

# LOCAL TALES OF SUFISM IN QUEBEC: SECULAR POLITICS OF MODERATION AND THE PRODUCTION OF CHARISMATIC MUSLIMS

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**Abstract:** *Through exploring the representations and political participation of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufi order of Montreal, this article analyses the relationship between Sufism, secularity, and political authority in Quebec in ongoing debates around religious “moderation” and State neutrality laws post-9/11. I offer an in-depth but necessarily bounded ethnographic account of this Sufi group in an attempt to expose a process of localisation and instrumentalisation of a particular Muslim identity in Quebec reflecting local pressures of religious reformation. I will argue that the charisma attached to the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufi order, as articulated by politicians as well as non-Muslim Montrealers, is one that has emerged most particularly in the past 15 years and is embodied in the current local leader of the community, Shaykh Omar Koné. Yet, this charisma operates within centuries-old Orientalist discourses about Sufism and Islam, and most notably is validated in Quebec through recent secular politics of “moderation” and State neutrality bills as heritage of the 1960 Quiet Revolution. Writing as a French-Canadian, in this article, I will offer an insight into the construction of a Sufi consciousness in Quebec, a tale that I trace through multiple accounts, though primarily through my interactions at the Montreal Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufi Centre and with their imam, Shaykh Omar Koné from 2014 to 2017.*

**Keywords:** Islam, Sufism, Quebec, Naqshbandi-Haqqanis, moderate, Quiet Revolution

Since 9/11, North American governmental bodies have institutionalised a fear of Islam and pressures to reform Muslims through different laws, from policing Muslim citizens and targeting certain religious behaviours or dress as incompatible with “Western values”, as well as restricting immigration policies towards Muslim countries and newcomers.<sup>1</sup> In Quebec, this mistrust of Muslims is conflated with secularity debates and State neutrality policies, wherein politics of “moderation” are asserted to define “desirable citizens”, and “appropriate” religious accommodations. Muslims have been cast as threatening to the province’s

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security and identity, politically and culturally, and thus in need of “religious reformation” as articulated in successive State neutrality laws since 2010. As seen in provincial politics and social debates, the legitimacy of Muslims as desirable and non-threatening citizens is regularly challenged through these different State neutrality laws.<sup>2</sup>

These policies and surrounding discourses in favour of a reformed, anti-religious secular State neutrality speak to the historical and mythological view of Quebec as a separate people and nation under threat of outside pressures. Quebec’s politics of secularity and what I call “religious moderation” as articulated since the 1960s are informed by its history as a distinct Francophone nation that has fought to liberate its (French) people from English domination, and thus is constantly under the threat of losing its Francophone identity, historically tied to its Catholic heritage and “innocent” white-settler roots.

In order to understand the centrality of the Quebecois psyche of victimhood that dominates discourses around secularity and “moderation” today in Quebec, I will first briefly examine notable historical moments that have shaped Quebecers’ rapport with the nation, immigrants, and religious identity in the twentieth century. Three specifically Quebecois phenomena are surveyed as relating to this development in which notions of victimhood are tied to language, loss of identity, and power dynamics. Then I will shift to my anthropological discussion and explore the impact of this quest for Islamic moderation that embodies Orientalist notions of “authenticity” within a specific Muslim group, namely the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufi Order of Montreal, based on my fieldwork from 2014 to 2017. I will address the interactions between this centre’s leader, Shaykh Omar Koné, public opinion, and Quebec governmental bodies on questions of immigration, citizenship, and “moderation” in relation to State neutrality laws. This anthropological discussion will bring me to my concluding points regarding the ongoing Eurocentric quest for “moderate Islam” and Orientalist notions of Muslim “authenticity” in local Quebecois imaginaries.

The period of this study, 2001–2017, reflects a phase in which the Naqshbandi-Haqqani group was particularly socially and politically active in Montreal. During my fieldwork, from November 2014 to July 2017, I conducted informal interviews with members at the Sufi Centre on my visits, usually Thursdays or Saturdays while they hosted bi-weekly zikr circles, followed by communal meals. Formal interviews were conducted one-on-one with Shaykh Omar Koné on three different occasions. During those years, I also interviewed members of other non-exclusively Muslim Sufi groups to explore different adherences to Sufism.

My fieldwork at the Sufi Centre was facilitated by the fact that I am a bilingual Francophone. I could understand Shaykh Koné’s sermons, predominantly held in French (at least during my visits), as well as interact easily with members who

spoke French and English. As a white female French-Canadian who adhered to the mainstream religious Islamic decorum at the Sufi Centre, female members often assumed I was another local convert, despite disclosing my positionality as a researcher from the get-go and restated when approached. I suspect that a familiarity with white female Quebecois converts facilitated my fieldwork, as female members were perhaps more willing to discuss with me their own experiences with this Sufi Centre, spirituality, or being a Muslim in Quebec more broadly.

### **Tracing the Politics of Moderation in Quebecois Secularity and its Relation to Muslims**

In this section, I will give an overview of the linguistic and religious politics that have shaped Quebec in order to analyse the evolution of the Eurocentric, proto-Catholic concept of secularity and the resulting politics of what I call “*Catholicate*” moderation in this province. This analysis will address the politics of victimhood in Quebec towards the Anglo-Canadian majority and other minorities, specifically Muslims in this case, and the Quiet Revolution as the foundation of State neutrality laws conceived since 2010.<sup>3</sup> My goal is to expose the defining politics of “moderation” in nation-building and religious belonging today, which are articulated in State neutrality laws.

The Quiet Revolution (*la Révolution tranquille*), which took place in Quebec from 1960 to about 1970, is conceived as the turning point historically that gave rise to a distinct *Québécois* identity while inscribing State secularity, gender equality, and the place of religious minorities in a (white) Francophone-dominated Quebec.<sup>4</sup> In the Quebecois psyche, State neutrality bills are meant to protect “our values,” which are in turn directly correlated to the Quebecois identity as imagined in the revolutionary myth that the Quiet Revolution symbolises. State neutrality bills embody “extensions” of this “traumatising” social battle fought with the Catholic Church for secularity and for women’s rights in Quebec.

Having said this, the reality of the post-Quiet Revolution secular state in Quebec is much more complicated than recognising the white Francophone majority’s trauma. The break performed between State and Church, wherein Quebecers departed *en masse* from Catholicism, was performed at the surface and organisational level, in an attempt by white French-Canadians to seek “control over the major economic, social, and political institutions in the province,” which were held by the Church and English-Canadians prior to the 1960s (Mugabo 2016b: 11).<sup>5</sup> The Quiet Revolution was performed by the white French-speaking majority to liberate white Quebecers from British-English domination and further assimilate non-white, and non-Catholic, Canadians living in Quebec into the “secular,” yet *Catholicate*, Quebecois nation.

