47–48.

<sup>675</sup> Hamdon, p. 99.

Islam’, may also differ from mainstream Muslim narratives. The topics of discussion arise primarily from survey and interview responses, which are then contextualized and elaborated upon.

The discussion will be presented as follows: first, it will examine how Ismailis see their Islam in relation to other Islams. This is important because it allows us to understand how they see themselves as different – not how others see them as different. Second, we will explore Ismaili practices and beliefs and compare them to the Muslim responses from Beyer’s Cultural and Religious Identity in Canada survey. This analysis will illustrate exactly how Ismailis differ from mainstream Islam, according to two comparable surveys that aimed to measure religious identity in Canada.

## WHAT MAKES ISMAILIS DIFFERENT?

In order to understand how Ismailis identified themselves relative to other Muslim communities, I asked them very frankly, “Is Ismailism different from other Islams? If so, please explain some of the differences.” Although 87% of survey respondents agreed that Ismaili Islam is different than other manifestations of Islam, many expressed in their responses that there were more commonalities than differences. As survey participant Mu‘izz (MR, 41) proclaimed, “fundamentally, there is no difference in the tenets of Islam in general. However, the difference is how these tenets are interpreted.” Thus, I believe it is important, before continuing on with this discussion, to stress that although Ismailis know that their manifestation of Islam appears different, many would argue that the fundamentals of Islam remain the same; such as the belief in Allah and the belief in Prophet Muhammad and his divine message.

The majority of participants (83%) said that there were theological differences that have made Ismaili Islam unique throughout the ages; 64% identified the major theological difference to be the Imam and his contemporary guidance – as transmitted through *farmāns*.

## Imamat

As discussed in Chapter 3: Know your Neighbour: Who are the Ismailis?, the Imamat remains the central authority to all Shi'i traditions. The Imamat is responsible for guiding religious belief and shaping religious practice across time and space. The Imamat enables the community to adapt the faith to different contexts and circumstances. Survey participant Zahra (SR, 27), mentioned previously in Chapter 8, contends that although Ismaili Islam looks different due to the contemporary authoritative guidance of the Imam, this difference should not deflect from the commonalities many Muslim traditions share:

It is different because we have a single Imam who interprets the Qur'an according to context, and hence Ismailis may look differently and pray differently to other Muslims. However, I generally don't encourage pointing out too many differences, rather instead point out commonalities in order to bridge the *umma* and avoid the temptation of calling Ismaili Islam the only type of 'West-friendly-Islam'.

In her response, Zahra touches on another important discussion point, the Good Muslim, Bad Muslim association.<sup>676</sup> Ismailis are often attributed to the 'Good Muslim' category by non-Muslims and assigned attributes such as modern, liberal, and progressive – many Ismaili participants even self-assigned themselves these attributes. But like other Ismailis, Zahra sees the harm in creating a divide between Ismailis and the rest of the *umma* – which 'others' and marginalizes millions of Muslims in the process. Ismailis have been marginalized for centuries, thus, it is important that they are careful not to do this to themselves, and other Muslim communities.

Zahra's quote above, alludes to the main reason why Ismaili Islam manifests differently than other Islams – the Imamat. Again, having the belief that the Imamat has inherited the divine authority given to the Prophet Muhammad significantly shapes Ismaili belief and practice. It is like living during the time of the Prophet himself and receiving guidance on all matters of faith and world. If the Imam tells you that you should educate your children, especially your daughters,

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<sup>676</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (Potter/TenSpeed/Harmony, 2005).

you listen. If the Imam tells you to leave India for better economic opportunities in East-Africa, you go. If the Imam tells you to resettle in Canada and make it your home, you do so. If the Imam tells you that it's ok to group your prayers or change your prayer times to accommodate a secular work week, you do so with his blessing. This is what makes Ismailism more of a "living tradition" than other Muslim traditions. This is not to say that other Muslim traditions do not have "living" contemporary religious authorities and guidance; they do in the form of imams, the *ulema*, Ayatollahs, Mullahs, Muftis, Shaykhs, etc. The difference is that none of these authorities claim to have inherited the authority of the Prophet. As discussed in Chapter 3, Shi'is, regardless of school of thought, believe that their Imam has inherited the same authority as the Prophet and that gives the Imam the ability to prescribe ideals and practices that other authorities cannot. Other authorities have to rely on the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet (*sunna*) to make their case. The Imam of the Time does not. The Shi'i Imam's speeches and actions become the contemporary authority, similar to the Prophet's *sunna*. This is not to say that the Imam goes against the Qur'an, he just does not have to justify his position in the traditional sense like other religious authorities do; such as how Sunni jurists must justify their positions by consulting the Qur'an and the Hadith and the precedents left by the four legal schools (Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, and Shafi'i). Even though the Imam of the Time does not have to justify his position in the same way that a Muslim jurist, *faqih*, does, he often does by using religious and historical examples.

In a somewhat contentious interview with Elle Magazine in 1969, interviewer Paul Gianolli asked the Aga Khan about his grandfather's, the Aga Khan III, decision to abolish the veil – something that in certain contexts, has marginalized and stigmatized Ismaili Muslim women. The Aga Khan replied:

*C'était une mesure audacieuse, mais plus sociale que religieuse. A l'origine, le port du voile n'avait rien d'islamique et le voile était porté en Arabie pré-islamique. Le voile c'était, au départ, ce qui distinguait une femme libre d'une esclave. La femme esclave ne portait pas de voile; elle pouvait s'acheter ou s'échanger. La femme qui portait le*

*voile n'était pas à la disposition de la société. Le voile est devenu, non plus un symbole, mais un folklore.*<sup>677</sup>

It was a bold measure, but more social than religious. The origin of the veil had nothing to do with Islam as a religion, it was worn in pre-Islamic Arabia. From the beginning the veil distinguished between free women and slave women. The slave woman did not veil; she could be bought or traded. The woman who veiled, was not at the disposition of society. The veil became, not so much a symbol, but folklore.<sup>678</sup>

Gianolli, followed up by asking the Aga Khan if he had the authority to make such important decisions, to which the Aga Khan responded,

*Sans aucun doute. La difficulté est de pressentir l'heure ou la mesure dans laquelle on peut corriger une contrainte. Quand on ne déçoit pas ceux qui se considèrent évolués, on décourage ceux qui restent dans la tradition.*<sup>679</sup>

Without a doubt. The difficulty is to sense the context or the extent to which a constraint can be corrected: when one doesn't disappoint those who consider themselves progressive, one discourages those who remain in the tradition.<sup>680</sup>

The Imam is mindful of how decisions like this one impact the Ismaili community in relation to other Muslim communities. The pros must outweigh the cons. Such decisions and prescriptions are communicated to the Ismaili community in a private and intimate nature, unique to the Ismaili *tariqa*; through *farmāns*.

## Farmāns

The Imam guides the community through various temporal contexts and prescribes ideals and practice through *farmāns*, which are official decrees. *Farmāns* are of a private nature and are intended only for the initiated; thus, you will not see *farmāns* published publicly unless done so

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<sup>677</sup> Paul Giannoli and Aga Khan, 'Elle Magazine Interview, Paul Giannoli, "Mystery of the Aga Khan" (France)', *NanoWisdoms*, 1969 <<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1527/>> [accessed 12 December 2017].

<sup>678</sup> Translation mine.

<sup>679</sup> Giannoli and Khan.

<sup>680</sup> Translation mine.

without permission.<sup>681</sup> In order to better understand *farmāns* while simultaneously being cautious so as to not betray their sacredness to the community, interviews were designed to reveal contents of *farmāns* of particular importance to that participant, and how they incorporate that guidance into their own lives.

The Imam guides the *Jama'at* through various means: his institutions, his councils, *farmāns*, and public speeches. As previously mentioned, *farmāns* are of utmost importance to the Ismaili community as this is the primary method by which they receive guidance on how to live an Islamic life in the modern era. Interview participants were asked to identify *farmāns* of significant importance to themselves, and then asked to reflect on how they have incorporated that guidance into their lives. I figured that *farmāns* that first come to mind reveal their importance in the lives of these individuals – although I recognize that this might not always be the case. *Farmān* themes for the Canadian *Jama'at*, according to the data, include the importance of education, making Canada a permanent home, embracing pluralism, and living in accordance with the ethics of Islam.

Khadijah, who was first introduced in Chapter 8, says that one of the *farmāns* that has resonated the most with her is from the 1987 Silver Jubilee,<sup>682</sup> *dīdar*.<sup>683</sup> During the Toronto *dīdar*, the Aga Khan met privately with the students. Khadijah was volunteering at the time, her duty was to take care of everyone's shoes since they are not allowed to be brought into the *dīdar* hall – a common practice amongst Muslims when entering sacred spaces. In his address to Canadian-Ismaili students, the Imam called upon them to educate themselves, to not accept mediocrity, and

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<sup>681</sup> See Supreme Court of Canada - SCC Case Information - Summary - 34731, 2001 <<http://www.scc-csc.ca/case-dossier/info/sum-som-eng.aspx?cas=34731>> [accessed 8 December 2017].

<sup>682</sup> Jubilees are according to how long the present Imam has been in office. The Silver Jubilee signifies 25 (1982-1983) years in office, the Golden is 50 years, and the Diamond Jubilee is 60 years (2007-2008). The Aga Khan is currently celebrating his Diamond Jubilee (2017-2018).

<sup>683</sup> “The Persian word *didar* is derived from *didan* means meeting, beholding or seeing. In Ismaili terminology, it denotes the beholding the Imam of the age. It is a means to strengthen the heart, cooling the eyes, refresh the faith and earn guidance and blessings of the Imam.” Quoted from Mumtaz Ali Tajddin Sadik Ali.

to strive to be better academically. He said that getting a ‘C’ or ‘D’ grade is unacceptable, and that students need to constantly push themselves to be better.

In another *farmān* on the topic of education, Khadijah recalls that the Aga Khan stressed the importance of continuing education:

[I]n the *farmān*, Hazar Imam talks about continuing education, and the benefits of education... and goes on and on about education. But at the very very end of the *farmān*, he says, “it does not matter if you’re 70, 80, 90, 100, or 110 [years old].” And it was because of that *farmān* that I said, ok you know what, I got to stop complaining, I need to change my career because if I lose my current job, I won’t be able to get another. So, I think those *farmāns* [about education] actually have hit and stuck in my head.

Khadijah says that this *farmān* on education has really resonated with her and, today, at the humble age of 49, she is going back to school to finish her undergraduate degree.

Participants, such as Khadijah, say that *farmāns* are very important to their daily living. Khadijah says that *farmāns* offer her answers and inspiration in challenging times:

Everything happens for a reason. And you have to learn from your experiences. And every time I get frustrated or I feel like I’m lost... I start looking at the *farmāns* or speeches and saying, “there’s got to be something in these speeches that’s going to give me my answer.” And more times than not, I’ll find a single line that will [give me that answer]. So as an Ismaili I feel honoured that I have access to those kinds of resources that guide me through what I do, day-to-day.

Sultan, a South-Asian *Standard Religious* 43-year-old university administrator, speaks about *farmāns* in terms of their layers of meaning; they have both apparent meanings (*zahiri*) and hidden meanings (*batini*). Sultan recounts a story during the 8<sup>th</sup> century where the Imam of the Time, *Imam-e-Zamān*, who was stationed in Salamiyya (modern-day Syria), sent two Ismaili *dā’īs*, missionaries, to Yemen and then to North Africa to proselytize the Berber tribes. He says that at the time, the *dā’īs* did not understand the importance of their mission. The real purpose of their mission was not apparent until 150 years later, when the Imamate would move his office from Salamiyya to North-Africa (modern-day Tunisia and later Egypt). This move was only possible

because the *dā'īs* were able to gain support for the Ismaili Imam, and consequently, the first Shi'i empire – the Fatimid Empire, which started in 909 in modern-day Mahdia, Tunisia. “We have no idea what the *farmāns* are even about because the *farmāns* are giving us guidance within a continuum that is centuries and many generations long, and in that sense, all *farmāns* are important” asserts Sultan. He continues, “[The Imam’s] guidance can be beyond what we even understand and [that’s] why we should understand all guidance to be critically important because we don’t know the context in the grand scheme of things.”

The concept of time is central to Ismaili theology and not only manifests itself in *farmāns*, but in the Imam’s institutions as well; such as the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). The AKDN is the first and only development network to build a university in the developing world, the University of Central Asia in Khorog, Tajikistan. In an interview with Hussein, one of the executive employees of the Aga Khan Foundation Canada (AKFC), he discussed the Imam’s greater understanding of time:

One of the things I’ve learned here [at AKFC], is that there’s a question of timeframe as well. The institution works on very very long time frames. And of course, it’s a feature of the Imam himself, which essentially has an indefinite time horizon – it’s a lifetime office, an indefinite chain of succession. It’s effectively an indefinite time horizon, which is difficult. We live in biographical time, not in historical time, right? So, we can only see as far as our own noses. But the institution [of Imam] has a different relationship to time. That’s part of the challenge. One of our distinguishing features as a development institution, AKFC, in relationship to other development organizations, is our time horizons. I mean we talk about things in terms of generations, in generational terms that others simply can’t fathom. Others can’t organize themselves in those terms. We have permanent institutions... we’re building a university! Who builds a university? This university is not going to have impact on any kind of scale or magnitude for generations.

*Farmāns* from the 1800s advised Ismaili Muslims in India to migrate to East-Africa to help build the Ugandan railway. Many Ismailis understand their financial prosperity in East Africa to be divinely ordained. There are countless examples of life-altering stories as a result of *farmāns*, such as the contemporary migration of Ismailis to Canada – where the Aga Khan advised his Ugandan *jama’at* to seek refuge in Canada in the 1970s. As a result of this *farmān*, other African-Ismailis followed suit.

Sukayna, who was first introduced in Chapter 8, revealed that her mum was part of the Ugandan exodus. She recounts how *farmāns* influenced the resettlement of Ugandan Ismailis in Canada. Sukayna contends that *farmāns* were really important during that time; that they advised the community on what actions to take and once a family was accepted into another country, how to successfully resettle:

My mum was part of the refugee group that got expelled when Idi Amin was in power... The Imam gave them guidance. Not only did [the Imam] work with local officials to help get the refugees accepted into other countries, but once they actually got into countries like Canada, there was guidance in terms of how to live your life. Some of it was simple guidance such as “do as the romans do”... when you’re here dress westernized, get an education, work hard, and assimilate yourself within this community and country because it is going to be your home moving forward.

Like Sukayna, many participants who spoke about the migration to Canada also mentioned how the Imam called upon the community to make Canada their home. While many African-Ismailis were westernized in their respective locales, the migration brought new and existing challenges and *farmāns* played an important part in guiding the community to live in accordance to the ethics of Islam in Canada.

The migration to Canada initiated *farmāns* that spoke about how to live in the Western world in accordance with the ethics of Islam. East-African interview participant, Ismail, a *Standard Religious* 33-year-old who was discussed previously in Chapter 5, recounts how one Golden Jubilee *farmān* inspired him to change some of his social habits:

One *farmān* that stuck out for me was when I was in Kampala [Uganda] for his [the Imam’s] Golden Jubilee. It was a very spiritual moment for me... And he said a number of times “do not be hypnotized by this world,” because we have fallen into the material trap of this world. And a number of times he repeated that sentence... “Do not be hypnotized by this world.” The *farmāns* he has said on social habits have given me a lot of guidance on how I should proceed on those very controversial topics... I looked at a lot of his *farmāns* and his guidance [about alcohol consumption], I think it was 10 years ago, and after reviewing them and understanding them better, and internalizing them I decided not to consume alcohol again. That was 10 years ago and haven’t looked back.

Noteworthy is that the consumption of alcohol is not a new world problem, nor is it an Ismaili problem, and there have been *farmāns* and speeches on this topic prior to western migration. In an excerpt from a speech made by the Aga Khan III in Johannesburg, South Africa the Imam warned all Muslims of the dangers of alcohol consumption:

The greatest danger to every Muslim citizen — I have not the least hesitation in saying it — is alcohol. Time has shown that it is an injury to you; an injury to your person; an injury to your health. It is forbidden because it carries greater evil than good. Believe me, in a community like yours, alcohol is a very grave danger. Once you got into the alcohol habit, I do not know where it would lead you. A handful, here and there, of the weak, or of the unhappy, find their way to this terrible poison. Avoid it at all costs. Avoid it, I say, for in this country you cannot afford to lose one man.<sup>684</sup>

Like Ismail, Ismailis view *farmāns* as official decrees, but each believer will negotiate them and internalize them differently. What is of interest to this research is not whether everyone is obediently following every single *farmān* ever made, but which ones are important to the believer, in their current circumstances. While some *farmāns* may only serve a particular space and time, others can exceed our time and have various layers of meaning; *farmāns* that are generations old may still be relevant today, similar to how the Qur'an is considered timeless and relevant to today's day and age. How each believer understands them, negotiates them into their lives, and internalizes them to guide their lives, is what matters to the present study.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the topic of pluralism is an important mandate of the Imam and can be seen in many of his public speeches. Arguably, the MLP and IIP are components of the Aga Khan's greater Pluralism project. The concept of pluralism also arises in various *farmāns*. Living in Canada, Ismailis are surrounded by diverse people and worldviews. Participants mentioned that living with the ethic of pluralism, to not only tolerate diversity but to value it, is important to a just and inclusive society – however, as we saw in the previous chapter, like other Muslims, Ismailis

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<sup>684</sup> Aga Khan III, 'Select Excerpts of Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah's Speech (Aga Khan III): Guidelines for the Muslims of Transvaal (Johannesburg, South Africa)', *NanoWisdoms Archive*, 1945 <<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/10699/>> [accessed 1 August 2019].

also struggle with the diversity that exists within the *umma*, primarily because of a lack of literacy about the *umma*'s diversity and, also, because of negative past experiences with some of its members.

Again, looking at the importance and impact of *farmāns* from an academic perspective is difficult given the personal and private nature of this discourse. However, the data of the present study reveals that *farmāns* play a significant role in guiding ethics and ideals and motivating long-term goals and actions.

### Muslim Diversity

In their responses about how Ismaili Islam is different than other Islams, 61% of Ismaili participants also mentioned the diversity that exists within Islam – that Ismailis are just one manifestation of the diversity. According to survey participant, Sitt al-Mulk, Muslims experience Islam differently, which significantly depends on whether a Muslim interprets the Qur'an literally or figuratively:

[Ismaili Islam] isn't actually different. The Imam is interpreting Islam the way it is meant to be practiced as time goes on in the existence of humans and the development of society. But it is perceived as different given that Ismaili Islam interprets [the Qur'an] more figuratively than other sects (of course I can't speak about all diverse Muslim sects and peoples), while many other sects interpret [the Qur'an] more literally.

According to survey participant, Salimah (*MR*, 25), she believes that Ismailis are similar to other Muslim communities who share the belief that the basic message of Islam is about peace and love. Salimah argues, however, that this message has been hijacked by violent Muslim extremists:

The basic message of Islam is technically the same across all Muslim populations –a message of peace and love. However, in comparison to extremist groups (who term themselves “followers” of Islam) I would say there is a significant difference. In these cases, Ismailism (like other non-extremist Muslim populations) is different as it does not condone the practice of violence towards or persecution of individuals from other faiths.

For Ismailis, placing themselves in the spectrum of Muslim diversity allows them to authenticate themselves as a legitimate manifestation of Islam, amongst many other manifestations. This, in turn, creates space for other minority manifestations of Islam to be represented.

Muslim diversity means that not all Muslims look or dress the same, believe the same things, nor practice their faith the same. This leads us to the discussion of how Ismailis practice their faith and what they believe, that may or may not make them unique when compared to Sunni-normative constructions of Islam.

## WHAT ARE SOME IMPORTANT ISMAILI PRACTICES?

In this section, I will present on the most important practices and beliefs according to survey and interview participants. Further, in order to present comparable differences between Ismaili Muslims and non-Ismaili Muslims in Canada, original data will also be presented from the findings of Beyer's Cultural and Religious Identity in Canada survey, to which 117 Muslims responded. After removing Ismaili Muslims from that sample, there remained 93 non-Ismaili Muslims. The sample consisted of 63 females and 30 males, almost a 2:1 ratio, and the average age of the sample was 28 years old. Many of the same questions were posed to both samples with the present survey having some variations in order to cater to the spiritual nature of the Ismaili community. The discussion below will primarily showcase Ismaili practices but will draw comparisons between survey samples when appropriate.

There are various practical differences, again, due to how the Ismaili religion has been shaped by the Imamatus over centuries. Like other mystical traditions, Ismailis are part of a *tariqah*, meaning they observe certain beliefs and practices unique to their *tariqah* tradition. An example of a Sufi *tariqah* tradition is the *Mawlawiyya* Whirling Dervish in Konya, Turkey. There are many Sufi *turuqs* around the world but only this *tariqah* in Konya observes *dhikr*, remembrance or devotion to Allah, in their unique whirling fashion. Ismailis too have unique practices of devotion or *dhikr*, such as *Bayt ul Khayal*, House of the Imagination.

## Spiritual Search

Ismaili Islam is an esoteric tradition and, thus, has various practices that are not observed by Muslim traditions that are primarily exoteric in nature. *Bayt ul Khayal* is one example of an esoteric practice. *Bayt ul Khayal* is a *majlis*, a special sitting or meeting, and like other Ismaili *majalis*,<sup>685</sup> one has the option of attending – it is not obligatory. In this *majlis*, Ismailis gather in silence and humility in search of *Haqiqa*, the Ultimate Truth. *Bayt ul Khayal* is a form of *dhikr*, similar to *muraqaba*<sup>686</sup> in Sufism, where one seeks knowledge about the soul and the ultimate truth through the invocation of one of Allah’s divine names . With Ismailism being a spiritual tradition, there is an emphasis on seeking one’s higher self and ultimate understanding through contemplative meditation.<sup>687</sup>

According to the 48<sup>th</sup> Imam, Sultan Muhammad Shah (Aga Khan III), achieving higher consciousness liberates the Self from worldly matters:

And in the highest realms of consciousness all who believe in a Higher Being are liberated from all the clogging and hampering bonds of the subjective self in prayer, in rapt meditation upon and in the face of the glorious radiance of eternity, in which all temporal and earthly consciousness is swallowed up and itself becomes the eternal.<sup>688</sup>

The present Aga Khan explains that this practice is of an esoteric nature and although nothing is obligatory in Ismaili Islam, this meditation is best performed in the early morning hours:

*Notre religion est ésotérique, comprenez-vous? Elle est une perpétuelle initiation. Rien n’est imposé, pas même la prière à heure fixe: ce qui importe, c’est l’esprit... Ainsi, nous recommandons de prier à 4 heures du matin. Je sais, dans la vie moderne, c’est*

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<sup>685</sup> Plural of *Majlis*

<sup>686</sup> *Muraqaba*, is Arabic and means “to watch over” or “take care over.” It is a word that Sufis use to describe their meditation.

<sup>687</sup> It is argued that spiritual practices, such as *Bayt ul Khayal* and *muraqaba*, stem from the Prophet Muhammad’s *miraj*, Night Journey or Ascent. Mystical branches of Islam, such as Ismaili Islam, believe that this journey took place spiritually, not physically, in the Prophet’s astral state.

<sup>688</sup> Aga Khan III, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan*, p. 335.

*difficile... C'est pourtant à cette heure que l'esprit est le mieux libéré des choses de ce monde.*<sup>689</sup>

Our religion is esoteric, do you understand? It is a perpetual initiation. Nothing is imposed, not even fixed prayer times: what matters is the spirit... Thus, we recommend praying at 4 o'clock in the morning. I know, in modern life, this is difficult ... However, it is at this time that the spirit is best liberated from the things of this world.

The Ismaili community observes this spiritual search between the hours of 4 and 5 am, when the world and the mind is most silent and it is easier to de-attach oneself from worldly matters. During this meditation, Ismailis concentrate on one of Allah's divine names in search for higher understanding about the Self and its true nature.

Fifty-seven percent of Ismaili participants said that the practice of *Bayt ul Khayal* is important to them, even though it is optional. The *Standard Religious* identified most strongly with this practice at 63% and the *SBNRs* followed suit at 53%. Only 39% of the *Moderately Religious* elected this practice as important. The *Not-Religious* sample were not asked this question, or similar questions, because they identified as non-practicing Ismailis.

