

# Perceptions of Extremism Among Muslims in Australia

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## Abstract

The purpose of the present paper is to ask how Muslims in Australia perceive the existence of extremism in their ranks. Whilst there exists a body of research on the phenomenon of extremism amongst Muslims, a gap has emerged in our understanding of how Muslims themselves perceive extremism in their communities. The present research is based on data collected during 2007 and 2008 among approximately six hundred Muslims living in Sydney, Melbourne and regional Victoria. This sample was asked to respond to the question: “Some people think there has been a rise in extremism among Muslim Australians over recent years, others think extremism is declining—what do you think?” The present paper will analyse responses to that question and discuss whether variables such as age; gender; immigrant status; citizenship status; convert status; employment status; and ancestry impact responses given. In particular, close attention will also be paid to the type and level of extrinsic religious commitment of participants and seek to discover whether these two variables can predict perceptions of the existence of extremism among this sample of Muslims in Australia.

## **Introduction**

Whilst there exists a body of research on the phenomenon of religious and ideological extremism, there exists a gap in our understanding of how adherents themselves view the existence of extremism as a force in their communities. Muslims in particular have received much scholarly and media attention over recent years, but little research has been conducted with a view to discovering what Muslims think about the topic. This paper asks: how do Muslims in Australia perceive the existence of extremism in their ranks? Is it rising, declining, or staying steady? Does religio-political orientation influence how Muslims perceive extremism’s direction of movement in their community? Furthermore, what do Muslims themselves have to say on the topic of extremism among their ranks?

## *Framework of Religio-Political Attitudes*

As this paper is interested in how religio-political attitudes influence perceptions, the framework we use in this paper for understanding different Muslim responses to the existence and movement of support for extremism, is a modified form of Abdullah Saeed’s (2007) classification of contemporary trends among Muslims. Saeed categorised Muslims in their reactions to modernity, as belonging to the following orientations: legalist

traditionalists; theological puritans; militant extremists; political Islamists; secular liberals; cultural nominalists; classical modernists; and progressive ijtihadis.

In more detail: legalist traditionalists are “primarily concerned with maintenance of the law as conceptualized in the classical schools” (Saeed 2007, 397). They reject reform and reinterpretation of Islamic law, and attempt to revivify pre-modern interpretations and apply them without contextualisation. Theological puritans, who are Wahhabi-Salafis, emphasise a strict monotheistic theology, reject what they consider to be un-Islamic innovation, particularly what has developed in Shi‘i and Sufi Islam as well as in the traditional schools of jurisprudence. Militant extremists focus on and react to what they perceive as the subjugation of Muslims at the hands of Western neo-colonialists, most specifically the United States of America. They reinterpret jihad and permit the use of terror, particularly given the power and resource differential between themselves and the states and coalitions they fight. Political Islamists believe the establishment of an Islamic state (and the primacy of Islamic law within the state) through gradual conversion and change, will counter the decline of Muslim societies that has occurred, particularly since colonisation of much of the Muslim world. They are contrasted by secular liberals who eschew the politicisation of religion and call for the separation of mosque and state. Cultural nominalists are those Muslims whose link with Islam is purely through cultural heritage and not through the meaningful practice of Islam as a religion. Classical modernists seek reform of Islamic law, through a revival of the tool of *ijtihad* and with an emphasis on harmonising rationality and religious faith. This group has spawned the birth of progressive ijtihadis, who call for a major overhaul of the methodologies of interpreting Islam and Islamic law. They focus particularly on the arena of human rights, justice and pluralism.

Saeed’s is a useful classification that shifts the focus from historical boundaries of political, legal and theological difference and instead asks how Muslims are responding to questions of modernity, secularism, globalisation and the conceptualisation of law, justice and human rights. However, as Saeed points out, the classification is preliminary and there are a number of problems that need addressing. For example, although the classification looks at

contemporary trends, the group described as classical modernists, active in the early part of the twentieth century, has evolved into various streams of progressive ijihadis. Also, there is probably little genuine difference between secular liberals and cultural nominalists, except that the former take an explicit position on the question of separation of mosque and state. As well, the theological puritans, although historically arising out of Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab's preoccupation with reasserting a strict reading of Islamic monotheism, have been almost obsessively interested in matters of religious practice, or the application of shari'ah in Muslim life, particularly through the endless search for the most authentic of the hadiths to definitively settle questions of religious law. They also share a number of qualities with political Islamists that can be described as belonging to fundamentalism. There is also a group missing from Saeed's taxonomy: those whose contact with and expression of Islam comes through Islamic mysticism known as Sufism. This group includes Muslims raised in the faith as well as Western converts who may or may not incorporate other aspects of Islamic practice into their experience. Consequently, Woodlock as part of her doctoral research, has simplified seven of Saeed's categories (not including militant extremists) down to four overarching categories: Secularists, Traditionalists, Fundamentalists and Contextual Interpreters.

Secularists can be described as those Muslims who argue for the separation of religion and state, and the privatisation of religion. They see no role for religious institutions in the structures of society, particularly as they pertain to governance and legislation. We can include within this group Saeed's cultural nominalists whose affiliation with Islam is primarily through cultural connection to Muslim ancestors, families and friends rather than active religious belief and practice. Traditionalists are those Muslims who feel that the traditional, pre-modern interpretations of theology and jurisprudence should be the foundation upon which the state and society rests. They look to the past with some sense of melancholy, and wish to re-establish the link that has been ruptured by modernity, between themselves and their societies, and the Prophet and the generations of pre-modern Islamic scholars who developed the normative, orthodox interpretations of Islam and its sacred law. Fundamentalists are Muslims who, like the Traditionalists, are at odds with the modern world, but feel that the present pitiable state of Muslims is caused partly by the stagnation