Today, the white French-Canadian majority associates the trauma carried over from the separation of Church and State with Quebec's self-imaginary and nation-building efforts, which now reject all other religious organisations from the public sphere as an extension of the Quiet Revolution. This reactionary attitude is reflected today in the animosity towards so-called "orthodox non-secular" ethno-religious groups, as witnessed in the early 2000s with the "accommodation crisis".<sup>6</sup> Whether legitimate or not, the Quebec majority claims that these debates have revived old wounds within a segment of society and renewed fears towards religious minorities, Muslims women wearing the hijab or the niqab being at the crossroads of the Quiet Revolution's focus on both State neutrality and gender equality in the minds of many.<sup>7</sup>

The newly imagined *Québécois* political ideology upheld the sense of victimhood that dominated the pre-1960s Quebec politics against the Anglo majority, but under the banner of State neutrality following the "privatization of religion". As such, the founding myth of the "Québécois identity", based on historical amnesia and racial discourses of victimhood as imagined by French-nationalist historians and politicians, propelled "politics of moderation" as demands within State neutrality laws to legitimate belonging to the *Catholicate* nation. These politics of secularity and the demands of "moderation" are exemplified in the perceived crisis of religious accommodations propelled by minorities' practices.

Motivated by the ongoing social unrest around the 2003–2008 "accommodation crisis", and the fear provoked by debates around "proper" religious demands and the place of religions in the public sphere, the Party Québécois, then a minority government headed by Pauline Marois, proposed the "Charter of Values" or Bill 60 ("Charter affirming the values of State secularism and religious neutrality and of equality between women and men, and providing a framework for accommodation requests") in September 2013. Their aim was to rigidify the separation of Church and State in Quebec and provide a framework for accommodation requests. Amongst its five proposals, the Charter focused on the neutrality of the State, equality between women and men, and on "conspicuous" religious symbols.<sup>8</sup> The religious symbols directly targeted were the Muslim hijab, the Sikh turban, and the Jewish *kippah*. Support for the Charter mainly came from secular French-Canadians who fear religious fundamentalists and from feminist groups that perceive the hijab as patriarchal oppression of women, and thus a "challenge" to Quebec's values, or the "most valued heritage" of the Quiet Revolution.

The Charter of Values points to another instance where the "identity question" has been used to create division, mobilise voters, and assert the majority's demands towards minorities by exploiting local cultural insecurities, in this case triggered by the religious "accommodation crisis". The old sentiment of victimhood was recycled through an appeal both to Quebec's reshaped identity

post-Quiet Revolution, as well as its “traditional values” and Francophone roots that have historically been tied to and defended by the Catholic Church. As such, *Catholicate* State neutrality laws such as Bill 60 propose a clear institutional and social model of reformation for religious minorities as a new “moral contract” to be recognised as “desirable citizens” in Quebec.

This reformation, considered “moderate” by adherents because in line with the white majority’s values, acknowledges at once the heritage of the Quiet Revolution, its trauma for French-Canadian Catholics and women, as well as the primacy of the *Catholicate* legacy of the Catholic Church.<sup>9</sup> In other words, Bill 60 was proposed in a climate of fear of the “Other” and recycled the “crisis narrative” of the myth of victimhood to legitimise demands called “moderate” towards religious identity in the public sphere and perpetuate a discourse of protectionism amongst white French-Canadians against the religious reformation of minorities, notably Muslims, and more particularly Muslim women.<sup>10</sup>

After the failure of Bill 60, the Quebec Liberals, under premier Philippe Couillard, proposed Bill 62 in 2016, “An Act to foster adherence to State religious neutrality and, in particular, to provide a framework for requests for accommodations on religious grounds in certain bodies (modified title)”. Bill 62 was proposed as a more moderate version of Bill 60, yet was suspended as soon as it was passed because its application was not feasible and taken to court. The bill wanted to prevent individuals, namely full-faced-burqa-wearing and niqabi women, from accessing public services for security reasons (including public transport).

In response to the accommodation “crisis” beginning in 2003, the political discourse in Quebec – which includes scholars – has sought to find a “moderate” religious space against the persistent negative attitudes towards Muslims and Islam. Due to enduring Orientalist assessments of Islam, Arab and Muslim communities have remained circumscribed within a set of elements of Arab culture perceived as immutable and strongly rooted in an assumption that Islam is inherently violent, which ignores temporal and local political situations (Antonius 2006: 256). Instead of challenging such Eurocentric depictions, politicians, civil groups, and researchers alike have sought alternative “moderate” Muslim voices that suit the intercultural-*Catholicate* negotiations and demands of post-Quiet Revolution Quebecois society.

For instance, while studying Muslim communities in Quebec, Donna McDonough concludes that Sufism, and Sufis, could serve a particular function in Canada by providing an alternative picture of Muslim identity to counter the “demonization of Islam” pervasive post-9/11 in Western media (2005: 134). McDonough discussed how in the early 2000s a number of Muslim Canadian immigrants turned to Sufism to “find sources for a spiritual dimension in their lives to counter the confusion created by the challenges of a life in a new and demanding culture” (2005: 133).

However, the existence of this “alternative space,” provided by Sufism, is itself inscribed in Orientalist depictions of Sufism as an apolitical, inherently peaceful, and therefore non-threatening spirituality as opposed to Islam.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, Marie-Nathalie Leblanc published an ethnographic study on the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufi Order of Montreal that falls along the lines of previous scholarship in Quebec looking at “privileged sites for intercultural tolerance and for the production of cosmopolitan identities” (2013: 426). Her research reflects the broader trends in Quebecois society that ignore the racial historical processes mentioned above, pointing to the so-called “renewed concern for vivre ensemble” following Quebec’s accommodation “crisis” (Leblanc 2013, 425). Leblanc’s research and epistemological enquiry points to the problematic assimilationist politics of moderation towards Muslims in Quebec that reinforce a *Catholic-lite* secular State, while endorsing an Orientalist view of Sufism as the modern and moderate form of Islam. These appeals to Sufism do not operate in a vacuum, but are tainted by preconceived ideas of a non-Islamist apolitical Sufism, wherein this perennial Orientalist, romantic idealisation shapes the construction and “authentication” process of moderate Muslims in Quebec.

In the next section, I will build on my fieldwork from 2014 to 2017 to problematize both the social discourse and the Quebec governmental bodies’ appeal to the Sufi Naqshbandi-Haqqanis, and more precisely to Shaykh Omar Koné as an “authentic” charismatic Sufi. In doing so, I will problematize ideas of “moderateness” attributed to Sufi groups in Quebec as “charismatic Muslims” and their ensuing political potential. The Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufi Order of Montreal and the demands placed on them by researchers and politicians since 2001 epitomise the state of moderation that are the pressures of *Catholicate* reformation and Quebecois citizenship today, based on the province’s assimilationist history and linguistic politics.