For interview participant Rumi (SR, 66), the practice of *Bayt ul Khayal* is more important to him than other Ismaili practices. Rumi describes *Bayt ul Khayal* as a personal spiritual search, one that he has committed too more seriously since taking *bol* – *Bol* is Gujrati for *Ism-e-Azam*, meaning the invocation of Allah's names. In Ismaili Islam, *Ism-e-Azam* can only be given by the Imam of the Time. Asking the Imam for *Ism-e-Azam* is understood to be a serious request, as one pledges to devote themselves daily to spiritual search through *dhikr* of the prescribed *bol*, at the designated hour. Rumi, like other recipients of *Ism-e-Azam*, takes this pledge seriously and tries to attend *Bayt ul Khayal* in *jamatkhana* regularly. When he is unable to attend *jamatkhana*, however, he observes the meditation at home:

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<sup>689</sup> Anne Loesch and Aga Khan, 'Jeune Afrique Interview (1st), Anne Loesch, "Prince of Islam and Businessman" (Paris, France)', 1967 <<http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/1436/>> [accessed 18 December 2017].

I chose to do *Bayt ul Khayal*... but now I find... I just don't get home until late... I want to go in the morning... I used to go... I used to have to go to sleep at 10:00 [pm] and now it seems that 10:00 [pm] becomes 11:00 [pm] on a regular basis. So, it's a problem.

Rumi further admits that he prefers to attend morning prayers in *jamatkhana*, which take place immediately after *Bayt ul Kayal majlis*, rather than evening prayers in *jamatkhana*. Morning attendees, according to Rumi, share a common spiritual goal and, thus, he feels a much greater sense of belonging. Despite his preference, Rumi agrees that regular prayers are important, much like the vast majority of participants.

Survey participant, Nasir (SR, 19) says that the regular practice of *Bayt ul Khayal*, or *Bandagi* as he refers to it, is important for his spiritual progression. He also tries to practice *dhikr* throughout the day, to keep his heart pure. For Nasir, everything he does is part of his spiritual practice:

I try and engage in *Bandagi* as regularly as possible. I say my prayers. I also try and think of God in a loving manner at all times but that is a little difficult as I tend to forget. I consider all of my daily activities to be spiritual practices as I am doing them for my spiritual progression. For example, I go to classes to educate myself, and learn about my master's creation and also to equip myself with skills to be able to help the unfortunate ones. Both these objectives I derived from my faith; thus, I consider going to classes a spiritual practice and try to think of Allah when I do so.

Aside from regularly engaging in *dhikr*, Nasir also contends that secular education is a form of spiritual search as it helps him to better understand Allah's creation. Further, he says that a secular education can better equip him to serve those who are less fortunate – an important Ismaili practice that we will return to shortly. But first, we will discuss prayer, a religious practice that both Rumi and Nasir identified as being important.

## Prayer

When comparing the results from both surveys, the most important practice as recognized by Ismailis and non-Ismaili Muslims is prayer (97% in the present survey and 97% in Beyer's survey). In the present survey, 100% of *SR* and *MR* participants identified regular prayer as the most important practice while only 60% of *SBNRs* did. Ismailis, like some other Shi'i traditions, pray three times a day: once in the morning (sunrise), and twice in the evening (sunset and after sunset). The number of times to pray is taken from the Qur'an, "And establish Prayer at the two ends of the day and in the first hours of the night" (Surah 11: Ayat 114). Sunni and Salafi Muslims, in contrast, justify their five prayer times using the collection of *hadith*, as prescribed by Sunni jurists.

The Ismaili daily *du'a*, supplication, contains passages from the Qur'an, the acknowledgment of Imamat as *walayah*,<sup>690</sup> and ends in *sujud*, prostration. One part also consists of *dhikr* Allah, when time is allocated for silent devotion. Aspects of the Ismaili proclamation of faith, "There is no god but God. And Muhammad is His Messenger. And 'Ali, the master of believers, is from Allah",<sup>691</sup> can be seen in each part of the *du'a*. The *du'a* has layers of meaning and esoteric dimensions as well; however, not only is the content and meaning(s) of the Ismaili *du'a* of a private and intimate nature, intended only for the initiates, but it is also beyond the scope of this dissertation.<sup>692</sup> It should be noted, however, that for every Ismaili practice, there is an esoteric, *batini*, meaning behind it.

For Jafar (*SBNR*, 59), regular prayer is important but so are one's actions towards others in this world:

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<sup>690</sup> *Walayah*, is Arabic, for vicegerent. Shi'i traditions believe that the Imams are the divinely designated vicegerents.

<sup>691</sup> It is important to note here that the Ismailis have a different Shahada than both Sunni and Shi'i traditions. In Sunni Islam, the Shahada is "There is not god, but God. And Muhammad is his Messenger." For Shi'i traditions, they add "And 'Ali is *wali* (vicegerent) of Allah." The *umma* only share the first two statements.

<sup>692</sup> To read more about the esoteric dimensions of the Ismaili *du'a*, read, Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Spiritual Quest: Reflections on Quranic Prayer According to the Teachings of Imam 'Ali* (I.B.Tauris, 2014).

I pray to Almighty God for his grace, mercy and wisdom. Thank Him for what you have and ask Him to bless others who are less fortunate. Be generous and help others who need help unconditionally. Otherwise don't hurt or exploit them. Respect your parents and look after them – one day you may need your children to do the same. Teach your children the wisdom of right and wrong, so they may be able to make good choices in not only their lives but in the lives of others. Always think of your creator the almighty God, who is watching over your deeds and actions in your life and will reward you for your good deeds and punish you for the bad deeds. Life is a short journey. Do whatever good you can do for others and you will be blessed in return.

According to other studies about Muslim belief and practice, prayer appears to be the most important.<sup>693</sup> For Ismailis living in Canada, the *jamatkhana* is open for prayers in the mornings and in the evenings, for special *majalis*, and for rites of passage ceremonies; however, these times may not be practical for smaller *jama'ats*, such as those in small towns or cities. While prayers can be observed anywhere, Ismaili participants identified that regular attendance in *jamatkhana* for congregational prayers is important to them – more so in comparison to other studies on Muslims in the diaspora.

### Jamatkhana

The second most important practice, according to survey respondents, is attendance in *jamatkhana*.<sup>694</sup> Sunni Muslims typically congregate in a Mosque but there are other places of worship within the Islamic tradition such as the *khanaqah*, the *tekke*, the *ribat*, and the *husayniya* amongst others.<sup>695</sup> The *jamatkhana* is the place Ismailis gather to observe traditions related to their specific *tariqah* – most importantly their *du'a*.

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<sup>693</sup> Beyer, Cummins, and Craig; Peter Beyer and Rubina Ramji, *Growing Up Canadian: Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists* (McGill-Queen's Press - MQUP, 2013); Ahmad F. Yousif, *Muslims in Canada: A Question of Identity* (Ottawa: Legas, 1993).

<sup>694</sup> The word is a mix of Arabic (*Jama'a*) and Persian (*Khana*). *Jamatkhana* literally translates to congregation place or gathering house, and is a word used by various Muslim communities, not exclusively Ismailis. For the purpose of this dissertation, I use it to refer to the place Ismailis gather to observe their *tariqah* traditions.

<sup>695</sup> Rizwan Mawani, *Beyond the Mosque: Diverse Spaces of Muslim Worship* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

Ismailis not only worship in the *jamatkhana* but also perform certain life rites and rituals therein, such as the *bay'ah* ceremony,<sup>696</sup> *nikah* ceremony,<sup>697</sup> and *mayyit* ceremony<sup>698</sup> – the mosque, however, does not necessarily serve all or any of these purposes. The *jamatkhana* is a private space for the most part, open only to members of the community except for the ceremonies listed above, where the *jamatkhana* may be open to non-members to take part or observe the ceremonies. One of the reasons for the private nature of the community is a result of historic persecution for their more spiritual beliefs.<sup>699</sup> Another more common reason why the space is reserved only for those initiated into the Ismaili tradition is because this keeps the space sacred; the *jamatkhana* is often referred to as the home of the Imam, thus only those invited into the home may attend.

Eighty-seven percent of survey participants expressed that attending the *jamatkhana* is important to their practice. The *SRs* and the *MRs* (92.5%) were more likely to list the *jamatkhana* as important when compared to the *SBNRs* (33%). This is comparable to other studies with *SBNRs*, where the importance placed on practice is greatly diminished amongst *SBNRs*, and when practice is important, individual practice is preferred to communal practice.<sup>700</sup>

Interviews revealed that the main reason why participants attend *jamatkhana* was to participate in congregational prayers and to “recharge” and “re-energize” themselves:

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<sup>696</sup> Swearing allegiance to Allah through the Imam of the time. This tradition dates back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad. The ceremony takes place shortly after birth and also with Ismaili converts. A *murīd* can technically do this whenever they wish to reaffirm their loyalty. It usually takes place in the *Jamatkhana* amongst close friends and family – not necessarily all Ismaili.

<sup>697</sup> This ceremony denotes the marriage between two people. In Islam both partners must sign a contract stipulating the terms of their marriage and the gifts for the bride. Both partners must agree to the terms and conditions as they are legally binding in Muslim countries.

<sup>698</sup> This is the funeral ceremony for Ismaili Muslims and includes the cleansing of the body, shrouding the body in cloth, reciting special prayers, and the burial itself.

<sup>699</sup> Karim H. Karim, ‘Pluralism, Migration, Space and Song: Ismaili Arrangements of Public and Private Spheres’, p. 155.

<sup>700</sup> Peter Beyer, Scott Craig, and Alyshea Cummins, ‘Religious Identity Construction among Young Adults in Canada: The Religious, the Spiritual, and the Non-Religious’, in *Youth, Religion, and Identity in a Globalizing Context: International Perspectives*, ed. by Paul L. Gareau, Spencer C. Bullivant, and Peter Beyer (BRILL, 2018), pp. 33–52.

Well personally for me sometimes my visits are quite short. I don't really go for the social aspect of it. For me it's just for saying my prayers... you know... Maybe having a discussion with God about anything that's going on in my life; my worries, my concerns. It's almost therapeutic in a sense. I come out feeling refreshed and energized. It's just part of my day. - Sukayna

Sukayna and Rumi both revealed that although for the most part they conduct their prayers within the *jamatkhana*, they also participate in prayer services with other members of the *umma*. Sukayna said, "if there are Muslims praying in congregation, sometimes I will attend those prayers as well. I may not follow or practice exactly as they do, but it's just a concept of being a part of it and praying in congregation. I feel like whether it is a church or a mosque or another place of worship, I don't mind attending that. To me 'blessings are blessings' and 'God is God'." Thus, notwithstanding the fact that the *jamatkhana* is exclusively open to Ismaili Muslims for prayers, Ismailis do not have to pray exclusively in the *jamatkhana* – although many Ismailis do.

In Beyer's Cultural and Religious Identity in Canada survey, only 13% of non-Ismaili Muslim participants in the *SR* (14%) and *MR* (7%) categories, identified mosque attendance as being important to Muslim practice. Prayer and fasting were identified as the most important practices for the *SRs* (98% and 45%, respectively) and *MRs* (93% and 21%), 97% and 41% collectively, with charity and Qur'an recitation being far less important (18% and 16% collectively). Interestingly, Beyer's non-Ismaili Muslim *MRs* were slightly more likely to identify charity and volunteering as important to their practice in comparison to the *SRs*, 21% compared to 17%. Not surprisingly, Qur'an recitation was more predominant amongst the *SR*, although only by a few points; 17% versus 14%.

The low importance placed on mosque attendance could be due to the majority of the non-Ismaili Muslim sample being predominantly female, a 2:1 ratio, as traditionally non-Ismaili Muslim women are encouraged to pray at home and are given little space, if any, when attending

the mosque.<sup>701</sup> Ismailis, on the other hand, are given an equal amount of space in the *jamatkhana* and are not separated by a physical barrier, they pray on either the left or the right side of the *qibla*, the direction of prayer, with men on the opposite side – they do not sit behind the men, or in a different room, like in many contemporary mosque spaces. Rubina Ramji found similar findings about Muslim women, that they are either not attending the mosque often or not at all.<sup>702</sup>

During my interview with Sukayna she recounted a story about this very issue of space for women in mosques:

There are some mosques where men and women are praying on different floors... There was a large group of followers and the men's section had been filled completely and the women were on another floor. Somebody came upstairs and basically tried to imply that the women should leave because the other men had the right to pray upstairs, which implied that the women had to go home. A strong headed woman put her foot down and said that women should also have the opportunity to pray and if the overflow of men were not able to be accommodated then those men should go to a different mosque.

Things are changing in the non-Ismaili Muslim community and more space is being created for women in various mosques. In Canada today, there are mosques that offer a safe space for women and even members of the LGBT community, such as the Noor Cultural Centre and the Unity Mosque in Toronto and the Ottawa Valley Unity Mosque. This goes to show that gender-discrimination is no longer being tolerated within the Canadian *umma*, and progressive steps are being taken to have more representation by women and members of the LGBT community – at least by some leaders within the Canadian *umma*.

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<sup>701</sup> Zarqa Nawaz, *Me and the Mosque*, 2005 <[https://www.nfb.ca/film/me\\_and\\_mosque/](https://www.nfb.ca/film/me_and_mosque/)> [accessed 6 December 2017].

<sup>702</sup> Rubina Ramji, 'A Variable but Convergent Islam: Muslim Women', in *Growing Up Canadian: Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists*, ed. by Peter Beyer and Rubina Ramji (McGill-Queen's Press - MQUP, 2013), pp. 150–97.

## Volunteering

In his Address to the Canadian Parliament in 2014, as presented in Chapter 6, the Aga Khan spoke about the ethic of volunteering as “enlightened self-fulfillment.” Specifically, he said that “[t]he importance of contributing one’s individual energies on a voluntary basis to improving the lives of others is not a matter of philanthropy, but rather of self-fulfillment, enlightened self-fulfillment.”<sup>703</sup> This ethic is so enshrined into the Ismaili community that one of the mandates for the Ismaili Council is to “preserve and foster the tradition of voluntary service and identify, motivate and develop leadership talent”.<sup>704</sup> Further, the majority of leadership positions within the Ismaili institutions and the local *jamatkhanas* are on a voluntary basis, some higher positions asking for 1 to 3-year commitments. Again, as discussed in Chapter 6, in September 2017, Ismailis from around the nation pledged 1 million hours of service in cities across Canada, a goal that they surpassed in only 6 months.<sup>705</sup> According to the Daily Hive News, “thousands of Ismailis served as mentors and coaches, cared for the elderly, supported anti-poverty initiatives, and worked to maintain natural and public spaces” as part of Canada’s 150 year anniversary.<sup>706</sup> Thus, it will come as no surprise that the vast majority of participants are actively engaged in service efforts inside and outside of the community – something they ascribe to their religious identity.

Although only 20% of participants personally identified volunteering as important in response to the question, “Do you engage in what you consider religious and/or spiritual practices? If so, please specify the most important of these practices”, 78% of all respondents revealed that they have or are currently volunteering either inside or outside of the community. The responses revealed that as religiosity increases, so does the participation in voluntary service. Eighty-four percent of the *SRs* said that they have or are currently engaged in volunteer work compared to 74% of the *MRs*, 67% of the *SBNRs*, and 44% of the *NRs*. Overall, participants were more likely to

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<sup>703</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Address to Parliament of Canada, Ottawa’.

<sup>704</sup> *Ismaili Constitution*.

<sup>705</sup> ‘Canadian Ismaili Community Surpasses Pledge of 1 Million Service Hours | News’, *Daily Hive: Vancouver*, 10 April 2018 <<https://dailyhive.com/vancouver/canada-ismaili-civic-150-service-hours>> [accessed 5 August 2019].

<sup>706</sup> ‘Canadian Ismaili Community Surpasses Pledge of 1 Million Service Hours | News’.

volunteer inside of the Ismaili community; however, upon a closer look, *SBNRs* were more likely to volunteer outside of the community and the *NRs* were just as likely to volunteer inside of the community as outside of the community; which, again, might be attributed to the small sample of *NRs*. Table IX.I presents the comparison.

Table IX.I: Volunteering – Comparing Religious Identity Categories

Volunteering				
Category	(%)	Within Community	Outside Community	Both
SR	84%	91%	80%	79%
MR	74%	88%	70%	68%
SBNR	67%	88%	94%	81%
NR	44%	100%	100%	100%
Overall	78%	90%	80%	77%

In the Ismaili community, volunteering is often referred to as *seva*,<sup>707</sup> which can be translated to selfless service. *Seva* is service conducted without the expectation of receiving anything in return and is considered a humble way to serve Allah through serving the creation.

In her interview, Khadijah explains the importance of *seva* in her own family:

It's how we're brought up. I know in my family, both my mum's side and my dad's side, everybody was always involved in something. Now my grandfather, my mum's dad, was a *Mukhi* from the time of Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah. So, he always, always was in the service of the Imam and he instilled this in his 11 kids. I was brought up the same way. My dad's elder brother always told us, from the time we were little,

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<sup>707</sup> The word *Seva* or *sewa* is rooted in Sanskrit and is part of the Ismaili *Satpanth* tradition. The term is used in a number of other Indian religious traditions such as Hinduism and Sikhism. A similar concept in Arabic is *Khidmat*, selfless service for the benefit of others.

all of us, all of the little nieces and nephews, there must always be one person in the household who is doing some sort of *seva*. It doesn't matter what, but someone in the household should be doing something, so that *seva* stays within the family. It's passed on how we do *seva* and what *seva* we do, from one generation to another.

In an Ismaili family, it is also common to have multiple members of the family volunteering at once. Ninety-seven percent of participants said that at least one member of their family has, or is currently volunteering, with 90% volunteering inside of the community, 57% volunteering outside of the community, and 55% volunteering both inside and outside of the community. According to Sukayna, her sister is currently the vice-principal for the *Bayt ul- 'Ilm* religious education classes and her mother is an office manager for one of the Ontario *jamatkhanas*.

This ethic of service has existed since the time of the Prophet and Imam 'Ali. Back then, one would serve in the army or later during Muslim Empires as missionaries or other officials. Today, Ismailis look for ways to serve the Imam and Allah through various Ismaili institutions, community events, and not-for-profit organizations. Whether it is volunteering one's time at a local food bank, or giving free legal services as a lawyer, *seva* takes many shapes and forms. In her doctoral dissertation, Dossa describes the typical *seva* duties Ismailis perform at their local *jamatkhanas*:

The volunteers in the Jama'at Khana assist in organizing the ritual performances and worship. The young volunteers in the compound organize the parking of cars, carry the food offerings brought by participants, and on rainy days carry umbrellas for members of the Jama'at. The volunteers wear uniforms which include ties, representing traditional red and green colours. Red stands for activity and sacrifice, while green represents peace and repose.<sup>708</sup>

The ethic of service is so predominant within the Ismaili tradition that they even have Western-style uniforms in Canada: a navy business suit dressed with a white shirt and either a red and green scarf or tie (see Figure IX.I).

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<sup>708</sup> Dossa, p. 76.



Figure IX.I: Ismaili Volunteers with Mayor Jim Watson at the Mayor's Breakfast (2017)  
Credit: ©Bismah Haq (@bismahhaq)

To top it off, uniformed volunteers wear a red, green, and gold service badge that reads, “Work No Words” (see figure IX.II), a motto depicting the ethic of labour for the welfare of others, not the self; prescribed to them by the Aga Khan III:<sup>709</sup>

Today I will give you a small motto and that is “Work No Words”. Labour for the welfare of others is the best way of improving ourselves, because results are sure and certain. If you work for yourselves, you are never happy. This is not a new idea, but this is an outcome of the experience of thousands of years of history.<sup>710</sup>



Figure IX.II: Ismaili Volunteer Corps Badge with motto, “Work no Words”  
Credit: ©Abdul Shivji

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<sup>709</sup> Abdulmalik J. Merchant, ““Work No Words” by His Highness the Aga Khan, and Other Rare Ismaili Historical Quotes on Service’, *Simerg*, 2014 <<https://simerg.com/2014/04/11/work-no-words-by-his-highness-the-aga-khan-and-other-rare-ismaili-historical-quotes-on-service/>> [accessed 1 August 2019].

<sup>710</sup> As quoted in, Merchant.

Interview participant, Sultan, echoes the sentiments of the Aga Khan III. He describes volunteering as essential to his happiness. For him, volunteering is a part of him, a part of his identity. Sultan sees service as part of his purpose:

If you have a life where you don't talk to people and you don't do anything for anyone else, and no one does anything for you, that's a pretty sad existence. I think of [service] as important for my self-actualization and my happiness as anything else. I mean today I might have had something else [to do], I may have been watching the Olympics, but generally, I'd be wasting my time. It's better doing this [service]. Is it really a burden on me? No... It's my honour and to my benefit if I can do anything. And if I don't do anything, it is to my detriment. And that's simply my understanding of how the [*seva*] system works."

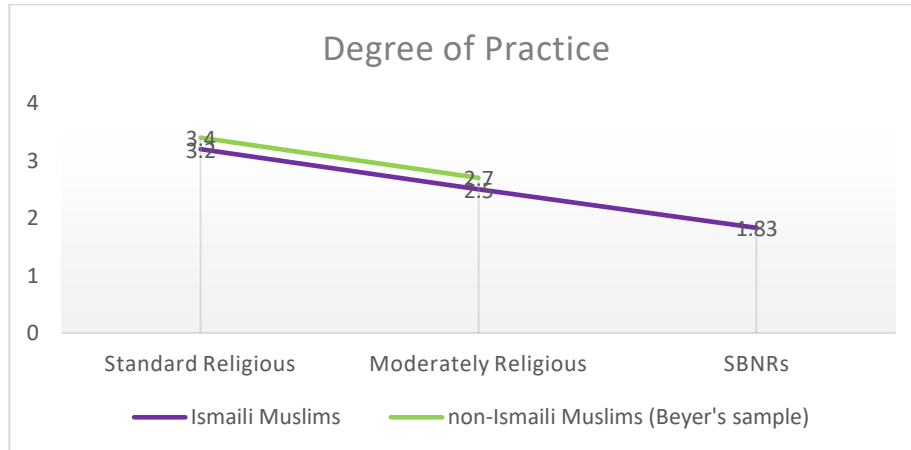
Volunteering is very important to the Ismaili community, and much of its institutional organization depends on highly qualified *murīds* to dedicate their time to serving the Imam and the *Jama'at*. While giving one's time may be difficult as a result of the demands of Canadian society, this has not deterred the masses from making sacrifices in order to keep their service tradition alive, much like what we saw with the Ismaili Civic initiative as discussed in Chapter 6.

### Degree of Practice

In order to determine how committed Ismailis were to their prescribed practices, the survey posed the following question, "Which best describes your religious and/or spiritual practices?" and gave four possible responses: "I am careful to faithfully follow all of the behavioural prescriptions of my religious group" (High-4); "I follow most of the behavioural prescriptions of my religious group, but there are some I don't practice regularly" (Moderate-3); "I follow some of the behavioural prescriptions, some occasionally, and some not at all" (Low-2); "I do not follow any particular religious group" (None-1). This same question was posed to the non-Ismaili Muslim sample which allows for a better comparison; however, it is important to note that the non-Ismaili SBNRs were not asked this question so only the Ismaili data is presented.

Not surprisingly, in both sample groups the degree of religiosity strongly correlated with degree of practice; this is best illustrated in Chart IX.I. On average, the *SRs* subscribed to a fairly moderate degree of practice, asserting that they follow most of the behavioural prescriptions of their faith, while the *MRs* were in limbo between low, following only some, and moderate practice, following most. The non-Ismaili Muslim sample was only slightly more practicing than the Ismaili sample. Participants from both samples expressed in their qualitative responses that they aspire to be more practicing. For Ismailis, a few mentioned the desire to be more punctual in attending the *jamatkhana*. It is difficult to determine whether *jamatkhana* attendance is the deciding factor on whether one subscribes to High practice versus Moderate practice as only a handful of participants offered explanations. However, based on practices Ismailis identified as most important, prayer, *jamatkhana* attendance, service, and *Bayt ul Khayal*, it is safe to assume they feel like they are not regular in at least one of these practices.

Chart IX.I: Degree of Practice – Comparison between Ismaili and non-Ismaili Muslims



Interestingly, not all Ismaili *SRs* identified the *jamatkhana* as important to their religious practice; for example, Ismail (discussed earlier), says that regular prayer and living by Islamic ethics are most important to his practice:

Well I try to say my *du'a* 3 times a day, and I try to think of God throughout the day whenever I can. But it's more or less the values more than anything... than the practice in my opinion. The values of honesty, integrity, giving back to society, being ethical

in all of your dealings, those values are essentially what the faith has taught me and that's how I use it in my everyday life.

