

## Introduction

Abdulkader H. Sinno  
*Indiana University*

The field of studying Western Muslim minorities is expanding, with increasing numbers of established scholars shifting some of their research attention to it and quite a few doctoral students writing their dissertations on the topic. The reasons are obvious: the numbers of individuals with some connection to Islam in North America and Western Europe are increasing fairly quickly; the discourses of politicians and the media about them can be exceptionally hostile; immigration, counter-terrorism, and even welfare policies are targeting them *de facto*; a dedicated cadre of highly-mediatised activists relentlessly attacks them and claims that they constitute a fifth column and are incapable of integration; they are discriminated against in employment and education; some public figures portray gender relations within their communities as pathological; and some Western Muslims were involved in attacks on soldiers and citizens of their own countries.

The *Review* invited contributions from five experts in the field to provide a description of the state of knowledge in several substantive areas of research on Western Muslims, to evaluate the methodological state of the art in researching them, and to suggest additional approaches to interested scholars.<sup>1</sup> This is perhaps a good juncture to make such an assessment because the substantial growth of scholarly interest in the topic is both recent and highly segmented

across disciplines and methodological lines. The contributors hope that the review pieces will help to integrate knowledge across disciplines, provide easier entry into this area of research, and illustrate the diversity of methods that could be brought to bear on each area of inquiry. Our target audiences are graduate students who wish to write dissertations on Western Muslims or who started doing so, more advanced researchers looking for an overview that transcends their own discipline or specialty, and colleagues considering migrating to this topic. In the spirit of other *RoMES* special sections and the journal's editorial direction, we intend our essays to be provocative rather than comprehensive, and aim to introduce rather than to complete scholarly conversations.

Two important and connected assumptions underlie the contributions to this project: that it is sensible to define research on Western Muslims as a field and that the term "Western Muslims" is the best one to use even though individuals with a connection to Islam in North America and Western Europe are very diverse. Contributors to this special section of the *Review* do not consider "Muslim" to necessarily mean a religious identity, but an identity that may have religious, racial, political or cultural dimensions. They also do not assume *a priori* that a sense of community exists among Muslims across Western countries or within any of them. Similarly, they do not assume that all Western contexts and publics are similar.

Still, there are very good reasons to use such terms. Muslim identity may be in flux and it may sometimes be irrelevant, but it is hard to escape in the context of today's politics in Western Europe, the United States and Canada (the "West" for short in this collection).<sup>2</sup> For example, I know from my own research that politicians who define themselves as "culturally Muslim" or even as "secular Muslim" find themselves dealing with "Muslim" issues and being considered as "Muslim" by their own political parties, by minority constituents who feel connected to them or indigenous ones who do not trust them, by jealous rivals wishing to discredit them, by the media when they need "Muslim" voices, and by civil society's organizations. Even those who define themselves in opposition to Islam as practiced by their families, such as the former Dutch parliamentarian Ayaan Hirsi Ali, end up being understood (and used) in the context of the broader politics of Western Muslim minorities. More broadly, non-religious members of Muslim minorities are defined as "Muslims" by the media, by Muslim organizations, by religious leaders, and in the speeches of many politicians. Non-Muslim European politicians talk of "Muslims" in their countries nowadays more so than of "Pakistanis" or "Turks." Surveys (Allen and Wike, 2009, *inter alia*) have also shown the substantial consolidation of a "Muslim" identity among Western Muslims, as opposed to ethnic identities. Even if someone from a Muslim background wishes to do

so, it is not easy to escape being a “Muslim” in the West anymore, as many of the studies cited in Erik Bleich’s contribution show. The category may have been created by opponents of Muslims who wanted to create an enemy Other (Shooman and Spielhaus, 2010) but it has now become an inescapable component of identity forged by external pressure and internal dynamics. To borrow from two eloquent contributors to this field of scholarship, Muslims and Islam have been racialized (Jamal 2009) and “being Muslim is not just a matter of faith, but also a sociological fact” (Klausen 2009). Studying Muslim minorities in the West is therefore just as legitimate as studying ethnic or other religious minorities.

There are also substantial analytical and methodological advantages to focusing on Western Muslims as opposed to Muslims generally or Muslim residents of specific countries. As Kambiz GhaneaBassiri argues in his contribution to this collection, knowing something about Muslims in Muslim-majority countries tells us little about Muslims living in the West. And while there are major institutional, sociological, economic, political, demographic and cultural differences across Western countries and across Muslim communities in these countries, processes of globalization and transnationalism keep the dynamics among state, public and Muslim minority within each Western country from being independent from the ones in other countries. Anti-Muslim rhetoric in the United States and many European countries, for example, often borrows from such discourses in other Western countries and advocates of these views spread them across borders in person and through online media and institutional means.<sup>3</sup> Western Muslim thinkers, theologians, and leaders also think and act across borders. For example, the Swiss theologian and Oxford Professor Tariq Ramadan invests his energy in developing a jurisprudence adapted to the situation of minority Muslims that speaks to the concerns and interests of devout Muslims across the West, and the US Islamic Society of North America recently had a Canadian President, Professor Ingrid Mattson. Pan-European and international media also bring news of tensions, terrorist attacks and discrimination in each of these countries to potentially all living rooms and computer screens in the West. And while the European Union has expanded eastward, patterns of immigration only justify including Western European countries with substantial Muslim immigration in the last five decades under this category.