### **Politics of Identity and (Re)formation: Performing Sufi Moderation in Quebec**

The Naqshbandi-Haqqani order was founded by Shaykh Nazim al-Qubrusi al-Haqqani (1922–2014), a native of Cyprus who joined the Naqshbandiyya of Dagestan (Russia) after finding his spiritual teacher, Shaykh ‘Abdallah al-Daghestani (d. 1973), in Damascus (Syria) in 1945 (Nielsen et al. 2006: 104).<sup>12</sup> Following the death of his teacher, “Shaykh Nazim received permission ‘from the Prophet (Muhammad) to spread the light of Islam into European countries,’” marking the beginning of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani sub-branch (Werbner 2003 in Damrel 2006: 117).<sup>13</sup> Across the many Haqqani branches, we can identify common themes such as the attitude to political authority, the looseness of definition of “membership”, and the centrality of

their internet platform in sharing information regarding their order and the Muslim world (Nielsen et al. 2006, 103).<sup>14</sup>

Appointed as Shaykh Nazim Haqqani's representative, Shaykh Hisham Kabbani has been working on articulating a positive image of Islam in the United States through marked interfaith and integration efforts since the early 1990s (Hermansen 2000: 184). Shaykh Kabbani established the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order politically in the United States with activities like meeting the Clintons at the White House, which was featured on the cover of their *Muslim Magazine* (Hermansen 2004: 44). Notably, Shaykh Kabbani was invited in 1999 to a Washington, DC State Department forum on Islam which focused on the positive role Sufism can play in US policies. On this occasion, Shaykh Kabbani told the audience "that he had visited over one hundred American mosques and found 80 percent of them to be run by 'extremists' and 'fundamentalists'" (Corbett 2016: 88). While Kabbani's comment was heavily criticised by broader Muslim communities, which ostracised his group, it nonetheless "reinforced the tendency among State Department officials to identify Sufis as peaceful, apolitical, and moderate and to view all other Muslims as possible extremists" (Corbett 2016: 88).

Following 9/11, this tendency to view Sufism as "moderate Islam" was further reinforced in the United States. As documented in *Making Moderate Islam*, Rosemary Corbett investigates the correlation between Sufism, Muslim moderation, and economic affluence in post-9/11 America through the central figure of Shaykh Feisal Abdul Rauf. Following 9/11, Rauf advocated for Muslim moderation and Americanness along the lines of "Abrahamic commonality" to facilitate Muslim assimilation in the United States. Constructed over two decades of public speeches, sermons at mosques, interfaith activities, and published books, Rauf's message became widely acknowledged as the desirable American Muslim voice, so much so that the US State Department cooperated with Rauf on many projects (Corbett 2016: 92). As Corbett explains, Rauf's message of "moderate Islam" is problematic for a number of reasons, one of which is its emphasis on the social and economic mobility of "affluent Muslims" that ignores the political dimensions and racial discrimination against black Americans (2016: 4).<sup>15</sup> The authority granted to Rauf as the moderate Muslim voice embodies at once the "apolitical Sufi" discourse in the United States as well as its impact on Muslim communities.

These dynamics around moderate Islam similarly play out in the case of the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis in the United States as well as in Montreal. The label of moderateness attached to their identity, as I will further demonstrate, is at once articulated by the group's leaders in non-Muslim and secular circles, while also reinforced by their recourse to Orientalist depictions of Sufism and spirituality in line with New Age spirituality. In the case of Quebec, being perceived as "moderate" works to

legitimise their religious identity and reach broader adherents. In order to do so, Shaykh Koné has appealed to particular Quebecois sensibilities, namely language and religion in the public sphere. In responding to local pressures for a “moderate Islam” that is familiar and non-threatening, the Naqshbandi-Haqqani of Montreal perpetuate certain Orientalist stereotypes around Sufism that resonate with New Age ideas and Quebec’s aversion for established religions.

In debates around universal and traditional or orthodox Sufism in North America, the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order remains unique and central as characteristically American in its outreach, influence, and community. Studied as a transnational order in the United States, Genn describes the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis as “non-traditional institutions [. . .] blending traditional and universalistic elements” (2007: 257). Consequently, this order challenges conventional dichotomous rigid categories of traditional-orthodox Sufi orders versus New Age non-Islamic Sufi orders. As discussed by William Rory Dickson, the leaders, members, and their practices might simultaneously embody both categories (2015). Whereas groups “ostensibly” New Age or non-Islamic in outlook may retain traditional practices rooted in Islam, other Sufi groups who follow mainstream Islamic orthodoxy manage to incorporate pluralistic understandings of Sufism that accommodate local sensibilities and New Age spirituality (Dickson 2015: 2013).<sup>16</sup> I would argue that the latter is the case of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order.

As an example of their universalistic approach, Shaykh Hisham Kabbani participated jointly with Pīr Zia Inayat-Khan in a number of events and conferences, such as the “Meeting of the Five Sheikhs” in 2000, “featuring Sufi teachers advocating a range of shari’a adherence” (Hermansen 2004: 46). Overall, both Shaykhs Nazim Haqqani and Hisham Kabbani have been particularly involved in such outreach, showing respect to all manifestations of Sufism in North America, including non-exclusively Muslim ones. In line with the spiritual leaders of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order, Shaykh Omar Koné has adopted a similar approach to traditional/universal within his local community and outreach work.

With the growth of Muslim communities in the 1970s, organised Sufi groups emerged in Quebec in the 1980s. In 2000, the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufi Order of Montreal had become one of the most active groups. Introduced in Montreal in 1984, the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order grew rapidly and drew a significant number of locals through its marked outreach to French-Canadians along the lines of New Age spirituality (Hermansen 2000: 176). While strongly rooted in Islam, the Naqshbandi-Haqqani approach is rather fluid than fixed, as exemplified in its focus on the universal truth of Sufism and liberal stance on official conversion to Islam. Considering the “anti-church, anti-religion reaction” of Quebecois society since the 1960s’ Quiet Revolution, the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order has introduced “more formal” aspects of the tradition in a gradual manner to draw and accommodate its



Quebecois members (Hermansen 2000: 176). The hybrid space distinctive of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order is further made possible through its capacity to tap into popular romanticised discourses around Sufi mysticism as universal and apolitical, and therefore non-threatening to secular ideals, as mentioned.

