

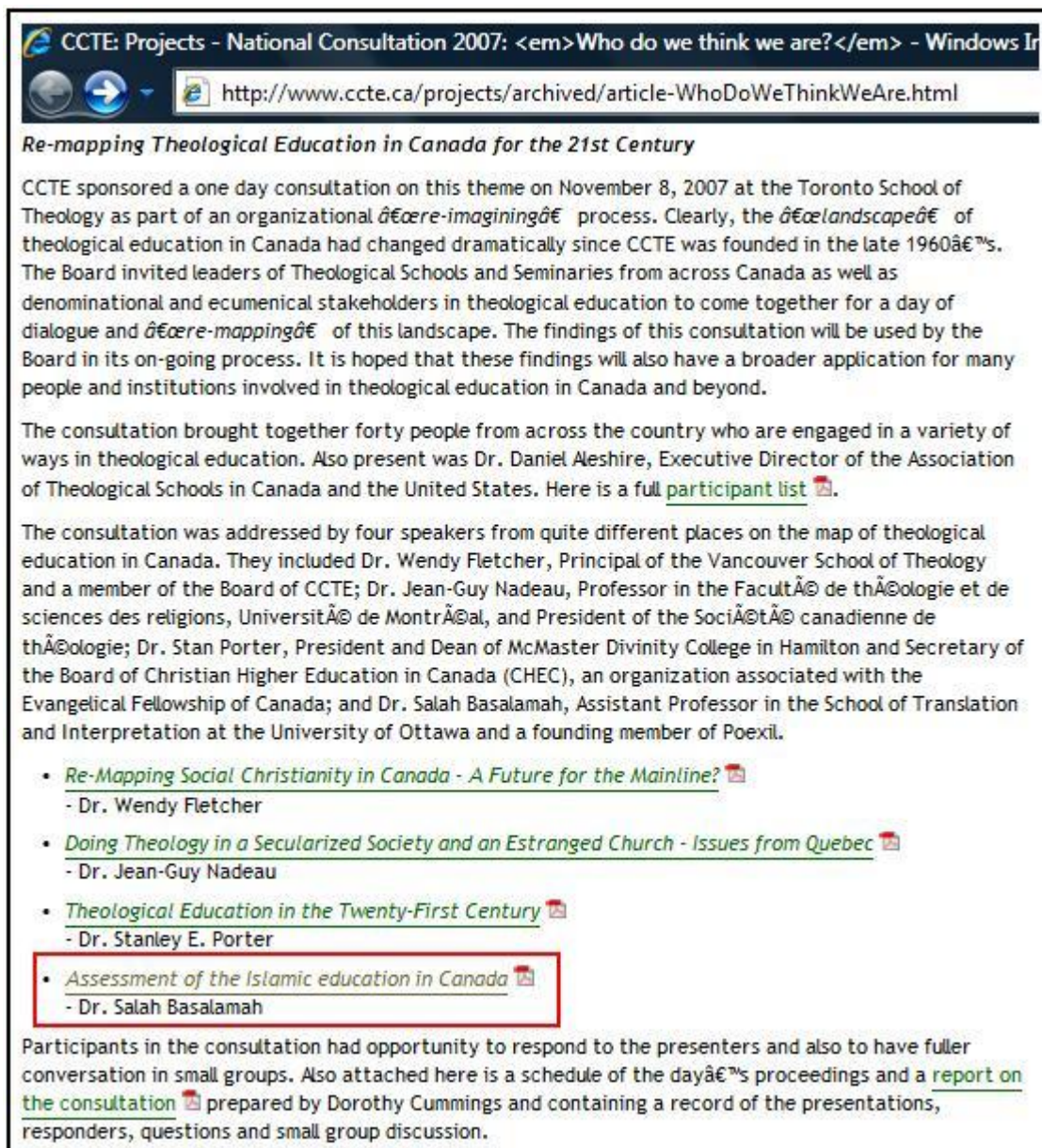
Salah Basalamah – Assessment of the Islamic Education in Canada

Presented to the Churches' Council on Theological Education in Canada

November 8, 2007

Original address (CCTE's presentation): <http://www.ccte.ca/projects/archived/article-WhoDoWeThinkWeAre.html>

Original address (Basalamah's Assessment): http://www.ccte.ca/projects/files/Basalamah_S-AssessmentOfTheIslamicEducationInCanada.pdf