Ismaili *SBNRs* were the lowest out of the three categories, subscribing only to some practices. As previously discussed, only 63% said that there were practices important to their spiritual identity with prayer, service, and spiritual search being the highest. Attendance in *jamatkhana* was not as much a priority as other practices. This finding is reflected in 44-year-old survey respondent, Shams' response, "Other than meditation, I no longer follow any prescribed religious practices."

We will now turn to discuss the most important Ismaili beliefs according to Ismaili survey and interview participants. The analysis will be compared to Beyer's non-Ismaili Muslim survey sample, in order to see the extent to which Ismaili Islam differs from mainstream Sunni Islam.

## **WHAT ARE SOME IMPORTANT ISMAILI BELIEFS?**

Again, in order to compare and contrast Canadian Ismaili beliefs against the greater Canadian Muslim population, the present research was compared against Beyer's survey data, isolating Muslim responses and removing Ismaili Muslim responses. It is important to note that the comparison presented below reflects the responses of all Ismaili participants (*SRs*, *MRs*, *SBNRs*, and *NRs*) alongside Beyer's non-Ismaili Muslim *SRs* and *MRs* (see Table IX.II below for the various comparisons). Non-Ismaili Muslim *SBNRs* and *NRs* were excluded from the analysis as there were very few who identified as such (5 and 5 participants, respectively).

Both surveys were designed to examine whether there was relationship between one's degree of religiosity, and spirituality, and one's religious beliefs. As such, a question was formulated to gauge religious beliefs by presenting a wide range of beliefs, including non-Muslim beliefs. On both the present survey and Beyer's survey, participants were asked the same question, "Do you believe in any of the following? (Please check all that apply)", which was followed by a list of possible beliefs including the belief that: 'people and/or animals have souls'; 'reincarnation or the transmigration of souls'; 'life after death'; 'enlightenment or salvation'; and 'people can

progress spiritually’ to name a few.<sup>711</sup> Participants in both surveys could check off all beliefs that they identified with. Ismaili participants, however, were given two extra questions on their survey specific to esoteric theology and the question about “God(s), Goddess(es), Spirits, and/or Spiritual beings” was split into three separate options: the belief in ‘One God’, the belief in ‘Multiple Gods or Goddess(es)’, and the belief in ‘Spirits, and/or Spiritual Beings’. These additions and amendments are marked with asterisks in Table IX.II. Further discussion on the differences between the Ismaili categories will be presented below.

### **Most Important Beliefs: non-Ismaili Muslims**

For Beyer’s non-Ismaili Muslim sample, the top three beliefs for the *SR* and *MR* categories were the belief in life after death (94%), that people have souls (86%), and in God (82%). Surprisingly, non-Ismaili Muslims listed the belief in God tertiary to the existence of an afterlife and souls; however, this may have been due to the way the question was asked – God was lumped together with Goddess(es), spirits, and spiritual beings. Muslim participants may have found this selection problematic because their answer could be associated with polytheism, contradicting one of the most important beliefs in Islam, the concept of *tawhīd*, the oneness of God. On a separate survey question asking participants to identify their most essential beliefs, the majority of non-Ismaili Muslim respondents self-identified that belief in God is the most important.

### **Most Important Beliefs: Ismaili Muslims**

In comparison, Ismaili Muslims present themselves as highly spiritual in nature. The top three beliefs for the *SR* and *MR* categories were God (98%), having a soul (91%), and being able to progress spiritually (90%). On the present survey, a question was added to see whether Ismailis believe that they can develop a personal relationship with God. This question was included due to the Ismaili practice of *Bayt ul Khayal*, the search for higher truth. Eighty-nine percent of the Ismaili *SRs* and 79% of the *MRs* believe that this is possible even though only 57% of Ismailis self-

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<sup>711</sup> Beyer, Craig, and Cummins.

declared the *Bayt ul Khayal* practice associated with this belief as important (as discussed previously). It would have been interesting to see to what degree non-Ismaili Muslims would agree that they too can develop a personal relationship with God; however, based on how they answered whether people can progress spiritually (67%), it is likely that the percentage would be similar. Further, many Ismailis also responded that they believe it is possible to achieve enlightenment in this world (71%) while only 48% of the non-Ismaili Muslim sample agreed. Thus, according to this analysis, Ismailis are more ‘spiritual’ than their non-Ismaili co-religionists and place a higher importance on developing their spirituality in this lifetime. Interview participant, Abu Ya’qub (*SR*, 31) summarizes this spiritual nature of Ismaili Islam in the following excerpt:

I think that the core of Ismaili Islam includes a commitment to a line of a hereditary Imams descended from the Prophet Mohammed as the bearers of legitimate authority for Muslims. I think it also includes a recognition that the Qur’anic revelation, the revelation to Mohammed transcends the Qur’anic text [and] that this revelation has an esoteric dimension which is imperative for human beings to engage if they wish to probe the depths of Islam. Thirdly, the notion that the spiritual goal for human beings is the gnosis of God, spiritual recognition of God, and for Ismailis that particularly comes through the guidance of the Imam and ultimately attaining gnosis or the spiritual recognition of the Imam. I would say that those 3 things; the line of Imam as the manifestation of authority, the recognition of the esoteric dimension behind the revelation of Islam, and the aspiration to attain the spiritual recognition of God through the recognition of the Imam, in my view, that would be the core of Ismaili Islam, regardless of its diverse manifestations in time and place.

It is interesting that non-Ismaili Muslims place a higher importance on life after death when compared with the Ismaili sample (94% of non-Ismaili *SRs* and *MRs* compared to 80% of Ismaili *SRs* and *MRs*). Spiritual progression in the present life is significantly more important for Ismaili Muslims when compared to non-Ismaili Muslims (90% of Ismaili *SRs* and *MRs* versus 67% of non-Ismaili *SRs* and *MRs*), with 76% of Ismaili *SRs* and *MRs* believing that one is able to attain enlightenment, or higher realization, compared to only 44% of non-Ismaili *SRs* and *MRs* (see Chart IX.II).

## Comparing Belief Systems

Non-Ismaili Muslim participants also placed an emphasis on Judgement Day, that they will be held accountable for their actions in this world by God after death. This concept of judgment was not as predominant in the Ismaili sample, although a few did mention it. Non-Ismaili Muslim participant, Amina (*SR*, 28), describes the importance placed on the afterlife and how one must try to progress spiritually in this life to prepare for the Day of Judgement:

People have souls and every single person's soul continues to live on after death regardless of whether this person believes in the afterlife or not. Humans are fallible and they have free will. God gives every single human the choice to believe in Him and, in His incredible mercy and love for His creation, he has placed signs to indicate His existence and His Power and Majesty...After death, on the Day of Judgement, God will then resurrect every person and *jinn* [spirits] who existed from the beginning of creation for a final judgement of their souls. I believe that every person has the capability to progress spiritually. Being fallible, weak humans, even the most spiritual and religious amongst us experiences lapses in spirituality from time to time due to mistakes and sins. We all have the ability to improve our connection to our Creator.

From the data, it is likely that non-Ismaili Muslims place a higher value on preparing oneself for the Day of Judgement than Ismaili Muslims. This may be because Ismailis believe in spiritual progression and attainment in this world and by developing a relationship with God, they are less concerned with what will happen to them after death. As the renowned Sufi poet Rabia Basri writes:

O God! If I worship You for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell  
and if I worship You in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise.  
But if I worship You for Your Own sake,  
grudge me not Your everlasting Beauty.<sup>712</sup>

The question of life before birth was added to the present survey because a significant number of Ismailis believe in some form of reincarnation or the transmigration of souls. According

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<sup>712</sup> *Muhammad in History, Thought, and Culture: An Encyclopedia of the Prophet of God*, ed. by Coeli Fitzpatrick and Adam Hani Walker, 2 vols (ABC-CLIO, 2014), 1: A-M, p. 513.

to the results, Ismailis were more likely to believe in some sort of concept related to reincarnation or the transmigration of souls when compared to other Muslims, possibly due to the sample being primarily South-Asian in origin;<sup>713</sup> 40% of the *SRs* and *MRs* in the Ismaili sample believe in this concept compared to only 9% of the *SRs* and the *MRs* in the non-Ismaili Muslim sample. The Ismaili *SRs* and the *SBNRs* were more likely to share this belief (43% and 42%, respectively) than the Ismaili *MRs* (33%). This cyclical concept of time coincided with the belief in life before birth. Overall, 49% of Ismaili participants asserted that they believe in life before birth, with the *SRs* and the *SBNRs* identifying more-so than the *MRs*; 55%, 50%, and 44%, respectively.

It is possible that some Ismailis found this portion of the survey problematic due to the language used, especially because many of the esoteric beliefs, particularly for the elderly *jama'at*, were transmitted to them in their native languages of Gujrati, Kutchi, Urdu, Arabic, Farsi, etc. Further, some Ismaili participants may have had difficulty with the terminology used in the survey. As survey participant, Zain (*SR*, 42) expressed:

The metaphysical aspects of our faith are complex. As one example, what is the meaning of life in your question? Do you include existence of the soul in the subtle plane as life, or are you saying life in a biological sense? In a biological sense, there is no life before birth or life after death (though before birth may extend some months from the point of viability). But if you mean in the metaphysical construct, the answer would be yes.

It would have been difficult to formulate questions representative of all the various languages and metaphysical understandings that make up the Ismaili community. Further, due of the esoteric and personal nature of Ismaili Islam, it would also be difficult to find the right words to express how Ismailis articulate their understanding of their spirituality.

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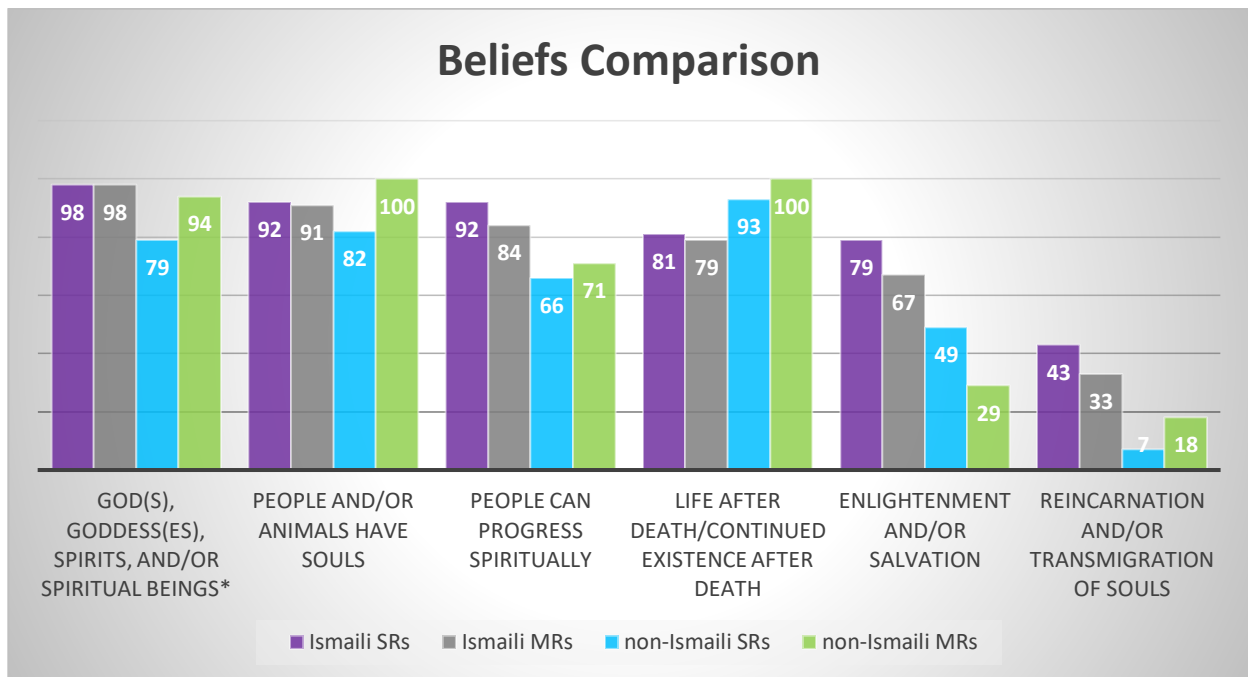
<sup>713</sup> Many South-Asian religions share the belief that time is cyclical. Since the majority of the sample originated from India, it is possible that this belief is a residual artifact of former belief systems. However, in order to compare the belief in cyclical time across different Ismaili communities around the world, more research is necessary.

Table IX.II: Beliefs Comparison – Ismaili Muslims vs non-Ismaili Muslims

Beliefs Comparison: Ismaili Muslims versus non-Ismaili Muslims						
	All Ismaili Muslims (including SBNRs & NRs) (n=221)	Ismaili SRs (n=131)	Ismaili MRs (n=57)	Total Non-Ismaili Religious (n=85)	Non-Ismaili SRs (n=68)	Non-Ismaili MRs (n=17)
*People can develop a relationship with God (this option was not on Beyer's survey)	81%	89%	79%	-	-	-
*Life Before Birth (this option was not on Beyer's survey)	49%	55%	44%	-	-	-
*God(s), Goddess(es), Spirits, and/or Spiritual Beings (this option was broken up into three categories on the present survey) <sup>714</sup>	93%; 4%; 58%	98%; 1%; 60%	96%; 2%; 54%	82%	79%	94%
People and/or Animals have Souls	90%	92%	91%	86%	82%	100%
People can Progress Spiritually	86%	92%	84%	67%	66%	71%
Life After Death/Continued Existence after Death	77%	81%	79%	94%	93%	100%
Enlightenment and/or Salvation	71%	79%	67%	44%	49%	29%
Spiritual Healing Powers	49%	55%	47%	48%	49%	47%
Reincarnation and/or Transmigration of Souls	39%	43%	33%	9%	7%	18%
None of the Above	2%	0%	0%	4%	4%	0%

<sup>714</sup> The first percentage corresponds to the belief in 'One God', the second is the belief in 'Multiple Gods or Goddess(es)', and the third percentage represents the belief in 'Spirits, and/or Spiritual Beings'.

Chart IX.II: Beliefs Comparison – Ismaili and non-Ismaili Muslims



When separated into the assigned categories of religiosity, the Ismaili *SR* and the *MR* prioritized the oneness of God (98% and 96%), the ability to progress spiritually (92% and 84%), having a soul (92% and 91%), and the ability to develop a relationship with God (89% and 79%).

The top beliefs for Ismaili *SBNRs* were the existence of souls (92%), being able to progress spiritually (83%), and the existence of spirits and spiritual beings (75%). For Begum (Ismaili *SBNR*, 23), she believes that the entire world is connected *in* God; she does not believe that there is a ‘controller’ God or that God is separate from this world. Further, although life after death and spiritual progression are important beliefs for her, she does not feel compelled to fully understand them. Begum believes that everyone has a spiritual potential, that “some are more spiritually connected than others” and that this higher realization is not meant for everyone:

I believe that there is an unknown and it is meant to stay that way. So, when I say I believe in “life after death”, to me, I believe that there is something that cannot be put into words... that maybe the world is not made to make sense of. To me, One God, means unity. We are all one. All connected. And to me, that is God. Also, I believe some people may be more spiritually connected than others but that is meant for their

own personal experience on this earth. If I don't have it, there is a reason and there is no need for me to go looking for it through that medium.

For Ismaili *SBNRs* the belief in one God declined significantly (67%) while the belief in 'multiple gods or goddesses' and belief in 'spirits and/or spiritual beings' increased (29% and 79%, respectively). Only one participant from each of the *SR* and the *MR* categories said that they believed in 'multiple gods or goddesses' but a significant number identified that they believe in 'spirits and/or spiritual beings' (60% and 54%, respectively). A possible reason for this selection is the Muslim belief in *Jinn*. In the Muslim worldview, *Jinn* are spirits who were created alongside angels and humans according to the creation story. However, it is also plausible that Ismailis made this selection because of how they understand the concept of 'spiritual beings.' There are multiple possibilities.

This latter belief may stem from the idea that humans are able to become 'awakened' in this lifetime; thus, a human can become a 'spiritual being'. It is also possible that participants were referring to the Ismaili Imams when making this selection, as they are considered divinely inspired and infallible. However, another likely possibility is that participants were referring to Ismaili *pirs*.

In the Ismaili *Satpanth* tradition, to which the majority of Ismaili participants belong, *pirs*, or preacher-saints, helped to guide Ismaili *murīds* to *haqiqa*, truth, in the organization of small *туруqs*.<sup>715</sup> Some stories tell of *pirs* performing miracles and having psychic abilities. The vast majority of the survey sample are of South-Asian descent, where the *Satpanth* tradition originated; thus, it is also possible that this is what participants were referring to when making this selection.

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<sup>715</sup> *Satpanth* means the true path and developed in South Asia as an Indo-Muslim tradition between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In Asani's *Ecstasy and Enlightenment: the Ismaili Devotional Literature of South Asia*, he explains that because Ismailis were being persecuted by Sunni rulers, Ismailis were forced to observe *taqiyya*, precautionary dissimulation. Ismaili *pirs*, or preacher-saints, took the guise of Sufi teachers to avoid hostility but because of this observance, "over time, non-Ismaili populations have come to regard them as holy men in the Sufi tradition rather than the Ismaili one." Asani explains that this blurred the lines between Sufi and Ismaili Islam, which is evident "by the strong mystical character of the *Satpanth* Ismaili literature." *Pirs* are understood to have reached *haqiqa*, and organized themselves in small *туруqs*, helping other *murīds* on their spiritual journey through the transmission of *Gināns*, hymns of knowledge. The vast majority of Ismailis in the present research originate from the *Satpanth* tradition.

Any one of these suggestions is possible for selecting the belief in ‘Spirits and/or Spiritual Beings.’ Unfortunately, no participant offered further explanation on this topic. We will now turn to the *NR* Ismaili sample, to see how their beliefs, or non-beliefs, differ from the other three groups.

The Ismaili *NR* sample yielded some interesting results. Although 33% of the *NR* said that they do not believe in any of the choices presented, 56% identified that they believe in one God, 44% said that they believe in souls, and also that people can develop a personal relationship with God (44%). This is important because it suggests that although Ismaili *NRs* identify as neither religious nor spiritual, they still have some religious-like beliefs. This is consistent with what Beyer, Craig, and Cummins found in their examination of *NRs* in Canada; that although half of the *NRs* (51%) ascribed to none of these beliefs, 27% of *NR* participants still believed in souls.<sup>716</sup> In the present study, the *NRs* believe in some of the fundamentals of the Ismaili faith but just consider themselves not-religious. Noteworthy is that 6 out of the 11 Ismaili *NRs*, despite their no-religious affiliation, declared that they still attend some Ismaili community celebrations and events: such as the two *Kushalis* (community festivals), Imam day<sup>717</sup> and the Aga Khan’s birthday (December 13, 1936); Navroz (the Persian new year); and other events put on by their local *jamatkhanas*. It would be interesting to see whether these findings are consistent with a larger sample of not-religious Ismailis.

Although the Ismaili *NR* sample was quite small let us look at the profile of one of the survey participants to get a greater understanding of their not-religious identity. Hawa is a 20-year-old *NR* who was born in Canada and identifies as an East-African Canadian. She also identifies as an Ismaili, but not in the religious sense: “I think being an Ismaili is both a cultural and religious experience. I will always culturally be an Ismaili; have a connection with people of the community,

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<sup>716</sup> Beyer, Craig, and Cummins.

<sup>717</sup> Imam day is the day that the present Imam, Shah Karim al-Husseini inherited the Imamate from his grandfather, July 11<sup>th</sup>, 1957. This day is commemorated each year by Ismailis around the world.

other aspects like food, music, and wedding/funeral traditions, but I do not attend *jamatkhana*, nor do I practise the Ismaili religion. I am an atheist.”

Hawa was one survey participant who did not ascribe to any of the beliefs listed previously. Despite being not-religious, Hawa still feels that she belongs to the Ismaili community and even partakes in various community events and religious celebrations. However, she feels as though there might be hesitation by some community members to accept her and other not-religious Ismailis who still feel culturally connected to the Ismaili community: “I think a lot of people are afraid of the youth falling out of touch with Ismailism. I think the important thing to remember is that we are in a diverse society, and what can sometimes happen is that people might find that religion isn’t for them, and that’s okay, too... The community has always maintained that it has an accepting nature, and so it’s important that we remind the community to be accepting of all these new differences.” Hawa may be an example of a shift from an Ismaili religious identity to an Ismaili cultural identity – similar to what we have seen with Jewish Canadians;<sup>718</sup> however, this topic is beyond the scope of this research and would require a much larger sample of Ismaili *NRs* to form any hypotheses.

In both surveys, there was an opportunity for religious (*SRs* and *MRs*) and spiritual participants (*SBNRs*) to self-declare any beliefs that they found essential to their faith (the *NRs* were not asked this question). In Beyer’s non-Ismaili Muslim religious sample, 90% said that there were beliefs essential to their faith. After analyzing and coding their written responses, the top themes were belief in one God (61%), prophets (21%), prayer (21%), and Angels and Jinn (16%). A few participants like Ayesha (non-Ismaili Muslim *SR*, 18), articulated “6 articles of the Muslim faith” that were the most important Muslim beliefs:

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<sup>718</sup> Rhonda Lenton and Robert Brym, ‘Young, Canadian and Jewish: The Shift from Religious to Cultural Identity’, *University of Toronto News*, 2019 <<https://www.utoronto.ca/news/young-canadian-and-jewish-shift-religious-cultural-identity>> [accessed 26 April 2020]; Robert Brym, Keith Neuman, and Rhonda Lenton, *2018 Survey of Jews in Canada: Final Report* (Environics Institute for Survey Research in partnership with the University of Toronto and York University, 2018) <[https://www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/project-documents/2018-survey-of-jews-in-canada/2018-survey-of-jews-in-canada---final-report.pdf?sfvrsn=2994ef6\\_2](https://www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/project-documents/2018-survey-of-jews-in-canada/2018-survey-of-jews-in-canada---final-report.pdf?sfvrsn=2994ef6_2)> [accessed 26 April 2020].

(1) There is no god existent or worthy of worship save for Allah (Arabic word for “God”). (2) God sent and guided messengers to spread knowledge of Islam (submission to God) and every single one of them must be respected as messengers, exclusive to their time, people, and general context - this includes Prophets Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Noah, and Jesus (Peace Be Upon Them All). (3) Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) was God’s last and final messenger. (4) It is forbidden to worship the Prophet (PBUH) just as it is forbidden to take upon any other deity – human, animal, or any other being or inanimate object. (5) The belief in the Day of Judgement, during which all of creation will be revived and held accountable for what they have done in the worldly life. (6) Belief in the Hereafter – Heaven and Hell—as well as God’s other unseen creations, the Angels and Jinn.

In stark contrast, only 70% of those in the Ismaili *SR* and *MR* sample said that there were essential beliefs: the Imamate (62%), esoteric aspects (36%), prayer (21%), and spiritual search (18%). It is clear that there are some fundamental differences when comparing Ismaili Muslims to non-Ismaili Muslims. The first is that Ismailis are less dogmatic in their conception of the faith – being a spiritual tradition, there is no one way of thinking about the unknowable. The Ismaili understanding of *dīn* and *dunīya* (the spiritual and the worldly) is open for individual interpretation by the *murīd* – only guidance is offered by the Imam of the Time. Other traditions in Islam are arguably more dogmatic, with clear boundaries laid out for the believer to understand and follow; for example, the 6 articles of faith listed in Ayesha’s answer. One essential belief in esoteric Muslim traditions is that mediation between Muslims and God is possible through a *Murshīd*, such as the Imamate in the Ismaili example.<sup>719</sup> This contrasts greatly with more exoteric interpretations of the Muslim faith, particularly Sunni Islam, where it would be heresy to believe that there can be mediator between humans and God.<sup>720</sup>

The second difference is the importance placed on the esoteric dimension: remembrance of God, that there exists a spiritual world, that our existence is eternal, and that accessing this

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<sup>719</sup> Jonah Blank, *Mullahs on the Mainframe: Islam and Modernity Among the Daudi Bohras* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 18.

<sup>720</sup> Samiul Hasan, ‘Islamic Jurisprudence: Sources and Traditions Creating Diversity in Human Relationships’, in *The Muslim World in the 21st Century: Space, Power, and Human Development*, ed. by Samiul Hasan (Springer Science & Business Media, 2012), pp. 23–42 (p. 35).

spiritual component to our existence, the *batin*, is achievable in this lifetime. Non-Ismaili Muslims, primarily Sunni and Salafi Muslims, place a greater emphasis on the literal teachings of the Qur'an, the *zahiri*, and rarely sway away from that which is clearly articulated in the Qur'an or Hadith. Comparing Ismailis to other Sufi *turuqs* may have yielded similar findings, as Sufi Muslims also aspire for *batini* knowledge in this lifetime and practice this search through the meditation prescribed by their *murshid* or *khidr*<sup>721</sup>, or other *dhikr* devotional meditations.