The Sufi Centre of Montreal, located on Fairmount Street in Montreal's Mile End neighbourhood, is a distinctively multicultural space; it does not claim any particular ethnic affiliation with a noticeable number of local converts.<sup>17</sup> It also fosters an active online presence with a strong North American community, a characteristic of the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis worldwide. Though their Muslim identity online is transnational, their projected religious affiliation in Montreal follows the dominant demands of Quebecois society to be "moderate", while also "authentic". As I will demonstrate, their public identity is amenable to the normative post-Quiet Revolution Quebecois notions of immigration, secularity, and Islam described above, which reaffirm Orientalist romanticised tropes about Sufism. The perception that their activism and civil engagement, or their "cosmopolitan identity", are a result of their "willingness" to adapt to their environment in Quebec is at once an erasure of the political history of Sufi groups, as well as an idea that supports eighteenth-century Orientalist depictions of Sufism as an apolitical tradition. Moreover, this assumption ignores and normalises the racial demands imposed by politics of moderation upon Muslim communities to be considered legitimate Quebecois, a point to which I will return.

From 1995 to 2010, "in their inter-religious phase" as Imam Omar Koné phrased it, the Sufi Centre participated extensively in inter-religious activities, festivals, and other inter-communal events, sharing knowledge on their tradition while reaching out to other non-Muslims and civil groups (Koné 27 April 2017).<sup>18</sup> For instance, major events in which they have participated include "300 Religions, 1 God", and their performance at the Arab World Festival of Montreal at Place-des-Arts, a performing arts centre. Moreover, the Centre had a lot of contact with Sufism-inspired New Age movements, mostly with the Sufi Dance Circle Montreal and the Inayati Order.<sup>19</sup>

Leblanc argues that this activism is a case in point of their "willingness" to integrate themselves into Quebec society and participate in local outreach activities, which shapes their "cosmopolitan identities". Leblanc frames their cosmopolitanism "in terms of openness to cultural and religious differences while promoting a sense of moral responsibility to both the *'umma* and Quebec society" (2013: 426). For her, the cosmopolitanism that characterises the Montreal Naqshbandi-Haqqanis is not a secular or doctrinal neutrality. Rather, it is rooted in a "moral content, which is embodied by what followers describe as the specificity of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani mystical experience" (Leblanc 2013: 426). This moral content, according to Leblanc, is endowed with Islamic moral principles while simultaneously "opposed to so-called political Islam or Islamism" (Leblanc 2013: 426).<sup>20</sup>

Leblanc further notes that members draw on this constructed “ideological boundary” between Sufism and political Islamism “to assert that Sufism is an open and tolerant form of Islam”, especially evoking Sufi notions of “Love, Unity, and Truth” (2013: 426).<sup>21</sup>

Such contemporary readings of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order’s cosmopolitan identities are endowed, in turn, with enduring Eurocentric and Orientalist romanticisation of Sufism which also assumes the inherent, unreasonable immutable character of Islam. I would rather argue that the Naqshbandi-Haqqani experience in Montreal is informed, on the one hand, by the broader Naqshbandi-Haqqani’s predilection for inter-faith and intercultural outreach work, as exemplified by Shaykh Kabbani in the United States since the 1990s. This inclination is justified in their Islamic religious identity’s universalism, exemplified when Shaykh Koné says that “Because Sufis have a more advanced form of knowledge, this openness of the heart to everybody, seeing wisdom in all traditions is special to Sufism” (Leblanc 2013: 431).<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, their religious leadership and outreach activities are also adapted to the demands of Quebecois pressures to reform in line with politics of moderation. Specifically, the imam of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufi Order of Montreal, Shaykh Omar Koné, understands how to navigate public opinion and perform in response to post-Quiet Revolution Quebecois politics of *Catholicate* moderation and language. Naturally, these demands to belong, which assume that Islam is threatening to the nation, place Canadian Muslims in impossible positions, as we will see. Notably, these demands have isolated groups that have attempted to respond and perform desirable “moderation”, such as the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis.

First, the Sufi Centre of Montreal is not the only Muslim or Sufi group based in Quebec to have initiated forms of civil involvement in local politics and outreach activities. For instance, the Sufi Institute of Montreal, a Boutchichiyya Sufi Order, has also been very active in some of the same events (such as “300 Religions, 1 God”). The founder, Karim Ben-Driss, is a public figure as well, though more on the academic side, as a lecturer of Sufism at the University of Montreal. More recently, the Sanad Collective, founded in Ottawa by Imam Hamdi Ben Aissa, is an active Sufi group which has operated different community organisations, namely the Café Floraison in Montréal and the Lotus Community Corner in Ottawa, as well as many retreats throughout the year.<sup>23</sup> As a community, they do significant outreach work with Muslim youth and aim to bring non-Muslims to adopt a positive vision of Islam, while their Imam Ben Aissa has been active in interfaith events and conferences since 2013. Yet, the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis are endowed with a “cosmopolitan identity” that is potent, which other Sufi groups seem to lack. The spiritual leader of the Sufi Centre, Shaykh Omar Koné, has been at the forefront of Muslim-based inter-religious activities in the media and more directly involved with the Quebec government and civil groups.

Since 2005, Imam Koné has been increasingly visible on the Quebecois political scene, especially for intercultural activities and public debates (Leblanc 2013: 429). He became a “public religious personality” in Quebec between 2007 and 2008 in the context of debates around the Bouchard-Taylor Commission, known for “defending the openness and cosmopolitanism of ‘moderate’ Muslims in Montreal” (Leblanc 2013: 432). The subtext of this declaration again suggests that Muslims are inherently “Other” and have to prove their openness and moderateness, which is facilitated by Sufism in this case. As I have mentioned above, Omar Koné’s activism with the Centre was prominent from 1995 to 2010, when the Centre was very energetic in its outreach. It was only after a decade of leading inter-communal activities that Imam Koné became a Muslim authority in popular, local political discourses, due to a notable passage at *Tout le monde en parle* (TLMEP) in 2007.

TLMEP is a very popular French-Canadian Sunday night talk show, watched by a third of Quebecers, that has been running since 2004. In his passage, Omar Koné responded to the demands and questions of average Quebecois on Islam in a language that resonated with the Quiet Revolution ideals and Quebecois psyche. In our interviews, Imam Koné confirmed that this televised passage concretised his mediatised position, as he was asked to address popular controversial issues such as the status of women, the veil, and homosexuality in Islam (Koné 19 May 2017).<sup>24</sup> In fact, Omar Koné was not very known before this appearance and was invited as a replacement on TLMEP because the initial guest, Saïd Jaziri, a controversial imam, was expelled from Canada right before the scheduled date of the television programme (Koné 19 May 2017). His fame, as a Muslim public personality, exploded following this appearance. Since then, local news networks such as Radio-Canada and TVA have contacted him punctually to conduct interviews and hear his opinions on major events related to Islam and Muslims (Koné 27 April 2017). Following his interview at TLMEP where he appealed to Quebecers’ sense of emancipation with the Quiet Revolution, Omar Koné became the “face” and leading imam in Quebec for any and all Muslim-related activities, news, or controversies.