CCTE: Projects - National Consultation 2007: *Who do we think we are?* - Windows Ir

<http://www.ccte.ca/projects/archived/article-WhoDoWeThinkWeAre.html>

Re-mapping Theological Education in Canada for the 21st Century

CCTE sponsored a one day consultation on this theme on November 8, 2007 at the Toronto School of Theology as part of an organizational *re-imagining* process. Clearly, the *landscape* of theological education in Canada had changed dramatically since CCTE was founded in the late 1960s. The Board invited leaders of Theological Schools and Seminaries from across Canada as well as denominational and ecumenical stakeholders in theological education to come together for a day of dialogue and *re-mapping* of this landscape. The findings of this consultation will be used by the Board in its on-going process. It is hoped that these findings will also have a broader application for many people and institutions involved in theological education in Canada and beyond.

The consultation brought together forty people from across the country who are engaged in a variety of ways in theological education. Also present was Dr. Daniel Aleshire, Executive Director of the Association of Theological Schools in Canada and the United States. Here is a full [participant list](#).

The consultation was addressed by four speakers from quite different places on the map of theological education in Canada. They included Dr. Wendy Fletcher, Principal of the Vancouver School of Theology and a member of the Board of CCTE; Dr. Jean-Guy Nadeau, Professor in the Faculté de théologie et de sciences des religions, Université de Montréal, and President of the Société canadienne de théologie; Dr. Stan Porter, President and Dean of McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton and Secretary of the Board of Christian Higher Education in Canada (CHEC), an organization associated with the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada; and Dr. Salah Basalamah, Assistant Professor in the School of Translation and Interpretation at the University of Ottawa and a founding member of Poexil.

- [Re-Mapping Social Christianity in Canada - A Future for the Mainline?](#)
- Dr. Wendy Fletcher
- [Doing Theology in a Secularized Society and an Estranged Church - Issues from Quebec](#)
- Dr. Jean-Guy Nadeau
- [Theological Education in the Twenty-First Century](#)
- Dr. Stanley E. Porter
- [Assessment of the Islamic education in Canada](#)
- Dr. Salah Basalamah

Participants in the consultation had opportunity to respond to the presenters and also to have fuller conversation in small groups. Also attached here is a schedule of the day's proceedings and a [report on the consultation](#) prepared by Dorothy Cummings and containing a record of the presentations, responders, questions and small group discussion.

Assessment of the Islamic education in Canada

Lecture given by Salah Basalamah at the Church's Council on Theological Education - The Toronto School of Theology - Toronto - Thursday November 8, 2007.

Introduction

- Youthfulness and diversity of the Muslim community as well as its institutions: their weakness and fragmentation.
 - As you know, Muslims in Canada are roughly between 650 and 700'000 people of quite recent immigration for the most of them (from about the late seventies and mid eighties) with an important increase in the nineties (due to several crises in the Muslim World).
 - As for the Muslim institutions, you can find at least one mosque in about any middle size town of Canada up to several tens of mosques in large cities such as Toronto or Montreal. Schools are also increasing in numbers. In a small city like Ottawa, notwithstanding the fact it's the National capital, you can find not less than three full time Muslim schools and 7 to 8 weekend Muslim schools.
 - Other than mosques and schools, you'll find dozens of associations offering community services, lobbying, information and community media, bridge building, professional networking, etc. Even though fragmented and inexperienced, it is nonetheless slowly evolving and developing.
 - As a foreword, I'd like to remind you that due to the tremendous variety of Muslim groups, I will be only speaking today about the mainstream Sunni, which constitute approximately 80% of the Muslim community in the West and about a little more in the World scale.
- General framework however, is to set at this stage the main durable objective of Muslims by being in the West as I believe it should be = a dynamic, civic and participative integration within the western cultural context by creating *Muslim Western cultures* while preserving the 4 pillars of *Muslim Identity*:
 - Faith, Practice & Spirituality
 - Reading Texts in light of Context
 - Education & Transmission
 - Action & Participation ...according to Tariq Ramadan (Western Muslims and the Future of Islam, 2004).
- My belief is: given this ultimate objective, Islamic education should be developed accordingly.

Present State of Islamic Education in North America

- As things stand at present, Islamic education in the West in General is still in its infancy. For the purpose of this presentation, I will briefly set the stage by giving an overview of what is being made in terms of Islamic education in the United States, Canada and France.