of the traditional pre-modern Islamic institutions, the incorporation of inauthentic innovations (both historical and modern) into the interpretations of Islam, and the consequent inability of Muslims to withstand the onslaught of Westernisation. Although they are fully rooted in the modern world, their solution is to seek a return to the fundamentals of Islam, what they believe are the original teachings of the Prophet and the first generations of Muslims. That they differ in what these fundamentals are, is not of interest here, except to note that Fundamentalists, being modern, assert there is a singular, objective historical truth to possess: an Islam that is pure, untainted, and of which they are the only guardians. Lastly, a group referred to here as Contextual Interpreters are those Muslims who accept the postmodern premise of bracketed truth-claims, and whose approach to interpreting Islam takes into consideration that Muslims are characterised by diversity through time and space. Thus, Muslims living in different periods, cultures and climates are required to assess and reassess whether particular interpretations of religion live up to the underlying Qur'anic Weltanschauung and the Prophet Muhammad's paradigmatic example, with a particular focus on human rights, justice and pluralism.

### *Understanding Extremism*

Concern about extremism manifested in religious and political guise has been discussed in studies emerging from a variety of disciplines including politics, sociology, psychology, and religious studies to name but a few. Often reference is made to 'Muslim extremism', 'Islamic extremism' or even just 'religious extremism' without explaining what is meant by such phrases. It is invoked both for imposing fundamentalist religiosity, as well as the motivation for acts of terrorism, and support given to those acts by others. Are these linked? And if so, how?

Douglas Pratt (2007) has provided a theory of religio-political extremism that argues the one is the end result of the other. Fundamentalism, confined not merely to the realm of religion alone, in its final form produces terrorism. He describes twenty key factors divided into ten sets that delineate three phases of fundamentalism—passive, hard-line and impositional—although not all groups follow Pratt's described trajectory to its dangerous

end. In identifying a progression of factors or markers, Pratt reminds us that extremism is neither exclusive to religion generally, or Islam in particular, for the same trend can be discerned in the beliefs and attitudes of non-religious and non-Muslim groups such as the Tamil Tigers, the Real IRA, the Communist Party of India, the International Sikh Youth Federation, the Christian Identity movement, or even (as Pratt points out) the Kamikaze pilots of World War II and Americanism invoked to justify the War on Terror (Pratt 2007, 198–200).

Iannaccone and Berman (2006) have provided an economic analysis of extremism that argues such fundamentalist groups, sectarian by organisational nature, are meeting a particular type of need. Religious extremism emerges from the religious market, due to the effect of costly demands placed on individuals as “payment” for membership. These costs inhibit free-riding low- or non-committed individuals from gaining benefits from membership without recompense. As a result, membership becomes valuable as an investment. Therefore, Iannaccone and Berman propose that religious extremism is at the most costly end of the “denominational continuum within any major religious tradition” (Iannaccone and Berman 2006, 117). Fundamentalist groups’ credibility in the unprovable offer of supernatural benefits (salvation, nirvana, seventy-two virgins in Paradise etc.) depends on their ability to provide real benefits in the mundane realm. As Iannaccone and Berman (2006, 121) note: “Religious groups chose violence to improve the lot of their institutions and constituents, by resisting repression and gaining political power.” According to Iannaccone and Berman, fundamentalist groups lose their ability to competitively sell their wares in societies where the state already ensures social services are provided to the populace. By protecting religious freedom without political interference, liberal states permit competition in the religious market, which also devalues fundamentalist offerings. In other words, the democratic welfare society and myriad options in the free religious market undercut fundamentalist selling power.

Looking specifically at the phenomenon of Muslim fundamentalism, it is possible to see how the arguments made by Pratt and by Iannaccone and Berman as discussed above, explain why violent extremism enacted by some Muslims occurs in greater and lesser

degrees in different contexts. However, Lentini (Forthcoming) has described a unique form of Muslim fundamentalism in what he calls neo-jihadism: a post-modern, globalised form of religious fundamentalism. Unlike the social and political activism that propelled twentieth-century fundamentalist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, HAMAS or Hizbullah to provide philanthropic and social services as a way of securing credibility, neo-jihadist groups such as al-Qa'idah are differentiated by their ultimate nihilism.

### *Perceptions of the Existence of Muslim Extremism*

Although fundamentalism occurs as a trend in all religions, it is Muslim fundamentalism in particular that has garnered much attention in recent years. The Pew Research Center has been gathering information on perceptions of Muslim extremism around the world including in Western European and English-speaking countries. As reported in "Muslim Americans: Middle class and mostly mainstream" (Pew Research Center 2007), researchers found that in a survey of 1,050 Muslim adults living in the United States, 51 percent were "very concerned about Islamic extremism in the world these days," compared with 52 percent of British Muslims, 35 percent of French Muslims, and 29 percent of German and Spanish Muslims surveyed in 2006. Furthermore, 36 percent of US Muslims were "very concerned" about the possibility of extremism within the United States, 25 percent were "somewhat concerned," 14 percent were "not too concerned," and 20 percent were "not at all concerned" with 5 percent declining to answer or expressing uncertainty (Pew Research Center 2007, 89). When asked to indicate whether suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets could be justified to defend Islam from its enemies, only 1 percent of US Muslims responded with "often justified," 7 percent "sometimes justified," 5 percent "rarely justified," and 78 percent "never justified," with 9 percent declining to answer or indicating they did not know (Pew Research Center 2007, 91).

What about Muslims living in Australia? The rest of this paper will deal with the question of Muslim perceptions about the existence and movement of extremism within the Muslim population of Australia, look at whether religio-political attitudes influence perceptions, and highlight Muslims' own thoughts on the topic of religious extremism amongst Muslims.