Recalling the time before the television appearance, during the reasonable accommodations “crisis” of 2007–2008, Omar Koné described the social atmosphere as the worst time for Muslims in Quebec, as they were insulted and spat on in the streets daily (Koné 19 May 2017). Knowing that Saïd Jaziri had become notoriously controversial during the reasonable accommodations crisis, Omar Koné knew why he was invited on the set of TLMEP. Jaziri was not someone reassuring to non-Muslims, or someone to whom Muslim communities could relate, as he could not express himself properly in French and did not understand Quebec society, its sensibilities, and the dynamics of the media (Koné 19 May 2017). In comparison, Shaykh Koné made important cultural references to Quebecois sensibilities during the TLMEP appearance, such as when he expressed his first

impressions of Quebec as a university student. He recounted telling his mother “tu sais, ici c’est un univers. Ici j’ai rencontré une couple de gars, et ya son char, sa bière, son hockey, sa blonde, yé ben correct! J’ai trouvé ça si beau” (Koné on *TLMEP* 21 October 2007).<sup>25</sup> This line speaks to the character of Shaykh Omar Koné as someone who not only speaks French, knows Quebec and its culture, but has integrated it to the extent that, in fact, he spoke the “Quebecois jargon” and expressed the mentality behind its slang, which touched an emotional core within the non-Muslim population.

Moreover, he addressed non-Muslim Quebecers through an appeal to their Quiet Revolution’s fundamental values of liberty and gender equality, saying:

You fought for your rights, and you fought well. And future generations will thank you. The movement that happened here, a movement of liberation, was totally justified and noble. Therefore, we have to give Muslims the time to progress on their faith, to progress, because constraint/coercion does not always work. I think that sometimes it has the opposite effect. Ostracisation and the continuous accusation tend to create a ghettoisation and a confinement. [...] It is a community that needs more to be helped than to be accused.

(Koné on *TLMEP* 21 October 2007, translations are my own)

With these statements, Shaykh Koné makes a plea to the broader non-Muslim Quebecois population to remember its own history of struggle and emancipation, and similarly to help Muslim Quebecers to progress, but with their faith.

Following his appearance on the set of *Tout le monde en parle*, the next day, Shaykh Koné said that it was as if the social tension in the air had deflated (Koné 19 May 2017). The media described him as *un imam rassurant* (a reassuring imam), which was a clear break from the image of the unreasonable “scary imam” Saïd Jaziri.<sup>26</sup> *TLMEP* marked an important moment for the government as well as Muslim and non-Muslim Quebecers. After that passage on Quebecois television, Imam Koné became widely known amongst these three groups mentioned above, and, to this day, Muslims and non-Muslims alike recognise and thank him for his reassuring words (Koné 19 May 2017).

In retrospect, Imam Koné has come to epitomise two ways in which Sufism is politically involved in Quebec. Koné is politically engaged externally, through the government which has contacted him personally to solve religious questions around reformist groups, and internally, by consciously carving himself a space within Quebecois popular debates through his authority as a charismatic religious figure. The involvement of Shaykh Omar Koné is a case in point of the impact of Sufi orders in Quebec, valued in politics for their “tolerant” and “moderate” nature, including their religiosity as articulated by the imam, that suits the religious ideals

of secular Quebecois society and “moderate” Islam. Ironically enough, this cooperation reveals a crucial ramification, namely the political potential of Sufism, even if the group is approached for its seemingly inherent non-political nature. Accordingly, Imam Koné has become the “prototypical” moderate Muslim in the Quebec public imaginary as an “open and tolerant imam” who is involved in community building, civil education, and the forming of inter-religious bridges.

Conversely, Imam Koné says that political and inter-religious participation has not been ideal for the Centre’s primary spiritual goal, but that it was “necessary” to take part in civil affairs, and that it was a question of being pragmatic – both for the broader Muslim communities and for their own survival I assume (Koné 19 May 2017). According to him, his group cannot simply stay in its corner and perform religious practice in isolation. This approach also reflects a traditional Naqshbandi principle: to be active socially while isolated spiritually – *khalwat dar anjuman*, or “solitude in the crowd” (Schimmel 1975: 364).<sup>27</sup> Therefore, we can further see how their cosmopolitan and political identities are not a creation of their environment nor “unorthodox” for a Sufi order, which is rather a perception reinforced in Orientalist re-evaluations of the tradition. As emphasised by Imam Koné, “il faut s’associer avec le pouvoir pour mieux le conseiller” (Koné 19 May 2017).<sup>28</sup> His response, as such, is pragmatic rather than patriotic or cosmopolitan – against a view that assumes Muslims are inherently not moderate.

His work with the government started in the early 2000s with the Chair of Research Denise Helly of the CRI (Conseil des relations interculturelles du Québec).<sup>29</sup> The central organisation with which he worked afterward and with which he continues to work is the Ministry of Immigration, as well as the Ministries of Employment, Education, and Social Services. These partnerships prove that the government deems the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufi Centre to be a landing point and resource for newly arrived Muslims in Québec. As the government-sanctioned representative of moderate Muslims in Québec, Imam Koné was invited to participate in multiple roundtables and committees on Reasonable Accommodations organised by community organisations before and during the Bouchard-Taylor commission (Koné 27 April 2017).

In 2014, he was approached by the former Premier of Québec, Philippe Couillard (2014–2018), to discuss ways of dealing with Islamic reformism outside and inside Canada (Koné 19 May 2017). A roundtable was organised by one of his ministers, focused on security, social care for youth to prevent the “trap of radicalisation”, and the integration of immigrants through employment (Koné 19 May 2017). According to Imam Koné, the point of the project, piloted by the Ministry of Immigration, was to recruit ten individuals from the Arabo-Muslim communities to ask for their advice concerning measures to prevent problems in their communities (Koné 19 May 2017). Notably, Omar Koné was the only religious

leader and representative of a mosque; the others were research chairs, professors, and the president of the Association of Muslims and Arabs for the Laïcité of Quebec (AMAL), amongst others.

Concerning security services, Imam Koné worked and continues to collaborate with multiple groups, such as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). As part of the RCMP programme to fight “Islamic radicalisation” and terrorism, he is invited every year at the end of their three-day training camp as a guest speaker to deconstruct preconceptions officers have around Islam (Koné 27 April 2017).<sup>30</sup> He also collaborates with the police service of Montreal (SPVM) to build stronger relations between them and the Muslim Council (Koné 27 April 2017). Consequently, the Sufi Centre, through the figure of Imam Omar Koné, has served the government as a central channel of integration for Muslim youth from across the diaspora in Montreal, as well as an educational resource to counter negative North American stereotypes against Muslims within the ranks of civil security services for more than ten years. These events point to the political ramifications of this particular Sufi group’s involvement in Quebecois public life.