- In terms of weight, numbers and diversity, the United States hosts the greatest part of the Islamic establishment in North America. You can count about five major Islamic educational Institutions that issue postsecondary diplomas:
 - The **Open Islamic University** based in Alexandria, Virginia. Founded in 1995; it has gone online in 1998. The only program it offers is called "Islamic Studies" and provided in both English and Arabic. Their diplomas are BA, MA and PhD. It is stressed that the American educational authorities have recognized this institution.
 - The **Islamic American University** is one of the most famous ones as it has been endorsed by one of most famous Muslim scholars in the World, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qardawi. Based in the Washington DC area, it provides direct and distance teaching in Arabic and English. Among its main goals is to "Attract both Muslims and non-Muslims in North America to pursue Islamic studies and other academic degree in order to strengthen their connection with Islam and its civilization" as well as "Produce highly educated, balanced and trained scholars who will contribute towards the Islamic reality of North America." One can further notice that among the traditional specialized Islamic courses that are mandatory in the curriculum there is a particular course called "American Government". Which may be give us a hint regarding the main objective for envisaging an enduring Muslim presence in the West.
 - The **Zaytuna Institute** is an educational organization founded in 1996 by famous American preacher and scholar Hamza Yusuf in California. The "school is [...] run by people committed to reviving time-tested methods of educating and transforming human beings." Which means that, while also using very hi-tech means of learning (like podcasting video and audio material online), this institute is stressing the application of traditional methods of learning where the relationship between the teacher and his students has to remain very personalized (not more than 25 students per class). The main goal is not to provide a necessarily recognized academic diploma, but rather to offer "educational programs, materials, and training in the traditional sciences of Islam in the most beautiful way using the most effective tools of our times." In fact, the mission of the Zaytuna Institute is not only to provide knowledge and tradition in order to generate "the next generation of indigenous and relevant scholars" of North America, but also to put "emphasis on across-the-board operational excellence", in other words to offer spiritual guidance by cultivating a sort of coherence between the contents and the forms of knowledge transmission. Suffice it to say that Hamza Yusuf was mainly educated in Mauritania where very traditional Islamic education is widely spread and highly regarded.
 - The **Nawawi Foundation** as well is a non academic educational institution. It has been founded by an American scholar, Dr. Umar Faruq Abdallah (Wyman Landgraf), in 2000. There are three main specificities to this institution, first of which is its "Scholar-in-Residence Program" which consists of "inviting a scholar to the Chicago land area and supporting her or his ongoing independent research activities as well as having the Scholar teach weekly classes on Islamic topics for the benefit of the Chicagoland community." The second special feature of the Nawawi Foundation is its research orientation, especially on the history of Islam in America, as it has recently released an extensive biographical work by Dr. Abdallah on the life of and times of Muhammad Alexander Russell Webb (born in 1846 and died in 1916). The third and last feature are the "organized international cultural-immersion trips [that] provide fun-with-learning opportunities for American Muslims to recognize and appreciate their role in the American and global Muslim communities."
 - And finally, a hybrid American Canadian organization called AlMaghrib which has its

headquarters based in Huston, Texas but has the particularity to move across 10 American and 4 Canadian majors cities to provide its educational services. As opposed to the previous examples, this school does not give distance learning, offers a single space for teaching nor puts emphasis on traditional pedagogical methods. On the contrary, its main purpose is to "provide trademark double-weekend university style seminars carrying students toward a bachelor's degree in the Islamic studies [...] and] provide this service with on-location instruction filled with visual splendor, activities, and rich lectures prepared well in advance by AlMaghrib certified instructors." One of the main features of AlMaghrib is what it calls "Traditional vs. Modern Learning methods and style" which is a kind of conciliation between tradition and modernity:

What do you picture when you think 'traditional' learning? Do you picture the drawing a diagram into the sand? Do you picture the straightforward five-minute lessons that the Prophet would give?

Many of the 'modern' techniques now used in universities and schools are in fact found in the Sunnah of the Prophet and are a part of our Islamic heritage.

When someone applies these techniques, they are not, in reality, departing from 'traditional' learning. On the contrary, they are looking deeper into the techniques that the used.

At AlMaghrib Institute, our instructors seek to apply many of the prophetic techniques of teaching knowledge, and to use methods that allow students to interact and understand the material presented in a deeper and longer-lasting way.