The *batini*, is a very important component of faith for Ismailis. As expressed by 52-year-old, Mata Salamat, who identifies as *SBNR*, “we are all God having an experience”:

We are all one. That the life force that animates all life is the same. That we are all differentiated expressions of that life-giving force. That we are all God having an experience. If we are all divine in soul nature, then my piece of soul is like a cell in a huge organism... Therefore, I have an obligation to myself and [others] to use my free will to create the experience I want, in alignment with the [Greater] will... If I become more conscious of the life force that runs through me, I can be aware of more cells and possibly the whole organism (gnosis, collective consciousness). I do not end with this one lifetime.

Many Ismailis contemplate the nature of themselves and the unknown. They contemplate the world beyond what is perceivable in this reality. The Imam of the Time is understood as a spiritual guide that helps to navigate the believers to their own spiritual realization – which is can be achieved through *ibadat*, devotion or servitude.

## Degree of Beliefs

In order to determine trends between the categories, the survey asked participants which statement “best describes your religious and/or spiritual beliefs?”. The possibilities were “I fully accept all

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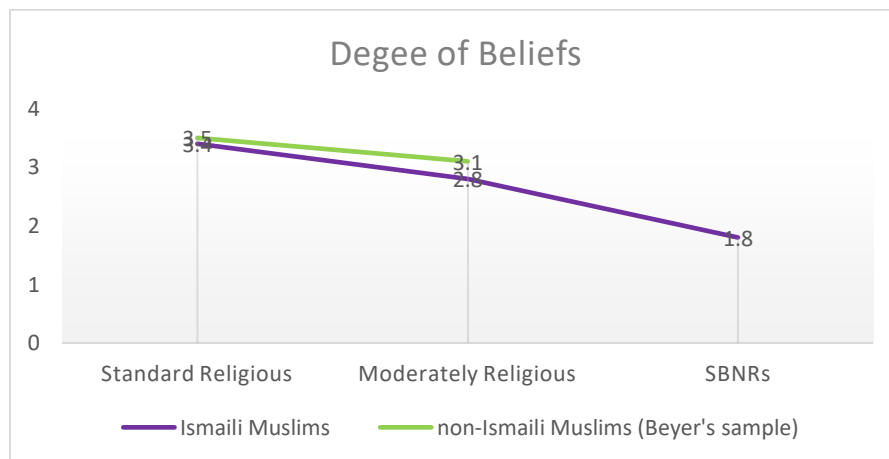
<sup>721</sup> *Khidr*, Arabic for the Green Man, is a mystical archetype for the Guide. *Khidr* appears in the Qur'an as the one possessing 'ilm of *alam al-Khayal*, or *alam al-mithal*. *Khidr* is said to help 'spiritual' travelers in their search for greater understanding. *Khidr* can be found between the two worlds, *din* and *dunya*. According to Sufi understanding, not all *murideen* have a teacher in the material world, some are visited by *khidr* to help them along their spiritual journey.

the beliefs of my religious group” (High-4); “I accept most of the beliefs of my religious group, but disagree with others” (Moderate-3); “I accept some, but I think each person should decide what they believe” (Low-2); and “My beliefs are not shaped by any religious group” (None-1). This same question was posed to the non-Ismaili Muslim sample and yielded some interesting results.

Similar to what was found previously with degree of practices, degree of beliefs strongly correlated with degree of religiosity. The Ismaili *SRs* fell between accepting all and accepting most of the beliefs of their faith (3.4), while the *MRs* were near accepting most of the beliefs of their faith (2.8). The *SBNRs*, not surprisingly, were fairly low in terms of acceptance, opting to agree with some but, ultimately, content that “each person should decide what they believe.”

Interestingly, the non-Ismaili Muslim sample was only slightly more inclined to accept the beliefs of their faith than the Ismaili sample. Chart IX.III graphs the correlation between the categories and the extent to which they accept the beliefs of their faith.

Chart IX.III: Degree of Beliefs – Comparison between Ismaili and non-Ismaili Muslims



One possible reason for the slightly lower acceptance of all beliefs may be due to the nature of the Ismaili tradition itself, it is less dogmatic than other Muslim traditions with an emphasis on building a relationship with the spiritual. On the survey, Zain (*SR*, 42) said that he “fully accepts all the beliefs” of the Ismaili faith but in his qualitative response noted that, “I fully accept, but

also note that ours is a faith of conviction, so there is an on-going prescription to question and vet and internalize. I'm not blind." Thus, asking questions and being critical of the faith remains an important aspect of the Ismaili tradition, which may be why, in comparison to the non-Ismaili Muslim sample, they were not as high in accepting the beliefs of their faith – Ismailis are on a spiritual journey to understand their beliefs on deep, meaningful levels.

SBNR participant, Shams, does not feel less Ismaili by not accepting all the beliefs of the Ismaili faith. For him, he knows there exists something beyond himself but what that is exactly, he does not know and is content with that:

I no longer have any beliefs. I either know something or I know that I don't know it. If I choose to know it; then I seek the existential or experiential answer. For instance, I do not believe in god, because I have not met "him/her"; though I am not closed to that possibility. I know that I am more than what I see in the mirror; because I have experienced it first-hand.

Based on the analysis here, Ismaili participants do not conform to any one particular belief system. Ismailis are searching for meaning and truth and how they have come to organize their thoughts and understandings on the subject are based on their own spiritual and worldly experiences.

## **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

Exclusivist understandings of Islam and Muslims delegitimizes the beliefs and practices or minority Muslim traditions, such as Shi'i Muslims, Ismaili Muslims, Sufi Muslims, and Ahmadiyya Muslims. "Islam" is often branded and defined by the Sunni Muslim majority – except in Shi'i dominated societies. When "Islam" is exclusively defined as a particular set of beliefs and practices, minority Muslim schools of thought are delegitimized, ostracized, and labelled as not Muslim, which as mentioned previously, can have harmful consequences. However, as discussed in this chapter, there are different ways to be Muslim.

This chapter discussed how Ismailis see themselves as different than other Muslims, specifically Sunni Muslims. Through survey and interview analysis, it becomes clear that the main

attribute that makes Ismailism different is having a contemporary spiritual authority, to guide them in worldly and spiritual matters. The main outlet in which Ismailis receive the Imam's guidance is through *farmāns*, which are transmitted in the sanctity of the *jamatkhana*.

*Farmāns* are official decrees that are understood to have layers of meaning and, due to the timeless nature of the Imam, their significance and importance are revealed in time. For this reason, *farmāns* are considered sacred and a high value is placed on adhering to them. Some of the *farmān* themes discussed in this chapter were that of valuing education, seeking new migration opportunities in times of distress, living with the ethics of Islam in the modern-era, and embracing the ethic of pluralism.

In their responses, Ismaili participants created space for themselves within the *umma* by discussing the diversity that exists within the Muslim world and by emphasizing the significance of having a living contemporary spiritual authority, who traces his lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad. Again, according to participants, the concept of the Imam is the main belief that makes them different than other Muslim traditions, particularly non-Shi'i traditions. Ismailis recognize that they are different, and they also recognize the vast diversity that exists within the Muslim *umma*; however, this recognition does not necessarily lead to valuing diversity. Recognizing and embracing this diversity is arguably the first step in uniting the *umma* – this value is being internally implemented within the Ismaili community through both the MLP and the IIP, mainly through their religious schooling.

The second section of this chapter looked at the practices that Ismaili participants deemed most important to their faith tradition. This data was compared to the Muslim respondents of Beyer's survey which measured cultural and religious identity in Canada, in order to achieve a fruitful comparison.

In terms of religious practices, both Ismaili and non-Ismaili Muslims argued that prayer is the most important religious practice. The second most important practice for Ismailis was regular attendance in the *jamatkhana*. Non-Ismailis Muslims were less likely to identify regular mosque

attendance as an important practice, and, again, this might be because the majority of the sample were women, who are not obliged to pray in the mosque and are also given very little space when they do attend. The second most important practice for non-Ismailis was fasting, which very few Ismailis mentioned as important. What Ismailis did place a high importance on was their spiritual search in this lifetime, even if they were not presently engaged in that search. This practice coincided with what Ismailis identified as the most important beliefs: that one can develop a relationship with God in this world, that people can progress spiritually, and that enlightenment is possible.

Another important practice that was identified in the analysis was the importance placed on volunteering. The majority of Ismaili participants saw the ethic of service as important to their spiritual identity, with many volunteering both inside and outside of the Ismaili community. While non-Ismaili Muslims said that charity is important to them, volunteering was not as central to their practice; however, unlike the Ismaili survey, there was no direct question asking participants whether they volunteered, so it is difficult to draw a fair comparison.

In terms of beliefs, non-Ismaili Muslims contended that the most important beliefs were in an afterlife, souls, and God. In comparison, the top beliefs for Ismailis were God, having a soul, and being able to progress spiritually in this lifetime. Further, Ismailis were given an extra question on their survey asking if they believe that they can develop a relationship with God and the majority of participants responded, yes. It may be that in the non-Ismaili sample, more importance is placed on living in accordance with the faith in order to achieve a desired afterlife while in the Ismaili sample, more importance is placed on finding God and building a relationship with God in this life.

Both samples described beliefs that they found essential to their religious identity. For non-Ismaili Muslims, those were belief in God, the prophets, prayer, and Angels and Jinn. Ismailis were less likely to contend that there were essential beliefs but those that responded described the Imamat, the mystical, prayer, and spiritual search to be the most important. Again, one of the stark differences between these two samples is that Ismailis place more emphasis in attaining spiritual

elevation and knowledge in this world – something that non-mystical Muslims may see as unattainable.

Overall, non-Ismaili Muslims were only slightly more practicing and more believing than the Ismaili sample. Again, this could be due to the nature of the Ismaili tradition itself; since they are a spiritual tradition, practice is more personal, even if often done in a group setting. Further, Ismailis are searching for the greater Truth, meaning they are trying to understand the nature of their beliefs, which are presented less often as absolute.

It is apparent that non-Ismaili Muslims represent more of the “textbook” version of what being Muslim entails – the importance of practicing the 5 pillars and believing in the 6 articles of faith. However, as discussed in this chapter even non-Ismaili Muslims place a higher importance on some aspects of the faith over others, such as prayer over all else. Further, the findings presented here suggest that non-Ismaili Muslims may be moving towards a less communal faith towards a more individual but still highly practicing faith. This is not the case with Ismaili Muslims where the *jamatkhana* remains an important aspect of their spiritual practice and source of information for their religious beliefs.

Regardless of their differences with other Muslim communities, Ismailis seek to be recognized as a legitimate Muslim tradition despite the varying degree of importance they place on the tenets of the Muslim faith. As one Ismaili Muslim put it, “Fundamentally, there’s no difference in the tenets of Islam in general. However, the difference is how these tenets are interpreted.”

This chapter is important as it highlights different ways of being Muslim; a theme central to both the MLP and IIP as discussed in chapters 5 and 6. By making Muslims and non-Muslims aware and appreciative of the vast diversity that exists in the Muslim world, one directly challenges monolithic and exclusive narratives that there is only one way to be Muslim. Having this basic understanding enables people to be more critical of media representations of Muslims and Islam and the critical lens necessary to recognize that the textbook Sunni-normative depiction of

Muslims itself is not entirely representative of Muslims, including Sunni Muslims. Further, the showcasing of Muslim diversity also humanizes Muslims as it illustrates that identity is dynamic and fluid and constructed based on various contextual factors – similar to how other religious identities are shaped over time and place.

There are different ways to be Muslim, none conforming to a single narrative. Through this discussion, exclusivist narratives of what it means to be a Muslim are challenged; creating more understanding and awareness of Muslim diversity within the *umma*.

Now that we have an understanding of Ismaili identity in the Canadian context, we will turn to the various ways Ismailis are living out their faith tradition through their involvement in discussions and projects related to the themes of the literacy project, as discussed in Chapter 5, and the identity project, as discussed in Chapter 6. As we will see, many Ismailis attribute their involvement to the Imam's guidance; as disseminated through *farmāns*, speeches, and his Imamāt institutions.

## X. ISMAILI PARTICIPATION IN THE MUSLIM LITERACY PROJECT AND THE ISMAILI IDENTITY PROJECT

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*SHAH-E SHARI' ATAM TU'I PIR-E TARIQATAM TU'I  
HAQ BA HAQIQTAM TU'I DAM HAMA DAM 'ALI 'ALI*

*You are the Law's high lord, you are the Master of the Path, you are the truth within the Truth:  
With every breath 'Ali 'Ali.<sup>722</sup>*

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In Chapter 4, we discussed how the MLP and the IIP fit into the greater Ismaili Pluralism Project (IPP). The MLP and the IIP are important components of the IPP because they are part of the solution to enable and foster an inclusive and pluralistic society. The institutional efforts discussed in chapters 5 and 6 aim to not only counter the negative effects of Islamophobia and intra-*umma* dissonance on Ismaili Muslim identity, but to also alleviate the growing irrational fear of Muslims, through educational efforts. Again, the MLP directly aims to alleviate the clash of ignorance not only between Muslims and non-Muslims, but between Muslims and Muslims as well, thereby combating both Islamophobia and intra-*umma* dissonance. For pluralism to work, people cannot fear or distrust their neighbours; there needs to be an intentional effort to alleviate tensions and misunderstandings on both sides. Further, for Muslim literacy efforts to be successful, Muslim identities need to be nurtured and strengthened in order to withstand outsider criticism and scrutiny, often coming from a place of ignorance and ethnocentrism; this is why the IIP is so critical – it not only aims to nurture an Ismaili identity well rooted in Islamic heritage, but to also alleviate intra-*umma* dissonance internally through the promotion of a shared collective Muslim identity.

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<sup>722</sup> This verse is an excerpt from the qasida, Saaqi-yi Baa Wafa Manam. Qasida is a form of poetry and predates Islamic Arabia; however, today we find them written and recited in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish cultures. This specific qasida is recited as an Ismaili devotional practice and speaks about the *murīd*'s love and devotion towards their first Imam, 'Ali. It was selected as this love and devotion continues to inspire Ismaili identity and participation in various Imam projects and initiatives.

There is a majority consensus amongst Ismaili participants that the Aga Khan alongside the Imam institutions are actively trying to change the way Canadians view Islam and Muslims; particularly through public speeches, the Ismaili Centres, the Aga Khan Museum, the Aga Khan Garden, the Global Centre for Pluralism, and various other projects presented in chapters 5, and 6. Further, as discussed in Chapter 6, the Aga Khan and his institutions are also engaged in an Ismaili identity strengthening effort, aimed to not only equip Ismailis with the knowledge necessary to engage with the religious ‘other’ to combat Islamophobia, but also the Muslim ‘other’ to alleviate intra-*umma* dissonance. Through this Ismaili literacy effort, the Ismaili community is actively creating confident ambassadors of the faith. However, of particular interest to this chapter, is how similar efforts related to the themes of religious literacy and identity are being carried out independently by members of the Canadian *Jama‘at*.

The present research suggests that many Ismailis are mobilizing to fulfill the aspirations of their Imam, both within and outside of formal institutional support. In previous chapters, we saw how the ethic of service is a motivating factor for many Ismailis to get involved with many of the Imam’s projects. While the Ismaili institutions in Canada can provide both platforms and resources to support the MLP and IIP, many Ismailis, of their own accord, are taking part via various formal and informal efforts.

This chapter presents how regular Ismailis are engaging in formal and informal efforts, aimed at either strengthening Ismaili identity or promoting religious literacy about Muslims and their diversity. The chapter begins by examining how Ismailis see themselves as ambassadors of their faith, and how they engage with non-Ismaili members in society in an effort to nuance perceptions of Islam and Muslims. Then, the chapter discusses how some members of the Ismaili intelligentsia are playing a particularly important role in efforts aimed to nuance the image of Muslims and Islam using the framework of religious literacy, and also efforts designed to nurture and promote Ismaili identity, both inside and outside of the community.

## AMBASSADORS

Ambassadors play an important role in challenging the negative image of Islam and Muslims in Canada. While there is an institutional effort to create confident ambassadors through the newly revamped Ismaili RE system and the ambassador program, as discussed in Chapter 6, many Ismailis are engaged in their own informal efforts.

In this section, we will discuss how some Ismailis have taken it upon themselves to nuance the image of Muslims and Islam in Canada, often by speaking about Muslim diversity and their faith in particular, and also by being a living example of their faith. Further, as discussed in Chapter 6, one of the Diamond Jubilee mandates is a call for Ismailis to be ambassadors of their faith; however, it is important to note that the survey and interviews were conducted prior to the Ismaili institutions actively inviting Ismailis to become ambassadors of their faith. The discussion that follows is based on both survey and interview responses.

### Survey Responses

One of the questions on the survey directly asked participants, “Do you consider yourself to be an ambassador of your faith?” which was followed by a textbox for participants to elaborate if they wished. The question did not explain what being an ambassador meant and left it up to the participant to decide whether they would consider themselves to be an ambassador. Overall, 63% of survey respondents said that they identify as ambassadors of the faith. When looking at participants’ qualitative responses to this question, the majority indicated that they readily engage in discussions about the faith; however, a significant number of respondents also said that they are ambassadors through example – by living in accordance with the ethics of their faith. For example, one 23-year-old *Moderately Religious* male responded, “I do what I can to make sure I follow the values, morals and ethics of our faith regardless of how much I go to *khane*<sup>723</sup>... I think [my] character speaks loud for who I am and how it represents my faith.” Interestingly, one’s degree of

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<sup>723</sup> Khane is the colloquial word for *jamatkhana*, the Ismaili place of congregation.

religiosity had an effect on whether they would engage with others on the topics of Islam and Ismaili Islam specifically. Not surprisingly, 79% of the *SRs* identified as an ambassador followed by the *MRs* (54%), the *SBNR* (13%), and the *NRs* (22%).

Survey participants were later asked the following question in the survey: “Are you personally doing anything to influence how fellow Canadians perceive Islam? If so, please describe what you are doing.” Out of the 130 survey participants who responded to this question, 89 (69%) of them said that they were doing something. Again, one’s degree of religiosity directly coincided with whether the participant was likely to be engaged in some effort; 79% of *SRs* were engaged, followed by *MRs* (60%), *SBNRs* (41%), and *NRs* (1 out of 4 respondents).

The majority of *SRs* and *MRs* who responded to this question indicated that they are comfortable engaging in discussions about their faith to other Canadians. Some even said that they regularly bring non-Ismailis to Ismaili events and buildings, namely the World Partnership Walk, the Delegation of Ismaili Imamat Building, the Ismaili Centres, and the Aga Khan Museum. Further, similar to how respondents answered the ‘Ambassador’ question, a significant number of respondents identified that they challenge perceptions of Muslims and Islam by being a living example of their faith. For example, a 31-year-old *SR* female responded, “I am clarifying stereotypes and living a good Muslim life so people can see that I am what Islam is about and not what media tells them.” Thus, for many respondents, it is not just about ‘talking the talk,’ but ‘walking the walk.’ Noteworthy is that in Chapter 6 we discussed how there is an institutional effort inviting Ismailis to become ambassadors of their faith by either “educating others about Islam and the Shi’a Ismaili Tariqah” or by simply “living and acting in accordance with the values and ethics of the faith in our everyday lives.”<sup>724</sup> However, although we see these themes of engaging in dialogue and living in accordance with the faith at the institutional level, these themes were existent at the grassroots level prior to their being an official call for Ismailis to be ambassadors of their faith. This is likely because for years prior to the data collection of this study,

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<sup>724</sup> ‘Being Ambassadors of Islam’.

the Aga Khan has used *farmāns* to call upon Ismailis to live in accordance with their faith and values so that their respective communities will see Ismailis as an example of a Muslim community that challenges preconceptions about Muslims through their actions and effort; however, because *farmāns* are a sacred and private means of communication between a *murshid* and a *murīd*, they cannot be cited here. I mention this simply because this is yet another example illustrating the importance Ismailis place on the words of the Imam of the Time in guiding their collective consciousness and behaviour in their respective societies. The same was observed with SBNRs; however, the means in which they challenged perceptions took a completely different approach.

Interestingly, while *SBNRs* were less likely to personally do anything to influence Canadian perception of Islam and Muslims when compared to *MRs* and *SRs*, 57% of *SBNRs* who said that they are doing something identified very unique ways in which they are challenging negative perceptions. For example, aside from engaging in dialogue with fellow Canadians, a couple of them said that they speak about Islam on public radio shows or challenge stereotypes through other creative means. For one participant (34-years-old), she uses her public platform as an actor to challenge stereotypes about Muslims:

As an actor, I am in the public eye. From 2006-2012 I was on a series where I played a Muslim girl who was caught in between two cultures. The Islamic/Pakistani culture of her dad, and the Canadian culture with her friends and at school. I think being a part of that show, the series played a big influence of how people perceived Islam. On top of that, being a Muslim (Ismaili Muslim) actor in real life played a huge role on how [other] Muslims in the arts... can use the arts to change how many people see Islam. That is my strength and I plan to use it to set a good example and influence people for the better[ment] of Muslims.

Another interesting example of how *SBNR* participants are challenging perceptions of Islam and Muslims comes from 52-year-old, Mata Salamat, who was mentioned briefly in Chapter 9. Mata Salamat is an artist and says that her art is inspired by her spirituality. After the tragic events of 9/11 she presented a piece depicting the lives that were lost at Ground Zero:

I make art. After 9/11 I made a piece about how there is no us and them, only us. I created two towers out of white cotton (funeral material) proportional to the twin towers. On each side, were painted words about life and death from different faiths

and philosophies, including science. Life and death are one, was the overall message. People were invited to take a flower, make a wish, say a prayer and add them to the base of the tower installation. At the opening, a woman came to thank me for making this piece. She said she could now replace the CNN images of the towers with one of these more ethereal peaceful ones. Art has this power, to crest understanding by touching someone else's heart and soul.

*SBNRs* use their spirituality to inspire their unique efforts aimed at challenging Canadian perceptions of Islam and Muslims. This is not to say that *SRs* and *MRs* do not, but none from the present survey sample described such creative ways to challenge Canadian perceptions of Islam and Muslims. As discussed, they were more likely to engage in meaningful dialogue or simply living by example to challenge preconceptions about Muslims.

The majority of Ismaili survey respondents see themselves as ambassadors of their faith who are actively challenging Canadian perceptions about Muslims and Islam through various means. The most predominant way in which participants are attempting to influence perceptions around Muslims is through dialogue; taking the time to converse with others about Islam, correcting misinformation, and speaking about the Ismaili community as an example of the diversity that exists within the *umma*. In addition, another important way that they are challenging perceptions about Muslims is by living in accordance with their faith – modelling what Islam is about, at least according to Ismaili Islam. Further, the *SBNRs* clearly stood out in their unique ways of challenging misperceptions such as through media and other creative means. Thus, the survey data supports that Ismailis are actively engaged in various efforts aimed at challenging misunderstandings about Islam and Muslims in Canada at the grassroots level. We will now turn to how some interview participants are challenging Canadian perceptions, looking at examples from both Ismaili leadership and ordinary Ismaili members.

## Interview Responses

The interview questionnaire did not directly ask whether the participant considered themselves as an ambassador of the faith, instead there were two questions that asked the participant about their personal involvement in initiatives aimed at bringing about awareness of the diversity that exists

within Islam and efforts aimed at changing Canadian perceptions about Islam. The questions were phrased as follows:

1. Is the Ismaili community doing anything to bring about this awareness (re: diversity in Islam)? Are you personally doing anything to bring about this awareness? Your family? Your friends?
2. Is the Ismaili community doing anything to change the way Islam is viewed in Canada? The way Ismailis are viewed? If so, are you involved in any way? What about other family members? Your friends?

Participants seemed to be aware of community-led efforts and named events such as the World Partnership Walk, Stampede, *Milad-I-Nabi*, and the Mayor's Breakfast, and also named the Aga Khan Museum as important in nuancing the image of Muslims in Canada. Regarding personal involvement, the majority said that they engage in dialogue and try their best to be an example of an ideal Muslim – similar to survey participants.

In the pages that follow, we will look at how a few individuals from the community are challenging perceptions about Islam and Muslims in their own unique ways and what inspires their efforts.