Moreover, their political position is informed and legitimised by their linguistic identity as mentioned earlier, as well as their perceived authenticity towards Islam, as traditional-looking Muslims. First, Shaykh Koné’s linguistic identity as a Francophone from Mali gives him considerable credibility and approval that would not be granted to an Anglophone.<sup>31</sup> By appealing to Quebecois history, linguistic idioms, and sensibilities in public discourse with a certain sense of humour, Shaykh Koné further shaped for himself a place as the “reassuring” and charismatic Imam, one who is not completely “Other”, but increasingly familiar. He is sufficiently “familiar” as a Muslim, while remaining sufficiently “Other” to justify his position as an “authentic” voice representing Muslims.

Secondly, Shaykh Koné has a long beard and is always fully dressed in traditional Muslim garb in public, a Naqshbandi tradition. Omar Koné’s physical appearance and social status as a Muslim spiritual leader gives him credibility in public, and works to legitimate and reinforce his position as the “moderate Muslim” in Quebecois rhetoric of Muslim identities. Shaykh Koné becomes “authentic” according to the fact that he reflects Quebecois ideals of inter-religious secular civil participation and discourse. His presence in public debates or events serves a specific purpose and provides legitimacy.<sup>32</sup> Imam Koné’s distinctively “Muslim-looking” physical appearance thus legitimises claims around his “authenticity” in the eyes of the Quebec media and government. This partnership between Sufism and central bodies benefits the government, for they have created an ally amongst the Muslims, one they can turn to concerning questions of radicalisation. This “authentication” process benefits the government in the long run in a way that might increasingly isolate the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Centre from Montreal Sufi communities and broader Muslim circles.

Indeed, Shaykh Koné's implication in civil affairs has led to a falling out with some of the other less active and smaller Sufi groups in Montreal who have cut ties with the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis (Koné 19 May 2017). Imam Koné explained that, for instance, they used to have a lot of contact with the Boutchichi Order, the Alawi Order, and the Order of Mourids, but these three groups have withdrawn themselves out of fear of the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis' "dynamism" – which one can suspect refers to their involvement with the government. The conscious inter-religious and political outreach efforts of the Sufi Centre have given them legitimacy in public appeal and in the media while simultaneously isolating them within the broader Sufi circles of Montreal. Therefore, their "authenticity" as "moderate Muslims" produced in the Quebecois imaginary in turn becomes marginalised by other Sufi groups who possibly consider that the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis have lost their "authentic" Sufi roots. As Koné suggested, whenever asked to speak on behalf of the Quebec Muslims about Islam or related topics – despite knowing that it is an impossible task to fulfil – he would respond knowing that, whatever he would say, he would be criticised for speaking on behalf of an entire community which is a fiction.<sup>33</sup>

Given that Omar Koné and the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis are both critiqued within Sufi circles and broader Muslim communities, and simultaneously acclaimed for their activism, notions of "authenticity" become more convoluted. What are the foundations of these narratives around Islam and Sufi tales of identity in Quebec? One answer could be found in Mahmood Mamdani's work, where he argues that these imagined discourses opposing "Good" to "Bad Muslim" in North America and Western Europe are rooted in a "Culture Talk [that] assumes that every culture has a tangible essence that defines it, and it then explains politics as a consequence of that essence" (2004: 17). The Culture Talk he mentions is "both a description and explanation of the events of 9/11", which "qualified and explained the practice of 'terrorism' as 'Islamic'" (Mamdani 2004: 17, 18). It is culture (as modernity) that is the dividing line between "Good" and "Bad," opposing "us" and "them" (Mamdani 2004, 18). In this perspective, all Muslims are inherently "Other" and therefore "Bad" and in need of proving themselves to be "Good" by fighting against radical Islam with the "modern" North American and Western European countries.

Sufis, in this trope, have emerged as the "moderate Muslims" in Quebec, wherein Imam Omar Koné is seen as having adapted and accommodated his group's culture and religiosity to the standards of non-Muslim Quebecois society in the past 15 years. Of course, this is not necessarily the case – this perception of the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis is a subjective Quebecois interpretation that serves the latter. Nonetheless, in local tales, the Sufi Centre of Montreal has "proven itself" to be worthy of the "moderate Muslim" label, fighting the war against the "Others", in this case "political Muslims" that refuse to integrate by threatening

the “heritage” of the Quiet Revolution. And it is this very same “apolitical” identity that is precisely the potent political force they represent as charismatic Sufis in Quebec.

### **Conclusion: The Production of the “Moderate Muslim” in Quebec: The Charismatic Sufi**

In conclusion, the “authenticity” attached to the Sufi Centre and Shaykh Omar Koné is one that has been socially constructed around and articulated by the imam in Quebec over the past 20 years. The fact that the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis are regarded as authentic and “moderate Muslims” points to the effectiveness of the Sufi Centre politically. In other words, their perceived authenticity works politically because their civil involvement and their theology converge with post-1960 Quiet Revolution’s Quebecois ideals of universalism, “desirable citizens”, and proper religious affiliation. However, as I have witnessed over three years of fieldwork, the embodied performativity of the Sufi Centre’s members regarding religious identities, modesty, and gender segregation recalls the religious performativity of mainstream Muslim organisations or mosques.<sup>34</sup> The label “Sufism” is endowed with the power of charisma and authority in the eyes of Quebecers, following Orientalist depictions of the tradition. In this perspective, we need to think of the normative roles and demands imposed on Muslim groups in the current “anti-radicalisation quest” and concomitant production of “moderate Muslims”.

My intent throughout this article was to expose the romanticisation of Sufism and Sufis as mystical and apolitical, and its powerful performativity, which has dominated Quebecois tales of Muslimness. We can see a palimpsestic process of Orientalisation, from Sufi romanticisation to distorted perceptions of Muslims, which further isolates and discriminates between “moderate” Sufis and “political” Muslims in scholarship, the media, and the Quebecois popular imaginary. By building on the narrative of Sufism as apolitical, the media and government’s fabrication of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufi Centre of Montreal as “authentic” works to legitimate their civil participation in Quebecois imaginaries. As I was standing in front of the Sufi Centre one evening, I overheard a man from the neighbourhood say about the “community centre” to his guests as they passed by: “They are charismatic Muslims.” This description adequately sums up in one sentence current Sufi tales in Quebec.