The following methods are used in our trademark AlMaghrib double-weekend seminars:

- Instructors assign recommended reading and share tips on how to prepare academically, mentally, and spiritually for the seminar, so that students can familiarize themselves with the material and maximize the benefit they acquire from the seminar.
- The seminars will usually be comprised of six days of instruction: with classes on Friday evening and all day Saturday and Sunday for two consecutive weekends.
- The seminar will include interactive sessions and activities such as Jam sessions and Gem boards, which encourage students to interact with the material they have learned and introduce them to innovative, reflective ways of expressing their thoughts and feelings about the seminar.
- Power Point presentations and other Audio/Visual methods are routinely used during the seminars.

Each student registered for the seminar receives a binder that outlines the material and facilitates absorption of the information taught.

- One can also mention the **individual Muslim scholars** who can be found in the mainstream Universities of North America. One example is Muslim scholar and Canadian born **Professor Ingrid Mattson** who teaches at the Duncan Black Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian/Muslim Relations at the Hartford Seminary, in Connecticut.
- As for the Canadian religious educational institutions for adults, the only one I know is the **Islamic Institute of Toronto** founded and run by Sheikh Ahmad Kutty. Except from the fact it has a huge multimillion campus project to be built on 8 acres in the north east of Toronto, I think it is the most ambitious project of Islamic education in North America as it is the only one that specifically mentions 3 elements that draw my attention:
 1. The necessity and priority to address its services to Muslim men and women equally as "seeking knowledge about the essentials of religion is an obligation on both males and females."
 2. The "ijazah" or IIT curriculum "aims to train and prepare capable religious leaders and preachers who can fill positions such as Imams for the mosques, preachers, Muslim chaplains

as well as Teachers/instructors of Islamic studies for high schools and colleges."

3. Modern issues addressed in few courses of the curriculum in order to contextualize readings of the Islamic scriptures, such as "Exegesis in the Modern World" and "Islam in the contemporary world".
- Which means that it has assessed the fact that there is not only an appeal of the Muslim identity to transmit the Islamic knowledge, but also an enduring and civic perspective on this very transmission through institution building in order to establish deeper roots in the Canadian soil.
 - This orientation can be also found in the French based "**European Institute for Human Sciences**" (IESH) founded in 1990. In addition to its first center in Bouteloin, next to Chateau-Chinon (the little town where late President François Mitterand was born), it has now two other branches, in Paris and in Wales (on the West coast, south of Liverpool). It was designed to respond to the increased awareness in the European Muslim communities that it became permanently established in the West for which it needed to bring to the fore stable Islamic structures that could offer an Islamic instruction from within the European competencies for the European citizens. Although all courses are provided in Arabic (with intensive Arabic courses offered as a basic training before even beginning the actual curriculum), its main objective is clearly stated: "to provide Europe with Muslim leaders who would have at the same time theological and scientific qualification as well as a deep understanding of the western cultural reality" stressing the fact that it is the "best means in order to positively integrate the Muslims in the European societies." As a matter of fact, the first mission of the EISH is to train imams and spiritual educators. Notwithstanding the political advantage that the French government could have taken from this very mission, as it has already through the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman or the French Council of the Muslim Cult, directly established by Nicolas Sarkozy when he was the Minister of Interior, favoring the training of Imams, in France and Europe more generally, was for the Muslim community a way of expressing its independence from the Muslim countries and especially from the political and financial influence of their governments. In fact, this latter consideration is the sine qua non condition for the emergence of a properly indigenous Western Muslim scholarship and institutions.

Present issues regarding the function and prerogatives of Imams

- Drawing on what we have seen in the previous section, I'd like now to bring you back to Canada and especially to Quebec where a very hot debate has taken place among the Muslim community, more precisely within a large discussion group of more than a hundred Muslim activists in the Montreal area.
- The story is about a Tunisian Imam called Said Jaziri, a 40 year old refugee who entered Canada about 10 years ago. May be you have heard of him...
Approximately 18 months ago, at the time of the Cartoon crisis was at its peak, Imam Jaziri went on calling the Muslim community of Montreal to get on the streets and protest against the Danish cartoons among others portraying the Prophet Muhammad with a bomb in place of a turban, the Canadian authorities started to enquire about Jaziri who seemed to have concealed a criminal record he had in France before coming to Canada as a refugee. The result of which his refugee status was revoked a year ago and he finally was deported last month, right after he was invited to numerous TV shows. The first one, where the host (Luck Mervil) invited him at his home with other religious representatives, he has shocked everyone as he has asked during the show that no