### *Alykhan*

Alykhan is 28 years old and works in marketing. He was born in Calgary, Alberta but was raised in Boulder, Colorado; he identifies as both Canadian and American. His mother is from Congo and his father is from Tanzania; they came to Canada in 1971. Alykhan describes his identity as spiritual but not religious. He reveals that his Ismaili identity has become more important to him as he has gotten older.

As with many other Muslims, myself included, the events of 9/11 motivated Alykhan to learn more about Islam more generally and his Ismaili identity specifically:

I was in the United States when September 11 happened, and so then a lot of questions came up because, you know, I was brown and I lived in an all-white community... So

their questions came, “are you Muslim?” and, again, I would primarily identify as Ismaili and when they asked, “well what is that?”, I would say “well it’s a type of Muslim”... So [9/11] brought up a lot of questions from people around me, and has required me to go and do my research and find out more about my own religion just to be able to advocate for it and to answer some of these questions.

As a child, Alykhan attended the Ismaili RE system and also volunteered as a teacher for BUI as a young adult. He believes that RE is important as it helps the youth be able to answer questions about their faith. As such, Alykhan aspires to become a STEP teacher to not only continue his own education about the faith, but to also leave a lasting impression on other students.

Aside from his aspirations to become a STEP teacher, Alykhan describes himself as highly involved in the community and has been a part of the ISAs, volunteered for the World Partnership Walk, and also the Aga Khan Health Board. Alykhan says that service inside and outside of the community is important and that to “give your time and knowledge to those people who can benefit from it” is something that the Imam instructs his *murīds* to do.

In his experience in Calgary, Alykhan says that a lot of people know who the Ismailis are because the mayor of Calgary, Naheed Nenshi, is Ismaili; however, he says that when people are not aware about Ismaili Muslims, he is happy to talk about Ismailism and the diversity that exists within Islam:

I explain as best that I can that we’re Shi’a Muslim and we have a present-living hereditary Imam who guides us and that makes us different from other Shi’as that believe that the [Imamat] line was cut or the Imam went into hiding... or that Sunni Muslims follow the teachings of the Prophet and [that] they’re more orthodox, generally speaking... but only if it comes up. I don’t make a point of it.

The majority of interview participants said that they would engage in dialogue with others about Islam and Muslims if prompted; however, very few actively sought out opportunities to engage with Canadians and other Muslims – less the Ismaili intelligentsia, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

*Khadijah*

Khadijah was first briefly introduced in Chapter 8 when discussing prejudice within the *umma* and again in Chapter 9 in the discussion of how *farmāns* have inspired her life and the importance of *seva* to the Ismaili community. She was born in Kalira, Uganda and was part of the Ugandan exodus in 1972. She and her family spent a year and a half in a refugee camp in Austria and later resettled in a city near Toronto. In their early settlement days, her family set up a local *jamatkhana* in the basement of their home where other Ismailis would come regularly to congregate. From an early age, Khadijah learned the ethic of service and what it meant to be an Ismaili through the example of her parents.

At the time of the interview, Khadijah served as the *Kamadianima*, in her local *jamatkhana*. Khadijah says that she has become an ambassador of the faith under the direction of the Imam's guidance. She says that whenever an opportunity presents itself to correct misinformation or to offer another narrative, she does not hesitate to engage:

I was one of those, you know, don't ask questions, just do what you're told, but it was during those three years [as *Kamadianima*] that I kind of said, ok I need to properly understand what the Imam is saying in order to be able to relate to questions. Even in my working environment, no one has really asked me questions. It wasn't until after 9/11 that the questions came; "Why does the Aga Khan get on national TV and talk about this?" And I always used to say, "Hey look, my philosophy is this, actions speak louder than words. This is the work that the ADKN does," I said, "if that doesn't tell you that there's an individual out there who's trying to do good, and this is a community that wants to do better," I said then, "no words are going to explain it." But now, in his speeches, he's given us the words.

Khadijah explains that the words of the Imam have given her the language to talk about Islam generally, and the Ismaili community specifically. She says that while at the local level there is regular Ismaili engagement with the Canadian community, there is not much engagement with the *umma*. Khadijah expressed that this is an area that needs immediate attention. I asked her why there is a hesitation to engage with the wider-*umma*, and she explained that part of the problem is that Ismailis do not want to be put in a position where they have to defend or justify their religion to non-Ismaili Muslims:

I think people are scared of the questions they're going to get and whether they can answer them... There is a hesitation and I think that only shows our lack of confidence in answering. I mean we're told by the Imam, be confident, go out there, talk about your faith, and don't shy away. And it's our lack of information, arming ourselves with the information that we need to answer these questions. And I think it's only going to get... not get worse but there's going to be more of a pull on us to ensure that we can, as leadership, as MKs [*Mukhisahebs*, *Kamadiasahebs*, *Mukhanimas*, and *Kamadianimas*], that we can talk about this.

Like some other interview participants, Khadijah believes that the Ismaili RE curriculums are intentional attempts to make Ismailis more literate in their faith in the context of intra-faith and inter-faith diversity. Khadijah believes that BUI and STEP are also playing a role in giving confidence to students regarding their Ismaili-Muslim identity:

A lot of times the broader Muslim community will say, you know, well the Qur'an says this and, you know, history says this and history says that, I think the BUI and STEP kids are being given the historical information to help them answer the, "No, hang on a second, during the time of Hazrat 'Ali this is what happened, during this or that, this is what happened." And I think that those historical points are what helps defuse the tense situation [when speaking to other Muslims] because it makes the other person go, oh, ok well I didn't know that... and a lot of that history is Muslim history, it's not something that has been made up.

While the Ismaili institutions are actively working to make Ismailis more literate about their faith and history through the RE system, ordinary Ismailis have taken it upon themselves to not only become more knowledgeable about their faith and identity, but to also help the institutions in their efforts.

### *Hagar*

Hagar is a 20-year-old undergraduate student in Arabic studies in a university in Ontario. Her parents are both from Dar es Salam, Tanzania and immigrated to Toronto in 1987. Hagar was born and raised in Toronto and identifies as both religious and spiritual. In the interview, Hagar spoke to me about her dreams to become a STEP teacher and work for the institutions. Hagar said that her own BUI and al-Azhar schooling played a role in her interests to become a STEP teacher.

While she was studying at university, she volunteered as a teacher at her local BUI, and also taught *du'a* meanings, the official Ismaili prayer, to students. Hagar said her volunteer work is important because it helps to strengthen Ismaili identity:

I think, for me, why I'm doing all of these things – teaching kids about their faith, teaching them the *Du'a* translation – is because I didn't have *du'a* translation when I was younger, right? I had to learn it on my own. So, these initiatives are really helping the younger generation kind of have an identity and also connect with the wider Muslim *umma*, so I think it's a very... it's so important given today's time, right? To put out these projects and to help mould the younger generation, and I think it's such an important thing, and Hazar Imam says we're the ambassadors of Islam, so... people look up to us.

Hagar considers herself an ambassador of the faith and is seeking a higher education so that she can help Ismaili youth feel more confident in their religious identity. Further, in her own efforts, she often has conversations with members of the *umma* to speak about the diversity of Islam, and how Ismailism fits in. Hagar has even taken some of her non-Ismaili Muslim friends to the Aga Khan Museum to show them Muslim diversity through art and culture. She believes that the museum connects all Muslims to a shared history as the contributions have come from various cultures and schools of thought – no one community can lay claim to all that encompasses Muslim history.

Hagar's ultimate goal coincides with the Imam's vision of an inclusive and pluralistic society:

I feel like that's my main goal in life, to change the way people view Muslims, Islam in general, and the way I'm doing that is through education, like I'm taking courses in religious studies, I'm taking courses in history that deal with Middle Eastern countries and how Islam plays a central role in those countries and how it influences the laws and regulations, but then I get into discussions about that, and I'm trying to change it, but I'm only one person so I don't know...

Many Ismailis, like Alykhan, Khadijah, and Hagar, are incorporating the Imam's guidance of becoming ambassadors of the faith and personalizing how they can best do so. For Alykhan and Khadijah, it is having informal discussions with colleagues and others about their faith in particular

and the work of the Aga Khan. Further, for Alykhan and Hagar, they are inspired to serve the *Jama'at* by becoming STEP teachers, so that the next generation is knowledgeable and confident in articulating their identity in the context of inter-faith and intra-faith diversity.

Having literacy about one's own identity is the first step in becoming a more confident ambassador of the faith. According to the survey results, the primary place where Ismailis learn about their faith is through friends and family (84%). The second most common place is the *jamatkhana* (82%). Historically for Muslims, the place of worship has simultaneously served as a centre for knowledge and education. The contemporary Ismaili example is no different. As previously mentioned, the Ismaili community in Canada has standardized their RE system for both primary and secondary levels in order to respond to the challenges of the modern world, the growing of anti-Muslim sentiment, and intra-*umma* dissonance. Further, more recent efforts have been made to standardize an adult RE program to make adults more knowledgeable about their history and faith. Through these RE initiatives and the commitment of both volunteer and paid STEP teachers, Ismailis are becoming more articulate about their history and faith and how this all fits into the context of religious and Muslim diversity – enabling them to become confident ambassadors of their faith.

Alykhan and Hagar's academic aspirations lead us to another important discussion, how other Ismaili academics are using their platform to alleviate Islamophobia and intra-*umma* dissonance through religious literacy efforts. Further, in order to better equip Ismailis to respond to anti-Muslim or anti-Ismaili rhetoric, some academics are also engaged in Ismaili identity strengthening efforts. While there are institutional efforts being conducted at the national level, the Ismaili intelligentsia is playing their own part in these efforts at grassroot levels.

## ISMAILI INTELLIGENTSIA

The Ismaili intelligentsia play a very important role in these nation-wide movements. Many, of their own accord, have gotten involved in projects related to the themes of the Ismaili Identity Project (IIP) and Muslim Literacy Project (MLP). Some have gotten involved due to their own

experiences with intolerance and others due to their personal interests. For instance, Fatima, who was discussed in the “Not Muslim Enough” section of Chapter 8, says that through her academic work, she is “working really hard to make people realize that Islam is not a religion of fear and violence and extremism...”; that people need to realize the vast diversity that exists within the *umma*; and that “if you have a billion followers then you probably have a billion ways to do Islam.”

Noteworthy, is that a significant number of the individuals in this section have had some relationship with the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, UK; some were either educated at this institute or have worked with the institute in some capacity. Others may work or volunteer within the Ismailis institutions; however, some contribute to various projects related to religious literacy about Muslims and Ismaili identity on an independent basis – like Fatima.

The individuals described in this section can be classified as highly educated, receiving some form of graduate education, often a doctorate. Not all of them have chosen to remain in academia but still use the skills that they acquired during their studies to build better awareness around the issues facing Ismailis and other Muslims today. Through research, interviews, and textual analysis, this section highlights a few Ismailis who have used their privilege and platforms to promote a greater appreciation of Muslim civilizations, art, and culture; Muslim diversity; and Ismaili identity and history.

### **Participation in the Muslim Literacy Project**

As discussed in Chapter 5, the Muslim Literacy Project (MLP) is a national effort led by the Ismaili Imamat institutions to nuance the image of Islam in Canada, often by showcasing the rich and diverse heritage and culture of the Muslim *umma*. The MLP is not only aimed at challenging preconceptions about Muslims to Canadian audiences, but Muslim audiences as well; thereby, helping to alleviate both Islamophobia and intra-*umma* dissonance. While the institutional approach takes the shape of highly organized and long-impacting efforts such as the Aga Khan Museum, the Aga Khan Garden, and other educational efforts, the discussion below highlights how some members of the Canadian Ismaili intelligentsia are using their own skills and platforms

to creatively challenge monolithic understandings about Muslims and Islam in often engaging formats. In some instances, the Ismaili intelligentsia are supported in their unique efforts by the Ismaili Council for Canada and, in others, they are engaged of their own volition. In the discussion that follows, it is important to note that the majority of data collected is from secondary sources.

### *Karim Gillani*

Karim Gillani has been particularly important in combating Islamophobia through the presentation of the diversity of Muslim art, music, and culture throughout the Muslim world. Born in Karachi, Pakistan, he grew up in a household of music cognoscenti, who helped shape his interest in diverse forms of music and other Muslim devotional literature. For Gillani, there was one particular event that inspired his current interest in alleviating, what the Aga Khan refers to as, “the clash of ignorance”:

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, I observed a significant cultural shift in Pakistan. It was a time in which many performing artists were placed under immense pressure. Interestingly, many Sufi musicians such as Abida Parveen and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, employed mystical ideas and music as weapons to counter extremist views. Therefore, I was always interested in exploring what role music plays in the socio-cultural environment of a society; how do people attach meaning to any particular kind of music and why; what is the cultural connection of music with oral traditions and memory; and what is the connection of sound with prayers and spirituality. I was also intrigued by the function of music in society, especially when music is used as a tool to spread moderate and mystical understandings of Islam. Some of these questions have always inspired me to better understand the unique feature of music and why it is a powerful tool to express emotions and ideas that are otherwise difficult to communicate.<sup>725</sup>

Gillani witnessed the transformative power of music in combating extremist narratives in his home country, a country already divided by religious and sectarian differences. Gillani later became a

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<sup>725</sup> ‘IIS Alumni Newsletter 2013’, *Islamic Publications LTD*, 2014, p. 8.

part of the music and cultural scene and went on to open music classes for the youth in Karachi.<sup>726</sup> He now devotes a significant portion of his time to use music as a tool for social transformation.

Gillani pursued a Master of Arts in the Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities program at the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) and graduated in 2003. He then completed his Doctor of Philosophy in Music and Religious Studies in 2012 at the University of Alberta where he also lectured in the department of Music from 2011-2016. Gillani's dissertation, "Sound and Recitation of Khoja Ismaili *Ginans*: Tradition and Transformation," investigated "the role and power of music and recitation within the socio-cultural and religious contexts of the Muslims of South Asia."<sup>727</sup> Through his examination, he found that *ginans* continue to play an important role "in maintaining the collective and cultural memory of the Ismailis, wherever they may live."<sup>728</sup> Of particular interest to the present research is while at the University of Alberta, Gillani organized various high-profile conferences and a youth-camp intended to inform on the diversity of music, art, architecture, and culture within the Muslim world.

### Conferences

Gillani has organized two very influential conferences at the University of Alberta, aimed at showcasing the diversity of Muslim cultural expression. The first conference, which I had the privilege of attending, was "Sounds and Spaces of Muslim Piety: Tradition and Transformation" held in 2011. This conference was a collaborative event between the University of Alberta and the Association for the Study of *Ginans*,<sup>729</sup> based in London, UK, which is devoted to the promotion, study, and preservation of *Ginans*. The aim of this conference was "to investigate as well as celebrate the richness and diversity of sounds and spaces of Muslim Piety through performances... [and] to create a verbal and musical dialogue between communities of both practice and

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<sup>726</sup> 'IIS Alumni Newsletter 2013', p. 8.

<sup>727</sup> 'IIS Alumni Newsletter 2013'.

<sup>728</sup> 'IIS Alumni Newsletter 2013'.

<sup>729</sup> This association is devoted to *Ginans*, the spiritual literature of the South Asian Ismaili Muslims. Their website can be found here: [www.ginans.org](http://www.ginans.org)

scholarship so as to explore, compare, understand, and support Muslim devotional traditions and their creative transformations in today's world of global interfacing."<sup>730</sup>

This conference was especially important as it directly challenged the homogenous narrative that the Qur'an is the only means of Muslim devotion. This misunderstanding glosses over histories of culturally unique expressions of Muslim piety: such as the *ginans* of South Asia; the *hamds*, or poems or songs in praise of Allah, of the Arab world; the *qasidas*, or odes, of Central Asia; or the *Qawwali*, or Sufi devotional music throughout South Asia, Europe, and North Africa, to only name a few. For many Muslim traditions, these forms of piety are central to community belief and practice and their influence and significance has often been overlooked, played-down, or delegitimized by Wahhabi, Salafi, and other exclusivist Muslim traditions who believe that music has no place within Islam.<sup>731</sup> While the Qur'an remains the central authority amongst Muslims, these additional forms of piety can be seen as the harmonization, integration, and crystallization of Islam in various unique cultural-temporal contexts.

This conference provided a platform for multiple representations of Muslim piety, stemming from the geographical regions of "South, Central, and West Asia, Middle East, and North and West Africa."<sup>732</sup> While many of the papers and performances spoke to the diversity of devotional expressions in the Muslim world, the Opening Keynote Address was of particular significance.

The Address was delivered by Professor Azim Nanji, an Ismaili scholar of Islamic and Religious Studies whose early work and influence has helped to shape contemporary Ismaili

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<sup>730</sup> 'Sounds and Spaces of Muslim Piety: Tradition and Transformation (Conference Program)' (Canadian Centre for Ethnomusicology (University of Alberta) and the Association for the Study of Ginans, 2011) <<https://words.usask.ca/ginans/files/2015/01/MuslimPiety-Booklet260411.pdf>>.

<sup>731</sup> Michael Drewett, 'Censorship, Religion and Popular Music', in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music*, ed. by Christopher Partridge and Marcus Moberg (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), pp. 45–46.

<sup>732</sup> 'Muslim Piety'.

studies.<sup>733</sup> Nanji's address spoke about the importance of "preserving the devotional voice in contemporary Muslim contexts" which he asserts is under threat as a result of "neglect, marginalization, or by forces that seek to narrow the pluralistic legacy that has evolved over centuries."<sup>734</sup> This address was not only a call to preserve Muslim devotional traditions, an important component to fostering pride in Muslim identity, but to legitimize such marginalized practices that are currently under immense scrutiny and attack by various exclusivist Muslim understandings; such as in Saudi Arabia where music and other cultural forms of devotion are seen as sinful or *bid'ah*, which translates more or less to heretical or innovation. Such exclusive narratives are responsible for the oppression and, in extreme cases, extermination of pluralistic Muslim devotional expressions which have existed throughout Muslim history. Thus, while it is evident that Ismailis are actively engaged in promoting pluralism in Islam, it is also evident that Ismailis are expressively opposing exclusivist traditions within Islam; namely Wahhabism and Salafism which have greatly contributed to perpetuating intolerance and sectarian violence within the *umma*.<sup>735</sup>

Gillani also presented and performed at the conference. He performed as part of a Sufi ensemble and presented a paper on the "contemporary practices and challenges of *ginnan* transmission" and the diversity in how it is recited within Ismaili communities. What was most fascinating about this academic conference was how dozens of ordinary Ismailis attended to

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<sup>733</sup> Azim Nanji helped pave the way for the contemporary study of Ismaili Muslims through various publications. Nanji served as the director for the IIS between 1998-2008 and is currently the Senior Associate Director of the Abbasi Program in Islamic Studies at Stanford University. Nanji continues to play key roles in Ismaili efforts in Canada and currently serves on the Board of Directors for the Global Centre for Pluralism and is also Special Advisor to the Provost, Aga Khan University. His early work on contemporary Ismaili studies includes, but is not limited to: Azim Nanji, 'Modernization and Change in the Nizari Ismaili Community in East Africa: A Perspective', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 6.2 (1974), 123–39; Azim Nanji, *The Nizārī Ismā'īlī Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent* (Caravan Books, 1978); Nanji, 'The Nizari Ismaili Muslim Community in North America'; Azim Nanji, *The Muslim Almanac: A Reference Work on the History, Faith, Culture, and Peoples of Islam* (Gale Research, 1996).

<sup>734</sup> 'Muslim Piety'.

<sup>735</sup> Guido Steinberg, 'Jihadi-Salafism and the Shi'is: Remarks about the Intellectual Roots of Anti-Shi'ism', in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. by Roel Meijer (Columbia University Press, 2011); Mariam Abou Zahab, 'Salafism in Pakistan: The Ahl-e Hadith Movement', in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. by Roel Meijer (Columbia University Press, 2011).

witness and participate in the recitation of their sacred *ginans*. As Gillani's dissertation reflects, *ginans* continue to play an important role in preserving Ismaili identity, which was also found in the present study, at least to the extent that *ginans* were presented as being an important authority and form of devotion amongst Canadian Ismailis.

The second conference that Gillani organized, “I am a Bird from Heaven’s Garden: Music, Sound and Architecture in the Muslim World,” was collaborative event between the University of Alberta, the Aga Khan University, and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture’s Music Initiative (AKMI) and received funding by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). It took place at the University of Alberta and the university’s Devonian Gardens in September 2013. Amongst the participants were international scholars, architects, artists, and musicians. The aim of the conference was to showcase the diversity of Muslim expression in “landscape, soundscape, architecture, and spirituality” and intended for the audience to walk away with “a greater understanding of Islam and Muslims, and their diverse cultures around the globe.” This conference was part of a greater partnership between the Aga Khan University and the University of Alberta which aims to “to increase global engagement and promote equitable human advancement and social justice throughout the world.”<sup>736</sup> This aim fell in line with the mandate of AKMI which is to “promote the revitalization of cultural heritage both as a source of livelihood for musicians and as a means to strengthen pluralism in nations where it is challenged by social, political, and economic constraints.”<sup>737</sup> This meeting was also an opportunity to showcase the development of the Aga Khan Garden project, which was still in the development stages during the time of the conference.

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<sup>736</sup> ‘Partnership Fosters Celebration of Sound, Space and Time’, *Partnership Fosters Celebration of Sound, Space and Time*, 2013 <<https://www.folio.ca/partnership-fosters-celebration-of-sound-space-and-time/>> [accessed 13 September 2018].

<sup>737</sup> ‘I Am a Bird from Heaven’s Garden: Music, Sound and Architecture in the Muslim World (Conference Program)’ (University of Alberta, Aga Khan University, and Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2013) <[heavens-garden.org](http://heavens-garden.org)>.

## Youth Camp

Finally, Gillani also worked collaboratively with the University of Alberta to organize and facilitate a youth summer camp aimed at “[d]eveloping a deeper understanding of Muslim cultures, values and spirituality” and “[c]elebrating diversity and cultural pluralism through art, music and poetry” in the summer of 2016.<sup>738</sup> The camp was designed to engage children from ages 6 to 17 in three age-appropriate sessions. Participants engaged in activities such as “music performance, building and creating hand-made instruments, games, painting, drama, dance, yoga, photography, and calligraphy”<sup>739</sup> which were facilitated by accomplished artists and musicians “under the guidance of qualified and trained instructors from the University of Alberta’s Department of Music.”<sup>740</sup> Noteworthy, is that a significant number of Ismaili children enrolled in the summer camps when compared to the few non-Ismaili participants. This is because a number of spots were reserved for Ismaili youth, as part of an internal effort to not only promote religious literacy about diverse Muslim cultures, but to strengthen pride in Muslim diversity amongst Ismailis – as discussed in chapters 5 and 6.

Through the presentation of these efforts, it is apparent that Gillani sees the importance of educating the public about the diversity that exists within Islam through these various organized musical and creative initiatives. In an IIS Alumni Newsletter he asserts, “I think now is the time that we should use music, culture and the arts as tools to share the diverse expressions and articulations of Islam with other faith communities in order to better educate them about Muslim art, culture and spirituality.”<sup>741</sup> And he is not alone.

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<sup>738</sup> ‘Music and Art in the Muslim World (Promotional Flyer)’ (University of Alberta, Department of Music, 2015).

<sup>739</sup> ‘Music & Art in the Muslim World Summer Camps - Faculty of Arts’, *University of Alberta* <<https://www.ualberta.ca/music/our-programs/music-and-art-in-the-muslim-world-summer-camp-2015>> [accessed 17 August 2018].

<sup>740</sup> ‘Music & Art in the Muslim World Summer Camps’.

<sup>741</sup> ‘IIS Alumni Newsletter 2013’.

*Ali S. Asani*

Ali S. Asani is not Canadian but has been highly influential in various Canadian-Ismaili initiatives, such as the *Shaping Pluralistic Dispositions in Education* as discussed in Chapter 5. He too believes that teaching about Muslims through the presentation of art, music, and culture can have a stronger impact in alleviating hostile feelings toward the other:

The arts can play a very important role since they are emotive and rely on aesthetics. The arts have the ability to connect people in creative and lasting ways... The arts have an extraordinary way of cutting across differences, since they appeal to such a wide range of people. The imagination and creativity involved transports people into different realms. I have seen lasting bonds created between students involved in these activities. The arts unite them, and they find they have much more in common than they realized. I will be excited in exploring further how the arts can not only be instruments of knowledge but can also be instruments of engagement.<sup>742</sup>

In order to problematize the current way Islam and Muslims are presented, Asani uses the cultural studies approach, presenting Islam and Muslims as a cultural phenomenon; “tied to a web of contexts: political, social, economic, literary, artistic and so on.”<sup>743</sup> For Asani, this approach emphasizes that Islam, like other religions, is a product of its context; that religion both shapes society and is shaped by society. Through his experience, Asani says that teaching about Islam and Muslims using this approach helps “students appreciate the diversity of interpretations of Islam” and is “an effective way for students to become literate in their thinking about religion and culture.”<sup>744</sup>

Not only has he delivered lectures on the topics of religious literacy about Muslims and Ismaili thought and practice, but he was one of the first professors in North America to offer a

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<sup>742</sup> Aaron Goldman, ‘Leader of Harvard Working Group Discusses Import on Focusing on Symbols and Spaces’, *The Harvard Gazette*, 2019 <<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/02/leader-of-harvard-working-group-discusses-import-on-focusing-on-symbols-and-spaces/>> [accessed 1 April 2019].