## Methods

### *Data Collection*

The data used for analysis in this paper are part of a larger dataset combined from two research projects using the same survey.<sup>1</sup> Along with the two research-team supervisors, we developed a questionnaire that included two questions on perceptions of the existence of extremism among Muslims in Australia. The first question was: Some people think there has been a rise in extremism among Muslim Australians over recent years, others think extremism is declining, what do you think? Participants could then choose one of five Likert items: a big rise; a moderate rise; stayed the same; a moderate decline; a big decline. The second question asked whether participants had any thoughts on the previous question, and provided a space for a written response.

In order to identify each participant's religio-political orientation, they were asked to identify which one of four statements most closely represented their main opinion in regard to the role and nature of Islam in society. The four options were:

- a. I think religion should be a private affair and have little or no role in the debate about the nature of our society.
- b. I think Muslims should rely on the chain of traditional interpretations of Islam in understanding the role of Islam in society.
- c. I think Muslims should return to the fundamentals of Islam as the source of authority for all political and social action.
- d. I think Muslims should interpret the role and nature of Islam in society in relation to the needs and contexts of the times.

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<sup>1</sup> The first project, still underway, is an ARC Linkage project, *Muslim Voices: Hopes and Aspirations of Australian Muslims*, headed by Professor Gary Bouma and Associate Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh. The industry stakeholders of this project are: the Australian Multicultural Foundation, the Islamic Council of Victoria, the Victorian Multicultural Commission and the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. The second project, *Muslim Voices: Hopes and Aspirations of Muslim Australians* was funded by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

These were then coded as a) Secularists b) Traditionalists c) Fundamentalists and d) Contextual Interpreters.<sup>2</sup> Further questions were included based on the themes of living in Australia; relationship with country of origin; values and characteristics; relationships and leisure; religion and spirituality; work and employment; education; economics; and background demographic information.

Data collection took place over two time periods, through meetings organised with representatives from mosques, Muslim organisations and through the snowballing technique, as well as via an online survey.<sup>3</sup> Participants had to be sixteen years or older to participate, and questionnaires were completed anonymously. Between March and August 2007, 290 questionnaires were returned from residents living in New South Wales (mostly around the suburbs of Sydney). Between September 2007 and May 2008, 380 questionnaires were returned from residents living in Victoria (Melbourne, Shepparton and Mildura). A handful of participants living elsewhere than Victoria or New South Wales returned their questionnaires online. Research assistants entered the questionnaire responses into a database and Woodlock performed a quality control check, yielding a dataset based on six hundred questionnaires. For this paper, 520 participants answered the question on perception of levels of extremism, and 298 participants provided a meaningful response regarding their thoughts on the issue.

### *Sample*

The sample of six hundred Muslims living mostly in New South Wales and Victoria have the following demographic characteristics.<sup>4</sup> Although 12 people did not specify their gender, of those who did 328 (55.8%) are female, 260 (44.2%) are male. Age distribution

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<sup>2</sup> One limitation of the present research is that in reality, participants may take different positions on different issues, although we asked participants to identify with an opinion that represented their *main* position.

<sup>3</sup> Because this research is largely qualitative in nature, the data used in this paper are not derived from a random sample and are not statistically representative. Nevertheless, the dataset is large enough to be able to make some tentative generalisations and provide directions for future research.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A for frequency tables.

tended towards the younger end, with nearly half of the sample, 279 participants, born between 1980 and 1989 and nearly a quarter, 139 participants, born between 1970 and 1979.

Of those who nominated their place of birth, 201 (37.1%) were Australian-born versus 341 (62.9%) migrants, which is roughly comparable with the national distribution. There were also representatives from fifty-eight different countries, who comprised the Muslims born outside of Australia. The top ten countries of birth listed are: Australia; Turkey; Lebanon; Iraq; Pakistan; Bangladesh; Afghanistan; India; Egypt; and Somalia. As to be expected, the three largest ancestry groups to which participants nominated belonging, were Arab (42.9%), South Asian (17.1%), and West Asian (14.1%).

There are 240 (40%) New South Wales residents in the survey sample, 345 (57.5%) are Victorian residents, and the remaining fifteen participants either did not state their location, or live somewhere other than New South Wales or Victoria. This is unlike the general population of Muslims, where there is almost a 3:2 ratio of New South Wales Muslims to Victorian Muslims (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006a, 2006b).

Among the 555 participants who specified their employment status, two thirds (66.3%) are employed, and nearly two thirds (63.7%) of these are in full-time paid employment. Of the 479 participants who specified their personal annual gross income, 198 (41.3%) earn between \$25,000 and \$75,000, whilst 135 (28.2%) earn \$10,000 or less. The group earning between \$10,001 and \$25,000 accounts for just over fifteen percent, as does those earning over \$75,000. It should be remembered that these figures will be affected by the sizeable proportion of younger participants, a number of whom are still undertaking some form of education.

Lastly 526 participants were coded as belonging to one of four religio-political orientations (74 declined to answer the question on religio-political orientation). Traditionalists were the largest group with 168 (31.9%) people, followed closely by 161 (30.6%) Contextual Interpreters. They were followed by 117 (22.2%) Fundamentalists, and the smallest group was the Secularists with 80 (15.2%) participants.

## **Perceptions of Extremism among Muslims in Australia**

### *Overview*

As mentioned previously, participants were asked whether they perceived a rise, stasis or decline in extremism among Muslims, with possible responses ranging on a five-point scale: a big rise; a moderate rise; stayed the same; a moderate decline; a big decline. Of the six hundred Muslims in the sample, 520 responded to the question. Overall, the Muslims sampled for this research were undecided in perceiving extremism's direction of movement. The largest share, 47 percent, felt that levels of extremism have stayed the same over recent years. They were followed by 29 percent who perceived a rise in extremism, in contradistinction with 24 percent who believed there had been a decline.