In the present, and near future, Quebecers need to ask themselves what kind of society they want to inspire, and the pressures they have reproduced since colonisation. The Quebecois ideas of nationhood, secularity, and citizenship are endowed with religious grievances that are, legitimate or not, polluting inter-communal relations. Instead of reforming Muslims according to manipulated ideals of *Catholicate*



secularity and Orientalist depictions of Sufism, Quebecers need to go through some social therapy and deal with their grievances towards the Church, and I would urge, for indigenous communities who have been its main victims historically. Socially, we ought to address those foundational issues, instead of erasing them, to envision a society focused on reconciliation as opposed to claims based on a sentiment of victimhood. If Quebecers were capable of prescience based on our past, they would recognise the signs of colonial and *Catholicate* assimilation that are built in our State neutrality laws since 2009, and vote for leaders who do not seek to erase other minorities, but rather work on balancing power dynamics.

## Notes

- 1 Following 9/11, Canada followed in the footsteps of its southern neighbours by increasingly policing Muslim citizens. The federal government implemented similar anti-terrorist security policies in line with the United States' global "war on terror". For instance, Canada implemented Bill C-36 in December 2001 which effectively restrained the rights and freedoms of many, predominantly Muslim citizens, to increase state security.
- 2 We can think of Bill 94 (2010), Bill 60 (2013), Bill 62 (2017), and more recently Bill 21 (2019). As will be discussed, these laws and the social perception that Quebec's secularity is not defined enough has been propelled by the perception of "unreasonable accommodation" cases that raged in the media from 2003 to 2009.
- 3 Although I cannot delve much into this topic, the assimilationist policies of Quebec and Canada towards minorities are the nation-building foundation of the white-settler colonisation of the land, including the genocide of indigenous nations. For more information, see Thobani (2007), Lawrence (2002), Razack (2002), and Jiwani (2014).
- 4 The Quiet Revolution was a period of socio-cultural and political changes that sought to transform the province of Quebec into a Francophone secular "welfare state", while privatizing religion. English Canadians led economically while the Catholic Church had been responsible for education and health since colonial New France. The colonial descendants of New France sought to take power economically and politically, and to displace the Catholic Church from its dominant role in the public sphere. Amongst other social transformations, gender reforms took place within the law, access to education, and personal health (accessibility to contraceptives), to inscribe equality between women and men.
- 5 For an interesting look on the catalyst role of the Catholic Church in the Quiet Revolution, see Gauvreau (2005).
- 6 Here, I explicitly refer to the social unrest around perceived "unreasonable accommodations". The debate in Quebec around reasonable accommodations was developed around 59 controversies, involving the publicised Jewish Hasidic, Sikh, and Muslim cases of the YMCA windows (2006), the kirpan (2002–2006), and the hijab in private schools (2003–2005) (Leservot 2009: 326). In order to calm popular opinion, panicked by accommodations increasingly called "unreasonable", the government of Quebec, then the Liberal Party headed by premier Jean Charest, created a commission in 2007 to give an overview of the practices of accommodation that drew on the public and was led by Charles Taylor (philosopher) and Gérard Bouchard (sociologist) (Leservot 2009: 326). The Commission Bouchard-Taylor was appointed "to conduct a public inquiry into the scope and limits of 'reasonable accommodations' and draft recommendations for the provincial government",

- to which the Final Report (*Building the Future*) was delivered in 2008 (Sharify-Funk 2010: 535). Following the release of the Final Report, the Liberal Party has been critiqued for shelving it and for conducting the commission only for political motives without further addressing the problem after its release (Sharify-Funk 2010: 535). Having said this, more than ten years on now, the Final Report and its authors remain central in ongoing debates on State neutrality.
- 7 In the Bouchard-Taylor Final Report, the authors acknowledge that the wave of accommodation cases in the media “clearly touched an emotional chord among French-Canadian Quebecers in such a way that requests for religious adjustments have spawned fears about the most valuable heritage of the Quiet Revolution, in particular gender equality and secularism” (Bouchard and Taylor 2008: 18).
  - 8 The latter is the clause that caused popular outcry, as it aimed to restrict “ostentatious” symbols to the private sphere, thus preventing public sector employees such as police officers or doctors from wearing religious symbols that “attract notice”.
  - 9 A good example of this primacy is the crucifix, hanging above the Quebec parliament, that the PQ refused to remove because they considered it our “historical heritage”. After decades of debates, the crucifix in Quebec’s Blue Room was finally removed in July 2019 by the Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) that proposed yet another radical plan to secularise the province, known as Bill 21. <https://globalnews.ca/news/5475505/quebec-national-assembly-crucifix-removed-july-2019/> (accessed 18 November 2019).
  - 10 The “*laïcité* crisis” in France, which concluded in banning the hijab from all schools in 2004, also contributed to build an alarming sense of urgency in Quebec. In the broader debate around State neutrality in Quebec, France’s approach to *laïcité* has often been critiqued as a model “against religion”, whereas *sécularisme* is a model that should not be against religions, but should aim at not favouring any one religion over another. Quebec remains divided on this question and on the desired model best suited to the province’s history and minorities.
  - 11 Sufism is considered to be a branch of Islam whose practice is more focused on the spiritual than the material. However, the intellectual tradition and representation of Sufism itself was severed from Islam by Orientalist writers in the eighteenth century due to its perceived rapprochement with the modern ideals of religion in Western Europe. Consequently, Orientalist writers distilled the “spirit” of Sufism to the literary tradition the scholars admired, while these same scholars overlooked what they considered contemporary “inappropriate” social manifestations (Ernst 2003: 110). This vein of scholarship delocalised and de-historicised the practice of Sufism, in favour of emphasising a transcendent character best exemplified in literary works rather than in community practices or regional religious differences. This essentialising, textual bias, on the one hand, continues to dominate approaches to Sufism in contemporary scholarship, and on the other hand, has shaped the ways in which Muslims have been defined in the Global North according to the myth that Sufis are inherently non-violent because concerned with otherworldly matters. The second section of this article will address the embodiment of this knowledge production about Sufism and Sufis today.
  - 12 The Naqshbandi order took shape under the guidance of the Central Asian Shaykh Khwaja Baha’al-Din Naqshband (d. 1389), buried in Bukhara, present-day Uzbekistan. Over time, the Naqshbandi brotherhood has spread across the world and remains active today especially in Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, the Balkans, South and Central Asia, Malaysia, and Indonesia (Damrel 2006: 116). According to Damrel, a set of key features “defines the Naqshbandis across these diverse ethnic, social and historic settings. These include: (1) an uncompromising Sunni orientation, (2) emphasis on shari’a and Sunna (3) a tradition of full social and political engagement with the world, and (4) as noted by K. A. Nizami, a willingness to guide and, if necessary, confront the state in order to bring it closer to religion” (2006: 116).