<sup>743</sup> Shenila S. Khoja-Moolji, ‘Harvard University Professor Ali Asani Discusses a New Course on Ismaili History and Thought’, *The Ismaili*, 12 August 2010 <<https://the.ismaili/our-culture/harvard-university-professor-ali-asani-discusses-new-course-history-and-thought>> [accessed 13 September 2018].

<sup>744</sup> Khoja-Moolji.

course on Ismaili history, thought, and devotional practice. In an interview with *the.Ismaili* online magazine, Asani said that such a course is necessary in nuancing homogenous narratives of Islam and Muslim civilizations:

For too long, Islam has been taught in the western academy through discourses that primarily represent the religion as a religion of empire and power. The story of Islam is framed solely as the history of Muslim empires, dynasties and their political fortunes. This has had serious implications on how students understand the tradition: certain perspectives are privileged and others marginalised; notions of orthodoxies and heresies are created; understandings of the nature of religious experience are severely curtailed; Islam is perceived in political and monolithic terms with students developing very little awareness of the lived religious experiences of Muslims, the rich diversity of their devotional life and its expression through artistic and literary traditions.<sup>745</sup>

Asani's decision to offer a course on Ismaili history and thought was driven by the need "to broaden the Islamic Studies curriculum at Harvard so that it reflects the plurality of Muslim experiences and the multiple ways in which Muslims understand and practice Islam today."<sup>746</sup> Further, although education about Muslim diversity is important, Asani says that is only one piece of the puzzle:

Coming to know people from different faith traditions is important to clear stereotypes and misconceptions. Statistics have shown, for example, that most Americans have never met a Muslim. But, of course, we know there are many issues surrounding Islamophobia which I feel are deeply embedded in the politics of the nation. I have personally encountered such phobias in Harvard students who, it is obvious, are unaware of their own bigotry. You see it in the kinds of questions they ask. One realizes that these phobias are a result of socialization — through the media, lack of positive exposure, etc. Anti-Semitism is also something that is the result of socialization. The list goes on and on.

The media constantly bombards all of us with negative images of people who are supposedly different from "mainstream" Americans, and this is very dangerous. The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding issued a report recently analyzing the U.S. media, and it stated that the predominant image of Muslims on major news networks was as criminals. It stands to reason that those negative images that surround

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<sup>745</sup> Khoja-Moolji.

<sup>746</sup> Khoja-Moolji.

us really do impact our students. We need to build a community here that is sensitive to the viewpoints of others.<sup>747</sup>

Being willing to engage with the other is an important step in alleviating biased misconceptions. Unfortunately, this is not an easy step for many to take as their current perceptions deter them from having any meaningful contact with the ‘other’. Engaging with the ‘other’ becomes easier in larger cities and universities, where it is almost impossible not to know a Muslim. However, one way to nuance biases before they become stagnant is by implementing religious literacy in primary schools.

Asani has been instrumental in the formation of the *Shaping Pluralistic Dispositions in Education* project across Ontario, which was discussed in more detail in Chapter 5. Again, this program aims to promote religious literacy in Ontario classrooms which includes an experiential component. Further, as previously discussed, Ontario teachers are invited to take part in cultural exchanges, enabling them to teach and learn in other countries.

Asani’s approach to religious literacy about Islam and Muslims is precisely the method in which other academics such as Karim H. Karim and Shafique N. Virani take when instructing on the matter. This approach is inclusive in that it does not define Islam or Muslims in a general sense, but rather points out the differences and similarities in thought and practice relative to cultural contexts. While this approach fosters the inclusion of minority Muslim narratives, it also allows for the study of violent and extreme Muslim narratives using the same framework.

### *Karim H. Karim*

Karim H. Karim was the Co-Director of the IIS from 2009-2011 and currently serves as the director for the Carleton Centre for the Study of Islam at Carleton University in Ottawa. Karim has hosted

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<sup>747</sup> Goldman.

various workshops and conferences aimed at promoting Muslim literacy and has been recognized for his work in interfaith collaborations by the government of Canada.<sup>748</sup>

Like most Ismailis, Karim sees service as an important part of his identity. While he no longer works at the IIS as their director, he continues to serve the Imamate in various other capacities. One example is his work with the Graduate School of Media and Communication at the Aga Khan University in Nairobi, where he helped to establish the program.<sup>749</sup> Other examples include organized efforts to promote greater understandings about Muslims.

In 2016, Karim hosted a workshop entitled, “Averting Violent Extremism: Religious Literacy, Pluralism and Community Resilience” which aimed “to assess the viability of the religious literacy approach in ameliorating the attractiveness of violent extremism for vulnerable youth.”<sup>750</sup> The event was hosted at Carleton University in collaboration with the International Dialogue Institute and the Canadian Council for Muslim Women. This workshop promoted the use of religious literacy as a tool to counteract anti-Muslim narratives, intolerances, and build understandings amongst Muslims and non-Muslims and Muslims and other Muslims. Karim contends that efforts such as this one are instrumental in nuancing the image of Muslims and Islam, especially in an age when Muslims are often wrongly affiliated with violence and terrorism:

I was very concerned about the kind of thinking that has dominated issues of terrorism, especially the way that it is linked to Muslims, and it was important to bring in people from different backgrounds: from government, academia, from civil society, to basically at least understand notions of religious literacy, of its importance. The basic, minimal objective that I had for that workshop was for people to grasp the notion that this issue is much more complex than just a security issue. That it’s not only those Muslims out there, it is how “I”, in “my community”, with “my perception” of various other people, is producing certain kinds of knowledges which are problematic, which

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<sup>748</sup> ‘Professor Karim H. Karim | The Institute of Ismaili Studies’, *Institute of Ismaili Studies* <<https://iis.ac.uk/people/professor-karim-h-karim>> [accessed 29 August 2018].

<sup>749</sup> Badruddin.

<sup>750</sup> ‘Averting Violent Extremism Workshop’, *The Carleton Centre for the Study of Islam, Carleton University*, 2016 <<https://carleton.ca/islamstudies/cu-events/averting-violent-extremism-workshop/>> [accessed 30 August 2018].

are very biased, very narrow. So, the formula of ‘how do you know what you know about Islam’, about religion, if people get that, that was the most important thing.

The workshop brought people from various backgrounds together, such as the government, academia, Muslim organizations, and community workers, in order to “mobilize knowledge” surrounding the themes of “(a) religious literacy, (b) Muslim history, beliefs, and practices, (c) Muslims in Canada and other Western countries, (d) violent extremism conducted in the name Islam, (e) communication strategies and tactics used by extremist groups such as ISIS, (f) education and curricula on Islam, and (g) building community resilience”.<sup>751</sup>

Although the workshop was centred around the theme of violent Muslim extremism, it called particular attention to the problem of how knowledge about Muslims and Islam is produced, and subsequently reproduced. While I attended this workshop, I could not help but notice that a few participants, particularly those in the public sector, played into the narrative that Islam is inherently violent and to blame. One man even suggested that the only way to eliminate the threat of violent extremism was to send young Muslims to “nationalizing” camps upon immigration. Thus, I suppose, another problem is that people are not literate about the role of concentration camps in legitimizing the oppression and stigmatization of minority communities for the sake of (or using the excuse of) state security. History is bound to repeat itself if literacy efforts, such as this one, are not given the platform or priority necessary to alleviate intolerance, prejudice, and discrimination.

For Karim, religious literacy is an important step in reducing misinformation about Muslims and Islam. He says that our educational institutions are not doing enough to engage students in meaningful study about Muslims, their diversity, and contemporary challenges:

I don’t think the [secular] educational system does a good job, but then one would say why would you bother with Islam when there are so many other aspects of Canadian diversity, why do we need to know more about Muslims? Well, there are some good

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<sup>751</sup> ‘#AVExtremism Workshop’.

reasons for that. First of all, Muslims are the second largest religion after Christianity. Granted, far smaller than Christianity, but second largest. And secondly, they're in the news all the time, and so this ignorance of not knowing the diversity among Muslims, or knowing very little the way that the, the formulaic kind of expressions of conflicts between Shi'a and Sunni will be explained by journalists in a very facile manner will only add to these stereotypes and a lack of understanding.

Karim contends that the media plays an important role in shaping and reproducing negative images about Muslims and Islam. However, he asserts that we cannot rely on one sector to mend the damage done, it needs to be a national collaborative effort.

Karim also points to another factor that contributes to illiteracy about Muslims; particularly how Muslims, with good intentions, try to respond to the monolith that fuels Islamophobia with another monolith. Karim believes that part of the problem is that many Muslims respond to Islamophobia by replacing one homogenous narrative with another. He recounts,

I remember being at a conference in London when a head of a Pakistani think-tank was very insistent that the Taliban and Al Qaeda are not Muslims, their members are not Muslims. Well, as Ismailis, we've learned the hard way how dangerous those arguments are because people have said we are not Muslims, so when you ascribe to any one authority and say who is a Muslim and who is not, it can lead down very dangerous paths. As you may know, the minimal acceptance for anyone to be a Muslim is to be able to recite the Shahada. And then after that, there may be other specific requirements depending on people's beliefs. So even those people who are terrorists and who claim to be using violence in the name of Islam, I don't think that anyone can take away from them their religion, as misguided as we may think them to be... [In regards to] *real* Islam, well, let me know if you find it [laughs] because people of different beliefs among Muslims are so varied, and I don't think that it's the right of anyone to say that this is the real Islam and that is not Islam.

For Karim, the more appropriate way to combat Islamophobia, while being mindful of intra-*umma* dissonance, is through religious literacy. He contends that many Muslims are not knowledgeable about the many rich histories, heritages, beliefs, practices, and cultural expressions of Muslim traditions – they usually just know their own. Karim argues that it is vital for Muslims to understand Islam as a cultural phenomenon – a faith that has been shaped by its circumstances, not as a static, unchanging entity.

Karim says that he has delivered multiple talks on the topics of Islam and Muslims and religious literacy outside of the Centre for the Study of Islam. Prior to giving lectures internationally, Karim says that he deliberately researches the areas that he's travelling to, to see if there has been Muslim presence, engagement, or conflict. An example that he provided was that during his visit to Crete, Greece, where he visited a church that had "a bell tower, a traditional Orthodox Christian structure, and a minaret." He said that even though the minaret was no longer being used since the end of the Ottoman Empire the public still felt that it was important to preserve. He spoke about the presence of these symbols of an Ottoman past, that exist throughout Greece, as a way to reimagine their relationship with the Muslim other, "I try to show them the problems, but also some of the solutions of how to build on these underlying... this underlying openness to the other. It isn't completely absent. So, I'm hoping that by through public lectures as well as with my writing that I'm able to – you know with those two books *Re-Imagining the Other* and *Engaging the Other* – to show that this is possible."

Through the organizing of lectures, workshops, conferences, and writing on the subject, Karim is actively trying to make Muslims and non-Muslims more literate about Islam, its diversity, what shapes its diversity, and steps we can take to alleviate harmful assumptions and build a better future together.

I asked Karim what was the moment that ignited his passion to promote more understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims, he said that he was inspired by a *farmān* made by the Imam during his Silver Jubilee (1982/83):

One of the key themes [in that *farmān*] was misrepresentation of Muslims, and that had a huge impact on me and the way that I was thinking because even as an undergraduate, I had been reading up on that and had been quite concerned about it, as I would imagine that many people were. But here I saw a very important signal for me to shift my intellectual work. So previously, I was going to be a traditional Islamic Studies scholar, looking at Fatimid history with a thesis lined up on the concept of the Mehdi and so on, you know historically as it developed as the pre-Fatimids and the Fatimids and I was already trying to read those Arabic texts and so on, and I completely turned it around. I tried to do a thesis on the portrayal of Muslims in Islamic Studies. I was told no, you can't do that, so I finished my master's degree and I moved to

Communication Studies, where I pursued that, and it opened a completely different world for me.

Further, Karim recounts that it was this *farmān* that also led him to develop a policy for the Ismailia Association<sup>752</sup> to better understand Islam and engage with other Muslim communities in 1983. He says that this policy is still active today although he believes that there needs to be much more engagement with other Muslim communities in Canada and around the world, as previously explained.

In addition to his literacy efforts, Karim is also adamant in ensuring the academic study of Ismailism. In 2014, Karim hosted the second International Ismaili Studies Conference at Carleton University, the first of which was held at the University of Chicago. The second conference was hosted by the Centre for the Study of Islam and also received SSHRC funding. Although neither the IIS nor ITREB was approached for financial support for these conferences, many faculty and staff either attended or presented their research and findings. Held once every two years, this conference offers a chance for researchers who are interested in Ismaili studies to come together, network, and present research findings. This gathering is important as it is the first conference dedicated solely to Ismaili studies which includes all Ismaili traditions such as the Nizaris (those of the present study), the Bohras, and the Druze.

Conferences such as this one legitimizes scholarship on Ismailism that may otherwise not be given space at other Islamic studies conferences. Further, again, it creates space for minority Muslim narratives to be presented and discussed critically amongst others in the discipline.

Thus, like other Ismaili academics, Karim is using his privileged platform to speak about issues affecting Muslims today, and how religious literacy can be used as a tool to remedy misperceptions of Muslims, which, as we have seen, can create challenges for Muslims to live peacefully in contemporary society.

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<sup>752</sup> The Ismailia Association was later renamed the Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board in 1986

In his efforts, Karim not only seeks to alleviate Islamophobia, but also intra-*umma* dissonance, both inside and outside of the Ismaili community. Finally, Karim is also active in assisting to preserve the academic study of Ismailism, in all of its schools of thought and cultural traditions; thereby creating space for minority Muslim narratives in academia.

### *Shafique N. Virani*

Another example of an Ismaili academic using his privilege and platform to nuance the image of Muslims and Islam is Shafique N. Virani. Virani is a professor at the University of Toronto and the founder and Director for the Centre for South Asian Studies. In addition to his academic activities, Virani actively volunteers in various educational capacities. Virani co-founded a youth summer camp for Syrians in al-Khawabi and is on the governing board of the Madrasa Resource Centre of East Africa, which supports over 200 schools and helps disadvantaged communities in different parts of East Africa.<sup>753</sup> In addition to these service efforts, he is a strong advocate for pluralism and invests substantial effort in fostering a greater understanding of the Muslim world.

In April 2017, Virani appeared on CBC News' *the National, View Points*, with a message on how to best address Islamophobia, through "weapons of mass instruction."<sup>754</sup> In his public appearance, he calls out pop-culture in their part in perpetuating Muslims in negative light, highlighting that only 12 in 1000 Hollywood films portrayed Arabs or Muslims as "good people."<sup>755</sup> In his address, he pleads, "I'm calling on governments and civil society to invest in education to attack ignorance with weapons of mass instruction."<sup>756</sup> He criticizes North American colleges and universities, claiming that 90% of them are lacking a specialist in Islam and Muslim

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<sup>753</sup> 'Virani, Shafique N.', *Department for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto*

<<http://religion.utoronto.ca/people/faculty/shafique-n-virani/>> [accessed 18 August 2017].

<sup>754</sup> CBC News: The National, *Fighting Islamophobia with Education | ViewPoints | Shafique N. Virani*, 2017

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TtXCJ6NQwSY>> [accessed 21 August 2018].

<sup>755</sup> CBC News: The National.

<sup>756</sup> CBC News: The National.

civilizations. He suggests that simple references to Muslim contributions over the centuries can have a significant impact in fostering a greater understanding of Muslims:

[F]or example teachers might explain that Muslim mathematicians developed some of the most elegant proofs of the Pythagorean theorem, that the very words algebra and algorithm come from Islamic culture, that the most foundational medical textbook ever is Ibn Sina's Canon of Medicine. Next time you grab your morning double-double at Timmy's remember that we get the word coffee from Arabic. From the stunning architecture of the Taj Mahal to the magical stories of the Arabian Nights, there is so much we've gained from Muslim civilizations...<sup>757</sup>

Virani believes that religious literacy about the Muslim world can have a tremendous impact in bridging the divide between east and west. He contends that religious literacy is needed to fight hateful rhetoric: "combating hatred before it strikes any misunderstood community anywhere in the world will require those weapons of mass instruction. A pluralistic education will create a more tolerant world, the type of world all of us want."<sup>758</sup>

This appearance came after Virani delivered a Tedx Talk in March 2016. The Tedx Talk took place at the University of Toronto, Scarborough Campus, and was entitled, "Islamophobia and the Clash of Ignorance." Virani's title was inspired by the speeches made by His Highness the Aga Khan where His Highness challenges the clash of civilizations hypothesis of Samuel Huntington, contending that it is not so much a clash of civilizations that we are experiencing but a clash of ignorance. In Virani's address, he makes the case that representations of Muslims in the media are disproportionately violent and negative and Muslim men are often villainized. He says that children are also subjected to this harmful narrative and gives the example of Disney's Aladdin where the opening song sings, "Oh, I come from a land, from a faraway place where the caravan camels roam. Where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face – It's barbaric, but hey, it's home!" Virani contends that the only way to confront this 'clash of ignorance' is to incorporate the cosmopolitan ethic of pluralism into public school curriculum. He concludes his Tedx Talk by

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<sup>757</sup> CBC News: The National.

<sup>758</sup> CBC News: The National.

saying, “If we are armed with the knowledge about neighbours, the people that make up our world, we will have the tools to stand up to anybody who hopes to dehumanize others, who hopes to divide us, because in the words of Sa’di Shiraz, we are all the children of Adam, we are all one human family.”<sup>759</sup>

Virani has taken a very public approach to ‘combat hatred’ via ‘weapons of mass instruction.’ By appearing on CBC and through his TedX Talk, Virani is clearly trying to appeal to the masses in an effort to resolve one of the most pertinent issues facing Muslims today, intolerance. Further, his method is one of religious literacy, pointing to the contributions of Muslims over history and how we benefit from those contributions. However, Virani is not only actively participating in what I have termed, the Muslim literacy project; in his scholarship, Virani is also contributing to the Ismaili identity project.

Aside from public addresses, in 2010, Virani became the first professor at a Canadian university to dedicate a class on Ismailism at the undergraduate level entitled, “RLG 461H: Ismaili History and Thought” and at the graduate level, “RLG 3514H: Ismaili History and Thought” at the University of Toronto. Dedicating courses on the topic of Ismailism in a university setting legitimizes the tradition as authentic and creates space for other minority Muslim traditions to be studied. Further, as discussed in Chapter 3, there were occasions where empires tried to wipe out Ismailis from history, both physically and through polemics. Thus, to see courses offered on this very community, after a very turbulent history, is extraordinary.

Like the other Ismaili academics discussed previously, Virani is contributing to the IIP and the MLP at his own accord. Virani speaks openly and publicly about the importance of religious literacy in alleviating Islamophobia. Further, Virani has been influential in putting Ismaili Studies on the map in Canada by offering courses on it at the University of Toronto.

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<sup>759</sup> TEDx Talks, *Islamophobia and the Clash of Ignorance* | *Shafiqe Virani* | TEDxUTSC, TEDxUTSC, 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoyNrlMNBvw>> [accessed 6 September 2018].

This section primarily focused on how Ismaili academics are contributing to the MLP. However, before closing this section, I think it it's important to look at how two other Ismailis are contributing to the MLP through a more creative means.

### *Creative Efforts*

Aside from academics using their institutional platforms to speak about Muslim literacy, others are independently helping to nuance the image of Muslims and Islam through various creative efforts. Aleem Karmali is one example. Karmali is an Ismaili who did his undergraduate degree at Wilfrid Laurier University in Communication Studies and Sociology and completed two masters' degrees: the first was in the Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies at the Institute of Ismaili Studies and the second was in Visual Anthropology at Goldsmiths College. Since then he has become a filmmaker and opened the production company, *Crescent Productions*, which aims to promote a “greater understanding and tolerance of different cultures and religions, with a particular focus on educating about Islam, the diversity amongst Muslim cultures, and the rich history of Muslim civilizations.”<sup>760</sup> Alongside his creative activities, he works for the Ismaili Tariqah Religious Education Board (ITREB) Canada as a Program Manager. Many Ismailis, after attending the IIS, go on to work in the Ismaili institutions either professionally or on a voluntary basis – Karmali is no exception. Karmali has dedicated a significant amount of time and effort to fostering pluralism and informing on religious literacy about Muslims and Islam in the west both academically and creatively.

Another example is academic, artist, and poet, Sheniz Janmohamed. Janmohamed is an Ismaili who completed a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the University of Guelph and is the founder of Ignite Poets. She describes herself as “an author, artist educator, spoken word

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<sup>760</sup> ‘Crescent Productions’, *Crescent Productions* <<http://crescentproductions.com>> [accessed 16 August 2018].

artist and land artist.”<sup>761</sup> Janmohamed is the author of *Bleeding Light*<sup>762</sup> and *Firesmoke: Poems*,<sup>763</sup> which are both written in the form of traditional *ghazals*, an ancient Arabic poetic tradition that has been used by Sufi mystics to express love, loss, and pain, usually in relation to the Divine. She has presented her work at the Jaipur Literature Festival in Jaipur, India and Aga Khan Museum in Toronto and, in addition to her performances, offers workshops in creative writing, spoken word, and land art. Janmohamed’s spoken word is of particular interest to this study, as it challenges identity constructions, promotes positivity and tolerance, and is often politically charged, nuancing stereotypes about herself and other minorities.<sup>764</sup>

Historically, spoken word was used in the US by the African American community to talk about and challenge racism and systemic oppression.<sup>765</sup> Spoken word can be used as a powerful emotive tool to talk about injustices and call for social awareness and change. In one of her spoken word performances at the Aga Khan Museum, she spoke about “barbaric cultural practices” referring the Bill that the then Conservative government passed earlier that year.<sup>766</sup> In her spoken word she criticizes the use of the term ‘barbaric practices’ as it is only used to describe cultures different from the Canadian ideal and reminds Canadians of their own ‘barbaric practices’:

Let me tell you, in perfect unaccented english  
Your practice of appropriating culture for votes is barbaric.  
Let me tell you, in perfect unaccented english  
A boil water advisory on FN reserves is barbaric  
Let me tell you, in perfect unaccented english  
Selling out the resources of a stolen land is barbaric  
Let me tell you, in perfect unaccented english  
Refusing an inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women is barbaric.

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<sup>761</sup> ‘Sheniz Janmohamed’, *Shenizjanmohamed.Com* <<https://shenizjanmohamed.com/>> [accessed 10 August 2019].

<sup>762</sup> Sheniz Janmohamed, *Bleeding Light* (TSAR Publications, 2010).

<sup>763</sup> Sheniz Janmohamed, *Firesmoke: Poems* (TSAR Publications, 2014).

<sup>764</sup> *Bollywood Blvd Interview: Sheniz Janmohamed - YouTube* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivD18LedZWE&list=PL080ECBCC2A81AAFC>> [accessed 10 August 2019].

<sup>765</sup> Priya Parmar and Bryonn Bain, ‘9. Spoken Word and Hip Hop: The Power of Urban Art and Culture’, *Counterpoints*, 306 (2007), 131–56.

<sup>766</sup> Ali Raza, ‘Scarborough-Raised Spoken Word Artist Sheniz Janmohamed Focuses Her Work on Identity’, *Toronto.Com*, 5 November 2015 <<https://www.toronto.com/news-story/6082896-scarborough-raised-spoken-word-artist-sheniz-janmohamed-focuses-her-work-on-identity/>> [accessed 10 August 2019].