It should also be noted that this question does not ask about the extent to which extremism exists among Muslims in Australia. That 46 percent of Muslims surveyed believe the level of extremism remains unchanged (is neither rising nor falling) says nothing about whether extremism is prevalent or rare, merely that it is perceived to exist at an unchanging level among the Muslim population. It is not until we examine responses to the second question that it is possible to derive an understanding of how Muslims view extremism's existence (or lack thereof).

The natural question, then, is why are Muslims conflicted on this question? The simplest answer may be that despite the misperception that the Muslim community is a homogenous entity that speaks with a single voice, with intimate knowledge of the activities of each of its members, in reality there is not one Muslim community, but many diverse and varied groupings of Muslims only loosely affiliated through adherence or cultural connection to the religion of Islam (Saeed and Akbarzadeh 2001). Because of this, we might expect that the vast majority of Muslims, like other Australians, gain their knowledge and understanding about issues connected with extremism via the same sources available to them as to the generality of Australians: primarily the media relaying information from government and law enforcement as well as providing journalistic commentary. They do

not necessarily have intimate and accurate knowledge of the existence and direction of movement of extremism among their ranks. Furthermore, the results may be further complicated due to the effect of religio-political orientation, to which we now turn.

### *The Effect of Religio-Political Orientation on Perceptions of Extremism*

This section explores the relationship between religio-political attitudes and perceptions of a rise or decline in extremism in considerable detail. As the ultimate goal of the study was to determine the effectiveness of religio-political attitudes as a predictor of perceptions of a rise or decline in extremism, this section culminates in an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). ANOVAs are a comparison of means, and typically comparisons of means are discussed concurrently with results from this analysis. However, this study breaks from this norm in that it begins with a basic exploration of the interrelationship of the variables, and concludes with the testing of the significance of their relationship. Because of this, mean scores (including comparisons of means without a test of significance) for each religio-political attitude grouping are explored and discussed prior to the testing of the significance of the relationship between religio-political attitudes and perceptions of a rise or decline in extremism.

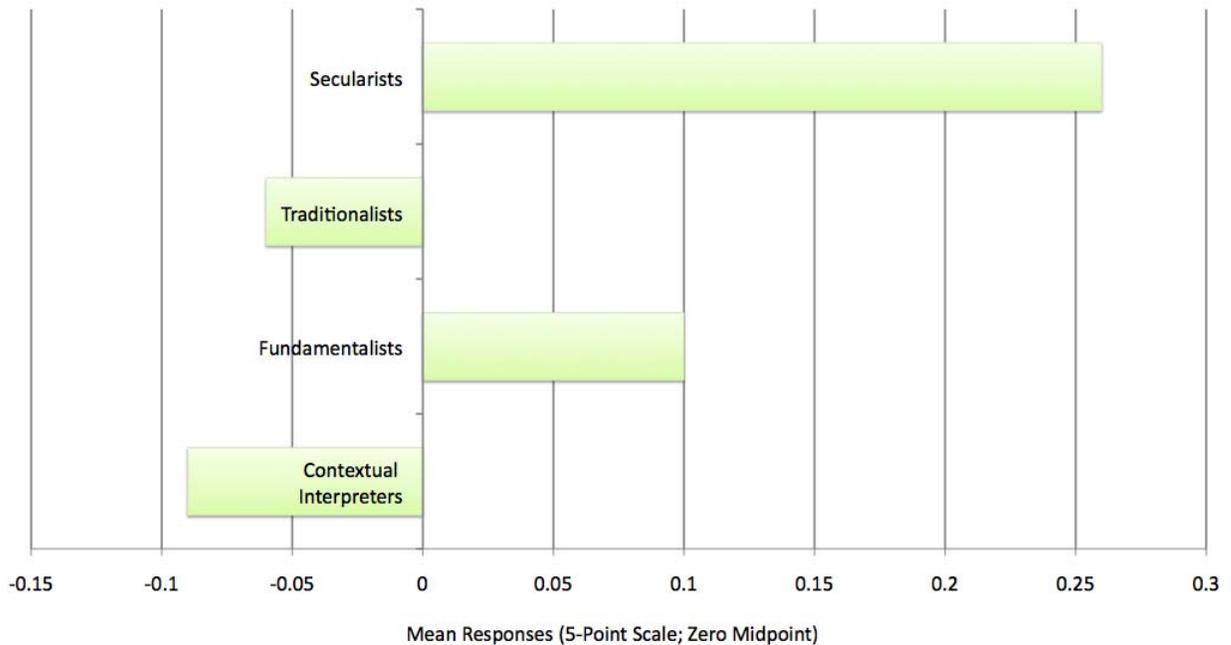
The starting point of this exploration is a cross-tabulation of religio-political attitudes and perceptions of a rise or decline in extremism (see Table 1 on page 71). What is immediately clear in this table is the popularity of the neutral (i.e. “stayed the same”) response for all religio-political attitude groupings. Moreover, with one exception (Fundamentalists), responses within each religio-political group form a normalised pattern, wherein the extreme ends of the scale (i.e. “big rise” and “big decline”) represent the least popular responses. Addressing the aforementioned exception, Fundamentalists defy the normalised trend in that those who perceive a big decline in extremism slightly outnumber those that perceive a moderate decline in extremism.