one drinks wine in his presence, otherwise he would be forced to leave. The scandal was so big that he was invited to several other TV shows to explain his stance. He kept saying that it's not his own decision, but the Islamic teachings' according to prophetic tradition (which is right by the way); that this is the only way to act for a Muslim believer when faced with alcohol at a table. His blunt statements attracted so many comments and curiosity that he was invited to the most viewed show in Quebec, called "Tout le monde en parle", a kind of social and cultural gossip where anything recent in the realm of culture and society is commented directly with the people concerned. On the day of the show, he didn't show up, saying his wife was ill and he couldn't come. The comments of disappointment and criticism were so hard on him that anyone would have said: it is really fortunate he didn't go, otherwise he would have been literally lynched. The next morning the Borders police have arrested him and kept in custody until the issuance of an order of deportation that was eventually executed the very next week with the pathetic appearances of his pregnant and crying Canadian wife in front of the cameras on the way out of the hearings.

- The discussions that went along the whole story until very recently, have emphasized two main streams of thought:
 1. The Imam doesn't represent us and he shouldn't have taken that stance or he shouldn't even have appeared on TV at all.
 2. The Imam is a scholar (although not much respected) and one of the leaders of the community; he has the right and duty to speak by virtue of these qualities (even if he didn't have expressed himself in the most acceptable way).
- In fact, along the discussions there was a number of very important questions that have been raised:
 1. What is an Imam and what are his functions in a Western context?
 2. What are his prerogatives, powers and legitimacy in taking the floor in the media?
 3. What should be the role of an Imam in a context where the Muslim community is targeted as in Quebec?
 4. What are the complementarities and differences between a second-generation community leader and an Imam who is most probably a first generation immigrant and very much influenced by his original cultural background?
 5. What are the conventional misconceptions about the function of Imam in a Western Christian context?
- All these questions are too extensive to be answered here, but let me summarize by saying that:
 1. Imams (in mainstream Sunnism) are not bishops or archbishops as one can find in the hierarchies of the Church. They are only religiously educated people who traditionally have not to demonstrate any formal education diplomas (especially in Muslim diasporas), but only competence in leading the prayer (which means good and by heart recitation of the Quran), giving Friday sermons and preaching.
 2. The right to speak for the community is never given to anyone nor it can. But there are criteria: among them a) an excellent mastering of the local knowledge - which means at least language, rhetoric and culture, and b) a firmly resolved priority for bridge building and cultural translation between the Muslim citizens and the larger community for a peaceful coexistence.
- This means that in order for an Imam or whoever it may be to speak for the Muslims (even though not formally mandated), the first objective should be the same one I have stated in the

beginning of my talk: "to aim for a dynamic, civic and participative integration within the western cultural context by creating *Muslim Western cultures* while preserving the *Muslim Identity*"

Conclusion

- All this, fundamentally raises the question of representation of the Muslim community.
- As for the any polemical questions, there are always broadly two sets of opinions:
 1. We should have - as any other community - people who should be chosen among ourselves in order to represent us officially, be it to dialogue with governmental authorities or in the media.
 2. Representation is a pitfall where political forces will have the opportunity to manipulate the community through their representatives more than ever. Moreover, it is considered as an artificial body as long as it has not been designated democratically, hence transparently.
- Whatever may be the result, sooner or later, what's compelling for me in this kind of discussion is how usually they are conducted, in fact very symptomatically like a natural minority would do it. That fragile state of being that make us react to danger as if we were sure that the danger was clear and present, not an illusion at all.
- If we are really in a place where we would like to create a new Muslim culture, a Western Muslim culture, then we should play the game more faithfully, more trustfully and de-center ourselves from our limited sphere of the tighter determination to a broader one, one that would translate us from the private sphere of a particular community to the public sphere of the larger one, - I mean by that of citizenship.
- My message to my community (and to other so called visible minorities) is to reform our language in order to be able to reform our minority mentalities. In order to know how to translate into a more common ground, we need to open up and learn the language of the "common" as defined by Hardt and Negri (2004).