Let me tell you, in perfect unaccented english  
Leaving a Canadian journalist to rot in a foreign jail is barbaric  
Let me tell you, in perfect unaccented english,  
Denying critically ill refugees healthcare is barbaric  
Let me tell you, in an accent so thick with the truth that you can't understand it:  
What you've done to this country is barbaric.<sup>767</sup>

In an interview, Janmohamed expressed, “Spoken word is my place to rage against whatever injustice I see. It’s my immediate response to what’s happening in the world.” Further, part of what motivated Janmohamed to speak about identity and political issues is how South Asians and Muslims were spoken about in the media, “I write spoken word when I’m really struggling to get through something. So, if I’ve just seen something on TV and I don’t know how to react to it, I just write. I just write and it usually comes out in spoken word and that’s really why I do spoken word.”<sup>768</sup>

In their unique niches, Karmali and Janmohamed are challenging preconceived notions about Muslim identity and Islam. While Karmali does so through film, Janmohamed does so through art and creative expression. Through the powerful means of creative artistic outlets, both Karmali and Janmohamed “have the ability to connect people in creative and lasting ways.”<sup>769</sup>

Whether doing so through academic or creative means, Ismailis are actively working to change the way that Muslim and non-Muslim Canadians view Islam and Muslims, similar to the methods outlined in Chapter 5. While the MLP, aims to create long-lasting impressions on the collective Canadian consciousness – such as through the Aga Khan Museum, the Islamic gardens, and other educational efforts – the efforts mentioned here are carried out by the Ismaili intelligentsia by their own volition. Further, while some are driven by the guidance of their Imam, others are driven by their own convictions; such as an internalized duty to safeguard their Muslim identity in the context of Islamophobia or their own experiences with intra-*umma* dissonance, as

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<sup>767</sup> Published with permission of Sheniz Janmohamed

<sup>768</sup> *Bollywood Blvd Interview: Sheniz Janmohamed - YouTube.*

<sup>769</sup> Goldman.

discussed in the ‘Not Muslim Enough: Narratives of the Ismaili Intelligentsia’ section of Chapter 8. In a country where experiencing diversity is becoming inevitable, it is not only important to be literate about communities one shares spaces with, but also about one’s own cultural and religious identity; enabling them to confidently articulate their identity and withstand harsh, and misinformed, judgements.

### Participation in the Ismaili Identity Project

As discussed in Chapter 6, there has been a national effort to strengthen and preserve Ismaili Muslim identity in local Ismaili communities, primarily through the standardization and professionalization of their religious schooling. Further, a part of this effort has been to portray a particular narrative of Ismaili Muslims for non-Ismaili audiences. Many Ismailis, by their own conviction, are taking part in the Ismaili Identity Project (IIP) through various formal and informal manners. As discussed previously, ambassadors are key players in the movement overall and mainly contribute in informal settings. This section will present those Ismailis who formally engage inside and outside of the community to foster a greater understanding and appreciation of Ismaili Muslim identity.

#### *Al-Waeza Rabia*

Al-Waeza Rabia was discussed previously in the ‘Not Muslim Enough: Narratives of the Ismaili Intelligentsia’ section in Chapter 8, where she spoke about how Ismailis are ‘othered’ by members of the *umma* and how, in many cases, this ‘otherness’ has been internalized by members of the Ismaili *Jama‘at*.

Rabia identifies as an East-African Ismaili but was born and raised in Edmonton. Rabia is a PhD Candidate in Religious Studies and became an al-Waeza through the Waezeen Training Program (WTP), which was mentioned briefly in Chapter 8. The WTP, again, is a program that trains Ismailis from around the world to become preachers within their communities. The WTP is an important contributor to the identity movement because Ismailis do not have a hierarchal

religious clergy like, say, the Shi'a Ithna'asheriyya in Iran or Iraq. Ismailis have the Imam as their religious authority but because he is remote and not as accessible to lay Ismailis, they turn to ITREB and waezeens for answers to their religious and spiritual questions. Rabia is a person of particular interest because she not only teaches about Ismaili identity within the community, but also outside of the community.

Rabia volunteers within the Ismaili institutions in different capacities. After she develops a sermon, it is sent to a peer-review board. Only after the sermon has been approved is Rabia able to deliver it locally. When delivering sermons within the *jamatkhana*, Rabia often chooses topics that Ismailis may struggle with as a result of living in the diaspora, such as the meaning behind Ismaili rites, beliefs, and rituals. She also delivers a youth and young adult RE program called, "Back to Basics," which she says is designed to help individuals of her generation understand the 'basics' that may not have been retained during their religious schooling years. Rabia is currently working on developing this program to include non-Ismaili spouses, who are interested in learning more about the faith – to which many feel excluded from because only Ismailis can enter the *jamatkhana* during prayer times.

Rabia says that her work as an al-Waeza is important because it is pertinent to nurture the faith of the community, especially a community in diaspora:

It's important because it's important to nurture faith... I have always felt very strongly that the person that I am is because of the community that I come from and the things that I believe in, and the things that we collectively believe in...It's really important to be able to pass that to the next generation but also to help other people remember that about our community and about the faith that they come from. And I think it's a very powerful thing to be entrusted with people's faith and it's a responsibility that I take very seriously. And that's always my goal – to help inspire, or re-inspire, or nurture people's faith in the work that I do.

For Rabia, her love for the Imam and the faith is what has driven her vocational and service convictions. She is honoured to serve the Imam and his *Jama'at* through these religious educational efforts. Rabia is passionate about shaping Ismaili identity and wants to help inspire an identity that Ismailis can be proud of:

I like to think that the work that I do helps to shape a narrative that is more forward looking, and inclusive, and self-aware, and articulate in terms of identity... The work that I do very consciously tries to do that, and that's what I want for the people that I'm speaking to, or dealing with, or working with when I'm doing this stuff. I really want to help mold the community and Ismaili identity in [a progressive] way. And I think in a lot of ways I'm a product of that identity too, it's just that I think we need to keep going along that trajectory and not kind of get stuck. So, I always hope that the work that I do helps to propel us forward on that path.

While Rabia remains a key-contributor to the identity project, it would be neglectful to imply that her work does not overlap with the literacy project. As an academic, she actively attempts to nuance the image of Muslims worldwide by showcasing the diversity that exists within Islam and has even challenged the way that Islam is taught at the university level – which has historically been taught from a Sunni-normative perspective.

Unlike Rabia, whose waezeen services are authorized by the Ismaili institutions, Abu Ya'qub does all of his Ismaili identity work outside of the institutions – primarily so that he can talk about various themes and subjects without having to go through bureaucratic channels.

### *Abu Ya'qub*

Abu Ya'qub was first mentioned in the 'Not Muslim Enough' section in Chapter 8. He started out as an accounting professional but left that career to pursue what he would describe as his passion, obligation, and purpose in life: enhancing a greater understanding of Ismailism to both Ismaili and non-Ismaili audiences. Abu Ya'qub describes his Ismaili identity as very important to him and influential in his decision to change his career for something more meaningful.

Abu Ya'qub does not work with the Ismaili institutions, instead he uses his research, writing, and presentation skills to present on the Ismaili faith to Ismaili and non-Ismaili audiences.

My Involvement with the Ismaili community is at the grassroots level, I am not involved at the institutions level. I regularly share some of my academic research with members of the Ismaili community as well as people outside the Ismaili community. I do a lot of speaking engagements. I help facilitate different discussions sessions for

different intellectual topics to be discussed. Members of the community privately reach out to me on a weekly basis, in terms of information seeking and many people even in the leadership will consult with me privately to get my input on specific issues. So, I am involved, but I am involved in a sort of non-institutional capacity.

Abu Ya'qub does this work on a voluntary basis and usually organizes his own meetings with various Ismaili Student Associations across Canada. After receiving positive feedback from Ismaili attendees, Abu Ya'qub decided to leave his accounting career and go back to school to study Islamic Studies at the graduate level. He recounts *farmāns* that impacted his decision to do so:

In many *farmāns* going back to 1957, the Imam has stressed repeatedly the importance of the intellect in understanding faith. There is a whole cluster of guidance about intellectual understandings of faith, whether it is in that context, whether it is in science and religion, whether to reconcile science and religion. In 1983 he made several *farmāns* just on how scientific discovery should not be a threat to religious belief, and he explained how to reconcile that. He has made *farmāns*, encouraging the community to use a logical approach in understanding faith as well as academic studies, so that one topic. ... my whole approach to studying and understanding Islam and the Ismaili tradition is very much grounded on how the Imam has explained we should go about doing this.

While pursuing his academic career, he continues to volunteer his time to help Ismailis better understand their faith on a deeper level, and even speaks about Ismailism to non-Ismaili audiences – including academic audiences. He feels that this scholarship should be easily accessible to Ismaili audiences, which is why he takes the time to present Ismaili theology in more personal settings:

This work is very important for me. This sort of involvement expresses in many ways my ties to the community. It's also a way that I feel I have an obligation to share whatever knowledge that I have gained through my efforts, I feel an obligation to share with the community. I really believe in access to scholarship and to information and as I grew up, one of the biggest turn offs was there was very little access within community channels to reliable information, especially about Islam and the Ismaili faith and I am trying to really correct that problem, and I really would like to help community members feel more empowered about a personal intellectual search using the best sources, so, I have devoted some of my energy in making my academic scholarship more available within the community as well as to anyone outside who is looking to learn about these topics in a reliable way.

Again, Abu Ya'qub not only disseminates his research to Ismaili audiences but also makes it available for others, particularly academics to develop a better understanding of Ismailism. He says that there are a lot of anti-Ismaili campaigns out there and hopes that he can make an impact in correcting misinformation about Ismailis in both Muslim and non-Muslim settings.

Given the private nature of the Ismaili community, many within the community have found it difficult to access information related to their faith – especially in an age of globalization. Other Muslim communities can go online and have information readily available at their fingertips. Questions are easily answered. This has not always been the case for Ismailis; however, in recent decades individuals within the Ismaili community have taken it upon themselves to make Ismaili knowledge accessible online.

### *Ismaili Websites*

While many Ismaili academics use their various platforms to inform on Ismaili identity, other members of the intelligentsia have opted to use public platforms; mainly the world wide web. Ismaili individuals have gotten more creative in their approach to provide Ismailis with the tools necessary to articulate and better understand aspects of their identity – and even make them readily accessible. Further, because these are public domains, non-Ismailis looking to learn more about Ismaili history, belief, and practice can now access information from a wide-range of institutional and non-institutional websites, which is important because before their development, non-Ismailis were reliant on websites that often aimed to delegitimize the Ismaili faith.

Ismaili websites have been around since the 1990s with the first most popular being *Ismaili Heritage*. According to a website discussion board, the website was started by a group of Ismaili volunteers wanting to provide the global community with resources and up to date news related to the Imam and their faith. Since the creation of *Ismaili Heritage*, other non-institutionally run sites have been developed and many are part of a self-organized group call the *Ismaili Civil Society*. The group, *Ismaili Civil Society* runs on a voluntary basis with no support from Ismaili institutions. The websites that it promotes include *Ismaili Digest*, *Simerg*, *NanoWisdoms*, and *Ismaili Gnosis*.

In the section that follows, we will focus solely on the efforts of *Ismaili Gnosis* (IG): this is because IG is not only active and unique in their efforts to strengthen and preserve Ismaili identity within the community, but also because IG has intentionally made quality resources on Ismaili identity available to Canadian and non-Ismaili Muslim audiences.

In 2007, a couple of friends got together and created the Facebook group, *Ismaili Gnosis* (IG). The private Facebook group was created to allow Ismailis a safe and secure online space to discuss Ismaili thought and practice without being trolled by anti-Ismailis who, as one of the founders said, “would invade” any discussions that Ismailis had on other Facebook groups. The IG group was made private to ensure that Ismailis had a safe space to talk about their religion without other Muslims chiming in to delegitimize their identity, belief, or practice. In order to join the group, each member was vetted, and their faith was confirmed through informal means.

In an interview with one of the founders, who asked to remain anonymous, they expressed a personal experience that led them to take it upon themselves to correct misinformation about Ismailism:

I can speak from personal experience. For me, the biggest challenge in my high school where I first encountered non-Ismaili Muslims was that my sense of Muslim identity was always challenged. The beliefs, but more so the practices of the Ismailis were being criticized by my peers. It also didn't help that the earliest websites on the web to discuss the Ismailis were anti-Ismaili websites that branded the Ismaili belief system, doctrine, and practice as un-Islamic. Anti-Ismaili propaganda has a large history, going back to the 10th century, and can be found in Sunni discourses... This history of polemic [discourses] has rubbed off on many other Muslims. The reason why many [Sunni Muslims] have a negative disposition towards the Ismailis is based on [historical] misinformation. But I also think that the Ismaili community today as a whole from an institutional perspective, does a very poor job in representing themselves in terms of their beliefs and practices to the *umma*. There's a real shyness, there's a real sense of timid'ness (sic) on the part of the community institutions to even talk about faith in a public forum, and I believe that this timid'ness, this hesitancy to speak up and represent the community, has hurt the community because it has allowed anti-Ismaili authors to take over the floor, and what I'm trying to do in my scholarly activities is to help change that narrative. To say that, Ismailis, intellectually, historically, spiritually have been a major positive influence on Islamic history, Ismaili

ideas, whether one agrees with them or not, they have the aura of intellectual respectability, and if wants to engage them in a positive and negative sense, one has to engage Ismaili discourses from their own sources and not as caricatures that detractors have created.

The co-founder revealed that the creation of IG was inspired by their faith; they wanted to serve the Imam by strengthening Ismaili identity, belief, and understandings behind practice through an online platform:

*We see Ismaili Gnosis as a practical service to the Ismaili Jama'at. We also see Ismaili Gnosis, in all its manifestations, as a direct continuity with the Ismaili intellectual tradition and we feel that this tradition of understanding faith and expressing faith through intellectual endeavour has been dying out in the present times. And it has been eclipsed by more bureaucratic and devotional expressions and we feel that the modern Ismaili Muslim needs the intellectual expression of faith just as Ismailis over the last 1400 years have engaged in it. We see Ismaili Gnosis as a continuation of this approach.*

From the Ismaili institutional perspective, the 'intellectual' aspect of the Ismaili tradition is being fulfilled by the waezeen program and ITREB. However, the founder says that these efforts only graze the surface and IG aims to delve deeper into thought and meaning.

The interviewee said that they, like other *Ismaili Civil Society* websites, are not supported by the Ismaili Council for Canada but fill a need for intellectual engagement with the Ismaili tradition. One of the benefits of the Ismaili National and Regional Councils, is that they allow for the high organization of Ismaili Muslims. This, arguably, is one of the reasons why Ismailis have been able to accomplish so much in Canadian public space. However, there is a growing number of unofficial Ismaili websites and organizations, which in some cases, challenges the authority of the Ismaili Councils.<sup>770</sup> As Karim notes, "[t]his presents a conundrum to the communal hierarchy which, on the one hand, champions pluralism but, on the other, favours unitary, top-down

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<sup>770</sup> Karim H. Karim, 'Pluralism, Migration, Space and Song: Ismaili Arrangements of Public and Private Spheres', p. 150.

discourses.”<sup>771</sup> Thus, IG, like other Ismaili websites, are forced to operate on a grassroots and voluntary basis. Nevertheless, these websites are quite popular.

The interviewee says that there are many anti-Ismaili websites currently operating to defame Ismaili identity, belief, and practice: such as *mostmerciful.com* or *insideismailism.wordpress.com*. It is for this reason that IG is ever more determined to become one of the standard websites for Ismaili thought and practice.

In the context of Muslim diversity, Ismailis too have questions about their faith, especially in relation to other Muslim traditions. For this reason, IG and other similar websites, were created. IG provides a place for deeper theological discussions to occur and serves those looking to delve deeper in the mystical aspects of their faith or those who are simply interested in basic ideas and principles. The founder said that IG is important because it fulfills a need that the Ismaili institutions have, thus far, been unsuccessful in fulfilling:

We’re looking to be a service to the Ismailis that are questioning their faith, questioning the existence of God, questioning the legitimacy of the Imam. Ismailis that may commit to principles [of faith] but then question certain practices as, perhaps, being un-Islamic due to pressures from other Muslims. [It also serves] Ismailis that are fully cognisant and fully comfortable with their identity but actually want to engage the esoteric interpretation of Islam, which as I mentioned, official community institutions are not providing in any substantial way.

The Facebook IG group has been so successful that the founders now also operate a sister-site: <https://ismailignosis.com/>. This public domain does not host all the content from the Facebook group but gives Ismailis and non-Ismailis access to answers on topics such as, “How the Imam Teaches the Esoteric Interpretation of the Qur’an”, “What does Mowlana Hazar Imam do with the Religious Dues (Zakat/Dasond) Given by the Community?”, or “Why Ismaili Jamatkhana are only open to Ismailis for Prayers.” According to the interviewee, “we want the public to have

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<sup>771</sup> Karim H. Karim, ‘Pluralism, Migration, Space and Song: Ismaili Arrangements of Public and Private Spheres’, p. 150.

access to a very respectable scholarly informed articulation of Ismaili theology. That's the goal. Where primary sources are quoted allowing the reader to come to their own judgments based on the sources that we were engaging with." Other public domains that IG now operates on are Twitter,<sup>772</sup> Instagram,<sup>773</sup> and Tumblr.<sup>774</sup> More recently, the founders even organized an in-person conference retreat.

At the end of summer in 2015, IG held their first retreat in Chicago primarily aimed at informing on questions related to the Imam. The content presented was already available on the IG website but the organizers were looking at different ways to make the information more accessible. A total of 60 Ismailis attended over the two and a half days and were invited to participate in intimate discussions. The reason for focusing this retreat on the content of the Imam was because that is what makes Ismaili Islam unique:

The Imam in Ismaili history is the corner stone of the whole Ismaili tradition of Islam. Ismaili Islam revolves around the Imam, the divine guide. He's the axis... And to be quite frank the younger generation is starting to question the authority and the legitimacy of the Imam. People are questioning the basis on why is there an Imam to whom the community obeys? Why is the community devoting itself, expressing love for, and praying to God through the Imam... There are questions about the Imam's personal life; why does he own horses, why does he engage in projects like Sardinia or tourism? Where does the *Dasond*, the religious purification dues, go? What does the Imam do with it? All the key questions are about the Imam, we felt that the Ismaili institutions have not been able to provide an intellectually and emotionally satisfying response to these questions and, therefore, we figured that we at Ismaili Gnosis have the resources to do this, we can provide a satisfactory presentation that respects logic and emotional engagement. So that's what we did.

The co-founder said that through all of their platforms they probably have around 40,000 subscribers, primarily in Canada and the United States, and that the reach of their content can extend up to 100,000 in one week. They said that the Huffington Post has even sited their site when writing about the Ismaili community:

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<sup>772</sup> <https://twitter.com/IsmailiGnosis>

<sup>773</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/ismailignosis/>

<sup>774</sup> <https://ismailignosis.tumblr.com/>

I can tell you that the most popular article in the Ismaili Gnosis website is called, “Who are the Shi’a Ismaili Muslims: A Primer with Visual Charts.” That article was written in the aftermath of the attack against the members of Ismaili community in Karachi last May. And it was written... it’s the easiest article on the whole website, it’s very basic. There’s nothing in that article that isn’t already known. But that article, in one day, had like tens of thousands of views... We felt that there was need for deeper theological stuff but it turns out that there is a need for very basic knowledge, which is very tough get in a visually friendly, accessible form. So, that primer is the most popular article on the website even though it is one of the most recent ones. And this primer was picked up as a reference by *Huffington Post*. So, when the Aga Khan visited Harvard in November 2015, *Huffington Post* wrote an article about the event, and at the beginning of the first paragraph of the article they linked the term, Ismaili Muslims to the Ismaili Gnosis primer. Out of all of the available things they could have linked to. So that says a lot on the influence Ismaili Gnosis actually has.

IG is active in promoting their articles via Facebook and other media outlets. They said that one of their goals is to bring awareness about Ismailis and their interpretation of the faith to non-Ismaili Muslims and non-Muslims, in an effort to be better understood and represented. Although not supported by official Ismaili institutions, IG and all its media outlets have been a great resource for Ismailis who have questions about their identity, history, faith, and practice.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter discussed the various means in which Ismailis are participating in and contributing to the MLP and IIP. As presented, the majority of Ismaili survey participants revealed that they see themselves as ambassadors of the faith with many engaging in informal discussions with both non-Muslims and non-Ismaili Muslims to correct misunderstandings about Islam and Ismaili Islam. Participants also believe that by living in accordance with their faith tradition this makes them an exemplar of Ismaili Islam. Further, the act of becoming an ambassador of the faith is directly inspired by an official decree given to them by their Imam and his Canadian institutions. Thus, Ismailis are actively being motivated by the speeches and *farmāns* of their Imam to nuance the image of Muslims in Canada, and to be confident in creating space for themselves within the diverse *umma*. Further, as we saw with Hagar and Alykhan, some ambassadors are seeking a higher level of education in order to help the institutions strengthen Ismaili identity at a more professional

level; mainly by enrolling themselves at the IIS to partake in the STEP program, which is arguably the most important contributor to the IIP as discussed in Chapter 6.

The Ismaili intelligentsia are playing a particularly important role in both the MLP and the IIP. Many by their own accord are organizing events, camps, conferences, and workshops aimed at promoting religious literacy about Muslims and Islam, often speaking about different Muslim civilizations, cultures, and Ismaili Islam in particular as an example of Muslim diversity. Further, we are also starting to see creative efforts arise from other highly educated Ismailis that challenge the way people understands Muslim identity and Islam; such as through film and spoken word performances.

These grassroots efforts vary in their reach. For example, while MLP efforts often have a broader audience, individuals carrying out IIP initiatives first target their efforts towards Ismaili audiences, but also simultaneously engaged in presenting Ismaili Islam more publicly; whether through inter-faith dialogue, as with al-Waez Rabia, through academic dissemination, as with Abu Ya'qub, or through Ismaili websites, like *Ismaili Gnosis*. It is clear that these grassroot efforts help to foster an academically informed Ismaili identity to both Ismaili and non-Ismaili audiences.

While the Ismaili Imam, through the Imam's institutions, is actively pursuing these two important initiatives (the MLP and the IIP) to combat both Islamophobia and intra-*umma* dissonance and build a confident, pluralism inspired Ismaili Muslim identity to withstand these two hostile climates, Ismailis are also participating in similar efforts at the grassroots level, often inspired and motivated by the Imam and their Ismaili Muslim identity. Again, in order to foster the ethic of pluralism within society, harmful misinformation about the 'other' – and in this case, the Muslim 'other' amongst both Muslims and non-Muslims – needs to be remedied. Finally, in a growingly diverse world, in the words of the Aga Khan, it is important “that one's individual identity is strong enough to engage confidently with those of other identities as we all walk together

along the road to a better world.”<sup>775</sup> Thus, through these grassroot efforts, Ismailis are one step closer to alleviating Islamophobia and intra-*umma* dissonance and constructing a modern Ismaili identity rooted in Ismaili faith and heritage, thereby contributing to Imam’s aspiration to nurture a society inspired by the ethic of pluralism.

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<sup>775</sup> Aga Khan IV, ‘Inaugural Global Pluralism Award Ceremony (Ottawa, ON)’.

## XI. CONCLUSION

This doctoral dissertation examined how the Aga Khan, alongside his Imamatus institutions in Canada, are attempting to alleviate both Islamophobia and intra-*umma* dissonance. Unlike other responses to Islamophobia, which often replace one monolithic narrative with another, the Ismaili community has taken a more inclusive approach to combating anti-Muslim rhetoric – one that creates space for all Muslim traditions to be represented. Upon closer examination, it is evident that Ismaili identity and experience are influential in shaping the unique motivations behind these efforts. Further, Ismaili identity and experience are not only important in influencing participation in these national projects, but in grassroots initiatives as well.

Chapter 8 examined how Canadian-Ismailis negotiate and present their identity amongst different ‘others’: non-Muslim Canadian ‘others’ and Muslim ‘others.’ This was to better understand whether the contexts of Islamophobia and *takfirism* influence the way in which Ismaili identity is negotiated and expressed. The data revealed that one’s degree of religiosity affected participant responses; however, one general finding was that when participants present themselves to a Canadian audience, they actively bridged Ismaili values with Canadian values and disassociated themselves from negative generalizations about Muslims. When speaking to a non-Ismaili Muslim audience, however, while respondents also attempted to bridge commonalities between themselves and the Muslim ‘other’ – arguably in an effort to create space for acceptance of Ismaili difference – they also attempted to legitimize their faith tradition; thereby revealing that Ismailis are aware that they are not fully accepted as ‘Muslim’ by some members of the *umma* – a product of intra-*umma* dissonance. This finding was further supported by participants in terms of what they would conceal to the Muslim ‘other’: basically, anything that would further marginalize them from the wider-*umma*. This further revealed that some Ismailis have internalized a sense of being ‘not Muslim enough’ in the eyes of their co-religionists.