*Table 1. Cross-tabulation of religio-political attitudes and perceptions of strength of rise/decline in extremism.*

	Big decline	Moderate decline	Stayed the same	Moderate rise	Big rise	Total
Secularists	3% (n=2)	12% (n=9)	48% (n=35)	30% (n=22)	7% (n=5)	n=73
Traditionalists	12% (n=18)	13% (n=20)	49% (n=75)	20% (n=31)	5% (n=8)	n=152
Fundamentalists	10% (n=9)	9% (n=8)	50% (n=47)	27% (n=25)	5% (n=5)	n=94
Contextual Interpreters	10% (n=13)	23% (n=31)	41% (n=56)	21% (n=27)	7% (n=9)	n=136
Total	9% (n=42)	15% (n=68)	47% (n=213)	23% (n=105)	6% (n=27)	n=455

Turning to mean responses, Figure 1 on page 60 charts the mean score for perceptions of a rise in extremism amongst each religio-political group. For this analysis, the scale was adjusted so that the neutral midpoint (i.e. “stayed the same”) represented a value of zero. In doing so, those that see a decline in extremism had negative values on the scale, and those that saw a rise in extremism had a positive value; such an adjustment more accurately illustrates (visually) a scale measuring a decline versus a rise, as these are ultimately negative vs. positive values centred on a neutral midpoint. Results from this analysis suggest a rather distinct pattern: setting aside the most popular view that extremism neither rose nor fell, Secularists and Fundamentalists tend to see a rise in extremism (mean scores of 0.26 and 0.10 respectively), whilst Traditionalists and Contextual Interpreters tend to see a decline in extremism (mean scores of -0.06 and -0.09 respectively). Also of interest, Secularists’ mean responses ventured notably further from the neutral midpoint than any other religio-political category, wherein they saw a relatively large rise in extremism. However in interpreting our findings regarding the mean scores (especially when looking at Figure 1), it is important to again note the popular perception that extremism neither rose nor fell, which can be observed in that no mean scores for any religio-political attitude deviated far from the centre of the scale. Thus, while we see great visual contrast amongst mean scores in Figure 1, it must be observed that the values presented on the ‘X’ coordinate

of the figure (-0.15 ↔ +0.30) represent only a fraction of the full length of the scale (-2 ↔ +2).



Using adjusted 5-point scale: (-2) Big decline in extremism ← (0) Stayed the same → (+2) Big rise in extremism

*Figure 1. Mean responses for religio-political attitudes on perceptions of a rise in extremism.*

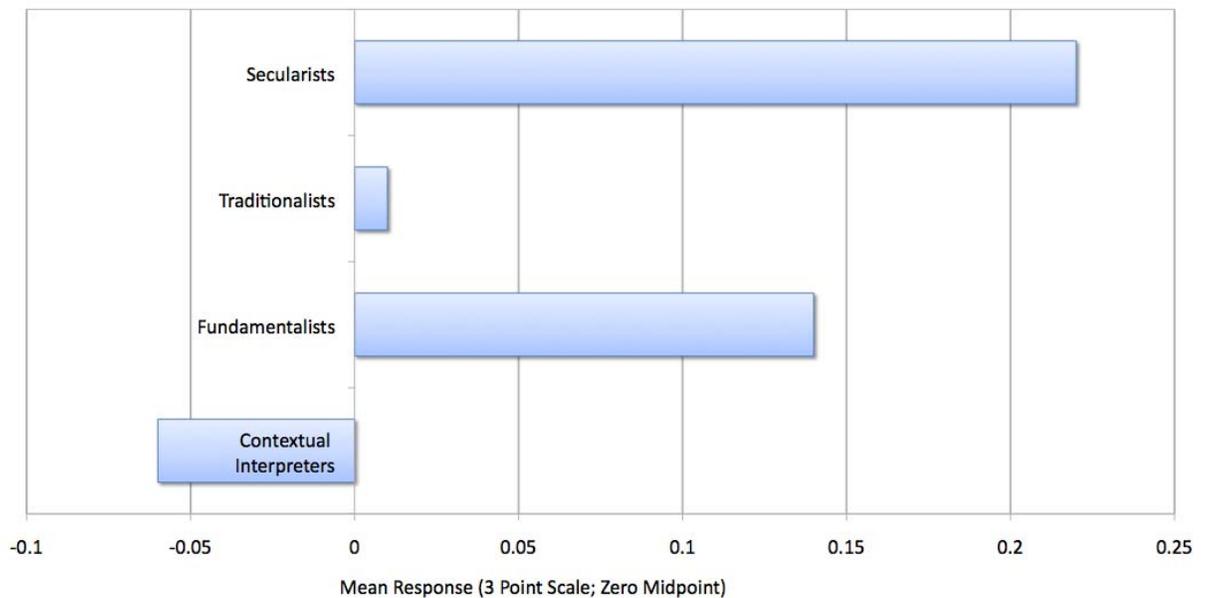
However, careful inspection of these mean responses in combination with the cross-tabulations presented in Table 1 reveals something of a contextual quagmire: while mean scores would suggest that Traditionalists tend to see a decline in extremism (vs. a rise in extremism), in actuality a greater number of Traditionalist respondents perceived a rise in extremism (n=39) versus perceiving a decline in extremism (n=38). This is due to the increased popularity of the “big decline” response option amongst Traditionalists who perceived a decline in extremism relative to the (lesser) popularity of the “big rise” response option amongst Traditionalists who perceived a rise in extremism. In other words, the popularity of the extreme value amongst the decline in extremism response options has skewed the mean score in such a manner that the mean response to a perceived rise in extremism appears to not reflect the frequency with which respondents saw a rise vs. a decline in extremism. In statistical terms, such a peculiarity simply illustrates the

difference between mean scores and frequencies of particular responses, and accordingly this peculiarity does not represent a contradiction of any kind (as a superficial/quick glance may suggest). However, as our primary question centres on how religio-political attitudes relate to a perceived rise versus decline in extremism, this considerable discordance between the frequency pattern and the mean score for Traditionalists does present something of a concern. In short, there was concern that the skewing effect previously highlighted would undermine the ability to accurately test the basic relationship between religio-political attitudes and basic perceptions of a rise vs. decline in extremism.