Report on Salah Basalamah's presentation by the CCTE

Original address: <http://www.ccte.ca/projects/files/ReportOnTheNationalConsultation-WhoDoWeThinkWeAre.pdf>

Report on the National Consultation

"Who Do We Think We Are? Re-mapping theological education in Canada in the 21st century"

Organized by The Churches' Council on Theological Education in Canada:
An Ecumenical Foundation

Thursday, November 8, 2007
Toronto School of Theology
University of Toronto
47 Queen's Park Crescent East
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Report on CCTE Consultation "Who do we think we are? Re-mapping theological education in Canada in the 21st century."

The consultation began at 9:30 AM on Thursday, November 08, 2007 after an informal gathering around coffee and breakfast pastries. Dr. Robert Faris welcomed the participants, gave a brief summary of the historical context of the CCTE and introduced the organizational structure of the day. The day was divided into four units, each consisting of a lecture, a response and small conversational groups. Each group selected a secretary and/or leader to guide and record the conversation.

Unit 4

Dr. Salah Basalamah (University of Ottawa) on the birth of an Islamic western culture

Dr. Salah Basalamah gave a presentation that touched on Muslims' hope to put down roots in the west, Islamic schools opening in North America and France, and the issue of who may represent the Islamic community. As time was short, small group discussions were replaced with an extended question and answer session.

There are between 650,000 and 700,000 Muslims in Canada today. Their schools are increasing in number; there are now 3 full-time and 7 or 8 weekend Muslim schools. Eighty percent of Muslims in the West are Sunnis, but there are a variety of Muslim groups in Canada.

The main objective of Muslims in the West is to create Muslim western cultures while preserving the four pillars of Islam. These were defined by [Oxford University-based scholar] Tariq Ramadan in 2004 as faith and the practice of spirituality; reading texts; educating and transmitting the first two pillars; and action and participation. Islamic education is still in its infancy in Canada and the USA, but the USA already hosts five major Islamic educational post-secondary institutions: Open Islamic University in Alexandria, VA; Islamic American University in Washington, D.C.; Zeytuna Institute [in California]; Nawawi Foundation in Chicago; and Al-Maghreb in Texas. Dr. Basalamah gave a brief description of each school, noting that courses were in Arabic or English and that Islamic American University offers a course called "American governance" which, the professor said, "may give us a hint regarding the main objective for envisioning an enduring Muslim presence in the

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West." He noted the presence of such Muslim scholars as Ingrid Matson in mainstream American universities.

In Canada, there is only one Islamic school of higher education, in Toronto. However, there is a multimillion dollar project to build a larger school north of the city. Dr. Basalamah observed the necessity of catering to men and women, a curriculum that trains leaders, preachers and teachers of Islamic studies in colleges and high schools, and the formation of a civic perspective in order for the Islamic community to establish deep roots.

In 1990 IESH was established in France to respond to Muslims' realization that they were permanently established in the west. Although courses are solely in Arabic, the school's objective is to provide Europe with Muslim leaders. Its goal is to positively integrate Muslims into European society.

Dr. Basalamah turned to controversies over the role of the imam. He outlined the case of Said Jaziri, the refugee [claimant] who, eighteen months ago, told people to go on the streets [of Montreal] to protest the publication of cartoons in a Danish newspaper. Canadian authorities investigated and discovered that Jaziri had concealed a criminal record in France. He was deported [to his native Tunisia]. Before he was removed from the country, he aroused much media interest, especially when he caused even more controversy by refusing to sit with people drinking wine. There were two main opinions voiced by the Islamic community in Quebec: the first was that the imam didn't represent them, and the second was that the imam was a scholar, although not a well-respected one, and a community leader; he had the right to speak because of these qualities.

Imams are not bishops, explained Dr. Basalamah. They are religiously educated people who may have no formal education. No Muslim can speak for the Muslim community per se but the criteria for a Muslim speaking to non-Muslims about Islam are mastery of the local language and culture and an ability to build bridges between Islamic people and the local population. It is a question of representation, and on this there are two sets of opinions: first, that Muslims should have official representatives and second, that representation is a pitfall, subject to outside pressures. What is compelling for Dr. Basalamah is how the discussion is carried out. A fragile state causes Muslims to fear [negative possibilities] as if they were real. Meanwhile, there is a need to create an Islamic western culture and Islamic western citizenship. Muslims need, he said, to learn the "language of the common [common language]."