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# Progressive Muslims responding to very narrow version of Islam

Muslims connect via Internet discussions

Publicly gather to talk about role in society

LESLIE SCRIVENER  
FAITH AND ETHICS REPORTER

The Muslim Meet-up, an Internet gathering of progressive Muslims that started in the U.S. and spread around the world, has one of its greatest successes in Toronto.

By connecting on the Internet, dozens of Muslims from many backgrounds — Palestinians, Iranians, Somalis, Pakistani, Shiites and Sunnis — get together in public places to talk about Islam and Muslims' role in society.

Though membership is now growing in the U.S. as the progressive movement gains steam there, some of the largest turnouts in recent months have been in Toronto, says Tarek Fatah, founder of the Muslim Canadian Congress. Most of those who attend the meet-up are members of the congress.

The Muslim Canadian Congress provided some of the inspiration for the Progressive Muslim Union of North America, which will be launched in the U.S. on Monday, the day after Eid al-Fitr, the festival that marks the end of the month-long fast of Ramadan.

These fledgling progressive movements support leadership for women, gay rights, critical examination of Islamic texts and alternatives to the conservative mindsets found in many mosques.

More than 40 attended this month's meeting held at the Butler's Pantry on Markham St. Their numbers included lawyers, a high-school vice-principal, a poet, a media analyst, a financial officer and 16-year-old Erin Glass of North Bay, whose father brought her to Toronto for the meeting.

"I needed a progressive group," said Glass, a recent convert to Islam. "I've experienced way too much fundamentalism. I met one man at a mosque, who wouldn't look at me, but spoke to me through my father. That really bothered me."

Fatah, the host of television's *Muslim Chronicle* (on CTS), started the organization as a response to the narrow version of Islam he said is often portrayed publicly. Progressive Muslims are often told they are not "authentic", he said.

"I was scared to death by who was speaking for us," Fatah said in an interview.

"The mosque establishment and social conservatives have usurped the Muslim narrative, if not the religion. We are coming together to stake our claim that hate will not be spread in our name."

Those attending also subscribed to a range of religious practices and some, to none at all. Some were eating during the meeting, while others were observing the Ramadan fast, which lasts from dawn to dusk throughout the month. "Our starting point is a strict separation of church and state," said Fatah. "We believe in Islam and are proud of our heritage. If one is fasting or not, does it matter in the public sphere? You or I should not judge people based on their personal faith. Otherwise, we cause serious division."

Abbas Syed said he was drawn to the group because he was looking for Muslims tolerant of other faith communities, who recognize the "gender apartheid" in Muslim society and who would be comfortable in a mosque where men and women can enter through a common door, pray in a common hall while standing shoulder to shoulder. (Men and women's prayer is segregated in almost all mosques.)

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