To address this concern, Russell restructured the rise in extremism measure wherein the response options for the perceived rise in extremism measure were reduced into a more basic “rise vs. decline” format, while still allowing for a neutral midpoint. In this restructured measure, responses of “big decline in extremism” and responses of “moderate decline in extremism” were combined on one end of the scale, creating a basic “decline in extremism” value. On the other end of the scale, responses of “big rise in extremism” and responses of “moderate rise in extremism” were combined, creating a basic “rise in extremism” value. The previous midpoint of the scale (i.e. “stayed the same”) was preserved, creating the following 3-point scale: (-1) Decline in extremism ← (0) Stayed the same → (+1) Rise in extremism (see Figure 2 on page 60). As expected, the mean responses now accurately reflect the frequency of rise vs. decline responses for each group, with Contextual Interpreters being the lone religio-political attitude grouping which more often saw a decline in extremism vs. a rise in extremism (with a mean score of -0.06). Secularists and Fundamentalists still formed something of a cluster, with mean scores reflecting a perceived rise (vs. decline) in extremism (mean scores of 0.22 and 0.14 respectively). Traditionalists, however, now occupy a mean score that is virtually on the midpoint of the scale (0.01). As was the case in the comparison of means of the original measure, while we see great visual contrast amongst mean scores for the reduced scale of perceptions of a rise in extremism, it must be noted that the values presented on the ‘X’

coordinate of the figure (-0.10 ↔ +0.25) represent only a fraction of the full length of the scale (-1 ↔ +1).

Concerning our manipulation, it is unfortunate that a considerable amount of variance—and therefore dimensionality—concerning perceptions of a rise in extremism was lost, and that



the item was reduced to its most basic form. However, the primary research question at hand centres on how religio-political attitudes relate to a perceived rise versus decline in extremism, and not on variance within those that see a rise or decline in extremism (i.e. “big” vs. “moderate”). Accordingly, a considerably strong skewing effect represents a greater threat to this aim relative to any variance lost. Consequently, dimensionality and variance amongst perceptions of a rise in extremism were expendable in the pursuit of eliminating the skewing effect, and this trade-off did successfully eliminate the skewing effect previously highlighted while preserving a scale which allowed for adequate (albeit more basic) testing of the primary hypothesis.

The final analysis of this part of the investigation was to test the value of religio-political attitude groups as a predictor of perceptions of a rise or decline in extremism. To investigate this question Russell employed a One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), with religio-political attitude groupings as the factor, and the reduced 3-point measure for perceptions of a rise in extremism as a dependent variable. Results from this analysis reveal

that religio-political attitudes do represent a significant predictor of perceptions of a rise in extremism [F(3, 451) = 3.003; P<.05]. Mean scores for the religio-political attitude groupings are the same as those presented in Figure 2 (above).<sup>5</sup> A Tukey's HSD post-hoc test examining a group-to-group comparison revealed that while Contextual Interpreters differed significantly from Secularists in their perceptions of a rise in extremism (p<.05), variance between any other combination of Religion-Political categories was not significant.

### **Reactions to Extremism**

Participants were given the opportunity to record their thoughts on the question of the rise, stasis or decline of extremism in the Muslim community. Most of the 298 participants who provided meaningful responses, took the opportunity to discuss broader issues around extremism. In order to sort and analyse these responses, ideas discussed in the responses were coded. This produced 481 instances of 72 coded ideas. These codes were then grouped into six major themes: rejection of extremism; questioning the focus on extremism; defining extremism; responding to extremism; causes of extremism; and

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<sup>5</sup> A secondary ANOVA was performed employing the original 5-point measure of perceptions of a rise or decline in extremism. In this second test, religio-political attitude groupings were shown to be a marginally significant predictor of perceptions of a rise in extremism [F(3, 451) = 2.482, P=.06]. While results still show that religio-political attitudes do represent a good (albeit statistically insignificant) predictor of perceptions of a rise in extremism, this secondary test illuminates the consequence of the skewing effect when the skewed measure is used a dependent variable in an ANOVA, and also illustrates the utility of reducing the measure to eliminate skewness (even at the cost of variance and dimensionality).

understanding human nature (see Figure 3 below).

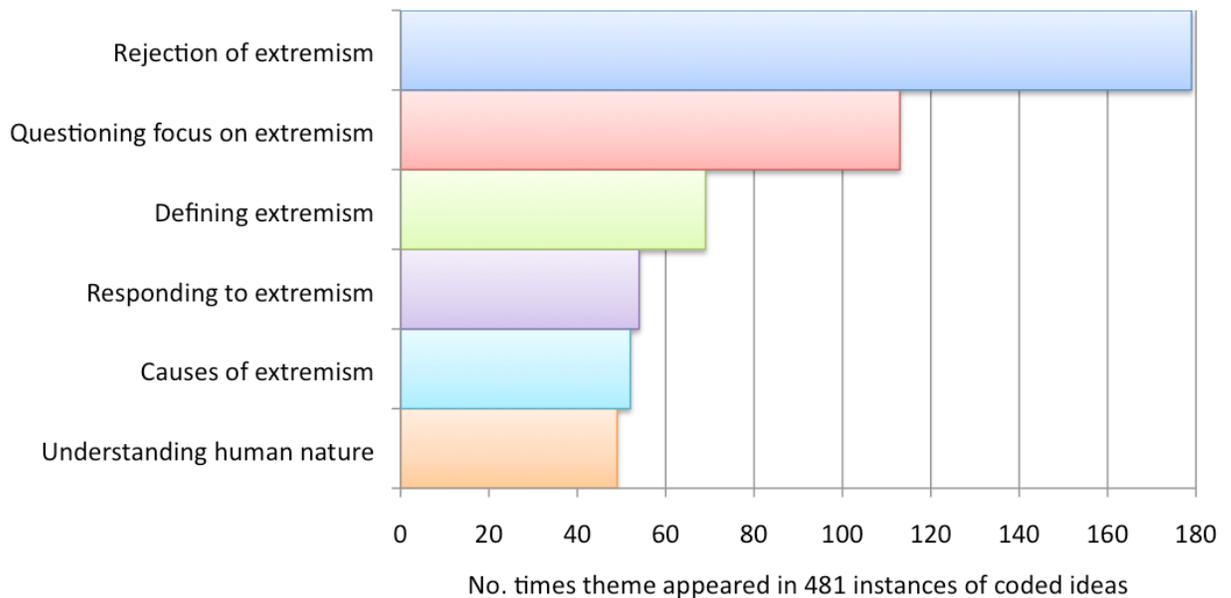


Figure 3. Themes derived from coding participants' thoughts on extremism.