- 13 Long before sending his representative Shaykh Hisham Kabbani to the United States in 1990, Shaykh Nazim had proselytised all over Asia and went to Britain in 1974 to begin his “mission in the West” (Nielsen et al. 2006: 104). By 1995, his Sufi order had properly become transnational, possessing one of the largest and most diverse international memberships of any Sufi order (Nielsen et al. 2006: 103).
- 14 Nielsen et al. contrast the Haqqani ease of adherence to other Sufi groups, especially others in the Naqshbandi lineage (2006: 110). The borders of the *tarīqā* are “porous” also in the sense that only in the cases of members falsely calling themselves shaykhs do we find any form of official expulsion (Nielsen et al. 2006, 110). Finally, in this *tarīqā*, the internet has become a central means of communication across the transnational Haqqani sub-branches, sharing news and ideas around the network (Nielsen et al. 2006: 112).
- 15 Rauf’s message and work emphasises “Islam’s compatibility with American meritocracy and exceptionalism”, namely democracy and capitalism (Corbett 2016: 7). As such, to be a moderate Muslim is to do service in society and contribute financially to its economic affluence, while also practising moderate forms of Islamic religiosity that are malleable to American society, meaning Sufi-inclined.
- 16 Dickson rightly adds that “static categories of ‘Islamic,’ ‘universal,’ ‘traditional,’ and ‘New Age’ fail to capture the ways in which streams of the Sufi tradition flow through and around religious identity and orthodoxy” (2015: 213).
- 17 The order was officially registered in 1984, but was organised in peoples’ houses before they rented a space on Park Avenue in 1992 (Leblanc 2013: 429). As the community grew, the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis relocated into a permanent space in 2004 when they bought their current two-storey building on Fairmount Avenue in the Mile End, which they named the Sufi Centre Masjid Al-Iman.
- 18 All my interviews were conducted in French, for which the translations here are my own.
- 19 The latter organisation, formerly known as the Sufi Order International, falls under the umbrella of Universal Sufism in North America brought by Hazrat Inayat Khan, and is headed by his grandson Zia Inayat Khan.
- 20 Leblanc relates clear instances in which Shaykh Omar Koné, in his sermons and in interviews with her, positions Sufism as a very open and tolerant form of Islam. Their Sufi identity and training, in this sense, allows them to understand and share “many things with people of all horizons, of all orientations”, including reformist Muslims and non-Muslim Quebecers (Leblanc 2013: 431).
- 21 In one particular instance, I explained my research topic to a white French-Canadian member of the Sufi Centre, along the lines of unpacking and challenging this ideological boundary as a historical construction between the notion of Sufism as peaceful in opposition to political Islam. The member responded that, in fact, many “Sufis” would relate to their tradition in those terms as well, perhaps signalling the internalisation of such romanticised tropes amongst white converts particularly (Anonymous 8 June 2017).
- 22 The commonly used sense of universalism consists in seeing all traditions as having some element of universal truth within them, or even believing them all to be the same.
- 23 <https://www.sanadcollective.org/national-chapters/> (accessed 8 January 2020).
- 24 Before *TLMEP*, Shaykh Koné had only joined one public event, which was a minimally mediated debate with Bernard Landry in 2004 in a Westmount library.
- 25 In English: “You know, here, it’s a universe. Here I met a couple of guys, and he has his car, his beer, his hockey, his girlfriend, and he’s A-Okay! I found that so beautiful.”
- 26 See full article “Omar Koné: Un imam rassurant” in archival form. Notably, the journalist describes Jaziri as scary, and inscribes Omar Koné’s tolerance to being Malian and African. Koné’s openness is therefore directly related to his racial and ethnic identity according to the journalist. He is “tolerant like all the Africans” she has met. [http://collections.banq.qc.ca/lapresse/src/pages/2007/10/23/C/82812\\_20071023LPC03.pdf](http://collections.banq.qc.ca/lapresse/src/pages/2007/10/23/C/82812_20071023LPC03.pdf) (accessed 25 April 2019).

- 27 Historically, Sufi groups acted as highly secretive clusters detached from state affairs or, at other times, they were either politically influential in their support of state leaders or openly critical of governments, even waging wars against colonial forces, such as in North Africa and the Indian subcontinent. In the context of colonialism and colonial administration, the word Sufism resonated not with mysticism but rather with “fanatical resistance”, threatening European domination (Triaud 1995: 19 in Philippon 2015: 192)
- 28 In English: “we have to associate ourselves with political power to better advise it”.
- 29 Denise Helly is currently a professor at the INRS (Institut National de la Recherche Scientifique) in Montreal and has published extensively on Muslim communities in Canada, immigration, and nationalism.
- 30 As he described to me, Shaykh Koné comes in and “shakes them a bit”. He has been pursuing this engagement for more than ten years (Koné 27 April 2017).
- 31 Shaykh Koné also expressed this feeling to me when he mentioned that he can properly express himself in French and is also comfortable speaking to the media, as opposed to Imam Saïd Jaziri, as mentioned above.
- 32 Shaykh Koné further confirmed this theory of mine, saying he was invited to every new initiative of the provincial government and knew that it was due to his public notoriety as a respected imam within Muslim and non-Muslim circles (especially following *Tout le monde en parle*), and that he played the game fully aware that they were using his distinctively Muslim image because it brought them a legitimacy (Koné 19 May 2017). In his words: “Je sais pourquoi je suis là”, when invited to these public events. Having said this, Shaykh Koné praised the work of the Premier of Quebec Philippe Couillard at the time, saying that for the first time the provincial government was nurturing a maintained relationship with some Muslim communities, as opposed to previous administrations that only called upon Muslim leaders in cases of “patates chaudes” as was the case with the reasonable accommodation crisis (Koné 19 May 2017). The deeper problem remains, according to Shaykh Koné, that the government is a big machine and that, despite Couillard’s efforts, more needs to be done to understand Quebec’s plural and eclectic Muslim populations, as well as support them financially to counter the powerful influence of Wahhabi-financed groups from Saudi Arabia (Koné 19 May 2017).
- 33 Shaykh Koné further implied that, as a Sufi outspoken figure, he would also receive threats. He added that “people do not realise that we put our lives on the line every time we speak in public” (Koné 19 May 2017).
- 34 Despite this “universal” label, in the eyes of many of my Montreal-based informants who were not members of this group, the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis remain very “orthodox” or traditional on certain aspects, such as the division of men and women within the Centre. For instance, the chanting takes place amongst the men, closer to the front and the Shaykh, whereas the women pray and sing behind them. More than once, this gender separation was either mentioned to me or critiqued by non-Naqshbandi-Haqqani women as something about the Centre not seemingly matching their “moderate” “cosmopolitan” identity.

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