This chapter was of particular importance as it revealed how Ismaili identity and experience have helped to shape the motivations behind the Imamatus-led MLP and the IIP. As discussed in Chapter 5, the MLP not only aims to make both non-Muslim and Muslim Canadians more literate

about Muslim diversity and Ismailism specifically, but Ismailis as well (the latter was presented in Chapter 6). The MLP aims to alleviate Islamophobia and intra-*umma* dissonance by implementing various projects aimed at promoting religious literacy about Muslims and their diversity such as the Aga Khan Museum, the Islamic Gardens, and the *Shaping Pluralistic Dispositions in Education* initiative which collaborated with the government of Ontario. Further, these projects also aim to foster a sense of collective pride amongst all Muslims – regardless of their diverse manifestations – in an effort to alleviate intra-*umma* dissonance and replace it with intra-*umma* harmony. These efforts collectively aim to make both non-Muslims and Muslims more literate and comfortable with Muslims and their diversity, thereby alleviating the fear of the Muslim and the Ismaili ‘other’. Further, through the MLP, this further enables an environment suitable for the ethic of pluralism to flourish – thereby contributing to the IPP as discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 8 was also significant as it revealed various motivations behind the IIP as discussed in Chapter 6. The IIP not only aims to crystallize Ismaili identity in Canada, but to also make Ismailis more comfortable in articulating their identity to both non-Muslim and Muslim audiences. Through the professionalization and the standardization of the Ismaili secondary religious education system, and through other forms of experiential programming, Ismailis are gaining the knowledge, tools, and confidence necessary to be prouder and more grounded in their identity, not only to strengthen Ismaili identity, but to be able to withstand polemic attacks by both non-Muslim and Muslim audiences. Further, the identity being nurtured by IIP efforts, such as through their various educational efforts, aims to root the ethic of pluralism within Ismaili identity, thereby alleviating dissonance amongst themselves and the non-Ismaili ‘other’. Also, in an effort to make others more aware about the Ismaili community specifically, the IIP actively engages in various public initiatives aimed at presenting Ismaili identity as one example of Muslim diversity, thereby creating space for other minority Muslim expressions to be represented. These efforts directly aim to dispel monolithic understandings of Muslims and Islam by presenting Ismaili identity as a legitimate alternative Muslim narrative than what is commonly depicted in the media. Through these identity-shaping and performative efforts, the IIP aims to nuance the image of Muslims in Canada and nurture a more tolerant environment where Ismailis feel comfortable engaging with the non-Ismaili ‘other’.

Chapter 9 presented on how Ismailis see themselves as different than other Muslims, and then compared Ismaili Muslim identity to mainstream Sunni Muslim identity using two comparable surveys. Further, this chapter also examined the internal diversity that exists within both of these communities in terms of belief and practice, which was influenced by one's degree of religiosity. With Sunni Islam often being normalized as the Muslim 'ideal' it becomes ever more important to nuance this monolithic narrative of what it means to be Muslim with other minority narratives – and further nuancing the norm by drawing attention to the internal diversity that exists within these traditions. By doing so, this creates space for Muslim diversity and helps to alleviate intra-*umma* dissonance amongst Muslims by showcasing how Islam is inherently, and has always been, dynamic and diverse. Further, by normalizing Muslim diversity and internal diversity, this fosters a greater acceptance of the various ways one can be Muslim and will make Muslims more comfortable learning about and learning from Muslim 'others' – fostering collective pride in Muslim identity in all of its diverse manifestations.

In terms of commonalities between Ismaili and Sunni Muslims, both groups identify prayer as being the most important religious practice; however, Ismailis differed greatly from Sunni Muslims in terms of their worldview – that spiritual progress and enlightenment are possible in this lifetime. This more spiritual inclination not only shapes Ismaili identity and practice, but also Ismaili identity and expression in the various Imamate projects. For example, Chapter 5 presented the esoteric symbolism embedded in the architecture and design of various Imamate buildings and gardens, which directly coincide with the esoteric nature of Ismaili identity. Thus, both exoteric and esoteric aspects of Ismaili identity inspire the various efforts discussed throughout this thesis.

Another significant aspect of Ismaili identity that presented itself throughout the chapters was the ethic of volunteering. The vast majority of Ismaili participants revealed that they volunteer and that this ethic is important to their identity. Further, participants disclosed that they not only volunteer inside the community, but outside of the community as well; however, the majority of participants were much more likely to volunteer within the community – as discussed, one's degree of religiosity greatly affected this trend. This helps us to better understand how ordinary Ismailis

are helping to progress the various MLP and IIP initiatives as discussed in chapters 5 and 6 – the ethic of serving the Imam and his institutions is deeply rooted in Ismaili identity and experience. Further, as we saw in Chapter 6 with the example of Ismaili CIVIC, Ismailis are not only volunteering in greater Canadian efforts, but by doing so they are nuancing the image of Muslims and Islam by presenting themselves as a tradition that aspires to enhance the quality of life of their wider-communities, an ethic that is rooted in the Ismaili tradition as we saw with the various AKDN efforts.

Chapter 10 revealed how ordinary Ismailis are contributing to the mandates of the MLP and the IIP in their own unique ways. The majority of Ismaili participants identified as ambassadors of Islam with many readily engaging in informal discussions with the religious ‘other’ and the Muslim ‘other’ to nuance pre-conceived understandings about Islam, Muslims, and Ismaili Muslims. However, Ismailis also consider themselves as ambassadors by living in accordance with the ethics of their faith tradition – a theme we also saw in Chapter 6. Chapter 6 revealed direct efforts to create confident ambassadors of Islam to help nuance the image of Muslims and Ismaili Muslims at a more personal level – such as through the “Jamati Ambassador Program.” However, in order to speak confidently to the religious and Muslim ‘other’, one must be well-rooted in their faith tradition – hence the various religious education efforts also discussed in Chapter 6.

Participants in Chapter 10 also revealed that their faith has inspired them to take part in both Imam-led initiatives and grassroots initiatives. For example, some Ismailis revealed that they are attempting to become STEP teachers so that they may help other Ismaili youth become more grounded and adept in their faith tradition. Further, as presented in chapters 5 and 6, Ismail and Maryam also see themselves as meaningfully contributing to Imam-led initiatives. However, as previously discussed, Ismailis are not only taking part in Imam-led efforts; some are using their own privilege and position to contribute to the mandates of the MLP and IIP in other unique ways.

Inspired by their faith and unique experiences with Islamophobia and intra-*umma* dissonance, members the Ismaili intelligentsia, by their own accord, are nuancing the image of Islam and Muslims through religious literacy and other creative efforts. Further, some are also invested in initiatives related to the themes presented in the IIP. While these grassroots Ismaili identity initiatives are mainly directed towards an Ismaili audience, many are also projecting Ismaili Islam more publicly, such as through inter-faith dialogue, academic dissemination, and Ismaili websites. We observe similar efforts being carried out by Imam-led initiatives such as through the Ismaili Centres, the IIS, and the creation of the the.Ismaili website as presented in Chapter 6.

Thus, the data reveals that while there are institutionally mandated efforts to combat Islamophobia and intra-*umma* othering and strengthen and project Ismaili identity to help nuance the image of Muslims by presenting Ismaili Islam as an example to diversity within the *umma*, ordinary members of the Ismaili Muslim community are also contributing to these initiatives: either by getting involved in these various Imam-led efforts, or through their own unique ways. Further, as argued, these Imam-led initiatives are reflective of Ismaili identity and experience.

The findings from the present study reveal why there is an organized effort to promote religious literacy about Muslims and their diversity to both Canadian and Muslim audiences. The Ismaili community not only suffers from the consequences of Islamophobia, but also the consequences of *takfirism*, a problematic manifestation of intra-*umma* dissonance. Further, as discussed in Chapter 3, it is the mandate of the Imam to not only interpret the Revelation for the current day and age, but to also safeguard and enhance the quality of life of his followers and their respective communities. Thus, it is in the best interest of the Imam and the Ismaili community to actively nuance the monolithic image of Islam in Canada to not only deter prejudice and discriminatory practices by their governments and fellow members of society, such as those listed in the introductory chapter, but to also create space for themselves and other Muslim minorities in the collective consciousness of the *umma* to further alleviate intra-*umma* dissonance, which can lead to *takfirism*.

In order for pluralism to become part of the collective Canadian consciousness, Muslim and non-Muslim individuals need to be well versed in their own unique identities and histories in order to dispel and withstand judgement. Further, identities in the modern era, arguably, also need to be rooted in the ethic of pluralism for them to be able to live alongside the religious and cultural ‘other’; thereby alleviating dissonance experienced when confronted with the ‘other’. Finally, through the promotion of religious literacy about Muslim diversity in Canada is one able to alleviate anti-Muslim rhetoric and Islamophobia in Canada. Through these various Ismaili efforts, the Ismaili community in Canada is gradually ‘Alleviating the Clash of Ignorance(s)’ and making space for the full manifestation of the greater pluralism project – where diversity is valued and not feared.

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## APPENDIX A – INFORMATION SHEETS

### Information Sheet: Canadian-Ismaili

#### Doctoral Thesis Title: Redefining Islam in Canada: An Ismaili Muslim Movement

Principal Researcher: Alyshea Cummins, PhD Candidate  
Department of Classics & Religious Studies  
University of Ottawa  
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5

PhD Supervisor: Dr. Peter Beyer  
Department of Classics & Religious Studies  
University of Ottawa  
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5  
Telephone: 613-562-5800 ext. 1178

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this project is two-fold. First, the investigator wishes to find out more about how Ismailis in Canada understand and put into practice their cultural and religious identities in multicultural Canadian Society. Second, this project seeks to examine how Ismailis are responding to negative depictions of Islam as individuals and as a community; that is, answering whether Ismailis are attempting to change the way other Canadians view Islam. The investigator is doing this through an on-line survey questionnaire and follow-up interviews aimed at (1) examining cultural and religious belief and practice and, also, (2) whether community members are aware of the various Ismaili-led initiatives set out to nuance the image of Islam in Canada, what they think of them, and whether they are personally engaged in these community efforts.

**Participation:** Participation consists in taking part in an online survey and, if one chooses, also an interview. Survey participants wishing to participate further must indicate so at the end of the online survey. Participants can complete the survey without needing to agree to the interview portion. The interview is conducted through Skype and lasts from 30 minutes to 1 ½ hours. During this interview participants will be asked to discuss various issues having to do with their cultural and religious identity, including how these identities are put into practice in daily life and how participants may be aware or perhaps even engaged in various Ismaili-led institutions or programs aimed at changing the way Islam and Muslims are viewed in Canada.

**Risks:** Participation in this study will entail no foreseeable risks greater than those that a person might face in everyday life.

**Benefits:** Participating in this study will likely be of no direct benefit to the participants. The study itself, however, will likely be of benefit for our knowledge about Ismaili identity in Canada, the diversity that exists in Islam more generally, and how this community is actively attempting to change the way Islam is perceived.

**Confidentiality and anonymity:** The researcher assures that the information participants share will remain strictly confidential. The contents will be used only for the research purposes as stated above, and participants' confidentiality will be protected. The survey will be filled out anonymously. The interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed, but this recording and transcription will at all times be kept in a safe and secure place as described below. Only the principal researcher indicated above will have access to this recording and transcription as well as to any notes that they may take during the interview. Furthermore anonymity will be protected in that real names will not be used in any reports of the findings of this research. In all such reports, identities will not be revealed and all information that may identify people will be altered or removed.

**Conservation of data:** The data collected, including the electronic recording and the transcription, as well as analyses of the data by the researcher and his team members will be kept in a secure manner. All data will be in electronic form and stored on computers and on data storage devices that are password protected and only the researcher will know the passwords. The main copy of the electronic data will be kept indefinitely on password protected storage devices locked in the researcher supervisor's office at the University of Ottawa. All other copies of the electronic data will be kept securely for at least 5 years after the results of the study have been published, and then they will be erased.

**Compensation:** Participants will receive no compensation for participation in this project.

**Information Sheet: Leadership**

**Doctoral Thesis Title: Redefining Islam in Canada: An Ismaili Muslim Movement**

Principal Researcher: Alyshea Cummins, PhD Candidate  
Department of Classics & Religious Studies  
University of Ottawa  
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5

PhD Supervisor: Dr. Peter Beyer  
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**Participation:** Participation consists essentially in taking part in one interview conducted through Skype and lasting from 25-45 minutes. During this interview participants will be asked to discuss their roles in, and the influences of, various institutions and programs across Canada, and how this program or institution is seeking to have or may be having an affect on the way Canadians and other non-Ismaili Muslims view “Islam” and Muslims more generally

**Risks:** Participation in this study will entail no foreseeable risks greater than those that a person might face in everyday life.

**Benefits:** Participating in this study will likely be of no direct benefit to the participants. The study itself, however, will likely be of benefit for our knowledge about Ismaili identity in Canada, the diversity that exists in Islam more generally, and how this community is actively attempting to change the way Islam is perceived.

**Confidentiality and anonymity:** The interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed, but this recording and transcription will at all times be kept in a safe and secure place as described below. Only the principal researcher and their thesis supervisor will have access to this recording and transcription as well as to any notes that they may take during the interview. Please be aware that contents from your interview may be published in the researcher’s doctoral thesis and scholarly journals. Furthermore, it is important for you to know that your anonymity cannot be guaranteed because of your public role in the

program/institution and because contents from your interview, which may be directly quoted, could potentially identify you as the speaker even though your real name will not be used in any reports or publication.

**Conservation of data:** The data collected, including the electronic recording and the transcription, as well as analyses of the data by the researcher will be kept in a secure manner. All data will be in electronic form and stored in computers and on data storage devices that are password protected and only the researcher and her supervisor will know the passwords. The main copy of the electronic data will be kept indefinitely on password protected storage devices locked in the research supervisor's office. All other copies of the electronic data will be kept securely for at least 5 years after the results of the study have been published, and then they will be erased or otherwise destroyed.

**Compensation:** Participants will receive no compensation for participation in this project.

## **APPENDIX B – CONSENT FORMS**

### **Consent form for Survey**

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your interest in this doctoral research project. The purpose of this project is two-fold. First, the investigator wishes to find out more about how Ismailis in Canada understand and put into practice their cultural and religious identities in multicultural Canadian Society. Second, this project seeks to examine how Ismailis are responding to negative depictions of Islam as individuals and as a community; that is, answering whether Ismailis are attempting to change the way other Canadians view Islam. The investigator is doing this through an online survey questionnaire and follow-up interviews aimed at (1) examining cultural and religious belief and practice and, also, (2) whether community members are aware of the various Ismaili-led initiatives set out to nuance the image of Islam in Canada, what they think of them, and whether they are personally engaged in these community efforts. Follow-up interviews may also be conducted with participants consenting to do so. Participants wishing to be interviewed can indicate their interest at the end of the survey. Unfortunately, not all participants indicating their interest will be selected for an interview due to time and resource restraints. Those selected to be interviewed will be contacted to schedule an interview over Skype at a date and time convenient for them.

Findings from this study will be reported in the investigator's doctoral thesis and may also be published in articles in scholarly journals. You are invited to contact the researcher at the email address listed below for further information about and access to these articles once they are published.

The information that you will share will remain strictly confidential and will be used solely for the purposes of this research. Your write-in answers and your answers to open-ended questions may be used verbatim in presentations and publications but you will not be identified, whether directly or indirectly, as the source of the quote. Anonymity is guaranteed since you are not being asked to provide your name or any level of personal information with which you could be identified. Since the survey is completed via Survey Monkey and this instrument is hosted in the United States, it is subject to the USA Privacy Act.

The surveys will be kept on the password protected research computer of the principle investigator for an indefinite period. Backup copies will be kept on a password protected USB stick, which will be securely kept and locked away. The survey and its results will be removed from the Survey Monkey site by August 2016.

You will receive no compensation for completing this survey.

You are under no obligation to participate and if you choose to participate, you may refuse to answer questions that you do not want to answer. If you wish to participate in this study, please

complete the survey that will follow if you give your consent by indicating "next" below. Completion and submission of the questionnaire by you implies consent. The survey should take you approximately 30-45 minutes to complete. Once you have completed the survey, please click "done" at the end of the survey. Since the survey is taken anonymously, once you click on "done" you cannot withdraw as we will not know which questionnaire is yours.

If you have any questions with regards to the ethical conduct of this study, you may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5, tel.: (613) 562-5387 or [ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca).

In order to minimize the risk of security breaches and to help ensure your confidentiality we recommend that you use standard safety measures such as signing out of your account, closing your browser and locking your screen or device when you are no longer using them / when you have completed the survey.

If you wish to participate in this study, please click "Next" at the bottom of the page.

Please print and keep the consent page for your records.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Alyshea Cummins, PhD Candidate  
Department of Classics & Religious Studies  
University of Ottawa

PhD Supervisor:  
Dr. Peter Beyer  
Department of Classics & Religious Studies  
University of Ottawa

**Consent Form for Interview: Canadian-Ismaili**

**Doctoral Thesis Title: Redefining Islam in Canada: An Ismaili Muslim Movement**

Principal Researcher: Alyshea Cummins, PhD Candidate  
Department of Classics & Religious Studies  
University of Ottawa  
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5

PhD Supervisor: Dr. Peter Beyer  
Department of Classics & Religious Studies  
University of Ottawa  
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5

**Invitation to Participate:** I am invited to participate in the above mentioned research study conducted by Alyshea Cummins.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this project is two-fold. First, the investigator wishes to find out more about how Ismailis in Canada understand and put into practice their cultural and religious identities in multicultural Canadian Society. Second, this project seeks to examine how Ismailis are responding to negative depictions of Islam as individuals and as a community; that is, answering whether Ismailis are attempting to change the way other Canadians view Islam. The investigator is doing this through an on-line survey questionnaire and follow-up interviews aimed at (1) examining cultural and religious belief and practice and, also, (2) whether community members are aware of the various Ismaili-led initiatives set out to nuance the image of Islam in Canada, what they think of them, and whether they are personally engaged in these community efforts.

**Participation:** My participation will consist essentially in taking part in a one-on-one interview conducted through Skype and lasting from 30 minutes to 1 ½ hours. During this interview I will be asked to discuss various issues having to do with my cultural and religious identity, including how I put these identities into practice in my daily life and how I may be aware or perhaps even engaged in various Ismaili-led institutions or programs aimed at changing the way Islam and Muslims are viewed in Canada. The interview is scheduled for \_\_\_\_\_.

**Risks:** My participation in this study will entail no foreseeable risks greater than those that I might face in everyday life.

**Benefits:** Participating in this study will likely be of no direct benefit to me. The study itself, however, will likely be of benefit for our knowledge about Ismailis in Canada, the diversity that exists in Islam more generally, and how this community is actively attempting to change the way Islam is perceived. Given Canada's immigration and multicultural policies and the effect they are having of increasing Canada's religious and cultural diversity, an important question that many people, including public policy makers, immigrants, service groups, community groups, and academic researchers are asking is about the successful

management of this diversity and its foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences. This research will contribute to addressing such issues because it will tell us much more about what is actually happening in people's lives, and specifically how culture and religion may play a key role in working out this diversity. This knowledge will, it is hoped, help us in building a better society.

**Confidentiality and anonymity:** I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for the research purposes as stated above, and that my anonymity will be protected. The interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed, but this recording and transcription will at all times be kept in a safe and secure place as described below. Only the principal researcher and their thesis supervisor will have access to this recording and transcription as well as to any notes taken during the interview. Furthermore my anonymity will be protected in that my real name will not be used in any reports of the findings of this research. In all such reports, in which some of what I say may be quoted, my identity will not be revealed and all information that may identify me will be altered or removed.

**Conservation of data:** The data collected, including the electronic recording and the transcription, as well as analyses of the data by the researcher will be kept in a secure manner. All data will be in electronic form and stored in computers and on data storage devices that are password protected and only the researcher and her supervisor will know the passwords. The main copy of the electronic data will be kept indefinitely on password protected storage devices locked in the research supervisor's office at the University of Ottawa. All other copies of the electronic data will be kept securely for at least 5 years after the results of the study have been published, and then they will be erased or otherwise destroyed.

**Compensation:** I will receive no compensation for participation in this project.

**Voluntary Participation:** I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all that I have said during the interview up until that time will be erased and not used in the research.

**Acceptance:** I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by PhD Candidate, Alyshea Cummins, at the University of Ottawa.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact Alyshea Cummins at the coordinates indicated above.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5; Tel.: (613) 562-5378; Email: [ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca)

I will keep an electronic copy of this consent form and return another electronic copy as an attachment to Alyshea Cummins at [\[email\]](#), indicating in the accompanying email that I have given my consent to participate.

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of consent : \_\_\_\_\_

**Consent Form for Interview: Leadership**

**Doctoral Thesis Title: Redefining Islam in Canada: An Ismaili Muslim Movement**

Principal Researcher: Alyshea Cummins, PhD Candidate  
Department of Classics & Religious Studies  
University of Ottawa  
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5

PhD Supervisor : Dr. Peter Beyer  
Department of Classics & Religious Studies  
University of Ottawa  
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5

**Invitation to Participate:** I am invited to participate in the above mentioned research study under conducted by Alyshea Cummins.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this project is two-fold. First, the investigator wishes to find out more about how Ismailis in Canada understand and put into practice their cultural and religious identities in multicultural Canadian Society. Second, this project seeks to examine how Ismailis are responding to negative depictions of Islam as individuals and as a community; that is, answering whether Ismailis are attempting to change the way other Canadians view Islam. The investigator is doing this through an on-line survey questionnaire and follow-up interviews aimed at (1) examining cultural and religious belief and practice and, also, (2) whether community members are aware of the various Ismaili-led initiatives set out to nuance the image of Islam in Canada, what they think of them, and whether they are personally engaged in these community efforts.

**Participation:** My participation will consist essentially in taking part in a one-on-one interview conducted through Skype and lasting from 25-45 minutes. During this interview I will be asked to discuss my role at \_\_\_\_\_ and what influence this program/institution is seeking to have or may be having an affect on the way Canadians and other non-Ismaili Muslims view “Islam” and Muslims more generally. The interview is scheduled for \_\_\_\_\_.

**Risks:** My participation in this study will entail no foreseeable risks greater than those that I might face in everyday life.

**Benefits:** Participating in this study will likely be of no direct benefit to me. The study itself, however, will likely be of benefit for our knowledge about Ismaili identity Canada, and the diversity that exists in Islam more generally, and how this community is actively attempting to change the way Islam is perceived. Given Canada’s immigration and multicultural policies and the effect they are having of increasing Canada's religious and cultural diversity, an important question that many people, including public policy makers, immigrants, service groups, community groups, and of course academic researchers are asking is about the successful management of this diversity and its foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences. This research will contribute to addressing such issues because it will tell us much more about what is actually happening

in people's lives, and specifically how culture and religion may play a key role in working out this diversity. This knowledge will, it is hoped, help us in building a better society.

**Confidentiality and anonymity:** The interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed, but this recording and transcription will at all times be kept in a safe and secure place as described below. Only the principal researcher and their thesis supervisor will have access to this recording and transcription as well as to any notes that they may take during the interview. Furthermore, I understand that my anonymity cannot be guaranteed because of my public role in the program/institution and because contents from my interview, which may be directly quoted, could potentially identify myself as the speaker even though my real name will not be published. Further, I understand that contents of my interview may be published in the researcher's doctoral thesis and scholarly journals.

**Conservation of data:** The data collected, including the electronic recording and the transcription, as well as analyses of the data by the researcher will be kept in a secure manner. All data will be in electronic form and stored in computers and on data storage devices that are password protected and only the researcher and her supervisor will know the passwords. The main copy of the electronic data will be kept indefinitely on password protected storage devices locked in the research supervisor's office at the University of Ottawa. All other copies of the electronic data will be kept securely for at least 5 years after the results of the study have been published, and then they will be erased or otherwise destroyed.

**Compensation:** I will receive no compensation for participation in this project.

**Voluntary Participation:** I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all that I have said during the interview up until that time will be erased and not used in the research.

**Acceptance:** I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by PhD Candidate, Alyshea Cummins, at the University of Ottawa.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact Alyshea Cummins at the coordinates indicated above.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5; Tel.: (613) 562-5378; Email: [ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca)

I will keep an electronic copy of this consent form and return another electronic copy as an attachment to Alyshea Cummins at [email] , indicating in the accompanying email that I have given my consent to participate.

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of consent: \_\_\_\_\_