Overwhelmingly, the strongest theme to emerge from analysis of the responses was a rejection of extremism as un-Islamic. Within this theme, the variety of coded responses included sentiments such as that there is no real extremism in Islam, or among Muslims; that extremism is sinful and the result of ignorance; that extremists are only a small minority or are only found in a particular group of Muslims; that Muslims are largely unaware of who the extremists are; and that Muslims are keen to prevent extremism, and want non-violent change to address their concerns. As one participant wrote: “Extremism is bad and Muslims who are extremist have the wrong idea about Islam and should be educated by good Muslims who have the right understanding on how Muslims should approach society” (M/b.1988/Oman/m.1997/CI).<sup>6</sup>

The next strongest theme was questioning the focus on extremism (including the relevance of such questions in the survey itself). Within this theme, there was a relatively strong emphasis on the idea that the problem of extremism is media or government propaganda. A number of participants expressed the belief that the media focuses on extremism, which is

<sup>6</sup> Male, born in Oman in 1988, migrated to Australia in 1997, categorised as Contextual Interpreter.

exaggerated, or that whilst extremism levels have actually remained the same, attention on extremism has grown out of proportion, giving rise to the illusion of a problem rather than it having any basis in reality. One participant asserted: “There hasn’t really been an extremist problem here in Australia, but just the government has started to tell us so for their own political goals” (M/b.1987/Sri Lanka/m.1994/F). Another participant mused: “It makes you wonder why the media does not show footage of mainstream Muslims. Funny isn’t it” (F/b.1986/Australia/T).

Next, participants discussed the problem of defining extremism. Some felt that Muslim religiosity is being misunderstood as extremism: “This is a generalisation as non-Muslims who do not understand Islam may perceive a Muslim as being extreme, but this may just be due to misconceptions” (F/b.1979/Australia/S). Others struggled with ambiguity in the term:

Everything is relative. What is norm[al] for me might not be norm[al] for my neighbour, same applies to communities and what is norm[al] for one community is not normal for another. If extremism means blowing oneself up and kill many innocent people then that I believe has declined. I do not know even remotely any Muslim Australian that might be planning this. But if that extremism means following Islamic values and teachings and honoring them then yes that is in rise around me at least (M/b.1979/Pakistan/m.1997/F).

Furthermore, a small number were confused about the question or felt that as the concept was not defined for them, they were unsure how to answer.

The fourth overall theme to emerge was responding to extremism. Here participants focused on is and can be done in response to extremism; in particular that social inclusion, education and interfaith activities lessen extremism, as well as authentic religious faith. In answer to why he saw a big decline in extremism, this participant commented: “[It is] because of education. It’s the more you learn about Islam, the more you leave extremism” (M/b.1968/Turkey/m.1976/CI).

The fifth theme was looking at the causes of extremism. Again, some participants focused on social exclusion as a problem (versus social inclusion as a solution mentioned above). A

number of participants mentioned political problems, including the foreign policy decisions of Western governments, as the root cause of extremism. The frustration was evident in this response:

When you are born in Australia, you are Australian, period. When you take people that are born here, but have been singled out, they are bound to be frustrated. Frustrated because they boarded a train, sat next to some one, and this someone just got up and changed seats to the far corner of the train; all because the person was wearing a hijab. Frustrated because they go to Safeway, the check out person is having a laugh with the customer in front of you, and when it's your turn, you don't even get a traditional pearly Aussie smile. And I can go on and on.

Take these frustrated people and tell 'em some crap like "If we blow up the power exchange, it would be better for the environment" they'd probably do it. Tell 'em "Kill the white folk, and God will be pleased with you," they'd probably do it. All of that stems from being alienated, from being classified as second class citizens. And I believe a lot of that is fuelled by the media (M/b.1978/b.Saudi Arabia/m.1998/T).

Notably absent from these responses was the belief that Islam itself is somehow inherently prone to extremist interpretation.

Lastly, a number of responses were coded as attempting to understand human nature in explaining the existence of extremism. This included sentiments such as that extremism only exists where there is a reason, and that it exists in all groups to one degree or another. This participant, who felt there had been a moderate rise in extremism, argued there are many causes feeding into the alienation and frustration of some young Muslims:

Generally speaking, I don't think this "extremism" is motivated by religion (in this case Islam). I believe these young people are predisposed to extremist ideology because of many factors (e.g. how they were brought up, relationship with family members, family characteristics such as lack of education, their experiences and treatment by other non-Muslim Australians, other personal life experiences etc). Because Islam is now so out there, so recognised and blamed for much of what goes wrong, these young people tend to justify their own personal violence, anger and frustrations through Islam by making it about Islam or Muslims. There is a minority of such extremists who are truly upset by the suffering of Muslims around the world and/or may have had personal loss as a direct military involvement of Western powers like the US. I think another important factor for these

individuals is lack of proper religious knowledge and a lack of general education (F/b.1982/Afghanistan/m.1982/S).