Another advantage of the term “Western Muslims” is that it accurately reflects a sense of belonging and permanence among Muslim individuals who are not immigrants (descendants of immigrants and converts), an increasingly large proportion within these minorities (see Justin Gest’s article). Individuals who practice the religion or who belong to ethnic groups that are traditionally

Muslim are now estimated to make some 1-2% of the North American population and 4.5% of Western Europe's population, and many of them were born in the West.<sup>4</sup> The Pew Foundation (2011a, 124) estimates that the percentage of Muslims in Western and Northern Europe will increase by 57% to 7.1% of the total population by 2030 and that several European countries will have proportions of Muslims that approach or exceed ten percent by then, and quite a few of them will be third and fourth generation citizens of their countries. Of course, many Western Muslims may assimilate to the point of making Muslim identity irrelevant but that does not seem likely in the short run. Muslims are now an integral part of the West and their designation needs to reflect this reality. In addition, using the term "Western Muslim" does not distract from diversity and differences—it allows for comparative studies that explain differences and patterns on the national and even subnational levels. Such comparisons, if rigorous and focused enough, could even be policy-relevant.

In this spirit, the five papers in this collection focus on theories and methods in each area of research instead of regions or countries. The contributors leverage their expertise of such research in comparative context to identify promising research topics and the methods best suited to tackle them. Kambiz GhaneaBassiri discusses the theoretical and methodological possibilities for writing histories of Western Islam and Muslims and makes a case for 'relationality' in particular. Erik Bleich defines the term Islamophobia to allow the measurement of the phenomenon in a way that permits comparison with other types of biases and the tracking of its manifestations and intensity over time and across locales, and suggests strategies for doing so. Justin Gest discusses qualitative and quantitative research on the socio-economic integration of Western Muslims and suggests ways these approaches could dialogue synergistically and be improved upon separately. He also advocates embedding the study of Muslim minorities in the context of migration studies by deemphasizing the role of the religion. Ariane Chebel d'Appollonia charts the landscape of research on security and the civil rights of Western Muslims and suggests new openings in this area. Finally, Abdulkader Sinno describes recent developments in researching the politics of Western Muslim minorities and identifies potential research topics and methods inspired from work on other minorities, particularly in the rich US context.

As with all else in life, we had to make compromises. Our constraints were space and the lack of availability of expertise on some topics that we would have liked to cover in addition to our five core topics. These include gender issues among Western Muslims; theological and cultural developments, including the evolution of religious practices; institutional adjustments and

accommodation; the development of Western mosque communities, sects and institutions; Muslim artistic expression; Western Muslim architecture; the preservation of Western Muslim oral histories; the experiences and roles of converts to Islam in shaping Western Islam; and transnational influences and migrations. We hope that readers will still find our contributions useful. ✧

## Works Cited

- Allen, Jodie T. and Richard Wike. 2009. "How Europe and Its Muslim Populations See Each Other." In *Muslims in Western Politics*, A. H. Sinno, editor. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Jamal, Amaney. 2009. "The Racialization of Muslim Americans." In *Muslims in Western Politics*, A. H. Sinno, editor. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Klausen, Jytte. 2009. "Muslims Representing Muslims in Europe: Parties and Associations After 9/11." In *Muslims in Western Politics*, edited by A. H. Sinno. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Pew Research Center. 2011a. "The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010-2030," Pew Research Center, Forum on Religion & Public Life.
- Pew Research Center. 2011b. "Muslim-Americans: No signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism." Pew Research Center, Forum on Religion & Public Life.
- Shooman, Yasemin and Riem Spielhaus. 2010. The Concept of the Muslim Enemy in the Public Discourse. In *Muslims in Europe and the United States after 9/11*, Jocelyne Cesari, editor, 198-228. London: Routledge.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup>These papers are based on presentations and exchanges at a conference titled "Muslims in the U.S. & Europe: Islamophobia, Integration, Attitudes, and Rights," organized by Abdulkader Sinno at Indiana University on September 23, 2011. Funding and support were provided by several units at Indiana University, including the Center for West European Studies and the Center for the Study of the Middle East.

<sup>2</sup>Australia and New Zealand could also be subsumed under the "West" for the purpose of this topic.

<sup>3</sup>For example, the Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik was inspired by American anti-Muslim activists; the Dutch critic Ayaan Hirsi-Ali was given a position at the American Enterprise Institute to continue authoring her critiques of Islam and Muslims; US Islamophobes and other anti-Muslim writers often mention events in Europe to make their case about the danger of Islam to the United States; and the aggressively anti-Muslim Dutch Freedom party leader Geert Wilders has been invited on many occasions to the United States to spread his views.

<sup>4</sup>37% of Muslim-Americans, for example, were estimated by Pew to have been born in the United States (Pew 2011b). Already in 2001, some 50% of British Muslims were born in the UK (UK Statistics Authority's 2001 Census).