## **Conclusion**

This paper began by asking about how Muslims perceive extremism in their communities. In particular, do Muslims perceive there has been a rise in extremism? A decline? Or do they think it has stayed the same? It also asked whether religio-political attitudes—Muslims' reactions to modernity categorised into the four groups of Secularists, Traditionalists, Fundamentalists and Contextual Interpreters—influence perceptions of extremism. It found that Muslims take a range of positions on the question, possibly because this heterogeneous group of people are receiving their information about extremism from the same sources as Australians generally, and do not necessarily have intimate and accurate knowledge of the existence and direction of movement of extremism among their ranks. It also found that Muslims with different religio-political outlooks view the rise, decline or stasis of extremism differently, and that this can be predicted with statistical significance.

In terms of how Muslims perceive extremism as an issue, the biggest number of participants was concerned to reject extremism, and a sizeable number argued that extremism is un-Islamic. Other themes that participants discussed was questioning the focus on extremism, querying the definition of extremism, responding to extremism, suggesting possible causes for the existence of extremism, and attempting to understand human nature.

APPENDIX A  
**Frequency Tables**

*Sex*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid %
Female	328	54.7	55.8
Male	260	43.3	44.2
Total known	588	98	100
Unknown	12	2	
Total	600	100	

*Decade of Birth*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid %
1910-1919	1	0.2	0.2
1920-1929	1	0.2	0.2
1930-1939	5	0.8	0.9
1940-1949	17	2.8	2.9
1950-1959	37	6.2	6.3
1960-1969	75	12.5	12.9
1970-1979	139	23.2	23.8
1980-1989	279	46.5	47.9
1990-1999	29	4.8	5
Total known	583	97.2	100
Unknown	17	2.8	
Total	600	100	

*Migrant Status*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid %
Migrant	341	56.8	62.9
Australian-born	201	33.5	37.1
Total known	542	90.3	100
Unknown	58	9.7	
Total	600	100	

*Country of Birth*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid %
Afghanistan	16	2.7	3.2
Algeria	2	0.3	0.4
Australia	201	33.5	40.7
Bangladesh	24	4	4.9
Bosnia & Herzegovina	2	0.3	0.4
Brazil	1	0.2	0.2
Burma	1	0.2	0.2
Canada	3	0.5	0.6
Croatia	1	0.2	0.2
Cyprus	1	0.2	0.2
Egypt	10	1.7	2

Eritrea	1	0.2	0.2
Ethiopia	1	0.2	0.2
Fiji	2	0.3	0.4
France	3	0.5	0.6
Germany	1	0.2	0.2
Ghana	1	0.2	0.2
Greece	2	0.3	0.4
India	13	2.2	2.6
Indonesia	7	1.2	1.4
Iran	1	0.2	0.2
Iraq	26	4.3	5.3
Israel/Palestine	4	0.7	0.8
Jordan	3	0.5	0.6
Kenya	1	0.2	0.2
Kuwait	5	0.8	1
Lebanon	33	5.5	6.7
Liberia	1	0.2	0.2
Malaysia	5	0.8	1
Morocco	2	0.3	0.4
New Zealand	4	0.7	0.8
Nigeria	1	0.2	0.2
Oman	1	0.2	0.2
Pakistan	25	4.2	5.1
Saudi Arabia	7	1.2	1.4
Sierra Leone	1	0.2	0.2
Singapore	7	1.2	1.4
Somalia	7	1.2	1.4
South Africa	2	0.3	0.4
Spain	1	0.2	0.2
Sri Lanka	5	0.8	1
Sudan	5	0.8	1
Syria	4	0.7	0.8
Tunisia	2	0.3	0.4
Turkey	34	5.7	6.9
United Arab Emirates	3	0.5	0.6
United Kingdom	4	0.7	0.8
United States	4	0.7	0.8
Venezuela	3	0.5	0.6
Total known	494	82.3	100
Unknown	106	17.7	
Total	600	100	
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<i>Ancestry</i>			
	Frequency	Percent	Valid %
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American	1	0.2	0.2
Australian	9	1.5	1.7
Oceanian	2	0.3	0.4
North-West European	23	3.8	4.3
West European	9	1.5	1.7
North-East European	1	0.2	0.2
East European	1	0.2	0.2
South European	5	0.8	0.9
North European	2	0.3	0.4
South-East European	17	2.8	3.2
West Asian	75	12.5	14.1
Arab	228	38	42.9
Central Asian	22	3.7	4.1
South Asian	91	15.2	17.1
North-East Asian	2	0.3	0.4
South-East Asian	25	4.2	4.7
East African	10	1.7	1.9
North African	6	1	1.1
West African	3	0.5	0.6
Total known	532	88.7	100
Unknown	68	11.3	
Total	600	100	

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*Income*

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	Frequency	Percent	Valid %
\$10,000 or less	135	22.5	28.2
\$10,001 - \$25,000	73	12.2	15.2
\$25,001 - \$50,000	106	17.7	22.1
\$50,001 - \$75,000	92	15.3	19.2
\$75,001 - \$100,000	36	6	7.5
\$100,001 - \$125,000	14	2.3	2.9
\$125,001 - \$150,000	7	1.2	1.5
\$150,000 or more	16	2.7	3.3
Total known	479	79.8	100
Unknown	121	20.2	
Total	600	100	

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*Education*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid %
None	4	0.7	0.7
Primary	21	3.5	3.7
Year 10 secondary	56	9.3	9.9
Year 12 secondary	135	22.5	23.9
Trade qualification or apprenticeship	35	5.8	6.2
Certificate or diploma	63	10.5	11.2
Bachelor degree	172	28.7	30.5
Masters degree	67	11.2	11.9
Doctorate	11	1.8	2
Total known	564	94	100
Unknown	36	6	
Total	600	100	

*Religio-Political Attitudes*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid %
Secularists	80	13.3	15.2
Traditionalists	168	28	31.9
Fundamentalists	117	19.5	22.2
Contextual Interpreters	161	26.8	30.6
Total known	526	87.7	100
Unknown	74	12.3	
Total	600	100	

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